DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit
"The Marriage Proposal in Selected Nineteenth-Century English Novels"

Verfasserin
Andrea Rebecca Alberts

angestrebter akademischer Grad
Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, im April 2011

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt: A 190 344 313
Betreuerin: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Margarete Rubik
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 3

2. Courtship and marriage in the 19th century ............................................................... 6
   2.1 Contemporary gender roles and handbooks on etiquette .................................... 6
   2.2 The legal position of women in the 19th century ............................................. 9
      2.2.1 Marriage and the marriage ceremony .................................................. 11
      2.2.2 Divorce ......................................................................................... 12
   2.3 The 19th-century courtship rituals ....................................................................... 12
      2.3.1 Advice on "suitability" ...................................................................... 17
      2.3.2 Character pairing in the novels ....................................................... 20
      2.3.3 Love or money? – The financial side of courtship ............................. 21

3. Putting "rugged feeling into a graceful shape": a stylistic analysis of 19th-century marriage proposals ................................................................. 27
   3.1 Eloquence vs. lack of articulateness ............................................................... 27
   3.2 Planning vs. spontaneity ............................................................................... 29
   3.3 Romantic vs. business-like ........................................................................... 30
   3.4 Formal vs. informal .................................................................................... 31
   3.5 Natural vs. "fictional" .................................................................................. 32

4. From speech acts to scripts: making sense of suitors ............................................ 35
   4.1 Speech acts and speech events ....................................................................... 35
   4.2 Grice’s "Cooperative Principle" .................................................................... 37
   4.3 Background knowledge: frames and scripts .............................................. 39

5. Narratological analysis ................................................................................................. 42
   5.1 Speech representation, duration and tone .................................................... 45
   5.2 Indirect characterisation and comic effect .................................................... 53

6. "Yes" or "No"? ................................................................................................................. 55
   6.1 Refusing .......................................................................................................... 57
   6.2 Accepting ......................................................................................................... 59
   6.3 The suitor's reaction ......................................................................................... 61

7. Factors influencing success or failure ........................................................................ 69

8. Male-female power relations ..................................................................................... 76
   8.1 Active men, passive women? ......................................................................... 79
   8.2 Gaining power ................................................................................................. 80
      8.2.1 Male characters .................................................................................. 80
1. Introduction

The 19th century brought forth a vast number of novels which are, to this day, widely known and read, as well as the subject of continuous literary criticism. Despite an increasing awareness of social and scientific matters in the course of the 19th century and the existence of numerous sub-genres within contemporary fiction – all bearing their individual characteristics and agenda – it is hard to think of a single novel that does not feature a romance plot. In many cases, one could even argue that it is the love story portrayed that renders a novel so memorable and constitutes its lasting appeal. Consequently, it seems rather astonishing that many aspects of 19th-century fiction – from class and gender relations to narratological and stylistic methods – have received so much scholarly attention, while one recurring and highly interesting feature has habitually fallen rather short of notice: the marriage proposal.

In many novels of the 19th century, proposal scenes constitute the main conversations protagonists hold with other characters. Due to the sensitive nature and weighty implications of the subject matter, they typically surpass all previous or later colloquies in the depth and intensity of the rendered dialogue, as well as the featured eloquence and wit of the characters. A marriage proposal thus presents one of the most interesting scenes in any novel and, by virtue of this importance, deserves far more consideration than it is usually apportioned.

Although proposal scenes are certainly referred to now and then in the literary discussion of 19th-century fiction, and have in the case of some authors – most prominently Jane Austen – also been made the subject of more detailed study, there is still need for an extensive comparative analysis of such scenes. This thesis seeks to undertake a step in that direction, analysing the representative marriage proposals of six well-known 19th-century novels. In order to examine whether the presentation of marriage proposals is in any way gender-specific or not, three of the novels chosen were written by female, and three by male authors. Furthermore, for the purpose of determining if any kind of development can be traced throughout the century, their publication dates range over a period of six decades. The novels chosen are: *Pride & Prejudice* (1813) by Jane Austen, *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, *Barchester Towers* (1857) by Anthony Trollope, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) by Charles Dickens, *Middlemarch* (1871-72) by George Eliot, and *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874) by Thomas Hardy.

To grasp the full substance and significance of the proposal scenes portrayed – in terms of their implications, thus the stake for those involved, as well as the behaviour displayed by the characters – it is frequently necessary to regard them in the light of a 19th-century
mindset. For this reason, the prevalent ideas about women and their proper sphere in life, as well as the position of women in the legal system of the time and the laws regulating marriage and divorce, will be considered in the first chapter. Since the behaviour of characters can only be described as conventional or subversive when applying the standard of 19th-century rules of conduct, an outline of contemporary rituals of courtship and etiquette will form part of this discussion. This will then be compared to the depiction of courtship rituals and marriage proposals in the contemporary novels analysed.

As proposal scenes can take many forms – among others, that of spirited arguments, emotive declarations or witty repartees – they are highly interesting from a stylistic point of view. The manner, wording and tone of the example texts will be the subject of analysis in the second chapter; in other words, it will be examined whether the approach chosen by a suitor may be described as romantic or business-like, earnest or witty, servile or haughty. Of special interest in this context is the question of how far marriage proposals are, in fact, idiosyncratic in their nature – that is, representative of a suitor's characteristic expression and conduct – and to what extent they are restricted by the need to conform to certain conventions. This includes features such as the planning and explicitness of a proposal as well as its degree of formality and emotionality.

Given the frequently inexplicit and tentative, at times incoherent, confusing or ambiguous manner of the suitors' speech, it seems surprising that heroines are able at all to arrive at an understanding of what the male characters are trying to express. This remarkable fact provides an excellent opportunity to employ linguistics for the purposes of literary analysis, hence, some linguistic approaches offering possible explanations – speech act theory, Grice's "Cooperative Principle" and the concepts of frames and scripts – will be outlined and applied to the representative proposal scenes selected.

The analysis of marriage proposals from a narratological perspective yields interesting insights as well, since authors employ such scenes for a wide spectrum of purposes – ranging from the creation of suspense to the resolution of the plot, from indirect characterisation to comic effect. In the fourth chapter, both the depiction of a proposal scene and its positioning in the plot, as well as the effects thereby achieved, will be analysed with regard to aspects such as the tone and mode of the narration, authorial intrusion and the depiction of the characters' speech.

Marriage proposals in fact constitute dialogues, even though suitors occasionally neglect to grant the heroines their share of the conversation. Some attention will therefore be paid also to the reaction of the heroines involved, i.e. how they handle the business of
accepting or refusing such offers and how their response in turn affects the suitors. The tone and use of arguments on the part of heroines will be of special relevance in this regard, as well as frequently used strategies of persuasion on the part of suitors.

On a related note, the question of possible factors influencing a marriage proposal's success or failure will be considered, thus if there are any noticeable patterns in the depicted approaches of suitors that account for the eventual outcome of a proposal. Potentially determining aspects – such as expectedness, setting and degree of emotionality – will be analysed in more detail.

The final chapter will concern the issue of male-female power relations and the use of rhetorical or strategic devices for the purposes of gaining power. The position of women naturally being of special interest in this context, the discussion will, on the basis of the novels analysed, focus on the realisation of women's ascribed role and expected part in the courtship process and to what extent the conduct of heroines may be described as conventional or subversive.

The conclusion will then draw a comparison between male and female authors regarding their depiction of marriage proposal scenes and answer the question of a possible development throughout the 19th century.
2. Courtship and marriage in the 19th century

The courtship rituals as featured in the novels analysed were determined primarily by contemporary moral beliefs concerning gender roles and proper conduct on the one hand, and the legal position of women and existing marriage laws on the other. It therefore seems advisable to analyse these two aspects in more detail.

2.1 Contemporary gender roles and handbooks on etiquette

The 19th century saw a great rise in the publication of conduct manuals providing instruction as to the proper forms of etiquette.¹ Towards the end of the century, "[t]he devices regulating the conduct and the relationship between the sexes reached a peak", due to what Pearsall describes as "a desperate attempt to choke [...] the advance of libertinism" (128). It is important to note, however, that this advocated etiquette of courtship applied not to the whole population, but primarily to the middle classes, who "ha[ving] acquired wealth and power at the expense of their birthright [...] found themselves in a strange territory, a territory newly carved by the aftermath of the industrial revolution" (125). The lower classes were concerned more with issues of survival, leaving them less time to be worried about proper etiquette, while the higher classes trusted these things to arrange themselves, "the major families [...] always intermarrying and [...] interlocked like Chinese puzzles" (Pearsall 130).

The information stated in such manuals was thus primarily aimed at the middle classes and based on the supposed "high ideal of upper-class courtship" which, as Pearsall argues, was often "a representation by poets and novelists of what they imagined upper-class courtship to be, with all the unsavoury bits discreetly omitted" (125; emphasis given). He claims that these courtship manuals "that were deferred to as if they were holy script", were, in fact, "characteristic of an important and growing class, but [...] not characteristic of an age" (125).

One such publication, The Etiquette of Love, Courtship, and Marriage (1857), offers valuable insights into mid-19th-century beliefs and conventions, not merely regarding courtship rituals, but also the nature of woman, her strengths and weaknesses, and her place in society. Already at the very beginning of the publication, marriage is defined as the main object in life for any woman:

¹ For the following see Pearsall 123-132.
From the moment of her emergence into womanhood until she hath attained her fiftieth year, her affections are constantly occupied with one or other of the opposite sex. Equally true is it that young ladies are constantly thinking of and earnestly panting after the matrimonial state. [...] It seems to them the end, as it constantly is the aim of their existence. (6)

This assessment of woman’s nature brings to mind characters such as Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, whose every thought does seem to bend in the direction of matrimony. Yet as she, the mother of five single daughters who would be left unprovided for after the death of their father, had her valid reasons for making marriage "the aim of [her] existence", so had many other women. As stated some years before by Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792): "To rise in the world [...] [women] must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted" (127-128).

Apart from the necessity of being provided for, marriage was the only actual alternative for middle-class young women within the restrictive notions of contemporary gender roles. "A man", as stated in *Etiquette* at another point, "has many other objects to engage his attention, and to stimulate his pursuits and ambition. His worldly interests frequently engross his mind, and call forth his energies; and his character" (10-11). Women, on the other hand, were limited to the domestic sphere, to "making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags" (126), as Charlotte Brontë puts it in *Jane Eyre*. In contrast to the prevailing opinion of the time, however, Brontë clearly rejects the assumption that woman’s nature inherently differs from man’s: "Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do" (*Jane Eyre* 125).

The picture painted of the 19th-century woman in many publications of the time is one of a weaker and simpler creature, dependent on man for protection and guidance. The following passage from *Etiquette* aptly demonstrates the prevailing essentialist gender roles and the almost ridiculously sentimentalised idea of women:

There is something in the very nature of woman which ignites in the breast of man a host of flames of passion and affection towards her. She has been formed with a gentler and less uncouth mien than that which her opposite sex bears: she possesses all the qualities of virtue [...] beauty is in her form, and tenderness in her look; delicacy sits upon her cheek; love heaves beneath her breast; and there is a helplessness – a softness – which calls forth the esteem and sympathy of man. (48)

Conveniently, in addition to this general "helplessness" and "softness" of women, they were also believed to be naturally disinterested and subservient:
A woman who is actuated by sincere love will look upon him on whom she has fixed her choice, as her protector and guide. She will cling to him with all the confidence of a depending child. [...] She will endure privations of every kind to serve the man she loves. Such is the nature of woman’s love. – It is pure, it is disinterested. (*Etiquette* 18-19)

Men, by contrast, were thought to differ considerably from the "the softer sex" in their motives for marriage, as "[t]heir future prospects and worldly aggrandizements are mixed up with their affections, and sully their purity" (*Etiquette* 19-20). Women were thus allotted the moral role in matters of courtship, holding in their hands "that powerful influence, the liberty of rejection" (7). As the same publication so patronisingly states, women were not supposed to mind that "liberty of choice" was not granted to them, since it would "only increase their responsibilities, without adding to their happiness or usefulness" (7). Again, as in the matter of women’s natural submissiveness, the lack of one virtue was supposedly compensated by the existence of another: "As custom has forbid females that unlimited range in their choice which the men enjoy, so nature has benevulously assigned to them a greater flexibility of taste on this subject" (21).

Woman’s inherent "softness" was naturally believed to also render her more susceptible in matters of affection, while man’s superior rationality and intellect protected him from too rash an attachment:

> The female heart is generally soft and tender, and is easily susceptible of emotions, which are soon awakened, and wrought upon by flattery and praise. Impressions are very quickly formed on the mind of a young female, which are not easily effaced. [...] Man, generally, is more upon his guard, and calculates more carefully as to the manner in which he allows his affections to be fixed. (*Etiquette* 9-10)

This attitude finds reflection in the novels of the time. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, Mr Darcy states that, "[a] lady’s imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony in a moment" (26). Jane, too, chooses to blame herself instead of Mr Bingley and reproaches Elizabeth for thinking ill of him: "We must not be so ready to fancy ourselves intentionally injured. We must not expect a lively young man to be always so guarded and circumspect. It is very often nothing but our own vanity that deceives us. Women fancy admiration means more than it does" (115). To this Elizabeth replies, "And men take care that they should" (115) – thus, like Jane Eyre, rejecting the belief in a constitutional difference between the sexes.

Pearsall also describes how the conduct manuals of the time "emphasized the necessity of the wife’s sinking her dignity when the occasion arose" (76) – a notion illustrated in the following excerpt of *Etiquette*:
The first and most important female quality, is sweetness of temper. Heaven did not give to the female sex insinuation and persuasion, in order to be surly: it did not make them weak in order to be imperious: it did not given them a sweet voice, in order to be employed in scolding; it did not provide them with delicate features, in order to be disfigured in anger. A wife frequently has cause to lament her condition; but never to utter bitter complaints. (41-42)

Women in the 19th century were thus faced with severe restrictions. As Schor puts it, "[They] were expected to center their lives on home and family; they were expected to conduct themselves, indeed drape themselves, in modesty and propriety; they were expected to find the commands of duty and the delights of service sufficient, in fact ennobling, boundaries for their lives" (172). In her Women of England (1839) Sarah Stickney Ellis also criticises this lack of useful employment:

Time was when the women of England were accustomed, almost from their childhood, to the constant employment of their hands. [...] I cannot speak with unqualified praise of all the objects on which they bestowed their attention, but, if it were possible, I would write in characters of gold the indisputable fact, that the habits of industry and personal exertion thus acquired, gave them a strength and dignity of character, a power of usefulness, and a capability of doing good, which the higher theories of modern education fail to impart. (18; emphasis given)

The meek and submissive woman naturally features in many works of 19th-century fiction. Yet what renders the heroines of some 19th-century novels, such as Jane Eyre or Elizabeth Bennet, so particularly memorable is the fact that they do not act in accordance with contemporary gender roles. Instead, they are portrayed as self-willed, independent and outspoken, considering themselves the equals of men and "seek[ing] to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex" (Jane Eyre 126).

2.2 The legal position of women in the 19th century

Sir William Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England (1765) presents a major work when it comes to shedding light on the legal position of women in the 19th century. As Teachman states, it "provide[s] some of the clearest statements about English law as it was practiced and understood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" and, though written a number of decades before most of the novels analysed, the "definitions and interpretations of British law were as valid as they were in the years in which they were written" (165). Crucial to the understanding of women's legal position in 19th-century England is the concept of "feme covert", as described by Blackstone in his work:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law, that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing,
The principle of "feme covert" thus meant that a woman’s identity was, upon her marriage, subsumed under that of her husband. The implications of this legal status were severe: married women could not possess property, dispose of their own income or act as economic agents. They even required their husbands’ permission to write wills, and a husband could alter his wife’s will after her death. In addition, existing marriage laws rendered women "vulnerable to violence, imprisonment, and cruelty" and "restricted [their] access to any form of divorce" (Schor 175). Dolin points out how closely linked the established views on women and their legal position were at the time:

So deeply embedded were social assumptions about femininity and the proper role of wives and mothers, and so powerfully were those assumptions upheld in Victorian social institutions and in representations of womanliness in conduct books, literature, and the visual arts, that the customary inferiority of women seemed like a universal and natural law, of which the property legislation was only an inevitable extension. (4)

Women were thus placed at a highly disadvantaged position, especially in the first half of the 19th century. In the course of the second half, the situation gradually began to improve. The opening of Queen’s College in 1848 and Bedford College in 1849 granted women access to higher education and the increasing number of feminist activities improved not only the legal position of women, but also began to loosen the rigid constraints they faced concerning employment and lifestyle.

In 1855 a feminist committee headed by Barbara Leigh Smith submitted the pamphlet *A Brief Summary in plain Language of the most important Laws Concerning Women* to the Law Amendment Society with the aim of bringing about a reform of those laws that restricted the financial independence of women. In 1857 the Married Women’s Property Bill was presented to Parliament and first proposals for reforms in divorce and infant custody laws were made. The Marriage and Divorce Act was passed in the same year, while it took many more years for the married women’s property laws to change. Yet these early developments can be regarded as truly ground-breaking, as they "present[ed] an absolute challenge to the sanctity, privacy, and order provided by marital and family relations" (Schor 175).

The Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 eventually also improved the legal situation of women as far as financial matters were concerned. It allowed them to "treat as their own the money they were willed by others, or got from various investments" and a revision of

---

2 For the following see Teachman 157-179, Pearsall 123-180 and Schor 172-187.
the act in 1882 then "made basically all property that a woman acquired on her own hers to do with as she pleased, in addition to giving her the right to sue and be sued with respect to the property, and make contracts about it" (Pool 186).

2.2.1 Marriage and the marriage ceremony

In the 19th century, there were several ways a marriage could proceed. One possibility frequently resorted to in the novels of the time was "having the banns published", which meant that "the impending wedding [would] be announced three Sundays in a row from the parish pulpit" and that "[a]ny marriage thereafter within three months was valid unless someone spoke out against the proposed marriage during one of the announcements" (Pool 182-183). This, of course, exposed the couple to publicity and there was always the danger of someone speaking against the marriage.

A marriage by license constituted a slightly more expensive and prestigious alternative, typically chosen "[o]utside of very poor and rural areas" (183). The license could be obtained from a local clergyman or at Doctor's commons in London and allowed the couple to "get married in a parish where one of the parties had lived for at least fifteen days" (Pool 183). By obtaining a "special license", a couple could get married wherever it wanted and at any time. Such a license presented the most expensive alternative, as it could only be obtained from the archbishop of Canterbury and was thus restricted to the wealthy and well-connected. In Pride and Prejudice, for example, Mrs Bennet stipulated for such a special license when informed of the engagement between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy: "My dearest child, [...] I can think of nothing else! Ten thousand a year, and very likely more! 'Tis as good as a Lord! And a special licence. You must and shall be married by a special licence" (305).

Catholics, Jews or Dissenters – thus people who could not be married within the Church of England – had to obtain a civil license from the superintendent-registrar, which became available after 1836 and allowed them to be married in the registrar’s office or in a church ceremony. Couples who, for whatever reason, wanted to circumvent all these regulations often chose to get married in Gretna Green, Scotland. There, "under the looser regulations of the Scotch Presbyterian church" (Pool 183), it was sufficient to pledge oneself to one’s partner in the presence of one witness. When a twenty-one-day residency requirement was introduced in 1856, however, this option gradually became less attractive.
2.2.2 Divorce

Divorce was difficult to obtain and, until 1857, fell under the jurisdiction of the Church of England.\(^3\) Grounds for an annulment of the marriage, a so called divorce *a vinculo matrimonii*, were "improperly close blood relationship, insanity, impotence, or a similar impediment" (Pool 185) and permitted the marriage partners to remarry but rendered their offspring illegitimate. In cases of adultery, sodomy or cruelty a divorce *a mensa et a thoro* permitted separation but not remarriage. A parliamentary divorce constituted the third alternative, which meant that, first, a divorce *a mensa et a thoro* was obtained and secondly, the marriage partner sued for adultery – Parliament then granting a real divorce which did not make the children illegitimate. This option was typically only accessible to men due to the expensiveness of the process. Before the passing of the Divorce Bill in 1857, only four out of the ninety parliamentary divorces were obtained by women (Pool 185). In rural regions, the auctioning off of wives, as featured in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, for example, was an actual resort for some men, "the only checks on the practice being occasional ostracism and not very stringent legal penalties" (186).

The Divorce Act of 1857, however, abolished the most archaic practices concerning marriage and divorce. Jurisdiction was given to a new civil divorce court and the grounds needed for divorce were changed as well; women could now obtain it in case of adultery, as well as "incest, rape, sodomy, bestiality, bigamy, physical cruelty, or two years' desertion" (186). In addition, the Divorce Act stipulated "provision for legal separation that would permit of maintenance for an injured wife and the right to possess any future earnings or inheritance" (Pearsall 137).

2.3 The 19\(^{th}\)-century courtship rituals

As Mann puts it, "The rules of courtship were demanding [...] Displayed like candy in a confectioner’s window, the young woman was expected to “fix’ her man by any means, fair or foul, with the predominant means of proper ladies being to suppress all display of emotion, keeping their actual feelings to themselves" (202). Mann argues that the restrictions imposed upon female behaviour "served social convenience", as they rendered it impossible for a suitor to discover the true sentiments of the lady in question and thus "easier for the fair one’s relatives to coerce her into a financially beneficial marriage" (202). In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, "[e]ven the sharp-tongued Elizabeth Bennet", she points out, "is neutral enough in her behavior towards Mr. Collins that he believes her to be waiting for him to speak" (202). Similarly, her sister Jane is

\(^3\) For the following see Pool 186, Pearsall 166-180 and Teachman 157-179.
portrayed as conforming so exactly to the model of how a young woman should comport herself, that her suitor is entirely unaware of the extent of her feelings.

The very restrictive conventions that applied to proper female conduct figure in all novels analysed. In *Barchester Towers* it is Eleanor's association with Mr Slope that evokes suspicion and gossip in those around her, certain relatives and well-meaning friends continually pestering her on the subject. In *Madding Crowd*, too, the heroine is frequently slandered and reproached for her unconventional actions. As Bathsheba’s maid cautions also her at one point, "[a] woman's good name is such a perishable article" (316). Mr Boldwood, unaware of Bathsheba’s secret marriage to Troy and under the belief that she has compromised herself, even implores the latter to marry her: "Troy, make her your wife, [...] take Bathsheba; I give her up! She must love you indeed to sell soul and body to you so utterly as she has done. Wretched woman – deluded woman – you are, Bathsheba!" (183). Concern for Bathsheba’s reputation thus outweighs any consideration for his own happiness, illustrating the fatal social consequences such misconduct would have entailed.

The 19th-century advice manuals are quite empathic in their repeated warnings that "[n]o union should be undertaken until both of the contracting parties are fully acquainted with each other’s dispositions" (*How to Woo* 12). A thorough knowledge of the partner’s character, habits, and tastes is defined as absolute necessity for any chances of future happiness, the suitability in disposition determining whether life together will be characterised by "certain misery, bickerings, discontent, and an aptitude neither for business or enjoyment" or by "calm feelings, happiness, and domestic pleasure" (*How to Woo* 6-7). Although all lovers are called on to act guardedly and with due consideration as far as their "passions and wishes" are concerned – those being described as "more the subjects of control than most people are willing to own", regardless of what "the fantastical poets may say" (6; 7) – young women, in particular, are frequently cautioned against turning a blind eye towards their loved ones’ faults:

The doctrine that "reformed rakes make the best husbands,’ and that "young men must sow their wild oats,’ are but mere excuses for immorality – and bad excuses too. The very best authority tells us, "that as men sow they will reap,’ and experience assures us that nothing is so difficult to efface as the early traces of vice. Young ladies are earnestly warned against indulging in such hopes. (*How to Woo* 22)

Arriving at such an adequate understanding of a potential marriage partner’s character, however, presented no easy task. To begin with, a suitor’s nature is described as "no easy matter for a lady to scan", as "[s]ome men are ever ready to disguise their real character" (*Etiquette* 11). Secondly, as is explicitly deplored in a contemporary conduct
book, "females in general have but few opportunities of becoming sufficiently acquainted with the natural dispositions and uniform habits of those to whom they venture to entrust their future happiness, until the destiny of both is unalterably fixed" (Etiquette 22). Although the deficiencies of existing courtship rituals and the gravity of potential consequences are thus conceded, the publication’s only proposed solution to the matter is, that “the courtship should be of such a length, as will enable each to gain an insight into the various characters and dispositions of each other” (22). Yet as has been pointed out before, however, the strict moral beliefs of the time and rigidity of behavioural protocol, hardly allowed for this to happen.

Since there was very little opportunity for young people to get to know each other within the confines of 19th-century propriety, much of the information concerning a potential partner’s worldly circumstances and character did not result from primary observation, but from hearsay. Dickens’ satirises this absurdity in Mutual Friend, describing the case of the Lammles, a couple who shortly after the wedding discovers that their information about each other, especially concerning their respective financial affairs, had been entirely wrong. As the husband states, "When I look back, I wonder how I can have been such a fool as to take you to so great an extent upon trust. […] But the folly is committed on both sides. I cannot get rid of you; you cannot get rid of me" (130). The Veneerings, the hosts of the dinner parties where the Lammles had met and the main instigators of the match, are portrayed as a thoughtless, meddling couple who may believe it acts with good intentions but whose interferences, based entirely on gossip, actually have disastrous results with irrevocable consequences. Dickens enhances his satire by describing the evolvement of the match from the perspective of Mr Twemlow, a constant guest at the Veneerings’ dinner parties and socially rather inept person, who is depicted as frequently puzzled by the spurious and exaggerated conversance of people sharing an actually very superficial relationship:

There is excitement in the Veneering mansion. The mature young lady is going to be married (powder and all) to the mature young gentleman, and she is to be married from the Veneering house, and the Veneerings are to give the breakfast. […] The mature young lady is a lady of property. The mature young gentleman is a gentleman of property. […] While the Loves and Graces have been preparing this torch for Hymen, which is to be kindled to-morrow, Mr Twemlow has suffered much in his mind. It would seem that both the mature young lady and the mature young gentleman must indubitably be Veneering’s oldest friends. Wards of his, perhaps? Yet that can scarcely be, for they are older than himself. Veneering has been in their confidence throughout, and has done much to lure them to the altar. He has mentioned to Twemlow how he said to Mrs Veneering, 'Anastatia, this must be a match.' He has mentioned to Twemlow how he regards Sophronia Akershem (the mature young lady) in the light of a sister, and Alfred Lammle (the mature young gentleman) in the light of a brother. Twemlow has asked him whether he went to school as a junior with Alfred? He has answered, 'Not exactly.' Whether Sophronia
was adopted by his mother? He has answered, 'Not precisely so.' Twemlow's hand has gone to his forehead with a lost air. (MF 118-119)

Similarly, Austen’s narrative descriptions in *Pride and Prejudice* often serve to satirise the practices of gossip and the fact that estimations and opinions were frequently formed on the mere basis of hearsay:

"[A] report soon followed that Mr. Bingley was to bring twelve ladies and seven gentlemen with him to the assembly. The girls grieved over such a number of ladies; but were comforted the day before the ball by hearing, that instead of twelve, he had brought only six with him from London, his five sisters and a cousin. And when the party entered the assembly room, it consisted of only five altogether; Mr. Bingley, his two sister, the husband of the eldest, and another young man. [...] Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year. (PP 11-12)

The issue of limited opportunity for social interaction and sufficient acquaintance with each other’s character is also a central one in *Middlemarch*. Dr Lydgate and Mr Casaubon, acting within the confines of 19th-century etiquette restrictions in their dealings with Rosamond and Dorothea, have very little real knowledge of their future marriage partner. The courtship between Dorothea and Mr Causabon is rather brief, but nevertheless follows the conventions of the time. They meet at her uncle’s house, the first contact between them thus taking place by proper introduction and within the confines of a dinner party. Dorothea is surrounded by her family and although she eventually engages in tête-à-têtes with Mr Causabon, they always occur with other people in the immediate vicinity. In his proposal to Dorothea Mr Casaubon talks of the favourable impression he conceived of her the first time they met and of "each succeeding opportunity for observation" that gave it "added depth" (43), thus presuming an adequate acquaintance with her personality and disposition – which proves false in the course of their marriage.

Lydgate, too, meets Rosamond within the circle of her family. The only opportunities he has of seeing her and talking to her are the dinner parties given by the Vichy family, which again implies the existence of numerous impositions. The evenings follow a certain routine and possible activities are limited. In this case, the restrictions actually allow Rosamond to appear to advantage; she uses these opportunities to display her endowments and accomplishments and to generally act out the ideal of the perfect woman. Lydgate has little chance to really get to know her, being able to observe her only within this special sphere and never anywhere else. Their conversations, too, take place in the presence of others and are tied to certain topics and conventions. As in the
In *Madding Crowd* Hardy presents an interesting alternative to this dilemma, contrasting the relationship between Bathsheba and Mr Boldwood with that of Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak. Mr Boldwood again has very little real knowledge of Bathsheba’s character because he lacks opportunity for everyday interaction with her and so worships a manufactured, completely idealised, version of her:

The great aids to idealisation in love were present here: occasional observation of her from a distance, and the absence of social intercourse with her – visual familiarity, oral strangeness. the smaller human elements were kept out of sight; the pettinesses that enter so largely into all earthly living and doing were disguised by the accident of lover and loved-one not being on visiting terms; and there was hardly awakened a thought in Boldwood that sorry household realities appertained to her, or that she, like all others, had moments of commonplace when to be least plainly send was to be most prettily remembered. Thus a mild sort of apotheosis took place in his fancy, whilst she still lived and breathed within his own horizon, a troubled creature like himself. (97)

The relationship between Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak is portrayed very differently. He is one of her most constant companions in her everyday business affairs and thus thoroughly acquainted with all her virtues and vices. Hardy seems quite enthusiastic in his description of this special relationship:

*Theirs was that substantial affection which arises (if any arises at all) when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other’s character, and not the till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality. This good-fellowship – camaraderie – usually occurring through similarity of pursuits, is unfortunately seldom superadded to love between the sexes, because men and women associate, not in their labours, but in their pleasures merely. Where, however, happy circumstance permits its development, the compounded feeling proves itself to be the only love which is strong as death – that love which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown, beside which the passion usually called by the name is evanescent as steam.* (314)

Similarly, although Elizabeth and Mr Darcy do not transgress any boundaries of appropriate behaviour, their acquaintance is not limited to sporadic encounters at courtesy calls, dinner parties or balls. Jane Austen grants them decidedly more opportunity for observing each other and becoming acquainted outside the normal range of events, for example, through Elizabeth’s short sojourn at Neverfield Park, her visit to Rosings Park and meeting with Mr Darcy and her chance encounter with him at Pemberley.

The relationship between Jane and Mr Rochester constitutes an exception in this context as well, due to her position as a governess in his house and the opportunity of frequent
encounters and conversations. In fact, in Jane Eyre the typically observed 19th-century rituals of courtship are missing to a large extent – a natural consequence of Jane’s solitary position in the world. This lack of parental guidance and protection is evident throughout the novel and, regarding Jane’s relationship to Mr Rochester, also commented on by Mrs Fairfax: "I am sorry to grieve you [...] but you are so young, and so little acquainted with men [...] There are times when, for your sake, I have been a little uneasy at his marked preference, and have wished to put you on your guard". (297) Mr Rochester, on the other hand, looks upon it as a blessing for obvious reasons; when Jane tells him, "There is no one to meddle, sir. I have no kindred to interfere", he replies, "No – that is the best of it" (287).

2.3.1 Advice on "suitability"

On no other aspect do 19th-century conduct books seek to advise more than on that of suitability in a marriage partner, not merely with regard to social or financial considerations, but also concerning character and disposition. Mrs Fairfax’s response on learning that Mr Rochester intends to marry Jane Eyre illustrates some of the conventions of the time which this marriage stands in contrast with:

"I feel so astonished," she began, "I hardly know what to say to you, Miss Eyre. I have surely not been dreaming, have I? [...] Do you believe him? Have you accepted him?"
"Yes."
She looked at me bewildered. "I could never have thought it. He is a proud man: all the Rochesters were proud: and his father, at least, liked money. He, too, has always been called careful. He means to marry you?"
"He tells me so."
She surveyed my whole person: in her eyes I read that they had there found no charm powerful enough to solve the enigma.
"It passes me!" she continued; "but no doubt, it is true since you say so. How it will answer, I cannot tell: I really don’t know. Equality of position and fortune is often advisable in such cases; and there are twenty years of difference in your ages. [...] Is it really for love he is going to marry you?" (296-297)

The objections of Mrs Fairfax thus concern social position, wealth and age. As she states, "[e]quality of position and fortune is often advisable" in marriages. This echoes the advice given in contemporary conduct books, which propagated marriages within the same social sphere:

Position in society is frequently reckoned as more than equivalent for riches. Yet neither a wise man nor woman will seek to marry greatly out of their sphere of life; for if their partner be from a rank above them, their pride will frequently be wounded, and they will suffer patronage; if from below their state in society, they will be annoyed in another, but no less acute, manner, and will find that no critics in the world are more ill-natured than those relations who are below them in wealth or in worldly position. (How to Woo 20)
The person on whom you fix your choice, should be as much as possible in your own sphere of life. A man of refined taste and of good education, would not find that degree of happiness so devoutly to be wished in the married life, were he united to a coarse, vulgar, and uncultivated female; - and a lady of polished education, and of fine accomplishments would feel miserable and uncomfortable, in having to pass her days in the company of a boorish, rude, and ignorant husband. (Etiquette 12)

Jane, however, does not seem to care about Mr Rochester’s wealth and having declared herself his equal before, does not spend much time on such considerations:

"Ask me something now, Jane,—the least thing: I desire to be entreated—" [...] "Well then, sir, have the goodness to gratify my curiosity, which is much piqued on one point."
He looked disturbed. "What? what?" he said hastily. "Curiosity is a dangerous petition [...] Utter it, Jane: but I wish that instead of a mere inquiry into, perhaps, a secret, it was a wish for half my estate."
"Now, King Ahasuerus! What do I want with half your estate? Do you think I am a Jew-usurer, seeking good investment in land? I would much rather have all your confidence." (293-94)

Concerning the question of age, advice manuals state that "men and women vary greatly as to the age at which they arrive at maturity", so that "it is generally conceded that the wife should be younger than the husband" (How to Woo 9; 17). This idea also features in the novels analysed, although the age difference between couples typically amounts to less than a decade, with the woman approaching her twenties and the man his thirties. The 28-year old Gabriel Oak in Madding Crowd, for example, is described as at the prime of his life and in the perfect state for matrimony:

He had just reached the time of life at which "young" is ceasing to be the prefix of "man" in speaking of one. He was at the brightest period of masculine growth, for his intellect and his emotions were clearly separated: he had passed the time during which the influence of youth indiscriminately mingles them in the character of impulse, and he had not yet arrived at the stage wherein they become united again, in the character of prejudice, by the influence of a wife and family. In short, he was twenty-eight, and a bachelor. (4)

Jane Eyre, Dorothea Brooke and Eleanor Bold, on the other hand, marry men that could easily be their fathers. Although such matches would have been considered perfectly acceptable by 19th-century standards, they were by no means regarded as particularly desirable. Some conduct books, in fact, even explicitly advised against them: "By all means there ought not to be a great disparity in the ages of lovers; if a man has nearly doubled the years of the woman, he will very soon become an old man; ten or a dozen years are commonly considered no very great difference on the man’s side" (Etiquette 24). This critical attitude towards considerable age differences also finds expression in
some of the novels analysed. Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, for example, is looked upon with disapproval and incomprehension by her surroundings for deciding to marry Mr Casaubon, "a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father" (794). Even those closest to her, like her sister Celia, cannot possibly understand the desire for such a union:

For the first time it entered into Celia’s mind that there might be something more between Mr. Casaubon and her sister than his delight in bookish talk and her delight in listening. [...] Not that she now imagined Mr. Casaubon to be already an accepted lover: she had only begun to feel disgust at the possibility that anything in Dorothea’s mind could tend toward such an issue. Here was something really to vex her about Dodo: it was all very well not to accept Sir James Chettam, but the idea of marrying Mr. Casaubon! Celia felt a short of shame mingled with a sense of the ludicrous. (47)

Age considerations also constitute part of the opposition Jane Eyre experiences against her intended marriage to Mr Rochester. When referred by Mrs Fairfax to the twenty years of age between them and the fact that he might thus be her father, she appears revolted by such an idea: "No, indeed, Mrs. Fairfax! [...] [H]e is nothing like my father! No one, who saw us together, would suppose it for an instant. Mr. Rochester looks as young, and is as young, as some men at five-and-twenty" (297). Similarly, Mr Boldwood in *Madding Crowd*, being forty-one years old, acknowledges his age as a disadvantage from Bathsheba’s point of view, which he seeks to mitigate: "I fear I am too old for you, but believe me I will take more care of you than would many a man of your own age" (100).

Nonetheless, it should be noted that the age of a person, according to 19th-century beliefs, was not regarded merely in terms of his or her number of years. True maturity was believed to be constituted by a person’s health, character and knowledge:

> Age is to be counted from two qualities – the health of the subject, and the formation of his or her character. [...] An early formation of character, when accompanied by an equal growth and strength of body, may be taken as equivalent to age; for it is character and knowledge which make age. (*How to Woo* 9-10)

This notion is again featured in *Jane Eyre*, when in one of her conversations with Mr Rochester, Jane denies his pretensions to superiority and states her belief that age alone does not equal maturity:

> "Then [...] do you agree with me that I have a right to be a little masterful, abrupt, perhaps exacting, sometimes, on the grounds I stated, namely, that I am old enough to be your father, and that I have battled through a varied experience with many men of many nations, and roamed over half the globe, while you have lived quietly with one set of people in one house?" [...] "I don't think, sir, you have a right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have – your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience."
"Humph! Promptly spoken. But I won’t allow that, seeing that it would never suit my case, as I have made an indifferent, not to say a bad, use of both advantages." (152-53)

2.3.2 Character pairing in the novels

As advice manuals so sedulously propagate, "[a] similarity of disposition in wife and husband should be sought for" and "[t]he pleasure of the one should be reflected in the mind of the other" (How to Woo 10). Jane and Mr Rochester are depicted as the perhaps most ideal couple of all the novels analysed regarding this similarity of mind and tastes:

I hold myself supremely blest – blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine. [...] To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking. All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character. (500)

The supreme importance of character compatibility features quite heavily in Pride and Prejudice as well. As stated before, conduct books of the time also illustrate the potentially disastrous consequences resulting from the lack of suitability between marriage partners: "For what melancholy instances are daily to be witnessed in persons being united together of such uncongenial dispositions, that the married life, which ought to be a scene of uninterrupted peace and harmony, is frequently one of strife and misery!" (Etiquette 16). This attitude is clearly reflected by Mr Bennet when advising Elizabeth to reconsider her decision vis-à-vis Mr Darcy:

"I know your disposition, Lizzy. I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery. My child, let me not have the grief of eyeing you unable to respect your partner in life. You know not what you are about." (303)

Despite the initial reservations of Mr Bennet, however, Elizabeth and Mr Darcy are described as perfectly suited for each other as far as character and disposition are concerned:

She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgement, information and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. (252)
A crucial aspect in the context of being acquainted with a potential marriage partner’s character is naturally that of acknowledging, and at best also valuing, his or her individual peculiarities. As Mann points out with reference to Mr Collins proposal to Elizabeth, for example, all his considerations have very little to do with her as a person:

Adept at prearranging such little elegant compliments as flatter ladies, Mr. Collins had certainly composed this oration mentally before his arrival at Longbourn, perhaps during his journey thither with Lady Catherine’s command to marry still ringing in his ears. Consequently, it might just as well have been addressed "To Whom It May Concern" as to Miss Elizabeth Bennet, which became apparent when, in spite and wounded pride, he proposed to Charlotte Lucas just two days after Elizabeth's refusal. (204)

Similarly, Jones, in her introduction to the novel, describes Mr Collin's proposal as such that the reader can "hardly fail to sympathize with Elizabeth's acute sense of his awfulness as a prospective husband, nor to register the difference between his calculated and entirely impersonal criteria for a good wife and Darcy's irrepresible response to Elizabeth's individuality" (xi). Elizabeth herself is also depicted as aware that her own unique characteristics are what first caught Mr Darcy's attention and appealed to him: "The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the woman who were always speaking and looking, and thinking for your approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike them" (PP 306).

The same idea again holds true for Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester. He is drawn to the peculiarities of her character; it is thus her individuality, with all its idiosyncrasies, that he is in love with and not some idealised image of her, such as Lydgate has of Rosamond or Mr Casaubon of Dorothea. Neither does he regard her in terms of her potential value as a helpmate or fulfiller of a "need", which are the primary motives of St John Rivers and Mr Casaubon, and certainly not as a means to financial improvement, which presents the main inducement for both Mr Slope and Bertie Stanhope.

2.3.3 Love or money? – The financial side of courtship

Due to the legal implications of a matrimonial union, i.e. that "by law virtually all of a woman’s property became her husband’s upon marriage", courtship was, as Pool puts it, "a very serious matter indeed" (180) and "in some measure a career move as well as a search for a life partner" (181). He also states that "[t]here was little false delicacy about this sort of economic maneuvering" (181), financial matters being addressed quite openly by the respective parties of an impending marriage. The novels analysed support this view, as nearly all of them feature references to financial considerations. In fact, one could even argue that a statement on the financial situation of a potential suitor often
seems to be of as much interest as a description of his person or character. The reader is typically made aware of the worldly circumstances of the protagonists in quite some detail, occasionally even down to exact figures. In the very first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, the reader is informed about Mr Bingley’s affairs to a rather astonishing extent:

[He] inherited property to the amount of nearly an hundred thousand pounds from his father, who had intended to purchase an estate, but did not live to do it. – Mr. Bingley intended it likewise, and sometimes made choice of his country; but as he was now provided with a good house and the liberty of a manor, it was doubtful to many of those who bets knew the easiness of his temper, whether he might not spend the remainder of his days at Netherfield, and leave the next generation to purchase. His sisters were very anxious for his having an estate of his own; but though he was now established only as a tenant, Miss Bingley was by no means unwilling to preside at his table, nor was Mrs. Hurst, who had married a man of more fashion than fortune, less disposed to consider his house as her home when it suited her. (16)

On first being introduced to Mr Darcy, the readers are again provided not only with a description of his appearance, but also his financial status – "ten thousand a year" (12) and the means of the Bennet family are equally well disclosed to the reader:

Mr. Bennet’s property consisted almost entirely in an estate of two thousand a year, which, unfortunately for his daughters, was entailed in default of heirs male, on a distant relation; and their mother’s fortune, though ample for her situation in life, could but ill supply the deficiency of his. Her father had been an attorney in Meryton, and had left her four thousand pounds. (27)

Mrs Bennet features as the character most obsessed with figures in all of the novels analysed and seems to take delight in frequently stating the estimated worth of her daughters’ suitors. When informed of Elizabeth’s engagement to Mr Darcy, her thoughts again exclusively concern the financial aspect of that marriage: "Good gracious! Lord bless me! only think! dear me! Mr. Darcy! Who would have thought it [...] how rich and how great you will be! What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have! Jane’s nothing to it – nothing at all. [...] Ten thousand a year!" (304-305). In *Jane Eyre*, the exact amount of Jane’s salary as a governess is stated, "thirty pounds per annum" (103) – providing contemporary readers with an idea of her economic value and thus sharpening the contrast between herself and Mr Rochester. The reader is not left in doubt as to the extent of the fortune inherited by her uncle either, but again given the figures: "twenty thousand pounds" (427).

The financial aspect of marriage, and especially the notion that a man must be in a position to afford a wife, is a pervasive theme throughout *Middlemarch* as well. When it is settled that the marriage between Dorothea and Mr. Casaubon is to take place within six
weeks, the narrator’s comment is: "Why not? Mr. Casaubon’s house was ready" (51). Most of Dr Lydgate’s troubles are of a monetary nature and arise from his marriage to Rosamond and the eventual union between Dorothea and Will Ladislaw is long hindered by lack of means on his part and the stipulations of Mr Casaubon’s will. The relationship most affected by financial difficulties, however, is that of Fred Vincy and Mary Garth. Mr Garth takes great pains to reach an agreement with Mr Bulstrode concerning the tenancy of Stone Court and the management of the land there, which finally enables Fred to marry his daughter – though not right away:

"It will be a sad while before you can be married, Mary." (785)
"Not a sad while, father – I mean to be merry [...] I have been single and merry for four-and-twenty years and more: I suppose it will not be quite as long again as that." (786)

The major hindrance – money – thus overcome, there is no more obstacle to a marriage. When informed by Mary of her father’s plans, Fred’s reply is, "Oh, I could be a tremendously good fellow then, Mary, and we could be married directly." (788)

Advice manuals of the time also clearly state that a suitor is to acquaint the parents or guardians of his chosen one with his financial circumstances and that they in turn are to inform him what her exact fortune is. As Pool points out,

If this sounds like the preliminary negotiations to a corporate merger rather than the joyous coming together of two lovesick young people, that is because in a society where power, money, and prestige were still often tied to the possession of great estates and a name, an economic transaction is really what is was. A husband often had to have a rich wife in order to keep up the ancestral family name in style. And since her fortune by law became her husband’s property at marriage, the bride’s family had to worry about making sure she and her children had something to live on if her husband died or were a wastrel. (181)

There were certain arrangements the family of an heiress could resort to in order to protect their daughter’s fortune from a wasteful husband, such as establishing a trustee who would manage the property on her behalf (see Teachman 159). Thus, before the passing of the Married Women’s Property Act in 1870, "lawyers were kept busy building into marriage settlements protection for the woman" (Pearsall 131). Women were also entitled by law to a dower, "the income from approximately one third of their husband’s land" on his death, but the Dower Act of 1833 "all but abolished" this (Pool 181). As a result, a wealthy lady’s family typically sought to establish a marriage settlement, stipulating for "pin money", thus an allowance during his life, a "jointure", a substantial portion of property or money to support her after his death, and "portions" for their children (182) – terms frequently occurring in the novels of the time.
Although 19th-century conduct books strongly advise against a marriage for money, it was often rendered inevitable by the social system and disadvantaged position of women and also features as a rather common phenomenon in the novels of the time. Charlotte Lucas, for example, is clearly not romantically attached to Mr Collins but enters a marriage of convenience with him. Elizabeth, bewildered by her friend's decision, is reminded by her sister Jane that Charlotte "is one of a large family; that as to fortune, it is a most eligible match" (PP 114-115). Even Mr Bennet, though well acquainted with his daughter's character, initially assumes that her acceptance of Mr Darcy is motivated by mercenary intentions: "Lizzy [...] what are you doing? Are you out of your sense, to be accepting this man? Have not you always hated him? [...] He is rich, to be sure, and you may have more fine clothes and fine carriages than Jane. But will they make you happy?" (303).

Yet the novels also feature male fortune-hunters who prey on wealthy young women. Bertie Stanhope's view of Eleanor Bold in *Barchester Towers*, for example, is that of "a widow with lots of tin, a fine baby, a beautiful complexion, and the George and Dragon hotel up in the High Street" (124). Mr Slope's designs on Eleanor Slope, too, begin when he learns that she is quite a rich young lady with "twelve hundred a year of her own" (119). As Trollope states, "The train of Mr. Slope's ideas will probably be plain to all my readers. Why should he not make the twelve hundred a year his own?" and thus Mr Slope sets out "to make himself the master of the wife and money" (119).

Some heroines are described as being perfectly aware of mercenary considerations in marriage matters – both in the case of considering suitors and in being considered by them – while others find it hard to reconcile themselves to this materialistic view. When Eleanor realises that Bertie Stanhope's sister had played all sorts of little schemes (how she had "continually contrived to throw the two of them together", "encouraged all manner of little intimacies" and "with singular cordiality persisted in treating Eleanor as one of the family"; 406) and for the first time comprehends that all this was done in order to secure her income for the family, she is described as disillusioned and stunned:

Such a feeling as this is very bitter when it first impresses itself on a young mind. To the old such plots and plans, such matured schemes for obtaining the goods of this world without the trouble of earning them, such long-headed attempts to convert "tuum" into "meum", are the ways of life to which they are accustomed. [...] But Eleanor had not yet learnt to look on her money as a source of danger; she had not begun to regard herself as fair game to be hunted down by hungry gentlemen. (*BT* 406)
The idea suggested by Trollope, that young women are not usually aware of being regarded in a mercenary light, clashes considerably with Dickens’ description of Bella, a self-proclaimed fortune-hunter:

"And now, Pa," pursued Bella, "I'll make a confession to you. I am the most mercenary little wretch that ever lived in the world. [...] I have made up my mind that I must have money, Pa. I feel that I can't beg it, borrow it, or steal it; and so I have resolved that I must marry it. [...] If ever there was a mercenary plotter whose thoughts and designs were always in her mean occupation, I am the amiable creature." (316-317)

Also as concerns the older generation, there is a discrepancy of views between Trollope’s and Dickens’ novels. Trollope describes "the old" as accustomed to such "plots and plans", stating that "[w]ith them it is the success that disgusts, not the attempt" (BT 406). Bella’s father, however, far from encouraging his daughter in her endeavour, states, "But, my dear Bella, this is quite alarming at your age" (317) and seeks to dissuade her from such a course: "It would be quite [shocking], if you fully knew what you said, my dear, or meant it" (318).

Although a common phenomenon, marriage for money is quite clearly condemned in the novels analysed. Bella Wilfer learns that sound morals and true affection mean more than money and undergoes a substantial revaluation of Mr Rokesmith, whom she had previously dismissed as a poor and thus unwanted suitor. Rejecting Mr Boffin's money, she tells him: "I would rather he thought well of me [...] though he swept the street for bread, than that you did, though you splashed the mud upon him from the wheels of a chariot of pure gold.—There!" (586). In Madding Crowd, Hardy, too, depicts love as the crucial element in matters of courtship, as well as an obvious prerequisite for marriage. Bathsheba (initially) rejects both Gabriel Oak and Mr Boldwood on the grounds of not being in love with them:

"May I call in the evening, or will you walk along with me o’ Sundays? I don’t want you to make-up your mind at once, if you’d rather not."
"No – no – I cannot. Don’t press me any more – don’t. I don’t love you – so "twould be ridiculous." (27)

"I feel, Mr Boldwood, that though I respect you much, I do not feel – what would justify me to – in accepting your offer" (99).

Women in the 19th-century had one main predefined aim in life: marriage. The severe restrictions placed upon them by contemporary laws and moral values often left them no other choice than to conform to society's expectations, while the necessity of choosing a husband capable of providing for them, frequently meant a tug of war between a love match and a marriage of convenience. The austerity and rigidness of existing courtship
rituals did not facilitate the process; yet, as women were legally subsumed under the identity of their husbands once married and divorce was extremely difficult to obtain, their emotional as well as physical well-being depended entirely on their choice of marriage partner. It is thus important to bear in mind the stakes involved when analysing marriage proposal scenes of 19th-century fiction.
3. Putting "rugged feeling into a graceful shape": a stylistic analysis of 19th-century marriage proposals

The style of the marriage proposals analysed differs considerably from suitor to suitor and ranges from the premeditated and highly elaborate to the impulsive and simple, from a deeply impassioned and fervent to a fairly neutral and business-like tone.

3.1 Eloquence vs. lack of articulateness

Mr Collins, for example, is described by Herrle as "floridly long-winded and solemnly formal" and as "acutely aware of his style and the social functions of rhetoric" (241). This linguistic disposition, together with the "mixture of servility and self-importance" (56) that Mr Bennet makes out in Mr Collins’ letter to him, also features in the latter’s proposal to Elizabeth. On the one hand, he expresses himself with the utmost civility and gallantry: he refers to her "modesty" as "add[ing] to [her] other perfections" (88) when she exhibits an unwillingness to be left alone with him, and speaks of her "manifold attractions", her "loveliness" and "amiable qualifications" (91) even after she has rejected him. Yet the reasons he states for wishing to marry Elizabeth and his failure to accept her repeated refusals reveal his absolute blindness to her point of view and consequently the self-interest and blandness of his proposal. Herrle argues that "[Collins’] formality signifies not merely stiffness but a dogmatic attachment to the prescribed models of polite behaviour and talk of his day", in other words, "Collins speaks like a conduct book" (249). He couches his proposal in a manner he deems appropriate and expected, but the actual lack of feeling behind his words is apparent throughout.

Mr Casaubon’s proposal in Middlemarch, too, is obviously the result of much deliberation. It is very elaborate in syntax and lexis, thus features long-winded, complex syntactic structures with numerous sub-clauses and an exceedingly choice diction:

"It was, I confess, beyond my hope to meet with this rare combination of elements both solid and attractive, adapted to supply aid in graver labours and to cast a charm over vacant hours; and but for the event of my introduction to you (which, let me again say, I trust not to be superficially coincident with foreshadowing needs, but providentially related thereto as stages towards the completion of a life’s plan), I should presumably have gone on to the last without any attempt to lighten my solitariness by a matrimonial union." (43-44)

The thought and care invested in the composition of this proposal are obvious, but in contrast to Mr Collins’ manner of expression the syntactic complexity appears less unnatural, as Mr Casaubon proposes in written form. While the underlying egoism of both
suitors is evident, Mr Collins’ proposal also reveals him to be a foolish character, while Mr Casaubon’s letter rather reinforces the impression of a highly scholarly mind.

Gabriel Oak’s offer of marriage to Bathsheba in Madding Crowd, by comparison, appears very simple and straightforward: "Will you marry me? Do, Bathsheba. I love you far more than common!" (24). Throughout their entire conversation, Gabriel clearly attaches more importance to honesty and directness than to his style. He does not resort to high-flowing and elegant expressions of sentiments, but speaks his mind freely and genuinely. This artlessness is also commented on by Hardy when he states that "[f]armer Oak had one-and-a-half Christian characteristics too many to succeed with Bathsheba: his humility, and a superfluous moiety of honesty" (26).

Stylistic considerations are occasionally referred to explicitly by characters in the marriage proposals analysed. In instances of sincere and deep emotion, some suitors point out the difficulty of their situation and the inability to accurately express the state of their feelings. Mr Headstone, for example, does so very candidly in his proposal to Lizzy:

"I hope you will not judge of me by my hesitating manner when I speak to you. You see me at my greatest disadvantage. It is most unfortunate for me that I wish you to see me at my best, and that I know you see me at my worst [...] [W]hatever I say to you seems, even in my own ears, below what I want to say, and different from what I want to say. I can’t help it." (MF 387-388)

While most suitors would apologise for their lack of articulateness, Mr Headstone puts the blame for his incapacitated state entirely on Lizzy:

"[Y]ou are the ruin—the ruin—the ruin—of me. I have no resources in myself, I have no confidence in myself, I have no government of myself when you are near me or in my thoughts. And you are always in my thoughts now. I have never been quit of you since I first saw you. Oh, that was a wretched day for me! That was a wretched, miserable day!" (388)

Heroines are occasionally portrayed as struggling for words as well. Bathsheba, for instance, refers to her momentary inability to express herself more articulately when refusing Mr Boldwood: "[I]t is painful to have to say I am surprised, so that I don’t know how to answer you with propriety and respect – but am only just able to speak out my feeling – I mean my meaning; that I am afraid I can’t marry you, much as I respect you" (100). In most cases, lacking eloquence on a character’s part thus lies in an actual impotence, resulting from the influence of strong emotion or surprise. However, it might also be founded on a sheer unwillingness to attempt artificial eloquence. Mr Boldwood, for his part, tells Bathsheba: "I wish I could say courteous flatteries to you [...] and put
my rugged feeling into a graceful shape: but I have neither power nor patience to learn such things" (99). Dorothea, too, reveals her impatience for deliberate elaborateness in speech when answering Mr Casaubon’s letter, stating rather simply, "I am very grateful to you for loving me, and thinking me worthy to be your wife" – adding, "If I said more, it would only be the same thing written out at greater length" (45).

3.2 Planning vs. spontaneity

Naturally tied to the issue of articulateness is the question of spontaneity versus planning on the part of a suitor, as preparation obviously puts suitors at an advantage. Mr Collins proposal, for instance, is quite evidently not only premeditated, but also pre-formulated. As Mann puts it, "Adept at prearranging such little elegant compliments as flatter ladies, Mr. Collins had certainly composed this oration mentally before his arrival at Longbourn, perhaps during his journey thither with Lady Catherine’s command to marry still ringing in his ears" (204). Mr Casaubon’s letter, as well, does not constitute an impetuous act written on the spur of a moment but is reminiscent of a well-considered, carefully-crafted business letter.

Two different examples for a suitor’s approach are found in Barchester Towers. In the case of Mr Slope, Trollope depicts a suitor’s preparation, describing how Mr Slope "encourage[s] himself" by "call[ing] in the assistance of Bacchus", thus drinking his fair share of the wine served "in order to screw himself up to the undertaking which he had in hand" (380; emphasis added). Mr Slope also seizes an opportune moment for advancement – Eleanor being alone and "the grounds […] as nearly vacant as [he] could wish them to be" (380). In the case of Mr Arabin, however, there is no premeditation or preparation. Rather, he is depicted as acting out of the impulse of the moment:

Having ascertained that he loved this woman, and having now reason to believe that she was free to receive his love, at least if she pleased to do so, he followed her into the garden to make such wooing as he could. […] He had not considered how he would address her; he had not thought what he would say. (283-284)

In a similar vein, Mr Lydgate does not come to the Vincys’ house with the intention of proposing to Rosamond but is led to do so only by the sudden "crystallising feather-touch" that "[shakes] flirtation into love": his realisation that she "depend[s] on him for her joy" (292). However, this certainly does not present the typical approach in the novels analysed and a seemingly sudden proposal also does not always denote the absence of a prior resolution. Mr Rochester’s proposal may develop unexpectedly – for Jane and the reader – out of one of many conversations with her, but it is the result of a previous determination, as is Mr Darcy’s unanticipated offer to Elizabeth.
Although instances of impulsive and unplanned proposals thus feature in the novels analysed, they definitely constitute the exception rather than the rule.

3.3 Romantic vs. business-like

No marriage proposal analysed is like the other; in fact, they feature a surprisingly wide variety of tone, given the commonality of context and purpose. Mr Rochester is initially detached, sarcastic and superior, but then becomes passionate, sincere and eager. Mr Darcy, by contrast, starts out proud and confident though also fervent and earnest, but grows enraged, bitter and sarcastic once he has been rejected by Elizabeth. Quite unusually for 19th-century fiction, however, both proposals border on being insulting: Mr Darcy’s by his arrogance and lack of tact and Mr Rochester’s by his sarcasm and arguable cruelty preceding his actual declaration.

Mr Collins proposes in a complacent and rather matter-of-factly way – managing to be flattering and emotionless at the same time – and Mr Casaubon’s proposal bears some resemblance in that respect: it, too, is polite and gallant yet rather subdued in emotion. Whereas Mr Collins and Mr Casaubon make use of compliments to further their cause, Mr Darcy unflinchingly states the "scruples that had long prevented [his] forming any serious design" (159) and Mr Rochester, far from flattering Jane, echoes her own uncomplimentary phrasing when stating, "You – poor and obscure, and small and plain as you are – I entreat to accept me as a husband" (286; emphasis added).

Mr Slope, though not serious in the affection he professes, is exorbitantly romantic in tone and annoys Eleanor with his many endearments and his presumptuous familiarity, while Bertie Stanhope is completely passionless, blunt and rather too confiding. Eleanor is thus referred to as "beautiful woman", "dearest Eleanor" and "sweetest angel" (383-384) by Mr Slope, while Bertie Stanhope good-naturedly and candidly relates to her the "plan" his sister has devised to ensure his financial well-fare: "She wants me to marry you" (406).

In stark contrast to these examples stand the proposals of Mr Boldwood and Mr Headstone, which are so fiercely earnest and emotional in tone that the heroines in question are truly frightened by the suitors’ fervour. Mr Boldwood’s utterance of her name alone, for example, startles Bathsheba due to the intensity of implied feeling:

His tone was so utterly removed from all she had expected as a beginning. It was lowness and quiet accentuated: and emphasis of deep meanings, their form, at the
same time, being scarcely expressed. Silence has sometimes a remarkable power of showing itself as the disembodied soul of feeling wandering without its carcase, and it is then more impressive than speech. In the same way, to say a little is often to tell more than to say a great deal. Boldwood told everything in that word. (98-99)

Throughout the proposal scene, Mr Boldwood's tone remains deeply sincere, pleading and almost desperate. Mr Headstone’s proposal to Lizzy Hexam in *Mutual Friend* is still more excessively passionate, ardent even to self-abandonment:

"You could draw me to fire, you could draw me to water, you could draw me to the gallows, you could draw me to any death, you could draw me to anything I have most avoided, you could draw me to any exposure and disgrace. [...] But if you would return a favourable answer to my offer of myself in marriage, you could draw me to any good – every good – with equal force." (389-390)

This fervency of expression far exceeds the shallow and artificial flattery of Mr Collins or the compliments Mr Casaubon pays Dorothea on her "elevation of thought" and "capability of devotedness" (43) – virtues he seeks to employ for his own interests. Yet Mr Headstone is so utterly impassioned that his proposal is not merely awkward and strained but even appears rather humiliating and painful to himself.

### 3.4 Formal vs. informal

Most of the marriage proposals analysed are also formal in tone, as the suitor is frequently still unsure of his ground. Yet the formality of a proposal is not only tied to the level of acquaintance between a couple, but also to the social background of the suitor. Gabriel Oak, for example, is very informal in tone, although his acquaintance with Bathsheba is very slight at the time of the proposal, whereas Fred Vincy, the son of a well-to-do middle-class family, takes a highly informal tone with Mary due to their intimate relationship.

Tied to the question of formality are the forms of address. As stated in the conduct books of the time, a suitor should not address his chosen one by her Christian name before having been accepted (see *How to Woo* 30). Mr Darcy, for example, adheres to this convention by switching to “dearest, loveliest Elizabeth” (297) only after he has reached an understanding with her. Mr Slope, by contrast, disregards etiquette and comports himself in too familiar a fashion with both Eleanor and Signora Neroni, for which he is also reprimanded:

"Oh, Madeline!” he sighed.
"Well, my name is Madeline,” said she, "but none except my own family usually call me so. (BT 247)
"Ah, Eleanor," he continued, and it seemed to be his idea that as he had once found courage to pronounce her Christian name, he could not utter it often enough. [...] "Ah, Eleanor—"
"My name, Mr. Slope, is Mrs. Bold," said Eleanor. (BT 384)

Mr Rochester, too, is depicted as occasionally addressing Jane by her first name before their engagement. The unusualness of this practice serves to reinforce the impression of his rather eccentric personality and the unconventional relationship he shares with her from the start. However, Mr Rochester does attempt not to use too familiar an expression when addressing Jane before revealing his feelings to her. When asked by her whether she would have to leave Thornfield soon, for example, he replies, "Very soon, my— that is, Miss Eyre" (281; emphasis added). Having finally disclosed his true intentions, he immediately seeks to annihilate any remaining indication of social distance between them by insisting on her use of his Christian name as well: "Jane, accept me quickly. Say, Edward—give me my name—Edward— I will marry you." (286).

The great relevance that was obviously attached to the form of address in the 19th century is also revealed in the case of Eleanor and Mr Arabin in *Barchester Towers*. The mere utterance of her first name is presented as a trying and bold act for Mr Arabin and equated to a declaration of love:

"Mrs. Bold—" at last he said and then stopped himself. If he could not speak, how was she to do so? He had called her by her name, the same name that any merest stranger would have used! She withdrew her hand from his and moved as though to return to her seat. "Eleanor!" he then said in his softest tone, as though the courage of a lover were as yet but half-assumed, as though he were still afraid of giving offence by the freedom which he took. She looked slowly, gently, almost piteously up into his face. There was at any rate no anger there to deter him. "Eleanor!" he again exclaimed, and in a moment he had her clasped to his bosom. [...] Eleanor, my own Eleanor, my own, my wife!" (466)

The use of the heroine’s first name can, in this particular instance, even be seen as constituting the marriage proposal itself. Mr Arabin, "afraid of giving offence by the freedom which he [takes]", uses Eleanor’s Christian name deliberately, as a kind of request, and by carefully gauging her reaction as a means of obtaining her consent.

**3.5 Natural vs. "fictional"**

Another interesting question in the context of style concerns the difference between written and spoken language, thus if authors attempt to depict an oral mode of language in their rendering of marriage proposals.
Toolan argues that natural and fictional conversation must, by necessity, differ in many ways as "there are [...] literary conventions at work governing the fictional representation of talk, so that the rendered text is quite other than a faithful transcription of a natural conversation" (195). The various options available to authors in their portrayal of a character's speech have already been discussed in the second chapter.

Fictional conversation is "tidied up" in that it typically contains hardly any instances of "unclear utterances, overlaps, false starts, hesitations, and repetitions" (Toolan 195), although authors do occasionally integrate such markers of natural speech into their portrayal of fictional conversation. Of all the authors analysed, Hardy undoubtedly demonstrates the most perceptible effort to imitate natural talk exchanges. The proposal scene between Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba, for example, features instances of interruptions, ejaculations, and hesitation markers. Having run after Gabriel to set right her aunt's mistake, Bathsheba is not only described as being out of breath, but also speaks that way: "– It was quite a mistake – aunt’s telling you I had a young man already, [...] I haven’t a sweetheart at all – and I never had one, and I thought that, as times go with women, it was such a pity to send you away thinking that I had several" (23), Hardy using dashes to indicate pauses between clauses. In addition, the diction of his characters is plausible, because tied to their social background and the context of the situation. When Gabriel Oak admits that marriage to a rich woman would, in fact, constitute the more prudent choice and Bathsheba angrily asks why he then came to "disturb [her]" (26), he answers:

"I can’t do what I think would be – would be –"  
"Right?"  
"No: wise." (MC 26)

In contrast to the dialogues between Mr Rochester and Jane or Mr Darcy and Elizabeth, for example, which seem rather too elaborate to present plausible imitations of natural conversation, both Bathsheba and Gabriel couch their feelings in simple linguistic terms – their exchange of words therefore never appearing unrealistic or contrived.

Apart from such markers of natural speech as ungrammatical utterances, false starts, hesitations or overlaps, there are a number of other ways authors can create the illusion of an actual conversation. Indications of intense emotion, nervousness, sarcasm or despair, among others, constitute common examples in this respect. When Jane, due to Mr Rochester’s scheming, wrongly assumes that he will marry Miss Ingram, he replies, "Ex-act-ly – pre-cise-ly: with your usual acuteness, you have hit the nail straight on the head" (281). By rendering this instance of deliberately delayed diction, Brontë achieves a vivid impression of Mr Rochester's sarcastic and rather smug air while speaking. Dickens’
description of Mr Headstone, on the other hand, reinforces the anguish expressed by the character’s words:

"You draw me to you. If I were shut up in a strong prison, you would draw me out. I should break through the wall to come to you. If I were lying on a sick bed, you would draw me up – to stagger to your feet and fall there." The wild energy of the man, now quite let loose, was absolutely terrible. He stopped and laid his hand upon a piece of the coping of the burial-ground enclosure, as if he would have dislodged the stone. "No man knows till the time comes, what depths are within him. To some men it never comes; let them rest and be thankful! To me, you brought it; on me, you forced it; and the bottom of this raging sea," striking himself upon the breast, "has been heaved up ever since." (389; emphasis added)

In this case, a forceful picture of the conversation between Mr Headstone and Lizzy is created by narrative descriptions of the suitor's movements and manner of speaking.

Another crucial way in which many of the depicted dialogues resemble natural speech lies in their occasional incoherence, indirectness or incompleteness – in other words, the fact that more is understood than is actually stated. This interesting fact will be the subject of the following chapter.
4. From speech acts to scripts: making sense of suitors

The marriage proposal scenes analysed feature numerous instances in which heroines arrive at an understanding of the suitors’ meaning, despite the obscure, incoherent, fragmented or indirect nature of their utterances and in some cases even sheer failure to express themselves intelligibly at all. This frequent lack of articulateness on the part of the suitors raises the question of how such comprehension can in fact be achieved. In the following, three linguistic approaches offering possible explanations to this problem will be outlined and their respective claims applied to the context of this thesis.

4.1 Speech acts and speech events

As Yule, drawing on the work of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), states, "In attempting to express themselves, people do not only produce utterances containing grammatical structures and words, they perform actions via those utterances" (Pragmatics 47). These are referred to as speech acts and they are described according to "the speaker’s communicative intention in producing an utterance" (47), for example, as invitations, requests, promises or compliments.

There are three aspects of a speech act: the locutionary act, "the production of sounds and words with meaning", the illocutionary act, "the issuing of an utterance with conventional communicative force achieved "in saying" and the perlocutionary act, "the actual effect achieved "by saying" (Schiffrin 51). The illocutionary act thus describes the force of an utterance in terms of its performance and the perlocutionary act its consequences, i.e. how it affects the "actions, thoughts, beliefs of hearers" (Schiffrin 56). In the case of a marriage proposal, the linguistic utterance Will you marry me? would constitute the locutionary act, the performance of an offer of marriage the illocutionary act and the implicit desire for acceptance, thus the attempt at persuasion, the perlocutionary act.

Searle also proposes a distinction between five different types of speech acts: declarations, representatives, expressives, directives and commissives. The most relevant types for the present analysis are expressives, thus statements about what the speaker feels, directives, referring to attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something, and commissives, which "commit the speaker to some future course of action" (Schiffrin 58). Consequently, requests or offers on the part of suitors are examples for directives, while promises or vows would count as commissives.
Another relevant aspect of speech act theory concerns the distinction between direct and indirect speech acts, the former referring to acts where the structure of the utterance (i.e. declarative, interrogative or imperative) fits its function. In other cases, the relation between structure and function is indirect. A declarative statement may in fact function as a directive or commissive, thus be used to make a request or promise. Although a marriage proposal would typically be expected to take the form of an interrogative utterance, in several of the novels analysed, no direct question is put to the heroine. Instead, a declarative statement, such as a profession of love, occasionally serves as a marriage proposal. Sometimes suitors also choose not to openly address the question of marriage, but to approach the matter more slowly and indirectly by asking about preconditions first. As Yule states,

There is a definite difference between asking someone to do X and asking someone if the preconditions for doing X are in place [...] Asking about preconditions technically doesn't count as making a request, but does allow the hearer to react "as if" the request had been made. Because a request is an imposition by the speaker on the hearer, it is better, in most social circumstances, for the speaker to avoid a direct imposition via a direct request. When the speaker asks about preconditions, no direct request is made. (Pragmatics 56-57)

The "preconditions" a suitor would be likely to address are a heroine’s plans regarding marriage and the opinion she has of himself as a person – thus providing hints as to the overall attractiveness of his proposal to her. The beginning of the proposal scene in Jane Eyre, for example, is hard to make out. Mr Rochester gives Jane no clue of his intention, their tête-à-tête begins with him inviting her to have a look at a "great moth" (279). He then slowly proceeds to draw her out, to wring from her step by step the confession of her attachment to the place, to her pupil and eventually to him:

"It is a long way off, sir."
"No matter – a girl of your sense will not object to the voyage or the distance."
"Not the voyage, but the distance: and then the sea is a barrier –"
"From what, Jane?"
"From England and from Thornfield: and –"
"Well?"
"From you, sir." (JE 282)

Only when assured that his feelings are reciprocated, he moves on to the proposal as such. The social situation of proposing to someone thus does not merely consist of one utterance or speech act. Rather, it involves a set of utterances which can be referred to as a speech event and which Yule defines as "an activity in which participants interact via language in some conventional way to arrive at some outcome" (Pragmatics 57). A speech event generally includes "an obvious central speech act" as well as "other utterances leading up to and subsequently reacting to that central action" (57) and is tied to the roles of speaker and hearer, their respective status and relationship. Since no
suitor in his right mind would simply walk up to a heroine and propose to her without any form of introduction, a marriage proposal in its entirety – presenting an instance of "extended interaction" (57) – therefore qualifies as a speech event rather than a simple speech act.

One further important aspect of speech act theory concerns the notion of "felicity conditions", thus "certain expected or appropriate circumstances [...] for the performance of a speech act to be recognized as intended" (Yule Pragmatics 50). Yule gives the speech act of a promise as an example and describes that, first of all, a number of "general conditions" (50) have to be fulfilled, such as: the listener has to be able to understand the language used and believe in the sincerity of what is said. In addition, there are "content conditions", for example, that the utterance of a promise must refer to a future event involving the participants, as well as "preparatory conditions", such as "the event will not happen by itself" and "the event will have a beneficial effect" (51). In most cases, these conditions are met, which means that the heroines proposed to in the novels analysed are aware of the intentions of their suitors. In the case of Mr Rochester's proposal to Jane, however, a necessary general condition – her belief in his sincerity – is lacking, which means that she initially does not recognise his speech acts as intended and they fail to be successful.

Performing acts through language is thus only possible because of these "constitutive rules" (Schiffrin 60) which people share and assume to be respected. She refers to "two bodies of knowledge" (90) people draw upon regarding these rules: linguistic knowledge and knowledge about the world (60). In the context of the former category, Grice's "Cooperative Principle" constitutes a major concept worth discussing in more detail.

4.2 Grice's "Cooperative Principle"

As has been argued before, heroines frequently arrive at an understanding of their suitors’ intentions although these are not explicitly verbalised.⁴ The meaning of certain utterances therefore cannot be regarded simply in terms of what is said. As Yule points out, "Based on the premise that speakers and listeners generally cooperate with each other when involved in conversation, the speakers would attempt to convey something and the listeners would assume that this must be more than the simple meaning of the words" (35). This additionally conveyed meaning is referred to as an implicature, a term used "to account for what a speaker can imply, suggest, or mean, as distinct from what the speaker literally says." (Brown, G. and Yule 31). While, according to speech act theory, sequential coherence derives from "well-formed structures of speech acts"

---

⁴ For the following see Yule, Pragmatics 36-38 and Grice 24-37.
(Schiffrin 353), Grice holds talk exchanges to be cooperative efforts, their sequential identity thus resulting from cooperation between the participants:

Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually direction. (Grice 26)

He defines a general principle typically observed by participants, the well-known **Cooperative Principle**: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (26). According to this view, participants in conversation share a general agreement of co-operation and each participant expects the other(s) to conform to specific conventions. Among these maxims typically observed, Grice lists that of **quantity** (be as informative as necessary), **quality** (be truthful), **relation** (be to the point) and **manner** (be clear and orderly).^5

However, the maxims of the Cooperative Principle are not always adhered to by speakers. A participant in a talk exchange may "quietly and unostentatiously violate a maxim" or "opt out from the operation both of the maxim and of the Cooperative Principle" by indicating an unwillingness to cooperate (Grice 30; emphasis given). In other cases, the existence of a clash between maxims may render a participant unable to observe all of them, and finally, he or she may flout a maxim and "blatantly fail to fulfill it" (30). As participants in a talk exchange are expected to observe these conversational maxims, their violation carries with it certain implications.

Unintentional failure to comply with a conversational maxim occurs all the time in conversation, as speakers make mistakes, get carried away on a topic, narrate something in an incoherent way or make wrong assumptions about the hearer’s prior knowledge. As Pratt argues,

> Errors of this type do not threaten the assumption that the CP is in force [...] They mean only that he isn’t succeeding very well at the moment, whether for lack of verbal skill or for some other reason. On the whole, unintentional failures aren’t very serious in conversation because the turn-taking system allows the hearer to correct the offending speaker, interrupt him, or break off the exchange. (159)

In literary works, the failure of a fictional character to observe a particular maxim may also be unintentional, and mimetically represented as such, but it must always count as a deliberate flouting on the part of the writer. In presenting such a failure, the author

---

^5 Cf. Grice 26-27.
implies things in addition to what the character says, thus calling attention to the contrast between the readers’ expectations and the actual speech of the suitor. This obviously creates certain effects: violations may render a scene more gripping due to their unexpected elements, they may serve the characterisation of a speaker by highlighting his or her idiosyncrasies and they are often employed for humorous purposes.

Mr Rochester quite obviously violates the maxim of quality by deceiving Jane into believing he will marry Miss Ingram. As this constitutes a rather unusual approach, it provides readers with a further impression of his eccentric personality. Mr Collins violates the maxim of quantity by his pre-meditated verbose oration, and to some extent also the maxim of relation by detailing the role of his noble patroness in the matter. Both violations reveal his foolish nature and create a comical effect. Bertie Stanhope in Barchester Towers incurs Eleanor’s wrath by presenting more information than required as concerns his motivations for proposing to her, openly disclosing his sister’s mercenary considerations and thus the expediency of her friendship and his offer. Trollope’s comments on Mr Slope’s thoughts during his proposal to Eleanor reveal him to be violating the maxim of quality and Mr Darcy fails to observe the maxim of manner, as his proposal is not quite orderly and his rather copious explication of the concerns he has had regarding Elizabeth’s background is not merely superfluous but also inappropriate in the context of a marriage proposal.

In contrast to speech act theory, Gricean pragmatics can thus be described as "a functional approach to language" which focuses on speaker meaning rather than linguistic constructs and which regards people’s "cognitive ability to use context to make inferences" (352) as the basis of communication. The Cooperative Principle and its maxims enable interactants to arrive at interpretations of each other’s communicative intent, beyond what is actually said.

4.3 Background knowledge: frames and scripts

As outlined before, speakers of a language share a certain knowledge on which they rely in producing and understanding utterances and which is comprised of linguistic knowledge and knowledge about the world. While Grice's "Cooperative Principle" is relevant for the understanding of the first category, schemata, frames and scripts are crucial concepts in the context of the latter.²

² For the following see Brown Discourse 241-245 and Yule Pragmatics 85-86.
Yule states that "[o]ur ability to arrive automatically at interpretations of the unwritten and unsaid must be based on pre-existing knowledge structures" and that these "function like familiar patterns from previous experience that we use to interpret new experiences" (*Pragmatics* 85). In memory, knowledge about a certain topic, for example that of courtship or marriage, would be stored "as a single, easily accessible unit, rather than as a scattered collection of individual facts" (Brown, G. and Yule 236) – a schema. Schemas of a fixed and static nature, thus mental representations of "stereotyped situations" (238), are sometimes also referred to as frames. Scripts are tied closely to the concept of frames, but deal more with event sequences: while a frame is "an essentially stable set of facts about the world", a script is "more programmatic" (243) and can be regarded as an "action stereotyp[e]" (245).

As illustrated in the discussion of 19th-century courtship rituals and views on etiquette, certain ideas concerning the content, form and execution of a marriage proposal were in circulation at the time. This background knowledge allows heroines not only to interpret the discourse they encounter but in some cases to even predict events (Brown, G. and Yule 248). As Yule puts it, "For members of the same culture, the assumption of shared scripts allows much to be communicated that is not said" (*Pragmatics* 86). Hence Elizabeth is aware of the implications behind Mr Collins’ request for an interview with her, Eleanor knows "what she [is] about to go through" (381) when Mr Slope attempts more intimate small talk with her and the caresses of Dr Lydgate and Mr Arabin, within the context of 19th-century moral views, render a verbalisation of their intentions unnecessary and compensate for the lack of explicit questions or promises: "[Eleanor] had been told that her yea must be yea, or her nay, nay; but she was called on for neither the one nor the other. She told Miss Thorne that she was engaged to Mr Arabin, but no such words had passed between them, no promises had been asked or given" (466).

It is important to note that in natural speech, emotion becomes apparent not only through the use of language itself but also by means of physical symptoms, such as a trembling or reduced volume of voice, blushing and unsteady eye contact. According to the schema theory, heroines would, by means of their world knowledge, deduce such symptoms as telling of strong emotion and thus as indicators of the suitors' intentions. On the other hand, the lack of any sign of emotion would, in the case of a marriage proposal, be seen as a breach of the norm by the lady proposed to.

Frames and scripts are thus of great importance to the heroines and suitors in their process of inferencing from each other's talk. Yet readers, too, possess a certain knowledge of relevant scripts, which guides them in their interpretation of the text. As
Brown and Yule point out, "[O]ur understanding of what we read or hear is very much expectation-based" and "our expectations are conceptual rather than lexical" (242). In a similar way, Halliday and Hasan argue that "[a]ll use of language has a context" and that due to "the close link between text and context, readers and listeners make predictions; they read and listen, with expectations for what is coming next" (46).

The existence of such reader expectations is frequently exploited by authors, as the manipulation or thwarting of the same can make for much suspense or amusement. Eleanor’s reaction to Mr Slope’s advances, for example, is far from stereotypical and certainly not in keeping with the prevailing ideas of an appropriate refusal. Mr Rochester’s approach of provoking Jane into declaring her feelings first or Mr Rokesmith love declaration to Bella in front of others are not usual either, nor is the excessive emotionality of Mr Headstone and Mr Boldwood or the incredible obstinacy of Mr Collins. Eliot even refers to the unspoken "proposal" of Dr Lydgate and Rosamond’s implicit acceptance as "a strange way of arriving at an understanding" (292). These scenes are rendered all the more interesting and memorable because of their deviation from typical expectations. The fact that behaviour can be characterised as unconventional at all, however, obviously implies an existing background knowledge of a norm on the part of the readers, in the present case, shared assumptions about the nature and procedure of a marriage proposal.

Summing up, the interactants in a marriage proposal scene are able to make out much more from each other’s utterances than is explicitly stated. According to speech act theory, discourse functions because there are certain specified speech acts that people know and use, while interactional sociolinguistics puts more emphasis on inferences drawn by speaker and listener. Despite this fundamental difference and the potential shortcomings of the individual linguistic approaches, all are in their own way able to shed some light on the puzzling fact of mutual comprehension in the face of verbal obscurity and imperfection.
5. Narratological analysis

The marriage proposal in 19th-century fiction can be argued to constitute an important tool in narratological terms, as it is employed by authors for a variety of purposes.

The perhaps most typical example would be its application as culmination of the love story and resolution of the plot. In such a case, the anticipation of the marriage proposal constitutes the main driving force of the novel and its presentation is usually delayed until the end of the story – certain difficulties, hindrances or misunderstandings having kept the characters apart until then. Some works of 19th-century fiction, by contrast, feature the marriage proposal at a rather early stage in the development of the romance plot, thereby causing a disequilibrium which the further course of the novel seeks to resolve (see Rimmon-Kenan 22). *Pride and Prejudice* probably serves as the best known example in this respect. Elizabeth Bennet, due to certain misconceptions on her part and the conceited conduct of Mr Darcy, initially rejects his proposal. These obstacles having been overcome, the plot features a second proposal towards the end of the novel which, being accepted, establishes the eagerly anticipated "equilibrium".

In other novels of Austen, too, such as *Emma* and *Persuasion*, the main proposal constitutes the climax of the plot, instead of occurring in its aftermath. As Lundeen puts it, the "principal conflict" in these novels typically lies between the heroine and her future husband, whereas in Austen’s remaining novels, "the heroine is in contention with some other aspect of her world" (66). Both *Mutual Friend* and *Madding Crowd* can be argued to feature a climatic proposal as well, since existing hindrances between the lovers lie mostly in the character of the heroines and their motives for marriage. Bella Wilfer and Bathsheba Everdene initially regard themselves far above their suitors and are portrayed as undergoing a substantial "learning process", which leads them to readjust their priorities in life and thus enables them to eventually recognise the true value of the proposals received.

The heroines might also have to endure one or more disagreeable proposals by unwanted suitors before they finally receive an offer of marriage from the man they love. Eleanor Bold in *Barchester Towers* and Lizzie Hexam in *Mutual Friend*, for example, are proposed to against their will and by suitors they could never regard in the light of a husband, before the men of their choice take the initiative. As the colloquy between the characters in such undesired proposal scenes is typically rather awkward and unpleasant, and the approach and conduct of the male protagonists objectionable or even offensive, these suitors can be seen as serving the function of a foil for the eventually successful lovers.
In other cases, such as in *Jane Eyre*, the situation is again slightly different. The marriage proposal is readily accepted by the heroine, but hitherto unknown hindrances are then introduced and the resolution of the romance plot, i.e. the union in marriage, again delayed until the very end of the novel. In addition, the suspense is heightened by the introduction of another potential love interest, and the occurrence of a further marriage proposal made to the heroine, which she considers accepting.

The positioning of the marriage proposal within the sequence of the plot can thus be regarded as a significant decision in terms of the structuring of the action and the result of conscious deliberation by the author, because of its effects on reader anticipation and the creation of suspense. There are, however, also examples where these effects are deliberately destroyed by the author. Trollope, for instance, comments at quite some length on this convention of keeping readers in suspense. When describing Bertie Stanhope’s intentions with regard to Eleanor in *Barchester Towers*, he immediately discloses the following:

But let the gentle-hearted reader be under no apprehension whatsoever. It is not destined that Eleanor shall marry Mr. Slope or Bertie Stanhope. And here, perhaps, it may be allowed to the novelist to explain his views on a very important point in the art of telling tales. He ventures to reprobate that system which goes so far to violate all proper confidence between the author and his readers, by maintaining nearly to the end of the third volume a mystery as to the fate of their favourite personage. Nay, more, and worse than this, is too frequently done. Have not often the profoundest efforts of genius been used to baffle the aspirations of the reader, to raise false hopes and false fears, and to give rise to expectations which are never to be realized? [...] Our doctrine is, that the author and the reader should move along together in full confidence with each other. (126-27)

Trollope goes on to describe the danger of a literary work’s merit consisting solely in baffling readers and its only interest being in withholding the resolution of the plot until the very end:

And what can be the worth of that solicitude which a peep into the third volume can utterly dissipate? What the value of those literary charms which are absolutely destroyed by their enjoyment? [...] Nay, take the last chapter if you please – learn from its pages all the results of our troubled story, and the story shall have lost none of its interest. (127)

His statements obviously need to be taken with a grain of salt since deciding to overthrow established conventions in this one case does not mean he did so out of pure conviction or even followed his own advice in subsequent novels. As stated by Bhatia in his *Analysing Genre*, authors may choose to exploit the conventions of a

---

7 Cf. Hawthorne 130.
genre in order to achieve "effectiveness or originality" (14-16), and Trollope’s metafictional comment may be regarded as an example of this tactic.

Another typical convention of 19th-century fiction concerns the nature of a plot’s resolution, which was "apt to be particularly troublesome", as novelists "were always under pressure from readers and publishers to provide a happy one" (Lodge 224). Due to this demand for happy endings, the acceptance of a marriage proposal often heralds the final curtain fall in 19th-century novels. Although the future married lives of the characters are thus left to the imagination of the readers, the majority of works analysed do provide some comment in this regard – either briefly in the last chapter, or even at some length in the form of an epilogue. As George Eliot puts it, "Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years?" (MM 789). In most cases, this convention serves to assure readers of the eternal married bliss of the characters; however, there are also occasional attempts to paint a more realistic picture.

In the case of *Jane Eyre*, the author provides a thoroughly bright glimpse into the future lives of the protagonists and portrays Jane’s and Rochester’s marriage as supremely happy and harmonious: "I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine" (500). By referring to the birth of their first child and the partial recovery of Mr Rochester’s eyesight as well, the novel is left to end on a triply optimistic note. Similarly, the epilogue of *Pride and Prejudice* leaves little to be desired for in terms of a happily-ever-after. Even initially hostile characters, such as Lady Catherine or Miss Bingley, are eventually reconciled to the marriage of the heroine and kept from spoiling the perfect image. Although Elizabeth, as well as her sister Jane, are thus portrayed as living in perfect happiness and content, the marriage between Lydia and Wickham is described in a noticeably less euphoric way:

> They were always moving from place to place in quest of a cheap situation, and always spending more than they ought. His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; her’s lasted a little longer. (311).

Eliot’s depiction of the protagonists’ married lives in the epilogue of *Middlemarch* is even more differentiated. "All who have cared for Fred Vincy and Mary Garth will like to know that these two [...] achieved a solid mutual happiness" (789), she states, but adds that "Fred never became rich" (791) and that the couple was blessed only with sons, although "Fred wished to have a girl" (790). Similarly, Dorothea’s and Ladislaw’s marriage is slightly marred by their economic restrictions and the fact that Dorothea, "so substantive and rare a creature", was "absorbed into the life of another, and [...] only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother" (793). The glimpse into the married life of Rosamond
and Lydgate, however, presents the most unsatisfying instance of all novels analysed. Lydgate is described as considering himself "a failure" (791) and Rosamond his "basil plant [...] a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man’s brains" (792).

5.1 Speech representation, duration and tone

The depiction of characters' speech in marriage proposal scenes presents another major aspect of interest from a narratological perspective. As Hawthorn puts it,

One of the extraordinary achievements of realism [...] is that it gives us something that to us resembles the world even though it is formed and constrained by conventions of representation different from those that operate in the real world. [...] [W]e do not talk like people in books, but the dialogues in books seem to us to be like the conversations we have in real life. (Hawthorn 144)

This is possible, Hawthorn argues, because certain conventions are followed in representing speech and dialogue that readers are so familiar with, they do not realize any conventionality (144). There are, of course, a number of different options authors of narrative fiction can resort to in their representation of speech. Rimmon-Kenan distinguishes between no less than seven different kinds of rendering speech: diegetic summary, summary, indirect content paraphrase, indirect discourse, free indirect discourse, direct discourse and free direct discourse. In the novels analysed, those of summary, indirect content paraphrase, (free) indirect discourse and direct discourse are most commonly used for the portrayal of marriage proposals. While a summary typically only states the topic of conversation, an indirect discourse also paraphrases its content. The distinction between indirect content paraphrase and indirect discourse, in turn, lies in the fact that the former would "ignor[e] the style or form of the supposed "original’ utterance", whereas the latter would seek to "creat[e] the illusion of "preserving’ or "reproducing’ aspects of the style of an utterance" (Hawthorn 146).

The use of free indirect discourse presents an important option in this context, as it allows a narrator to either "intrude or remain hidden at will" (145), to comment on the proceedings or let the characters speak for themselves. The following passage from *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, illustrates how free indirect discourse is used to echo a character’s thoughts – in this case those of Elizabeth Bennet:

The tumult of her mind, was now painfully great. She knew not how to support herself, and from actual weakness sat down and cried for half-an-hour. Her astonishment, as she reflected on what had passed, was increased by every review of it. That she should receive an offer of marriage from Mr. Darcy! That he should

---

8 For the following see Rimmon-Kenan 106-10 and Hawthorn 144-47.
have been in love with her for so many months! So much in love as to wish to marry her in spite of all the objections which had made him prevent his friend’s marrying her sister, and which must appear at least with equal force in his own case – was almost incredible! (160)

Although this passage is rendered by the narrative voice and there are no actual instances of direct speech, it almost seems as if Elizabeth had stated her thoughts out loud. An author can create another interesting effect by alternating between direct and indirect speech, one that Hawthorn describes as "witnessing a real conversation but with someone beside us whispering in our ear comments concerning the participants in the discussion" (145). He states a piece of conversation between Mr and Mrs Bennet, occurring at the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, as an example:

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"
Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.
"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."
Mr. Bennet made no answer.
"Do you not want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.
"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."
This was invitation enough. (5)

Hawthorn describes the sentence "Mr Bennet replied that he had not' as "one of the most economically sarcastic lines in English literature" (145). Without any direct comment on the characters, the narrator is able to achieve a certain valuation of them. This considerably enhances the dramatic effectiveness of such scenes, as it allows readers to feel they are in fact witnessing them, "rather than being instructed by an intrusive stage-manager who keeps pointing out what [they] have to notice" (145).

As concerns the depiction of marriage proposals in 19th-century novels, the issue of speech representation obviously ties in with that of *duration*, thus the way in which a proposal is depicted regarding the time span of the narrative. Basically, authors can avail themselves of the following options: constancy of pace, acceleration or deceleration (see Shlomith 51). Most of the novels analysed present a real scene when it comes to the marriage proposal, story-duration and text-duration being considered identical. In these cases, the dialogue between the characters concerned is described at full length. However, there are also instances of acceleration, in which the author chooses an accelerated pace, thus a *summary* instead of a *scene* (see Hawthorn 127). In such examples, as described above, the conversation between the characters is condensed into a description of its gist and the exact words of the characters are not rendered.
Mr Darcy’s famous proposal, for example, is not depicted through direct presentation but by means of summary. Only his opening statement is given: “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you” (157). As Wherritt puts it, “The reader is willing to hear, but all is silence. […] Without the use of further dialogue, Austen compresses all of his presumed eloquence on tenderness and pride into the space of one paragraph of indirect description” (236).

Austen generally seems to be rather unobliging as concerns the portrayal of emotional declarations. In what might be called the second proposal scene in the novel, Elizabeth expresses her gratitude to Mr Darcy for his support in the case of Lydia’s elopement, whereupon he intimates that she was his main motive in doing so and, by stating that "[his] wishes and affections are unchanged" (295), seeks to elicit hers. When Elizabeth is thus finally called upon to declare herself, and the reader again full of eager anticipation as to what her exact words will be, Austen once more chooses to resort to summary:

Elizabeth, feeling all the more than common awkwardness and anxiety of his situation, now forced herself to speak; and immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to understand that her sentiments had undergone so material a change, since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure his present assurances. (PP 295)

In her article "For Better or for Worse: Marriage Proposals in Jane Austen’s Novels", Wherritt illustrates how Austen in fact "consistently demonstrates a pattern of summary handling rather than direct presentation of the moments of proposal" (229). In all cases of a serious marriage proposal, Austen establishes the scene, brings the male protagonist to the point when he is about to make his declaration and then suddenly and unexpectedly - and to the great frustration of many readers - withdraws and merely gives a summary of what took place (see 233).

A close analysis of Austen’s marriage proposals yields yet another noteworthy finding. Given her obvious inclination to avoid direct presentation of such scenes, it is interesting to observe that Mr Collins’ proposal in Pride and Prejudice, and those equally repugnant to heroines in other novels, are rendered in full detail. This seems to suggest that Austen preferred depicting ironic rather than sincere marriage proposals and those repulsive to the heroines rather than those welcome. In all of her novels, Austen "withholds scenes when proposals are joyful and successful" but chooses to present those that are "comic […] painful or abortive" (Wherritt 244).

Some critics have blamed Austen’s sheer inability to depict truly emotional scenes for this apparent "artistic defect" (Lundeen 65), attributing it to her naturally rather ironic and
detached tone which supposedly rendered her unable to depict romantic scenes in a convincing way. As Wherritt put it, "it seems [...] reasonable to conclude that she did not, and therefore probably could not, handle the intense emotion implied by a climactic proposal scene" (Wherritt 244). However, as Wherritt also states at another point, "Austen is one of the great masters of dialogue in English fiction" (232) – dismissing her narrative style as artistic incompetence thus seems rather too audacious an assumption.

There are, in fact, quite a number of plausible reasons that could have prompted her to write the way she did. First of all, Austen might have deliberately chosen a diegetic approach, because she was aware of the inadequacy of any direct presentation. Lundeen, for example, argues that "[a]n explicit rendering of the conversation between the lovers would run the risk of embarrassing the reader, reducing the scene to trite melodrama" (73). Similarly, Wherritt states that a concern for propriety and decorum could have played a role in Austen’s motivation:

Propriety and decorum are among the greatest concerns in her novels. Jane Austen assumes that her audience is well acquainted with the conventional code of propriety. Her own sense of decorum and the conventional code which she would assume among her readers might dictate a decision to gloss over the delicate declarations of lovers. (241-242)

On the other hand, Austen might have employed this approach as a way of ridiculing sentimentalities. Wherritt points to Austen's usual ironic stance which her handling of proposal scenes would stand in accordance with:

[T]he scene disappears. Expectancy is frustrated. The result is anticlimax. In this context, the summary handling of Austen’s proposal scenes might be viewed as a means of achieving a comic effect through the use of anticlimax. Hers, after all, is a comic muse, more intent on demonstrating the weaknesses of Gothic and sentimental novels than on imitating them. (233)

Since the novel features a "complex denouement, one which involves great changes of heart and perspective", Austen's decision to sum up Darcy's proposal instead of rendering his exact wording may have been "artistically motivated" (236) as well. From an artistic point of view, it would be more difficult to render that change believable if the readers heard Darcy’s unpleasant words in the first proposal.

Additionally, in the case of Pride and Prejudice, the summary of Elizabeth’s reply to Mr Darcy’s second proposal can be seen as serving the purpose of emphasizing her lack of articulateness. This initial loss of words stands in stark contrast to her usual eloquence and thus achieves considerable dramatic effect (see Lundeen 70-72). It not only illustrates the emotional transformation Elizabeth has undergone with regard to Darcy, but also demonstrates a more general change in her character: her reply to Darcy's first
proposal revealed her proud and self-sufficient nature, whereas her response to his second proposal is made "with the endearing artlessness of a person in love" (72). From this point of view, the narrator can be seen as "protect[ing] her from even gentle mockery by not disclosing her actual answer" (72) and "allow[ing] the lovers some privacy" (70). Lundeen thus concludes that, "[i]n all of her novels, Austen manoeuvres the most passionate moments with utmost delicacy, never violating the propriety of her characters nor her own novelistic decorum" (72).

A closer analysis of Austen's narrative technique concerning the depiction of marriage proposals seems to support this view. Her paraphrase of Mr Darcy's proposal, for example, is formulated in such a way that the reader is left with a sufficiently satisfactory impression of its content and manner:

He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority – of its being a degradation – of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit. [...] He concluded with representing to her the strength of that attachment which, in spite of all his endeavours, he had found impossible to conquer; and with expressing his hope that it would now be rewarded by her acceptance of his hand. (PP 157)

Although the readers might be deprived of the pleasure of learning Mr Darcy's exact words when proposing to Elizabeth and "representing to her the strength of [his] attachment" (157), they are provided with a verbal rendering of Elizabeth's refusal, text duration again catching up with story duration. Similarly, in the case of Mr Darcy's second and successful proposal, Austen chooses not to depict Elizabeth's reply in exact verbal terms, but demonstrates her skills in depicting emotional scenes by presenting a rather extensive dialogue between the protagonists, in which they discuss their past and present feelings for each other and comment on the transformation they have undergone.

*Middlemarch* also constitutes an interesting example in the context of authors’ narrative choices for the portrayal of marriage proposals. Mr Casaubon, for example, does not propose to Dorothea in person, but by means of a letter. Her reply is rendered in written form as well, but, as in the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, the reader is compensated for this lack of a directly presented proposal scene by a depiction of their subsequent conversation. Similarly, Lydgate's proposal to Rosamond does not feature as a scene, but as a summary:
Rosamond had to make her little confession, and he poured out words of gratitude and tenderness with impulsive lavishment. In half an hour he left the house an engaged man, whose soul was not his own, but the woman's to whom he had bound himself. (292)

In *Jane Eyre* and *Mutual Friend*, by contrast, there are no instances of summary where marriage proposals are concerned. Both conversations between Mr Rochester and Jane that eventually result in a marriage proposal are depicted in full detail and so are those between her and St John Rivers. The proposal of Mr Headstone to Lizzy Hexam in *Mutual Friend* is also rendered as a proper scene, the reader being able to follow the entire dialogue between the two characters. In this case, however, the narrator occasionally intrudes with side remarks such as, "She yielded to the entreaty – *how could she do otherwise!*" (389; emphasis added). By comments such as these, the author clearly takes an influence on reader partiality.

This leads to another point of interest as far as narrative technique is concerned, namely that of tone, which Hawthorn describes as "the attitude of the narrator [...] towards what is narrated" (112). In most of the novels analysed, the authors employ an omniscient, generalising and rather authoritative tone. Whereas Eliot and Hardy remain fairly neutral in their depiction of proposal scenes, Austen, Dickens and Trollope often resort to irony. *Jane Eyre* constitutes a rather unique example as far as tone is concerned, because the heroine also features as narrator, all comments and judgements thus deriving from her point of view. Though not comparable to other authors concerning irony in tone, Charlotte Brontë does reveal her capacity for sarcasm in her many depictions of Jane’s and Mr Rochester’s playful yet provoking banter:

"Have you a pocket-comb about you, sir?"
"What for, Jane?"
"Just to comb out this shaggy black mane. I find you rather alarming, when I examine you close at hand: you talk of my being a fairy, but I am sure, you are more like a brownie."
"Am I hideous, Jane?"
"Very, sir: you always were, you know."
"Humph! The wickedness has not been taken out of you, wherever you have sojourned."
"Yet I have been with good people; far better than you: a hundred times better people; possessed of ideas and views you never entertained in your life: quite more refined and exalted."
"Who the deuce have you been with?" (486-87)

In a similar way, the irony prevalent in the portrayal of Mr Collins’ proposal to Elizabeth results not from a direct narrative comment, but from his ridiculous speech habit and her exasperated answers. In the dialogues between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy, too, any irony derives from her reflections:
Elizabeth longed to observe that Mr. Bingley had been a most delightful friend; so easily guided that his worth was invaluable; but she checked herself. She remembered that he had yet to learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin. (299)

By contrast, the narrator seems much more apparent in the depiction of Mr Slope’s proposal to Eleanor Bold in *Barchester Towers*, due to the strongly ironic narrative tone:

“That which has made them drunk has made me bold.’ 'Twas thus that Mr. Slope encouraged himself, as he left the dining-room in pursuit of Eleanor. [...] He was right in repeating the boast of Lady Macbeth: he was not drunk, but he was bold enough for anything. It was a pity that in such a state he could not have encountered Mrs. Proudie. [...] This was not the first attempt at winning a fair lady. He had been on his knees, looked unutterable things with his eyes, and whispered honeyed words before. (381)

Trollope’s statement occurring in the context of this scene, that Slope was "not the first man who has thought it expedient to call in the assistance of Bacchus on such an occasion" (380), also serves as a typical example of a narrator’s intrusion by generalising commentary, a common convention of 19th-century fiction. The issue of tone is thus obviously closely linked to that of distance and intrusion on the part of the author. In Trollope’s treatment of Mr Arabin, for example, the narrator again features very prominently:

Mr. Arabin certainly did not go the right way to win such a woman as Eleanor Bold. Just as her wrath was evaporating, as it was disappearing before the true warmth of his untold love, he rekindled it by a most useless repetition of his original sin. [...] He could not make up his mind whether or no Mr. Slope was in truth a favoured rival. If not, why should she not have answered his question? Poor Mr. Arabin – untaught, illiterate, boorish, ignorant man! That at forty years of age you should know so little of the workings of a woman’s heart. (287)

The last sentence constitutes a very direct comment on a character’s conduct, in which the narrator completely distances himself from him. In *Pride and Prejudice*, on the other hand, the narrator seems to side with the heroine throughout the proposal scene, such as in the statement, "It was absolutely necessary to interrupt him now" (90).

In *Madding Crowd*, Hardy is barely ever ironic towards his characters in narrative tone. He does, however, depict a number of comical scenes in which the characters’ speech or conduct, rather than any narrative commentary, arouse amusement on the part of the reader. Mr Coggan’s description of Bathsheba’s father, addressed to Gabriel in the local malthouse, constitutes an apt illustration of this approach:

"Well, now, you’d hardly believe it, but that man – our Miss Everdene’s father – was one of the ficklest husbands alive, after a while. Understand, ‘a didn’t want to be fickle, but he couldn’t help it. The poor feller were faithful and true enough to
her in his wish, but his heart would rove, do what he would [...] But at last I believe he cured it by making her take off her wedding-ring and calling her by her maiden name as they sat together after the shop was shut, and so 'a would get to fancy she was only his sweetheart, and not married to him at all. And as soon as he could thoroughly fancy he was doing wrong and committing the seventh, 'a got to like her as well as ever, and they lived on a perfect picture of mutel love." (49)

Dickens, on the other hand, again features numerous instances of an explicitly ironic tone. When discussing the forthcoming matrimonial union between the Lammles, for example, he drifts off into a very sarcastic generalising commentary:

The mature young lady is a lady of property. The mature young gentleman is a gentleman of property. He invests his property. He goes, in a condescending amateurish way, into the City, attends meetings of Directors, and has to do with traffic in Shares. As is well known to the wise in their generation, traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world. Have no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; have Shares. Have Shares enough to be on Boards of Direction in capital letters, oscillate on mysterious business between London and Paris, and be great. Where does he come from? Shares. Where is he going to? Shares. What are his tastes? Shares. Has he any principles? Shares. What squeezes him into Parliament? Shares. Perhaps he never of himself achieved success in anything, never originated anything, never produced anything? Sufficient answer to all; Shares. O mighty Shares! To set those blaring images so high, and to cause us smaller vermin, as under the influence of henbane or opium, to cry out, night and day, 'Relieve us of our money, scatter it for us, buy us and sell us, ruin us, only we beseech ye take rank among the powers of the earth, and fatten on us'! (MF 118)

Eliot, too, serves as a good example of a typical Victorian author, who frequently intrudes upon the narrative in the form of judgements, commentaries or generalisations – thus providing guidance as to the interpretation of the story’s events:

Certainly those determining acts of [Dorothea’s] life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it [...] we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know. (MM 794-795)

In this particular instance, the narrator might even be seen as attempting to bond with the readers and establish a feeling of communion by the use of the pronoun “we”. Hardy’s Madding Crowd also features instances of a generalising comment written in the first person plural pronoun. On the day Gabriel first sees Bathsheba, she gets into an argument with a man at a toll-bar over twopence, which Gabriel pays for her, so she can pass. The narrator subsequently comments that, "She might have looked her thanks to Gabriel on a minute scale, but she did not speak them; more probably she felt none, for in gaining her a passage he had lost her
53

her point, and we know how women take a favour of that kind" (7; emphasis added). The last part of the sentence is fairly revealing of the author's gender and, through its prejudiced nature, serves to illustrate the subjectivity of such assuredly pronounced "general" commentaries.

5.2 Indirect characterisation and comic effect

Another narratological purpose marriage proposals may serve is that of indirect characterisation. Marriage proposal scenes typically feature the major repartees between the protagonists in which further light is shed on their characters through the portrayal of their demeanour, their ways of arguing and choice of words.

The "ostentatious words" (Wherritt 235) of Mr Collins, for example, in his obviously premeditated address to Elizabeth, characterise him not only as "pompously stupid" (Mann 203) but again reveal him to be the mere puppet of this noble patroness. Mr Darcy's proposal, on the other hand, enforces the impression the reader has previously received of his extremely proud character, yet at the same time, through the confession of his obviously strong and sincere feelings for Elizabeth, also discloses another side of him. Elizabeth’s answer shows her to be as eloquent and quick-witted as former instances of characterisation have suggested, but she is also depicted as prone to prejudice, an excitable temper and uncivil demeanour.

The paragraph from Barchester Towers cited above, in which Mr Slope resorts to alcohol to fortify himself for the task at hand, characterises him as not very bold or manly in his conduct. Throughout the whole proposal scene, his "honeyed words" (381) also appear in stark contrast to his actual motives regarding Eleanor, which the reader has previously been made aware of by the narrator. Revealed again through the manner of proposal are also the sarcastic and humorous strain in Mr Rochester’s character, his devious and slightly cruel tendencies, but also his deeply passionate, affectionate and loyal nature, while Jane’s emotional outburst depicts her as equally passionate, strong-willed and articulate but – in contrast to Mr Rochester – completely honest and straightforward.

A further purpose of marriage proposals is that of comic effect. Mr Slope’s insincere and exorbitant professions as a lover, and the just reprimand he receives for the same – "a box on the ear" (384) – constitute a perfect example in this context. In the marriage proposal scene of Jane Eyre, too, Mr Rochester’s sarcastic speech creates a humorous effect on the reader, although the narrator’s voice – that of Jane, still ignorant of Mr Rochester’s true feelings – is not openly ironic at all:
"Then you are going to be married, sir?"
"Ex-act-ly – pre-cise-ly: with your usual acuteness, you have hit the nail straight on the head." [...] 
"[A]nd you’ll remember, Jane, the first time I, or Rumour, plainly intimated to you that is was my intention to put my old bachelor’s neck into the sacred noose, to enter into the holy estate of matrimony – to take Miss Ingram to my bosom, in short (she’s an extensive armful; but that’s not to the point – “one can’t have too much of such a very excellent thing as my beautiful Blanche): well, as I was saying – listen to me, Jane! You’re not turning your head to look after more moths, are you? [...] I wish to remind you that it was you who first said to me, with that discretion I respect in you – with that foresight, prudence and humility which befit your responsible and dependent position – that in case I married Miss Ingram – both you and little Adèle had better trot forthwith. I pass over the sort of slur conveyed in this suggestion on the character of my beloved; indeed, when you are far away, Janet, I’ll try to forget it". (281)

Mr Collins’ proposal to Elizabeth Bennet, however, undoubtedly remains one of the best examples of a comical marriage proposal in English fiction of all time. In this particular case, the suitor establishes himself as such a ridiculous person that the reader cannot for a minute regard it in a serious light or be in doubt as to its inevitable failure. *Pride and Prejudice*, is, of course, not the only one of Austen’s novels that features what Barbara Mann refers to as *The Dreadful Proposal* and which she describes as “one of the funniest devices in all of Austen” (201).
6. "Yes" or "No"?

The majority of marriage proposals featured in the novels analysed come unexpectedly to the heroines. Since these are, however, usually portrayed as very perceptive to the intentions of suitors – welcome and unwelcome alike – they might initially be taken by surprise but are hardly ever completely unprepared on actually hearing them. As Trollope describes it in *Barchester Towers*, "Eleanor saw how it was now. She knew directly what it was she was about to go through" (381). In fact, the novels often depict attempts on the part of the heroine to dissuade the suitor from his course and prevent him from verbalising his intentions. In the case of Mr Slope’s proposal, for example, Eleanor even "reject[s] him before he had offered himself" (143) trying to avert potential unpleasantness or resentment:

"Pray hope nothing, Mr. Slope, as far as I am concerned; pray do not; I do not know, and need not know what hope you mean. Our acquaintance is very slight, and will probably remain so. Pray, pray let that be enough; there is at any rate no necessity for us to quarrel." (142-143)

Similarly, Lizzie Hexam in *Mutual Friend* interrupts Mr Headstone by stating, "I have heard enough. Let me stop you here. It will be better for you and better for me." (389) and Bella Wilfer tells Mr Rokesmith, "[Y]ou have said more than enough. I beg that you will not go on. If you have any generosity, any honor, you will say no more" (369). Bathsheba Everdene in *Madding Crowd*, too, intuitively deduces Mr Boldwood’s intentions and seeks to circumvent them by literally trying to escape his declaration. Far from being discouraged, however, he pursues her:

She heard footsteps brushing the grass, and had a consciousness that love was encircling her like a perfume. [...] "Miss Everdene!" [...] As the consciousness expands on learning that what was fancied to be the rumble of wheels is the reverberation of thunder, so did Bathsheba’s at her intuitive conviction. (98-99)

Two heroines, Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Eyre, might be regarded as exceptions in this context, as both exhibit genuine amazement on receiving their suitors’ offers. Although Mr Darcy’s earlier visit and abrupt departure, as well as his agitated manner and awkward silence before addressing Elizabeth, could have served as indications for his intentions, his first proposal occurs wholly unforeseen by her. As the narrator points out, "Elizabeth’s astonishment was beyond expression" (157).

Jane Eyre is described as even less prepared when receiving Mr Rochester’s proposal, a natural consequence of the latter’s very singular approach to the undertaking. He does not, as would be in keeping with the prevailing conventions of the time, take the initiative by openly stating his feelings for Jane, but seeks to evoke a declaration on her
part first. Having eventually succeeded in doing so by driving her into a fit of agony and fury – conjuring up images of "Mrs Dionysius O’Gall of Bitternutt Lodge, Connaught, Ireland" (282), her five daughters and eternal separation from him – he suddenly relinquishes his course, gives up the charade and turns serious. Jane, unsuspecting of his game, at first finds it hard to believe him:

I was silent: I thought he mocked me.
"Come, Jane—come hither."
"Your bride stands between us."
He rose, and with a stride reached me.
"My bride is here," he said, again drawing me to him, "because my equal is here, and my likeness. Jane, will you marry me?"
Still I did not answer, and still I writhed myself from his grasp: for I was still incredulous.
"Do you doubt me, Jane?"
"Entirely."
"You have no faith in me?"
"Not a whit."
"Am I a liar in your eyes?" he asked passionately. "Little sceptic, you shall be convinced." (285)

Mr Rochester thus has to pay for his tricks with the incredulity of Jane: doubting his sincerity she refrains from answering him sincerely. As a number of attempts are necessary to convince her of his genuine affection, he has to propose not once, but several times: "I offer you my hand, my heart, and a share of all my possessions"; "I ask you to pass through life at my side – to be my second self, and best earthly companion"; "But, Jane, I summon you as my wife: it is you only I intend to marry"; "Jane, will you marry me?" and "You – poor and obscure, and small and plain as you are – I entreat to accept me as a husband" (285-286).

In cases of unwelcome proposals, instead of attempting to avert them, heroines are sometimes portrayed as silently resolving to listen to the suitor’s address, even if intent on rejecting him. Eleanor Bold, for example, determines that, "as she had been unable to prevent the expression of Mr. Slope’s wishes and aspirations" she would "hear him out to the end, before she answered him" (384). Elizabeth Bennet, too, wills herself to bear the proposals she receives. When pressured by her mother to talk with Mr Collins, she does not attempt to save herself the disagreeability by appealing to her father for help but resolves to stay, thinking that "it would be wisest to get it over as soon and as quietly as possible" (88). In the case of Mr Darcy’s first offer of marriage, she does not interrupt either, but lets herself be subjected to the presumptuous and rather offensive manner of his proposal:

In spite of her deeply-rooted dislike, she could not be insensible to the compliment of such a man’s affection, and though her intentions did not vary for an instant, she was at first sorry for the pain he was to receive; till, roused to resentment by
his subsequent language, she lost all compassion in anger. She tried, however, to compose herself to answer him with patience, when he should have done. (157)

6.1 Refusing

As 19th-century conduct books advise, young women should ideally refer unwanted suitors to their parents or guardians: "Should the proposition not be in accordance with your feelings, your wisest plan will be to refer the gentleman to your parents or guardians, acquainting them with your objection, who will inform the gentleman of the decision you have come to" (Etiquette 76).

None of the novels analysed, however, feature a single instance where this is actually done; all heroines are portrayed as handling refusals themselves. In fact, there are only two cases in which the option of referring a suitor to parents or guardians is even considered. Elizabeth Bennet resolves to appeal to her father as a last resort, should Mr Collins not see reason, and Bella Wilfer seems rather put out that she has to bother with John Rokesmith herself:

"You know how I am situated here, sir, and you know how I am situated at home. I must speak to you for myself, since there is no one about me whom I could ask to do so. It is not generous in you, it is not honourable in you, to conduct yourself towards me as you do." (369)

In cases of refusal, conduct books advise that "[r]ejection should be courteous, definite, and decisive; but couched in a manner that, whilst it deprives the suitor of hope, it inflicts no pain" (How to Woo 30). This is largely adhered to in the novels; the heroines are not portrayed as beating around the bush for long and suitors are usually rejected in a polite and grateful, but also decisive and unmistakably clear way:

"Mr. Headstone, I thank you sincerely, I thank you gratefully, and hope you may find a worthy wife before long and be very happy. But it is no." (Mutual Friend 390)

"Accept my thanks for the compliment you are paying me. I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them." (PP 90)

Elizabeth also refers to this "established mode" of declining proposals as politely and gratefully as possible. In contrast to her rejection of Mr Collins, however, she chooses to disregard conventions when refusing Mr Darcy:

"In such cases as this, it is, I believe, the established mode to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed, however unequally they may be returned. It is natural that obligation should be felt, and if I could feel gratitude, I would now thank you. But I cannot – I have never desired your good opinion, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly. I am sorry to have occasioned pain to any
one. It has been most unconsciously done, however, and I hope will be of short duration. The feelings which, you tell me, have long prevented the acknowledgment of your regard, can have little difficulty in overcoming it after this explanation." (157)

Thus, in the case of overly presumptuous or disagreeable conduct on the part of the suitors, heroines do occasionally resort to a less polite, sometimes even insulting, tone and manner. Elizabeth Bennet, already harbouring hostile feelings towards Mr Darcy because of his supposed misconduct in regard to her sister and Mr Wickham, is provoked even further when he states that these objections might have been overlooked by her had he formulated his proposal in a more flattering terms. She retaliates by overthrowing all pretence at civility, commenting not only on his "arrogance" and "selfish disdain for the feelings of others", but referring to him also as "the last man in the world whom [she] could ever be prevailed on to marry" (160) – thus clearly disregarding any rules of etiquette.

Similarly, Lizzie Hexam is driven to openly declare her dislike of Mr Headstone by his excessively impassioned bearing and recourse to threats on being rejected. Supposing Mr Wrayburn to be his rival for Lizzie’s affections, and thus the real cause for her refusal, he loses all self-control and comports himself in such a way that she is at last aroused to fury, despite her pity and fear. Bella Wilfer is not depicted as comporting herself in a very polite fashion either. Appalled at the apparent presumptuousness of Mr Rokesmith’s proposal, she lets him know that she has "far other views in life" and states, "I beg it may be understood, Mr. Rokesmith, that there is an end of this between us, now and for ever." (MF 370) On receiving his assurance that he will never renew his addresses she does, however, resorts to a less uncivil tone and even tries to part in goodwill:

"I am glad I have spoken. […] It has been painful and difficult, but it is done. If I have hurt you, I hope you will forgive me. I am inexperienced and impetuous, and I have been a little spoilt; but I really am not so bad as I dare say I appear, or as you think me." (371)

The most extreme means employed by a heroine to put an end to unwelcome advances, however, is undoubtedly that of Eleanor Bold. When Mr Slope, thinking it "fitting that he should give her some outward demonstration of that affection of which he talked so much […] contrived to pass his arm round her waist", Trollope describes that she "quick as thought, […] raised her little hand and dealt him a box on the ear with such right good will, that it sounded among the trees like a miniature thunder-clap" (BT 144).
6.2 Accepting

In cases where the proposal is desired or even expected, the heroines' answers seem to be less bound to etiquette and so much more idiosyncratic: ranging from grateful, happy and overwhelmed to short, straightforward and simple. In some cases, an acceptance is not verbalised at all; both Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch* and Eleanor Bold in *Barchester Towers*, for example, express their consent in physical rather than linguistic terms, arriving at an understanding with their suitors by means of an embrace or kiss.

A heroine might also ask for further explanation or clarification, such as Jane Eyre, who needs to be convinced of the sincerity of Mr Rochester's proposal before answering. When he finally does succeed in assuring her of his honest intentions, explaining to her the true state of his feelings with regard to Blanche Ingram and herself, her answer is grateful, simple and straightforward: "If you are true, and your offer real, my only feelings to you must be gratitude and devotion." [...] "Do you truly love me? – Do you sincerely wish me to be your wife? [...] Then, sir, I will marry you" (286).

In other cases, however, due to either the lady's indetermination or her unwillingness to cause the suitor any pain, heroines might resort to inconclusive, elusive or procrastinating answers instead of adhering to the "established mode". Bathsheba in *Madding Crowd*, for example, blames herself for having kindled Mr Boldwood's romantic sentiments in the first place and driven him so far as to offer her marriage. The main motive guiding her in sending him the Valentine card in jest – which not only featured a popular love poem but, much more unusually, a seal reading "Marry Me" – was wounded pride for not having succeeded in subduing him to the rank of her admirers. Thus conscious of her responsibility in the matter, and the desperate state into which her imprudent action has brought this respectable man, she is reluctant to smite his hopes and add to his misery by an absolute refusal:

"I will try to love you [...] And if I can believe in any way that I shall make you a good wife I shall indeed be willing to marry you. But, Mr Boldwood, hesitation on so high a matter is honourable in any woman, and I don't want to give a solemn promise tonight. I would rather ask you to wait a few weeks till I can see my situation better. [...] I have every reason to hope that at the end of the five or six weeks, between this time and harvest, that you say you are going to be away from home, I shall be able to promise to be your wife [...] But remember this distinctly, I don't promise yet." (125)

As Hardy describes it, Bathsheba "had been awestruck at her past temerity, and was struggling to make amends without thinking whether the sin quite deserved the penalty she was schooling herself to pay" (125). In the case of Gabriel's proposal, it is
Bathsheba’s actual indecision that causes her to raise false hopes in him and thus delays the inevitable answer for longer than necessary. Allegedly seeking to rectify the false statements made about her suitors, she runs after him:

"I didn’t know you had come to ask to have me, or I should have come in from the garden instantly, I ran after you to say – that my aunt made a mistake in sending you away from courting me. [...] I haven’t a sweetheart at all – and I never had one, and I thought that, as times go with women, it was such a pity to send you away thinking that I had several." (23)

Believing that she may yet consent to his offer, Gabriel sets out to win her by elaborating on the conveniences she would enjoy as his wife and his dedication to assure her happiness in every respect. Bathsheba reveals her whimsical nature by telling him, "I never said I was going to marry you. [...] Why, if I’d wanted you I shouldn’t have run after you like this; ’twould have been the forwardest thing!" (24). She does not seem to know her own mind and, when implored by Gabriel to "think a minute or two", consents to do so, though adding, "if I can think out of doors; my mind spreads away so" (24). When she does finally reach the conclusion that she cannot marry him, her attempt at explanation is, "I shouldn’t mind being a bride at a wedding, if I could be one without having a husband. But since a woman can’t show off in that way by herself, I shan’t marry – at least yet" (25). Gabriel calls this "a terrible wooden story" and even states, "Upon my heart and soul, I don’t know what a maid can say stupider than that" (25). Nevertheless, he respects her refusal and even states that he will undertake no further attempts to persuade her: "Very well [...] Then I’ll ask you no more" (27).

Should a heroine state her reasons for refusing, either of her own accord or when bidden to do so, these usually concern the unsuitability of the male character as potential marriage partner or insufficient affection on the part of the lady. Among other things, Bathsheba tells Gabriel that she cannot marry him because she does not love him (26) and initially gives the same reason to Mr Boldwood: "I feel, Mr Boldwood, that though I respect you much, I do not feel – what would justify me to – in accepting your offer" (99). Elizabeth tells Mr Collins that "[her] feelings in every respect forbid it" (91), an unequivocal hint at insufficient affection on her side, and that she could not make him happy and vice versa, thus referring to incompatibility of character: "I wish you very happy and very rich, and by refusing your hand, do all in my power to prevent your being otherwise" (90-91).

Jane Eyre, too, quotes differences in character and philosophy when pointing out to St John Rivers that a marriage between them could never work: "You have introduced a topic on which our natures are at variance – a topic we should never discuss: the very
name of love is an apple of discord between us – if the reality were required what should we do? How should we feel?” (455).

6.3 The suitor's reaction

In the novels analysed, the reaction of a suitor on learning a heroine’s answer is telling of his true state of feelings towards her. Mr Darcy, for example, is described as displaying obvious traces of emotion when listening to Elizabeth’s reply: "His complexion became pale with anger, and the disturbance of his mind was visible in every feature" (157). When Jane begins to comprehend the sincerity of Mr Rochester's proposal and looks at him to "read [his] countenance", it is described as "very much agitated and very much flushed", with "strong workings in the features, and strange gleams in the eyes" (286). Mr Headstone, too, is obviously strongly affected when learning Lizzie’s answer to his earnest and passionate address. Flying into a jealous rage, he scares the object of his affection so much that she attempts to run from him.

Mr Collins, on the other hand, finally convinced of Elizabeth’s earnestness in rejecting him, is not described as enduring much pain as a result:

He thought too well of himself to comprehend on what motive his cousin could refuse him; and though his pride was hurt, he suffered in no other way. His regard for her was quite imaginary; and the possibility of her deserving her mother's reproach prevented his feeling any regret. (95)

Similarly, Mr Slope, receiving one of the undoubtedly most emphatic answers as far as refusals of marriage proposals go, does not question his own conduct or try to reconcile himself to the "sweetest angel" (384), with whom, just minutes ago, he had so much wanted to "walk that sweet path" (383) to heaven. Bertie Stanhope, too, having never harboured any sincere feelings for Eleanor, is not portrayed as cast down when his rather maladroit proposal is met with a justified rejection.

Some suitors, unsure of their ground, are depicted as rather reluctant to hear their lady’s answer: "Stop! I implore you, before you answer me, to walk round this place once more. It will give you a minute's time to think and me a minute's time to get some fortitude together" (Mutual Friend 390). Others, such as Mr Rochester, are described as highly impatient: "Will you be mine? Say yes, quickly"; "... [M]ake haste, for I suffer"; "Oh, Jane, you torture me!"; "Jane, accept me quickly. Say, Edward – give me my name – Edward – I will marry you" (286).
As concerns the reaction of the suitors on being rejected, the male characters featured in
the novels rarely accept the refusal immediately and without further argument, as would
be in keeping with the propagated rules of conduct for gentlemen in such situations. In
most cases, they are portrayed as actively opposing refusals and undertaking further
attempts at persuasion. These can take many forms, from simply demanding an
explanation to actual argument, from passionate outburst to practical bargaining.

In instances of "bargaining", the suitor typically resorts to a materialistic stance in his
plan of action, detailing certain incentives for the heroine to accept his proposal. Mr Oak,
for example, uses quite a number of different arguments in his attempt to win
Bathsheba's hand after all: "I have a nice snug little farm"; "When we be married, I am
quite sure I can work twice as hard as I do now"; "You shall have a piano in a year or
two [...] one of those little ten-pound gigs for market [...] a frame for cucumbers"; "And
when the wedding was over, we'd have it put in the newspaper list of marriages" (MC 23-
25). Mr Collins, too, does not miss any opportunity in pointing out the advantages a
matrimonial union with him would entail. Elizabeth is assured of financial security for
herself and her family, of introduction into socially superior circles and of his discretion
regarding her fortune that is "unhappily so small" (PP 91).

Although Jane initially accepts Mr Rochester's proposal, she is forced to withdraw her
consent on discovering the existence of Mr Rochester's still living wife and refuses to live
with him as his mistress. In the subsequent dialogue between the two, Mr Rochester
attempts by every means in his power to persuade her to stay. He appeals to her sense
of justice, providing her with an account of his life story, to her love for him, fervently
declaring his own, and finally to her compassion, expressing his inability to continue life
without her.

Some of the male characters who exhibit an unwillingness to give up their suit may also
realize, in the course of the conversation, that victory cannot be obtained that day and
postpone further discussion to some future time. Mr Boldwood, for example, elicits
Bathsheba's permission – against her will – to address her on the subject again. In fact,
he serves as a good example for a suitor who almost manages to wear down the
opposition of a heroine by his relentless pressure tactics. In the case of his first proposal
to Bathsheba, he does not relinquish his course, although she tries to reject him more
than once. By repeatedly declaring his love for her, countering all her arguments and
stress ing the benefits of a marriage to him, he eventually coerces her into considering his
offer:
"I fear I am too old for you, but believe me I will take more care of you than would many a man of your own age. I will protect and cherish you with all my strength – I will indeed! You shall have no cares – be worried by no household affairs, and live quite at ease, Miss Everdene. [...] I rather cling to the chaise, because it is the same my poor father and mother drove, but if you don’t like it I will sell it, and you shall have a pony-carriage of your own. I cannot say how far above every other idea and object on earth you seem to me [...] Say then, that you don’t absolutely refuse. Do not quite refuse?" (MC 100-101)

After Bathsheba’s disastrous marriage to Troy and the latter’s supposed death by drowning, Mr Boldwood again takes up courting her, trying to obtain the consent she had almost given him before she met Troy: "Now, pray speak! Oh Bathsheba, promise – it is only a little promise – that if you marry again, you will marry me! [...] Be gracious, and give up a little to me, when I would give up my life for you!" (296). Mr Boldwood actually becomes quite devious in his tactics and, realizing that his passionate avowals of love rather scare than assure Bathsheba, deliberately resorts to a more practical approach:

Her self-reproach for the injury she had thoughtlessly done him might be depended upon now to a much greater extent than before her infatuation and disappointment. [...] It would be possible to approach her by the channel of her good nature, and to suggest a friendly business-like compact between them for fulfilment at some future day, keeping the passionate side of his desire entirely out of her sight. Such was Boldwood’s hope. (262)

"But do give your word! A mere business compact, you know, between two people who are beyond the influence of passion. [...] It means simply a pledge – no sentiment – the seal of a practical compact" (295-296).

Not being able to win her affection, Mr Boldwood thus chooses to appeal to her rational side and to take advantage of her bad conscience. Eventually, Bathsheba feels so responsible that she honestly considers “sacrificing” herself: "I believe that if I don’t give my word, he’ll go out of his mind. [...] I believe I hold that man’s future in my hand. His career depends entirely upon my treatment of him" (280).

Mr Slope in Barchester Towers, on the other hand, though comporting himself as if nearly crazed with love, is revealed to be actually very mundane in his motives and deliberate in his actions:

The widow was bearing herself, as he thought, with too high a hand, was speaking of herself in much too imperious a tone. She had clearly no idea that an honour was being conferred on her. Mr. Slope would be tender as long as he could, but he began to think, if that failed, it would not be amiss if he also mounted himself for a while on his high horse. Mr. Slope could undoubtedly be very tender, but he could be very savage also, and he knew his own abilities. (383)

Similar to Mr Boldwood, however, Mr Slope consciously reflects on what strategy to use and adopts the approach with the supposedly best chances of success. Whereas Mr
Boldwood decides to "[keep] the passionate side of his desire entirely out of [Bathsheba's] sight", Mr Slope thinks it will serve his interests better to "be tender as long as he [can]".

St John Rivers, too, does not abandon the field after Jane's first refusal:

He had calculated on these first objections: he was not irritated by them. Indeed, as he leaned back against the crag behind him, folded his arms on his chest, and fixed his countenance, I saw he was prepared for a long and trying opposition, and had taken in a stock of patience to last him to its close—resolved, however, that that close should be conquest for him. (JE 448)

When he realizes that he cannot convince her at the moment, he decides to urge her no further for the time being and grants her some time to consider his offer – once again resorting to pressure tactics in doing so: "I shall be absent a fortnight – take that space of time to consider my offer: and do not forget that if you reject it, it is not me you deny, but God. [...] Refuse to be my wife, and you limit yourself for ever to a track of selfish ease and barren obscurity. Tremble lest in that case you should be numbered with those who have denied the faith and are worse than infidels!" (455). Rivers not only applies to Jane's morals and sense of religious duty, but also exploits his position as a man of God, supposedly sanctioned by the highest authority to guide and advise her in her vulnerable state. This way he almost manages to obtain her consent and she is saved from committing herself only by a supernatural intervention.

St John Rivers is not the only suitor in the novels analysed who regards his proposal in the light of a duty carried out to please God. Mr Slope, too, is described as acting under the belief of a divine mission:

His conscience had not a word to say against his choosing the widow and her fortune. That he looked upon as a godly work rather than otherwise; as a deed which, if carried through, would redound to his credit as a Christian. [...] If it should turn out to be really the fact that Mrs. Bold had twelve hundred a year at her own disposal, Mr. Slope would rather look upon it as a duty which he owed his religion to make himself the master of the wife and the money; as a duty too, in which some amount of self-sacrifice would be necessary. (BT 121)

However, as Jane Austen so aptly demonstrates, obstinate persistence on the part of a suitor can also be comical. In *Pride and Prejudice* Mr Collins refuses to acknowledge the repeated rejections of Elizabeth, denying all belief in their truthfulness:

"I am not now to learn [...] that it is unusual with young ladies to reject the address of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour; and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second or even a third time. I am therefore by no means discourages by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the altar ere long." (90)
"When I do myself the honour of speaking to you next on this subject I shall hope to receive a more favourable answer than you have now given me; though I am far from accusing you of cruelty at present, because I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application, and perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character." (91)

Elizabeth thus not only has to repeat herself several times: "I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them", "I thank you again and again for the honour you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible" (90-91), but also has to justify herself against his charges:

"I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time. [...] I have no pretension whatever to that kind of elegance which consist in tormenting a respectable man. I would rather be paid the compliment of being believed sincere. Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart." (91)

Mr Collins behaviour is not at all in keeping with the propagated conventions of gentleman-like behaviour in such cases. As the conduct books advise,

Although a lady has not the advantage of proposing love to any gentleman, yet she has undoubtedly the authority of accepting or refusing any proposition of love which may be made to her. When a young man has tendered his heart to a female, and from dislike or some previous engagement, she declines to accede to his wishes, and gives him to understand in a respectful and determined manner that she can by no means listen to his suit, if he be a man possessed of spirit and good-breeding, he will at once give up the pursuit. But should he be so unwise as still to persist in teasing her, there is no doubt but he will incur her scorn and aversion, and render himself an object of ridicule to those who are acquainted with his folly. (Etiquette 58-59)

In case of rejection, the gentleman should at once, unless under peculiar circumstances, abstain from his suit. Unless he does so, his conduct becomes persecuting. (How to Woo 30)

Elizabeth’s reaction to Mr Collins’ obstinacy can be taken as a further confirmation of his decidedly unconventional conduct: "Upon my word, Sir, [...] your hope is rather an extraordinary one after my declaration. [...] Really, Mr. Collins [...] you puzzle me exceedingly. If what I have hitherto said can appear to you in the form of encouragement, I know not how to express my refusal in such a way as may convince you of its being one. [...] Can I speak plainer?" (90-91). Having rejected his proposal in no less than five unsuccessful attempts, Elizabeth is at last driven to capitulate:
To such perseverance in wilful self-deception Elizabeth would make no reply, and immediately and in silence withdrew; determined, if he persisted in considering her repeated refusals as flattering encouragement, to apply to her father, whose negative might be uttered in such a manner as to be decisive, and whose behaviour at least could not be mistaken for the affectation and coquetry of an elegant female. (PP 92)

Instead of acknowledging Elizabeth’s objections, let alone attempting to comprehend them, Mr Collins denies having any responsibility in the matter. He chooses to attribute her refusal to "the usual practice of elegant females" (91), thus putting the whole blame on her and obstinately ignoring the fact that it might be founded on his own person. Mr Darcy’s reaction bears some resemblance in this respect. He, too, initially refuses to understand that his own conduct influenced Elizabeth’s rejection and ascribes it to her pride instead, stating his assurance that her objections to his declared concerns about her family might have been overlooked had he couched his proposal in more flattering terms:

"And this [...] is your opinion of me! This is the estimation in which you hold me! I thank you for explaining it so fully. My faults, according to this calculation, are heavy indeed. But perhaps [...] these offences might have been overlooked, had not your pride been hurt by my honest confession of the scruples that had long prevented my forming any serious design. These bitter accusations might have been suppressed, had I with greater policy concealed my struggles, and flattered you into the belief of my being impelled by unqualified, unalloyed inclination; by reason, by reflection, by every thing. But disguise of every sort is my abhorrence. Nor am I ashamed of the feelings I related. They were natural and just. Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?" (159)

The obtuseness and reluctance of suitors to accept a heroine’s refusal might, in extreme cases, not only affect the lady in question, but also others. Unable to acknowledge that a rejection might be based on their own person, suitors occasionally put the blame on rivals, real or imaginary. In such cases, jealousy often leads to paranoia and the conduct of the suitors, as they resort to passionate outbursts and violent threats, becomes unbearable:

"Ah, a time of his life shall come when he will have to repent, and think wretchedly of the pain he has caused another man; and then may he ache, and wish, and curse, and yearn – as I do now! [...] I'll punish him – by my soul, that will I! I'll meet him, soldier or no, and I'll horsewhip the untimely stripling for this reckless theft of my one delight." (MC 162)

"Is no short time necessary for reflection; no weeks or days?" [...] "None whatever."
"Are you quite decided, and is there no chance of any change in my favour?"
"I am quite decided, Mr. Headstone, and I am bound to answer I am certain there is none."
"Then," said he, suddenly changing his tone and turning to her, and bringing his clenched hand down upon the stone with a force that laid the knuckles raw and bleeding; "then I hope that I may never kill him!"

(MF 390)

When implored by the heroine to abstain from any such course, some suitors in the novels analysed express a willingness to attempt restraint but, at the same time, declare themselves unable to take full responsibility for their actions:

It is a fortunate thing for him that he’s gone back to his regiment – that he’s away up the country, and not here! I hope he may not return here just yet. I pray God he may not come into my sight, for I may be tempted beyond myself." [sic] (MC 162)

Other suitors, however, do acknowledge the arguments brought forth by the heroine and not only accept her refusal, but also part with her on amicable terms. Gabriel Oak, for example, is deeply disappointed by Bathsheba’s rejection and also fails to fully understand her reasons for it, but withdraws from his suit without any apparent ill-will. Bertie Stanhope, too, is more than aware of the questionable attraction of his proposal to Eleanor, instigated by his sister for mere financial purposes, and acknowledges her objections without taking offence: "Eleanor, looking out of the window, saw him with his hat in his hand, bowing to her with his usual gay smile, as though nothing had happened to mar the tranquillity of the day" (BT 410).

In contrast to Mr Collins, for example, Mr Darcy, too, accepts Elizabeth’s refusal and even proves to have listened very carefully to her objections, seeking to justify himself on the matters addressed by her in the form of a letter. At the very beginning he once again assures her of having acknowledged her refusal:

"Be not alarmed, Madam, on receiving this letter, by the apprehension of its containing any repetition of those sentiments, or renewal of those offers, which were last night so disgusting to you. I write without any intention of paining you, or humbling myself, by dwelling on wishes, which, for the happiness of both, cannot be too soon forgotten." (162)

In what may be called the second proposal scene between the two, Mr Darcy only ventures so far as to assure Elizabeth of his unchanged feelings and again stresses his absolute willingness to abide by her decision: "You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever" (295).
In rare cases, the suitor even expects to be refused and, when actually met with rejection, acknowledges it without any further argument. John Rokesmith in *Mutual Friend*, for example, proposes to Bella despite his conviction of it being a hopeless endeavour:

"That I may never, in the days to come afar off, have any weak misgiving that Bella might, in any contingency, have taken me for my own sake if I had plainly asked her, I will plainly ask her: proving beyond all question what I already know too well." (367)

On receiving confirmation of Bella’s disinclination towards his desires, he immediately expresses his acceptance: "I should be blind and deaf if I were not prepared for the reply. Forgive my offence, for it carries its punishment with it. [...] For the future there is no apprehension. It is all over" (370). He does so even though her estimation of him, and consequently her reasons for refusing, are based on false hypotheses, which he would have had in his power to invalidate. Instead of justifying himself by revealing his true identity, he chooses to accept that she cannot regard him in the light of a suitor.

Apart from such exceptionable characters as John Rokesmith, however, most of the suitors depicted in the novels analysed do not bear rejection calmly and without argument. The heroines, for their part, generally attempt to couch their refusals in polite and tactful terms, but – given the frequent obstinacy of suitors – are often compelled to resort to rudeness in order to put an end to unwelcome advances.
7. Factors influencing success or failure

As a marriage proposal can eventually only lead to two possible outcomes – success or failure – it seems advisable to have a closer look at potentially determining factors and the true extent of their influence.

The expectedness of a proposal certainly constitutes a relevant aspect in this context. An unexpected offer of marriage smacks of presumptuousness on the part of the suitor and is also not in keeping with the propagated ideals of the time: "Young ladies, and with reason, naturally object, on so important an occasion, to be the last to be consulted. Consequently, the gentleman should first make sure that the affections of the young lady would, in all probability, centre upon himself" (How to Woo 25).

An exclusively silent admiration on the part of a suitor and covert matrimonial designs up to the point of proposal, as occasionally found in the novels analysed, hardly ever prove to be successful. Taken by surprise, the heroines are mostly presented as reacting unfavourably. Elizabeth Bennet rejects both Mr Collins’ and Mr Darcy’s (first) proposal, as Eleanor Bold does those of Mr Slope and Mr Stanhope. Bathsheba Everdene rejects Gabriel Oak and, although Bella Wilfer is aware of having aroused a certain interest in Mr Rokesmith, she is astonished at his supposed presumptuousness in actually proposing to her and refuses him, too.

In rare cases, however, where the heroines themselves harbour secret feelings for their suitors, or have already considered them in the light of a potential husband for some other reason, unexpected proposals are sometimes met with favour. Eleanor, for example, accepts Mr Arabin, as does Dorothea Mr Casaubon and Jane Eyre Mr Rochester. The expectedness of a marriage proposal thus cannot be seen as truly decisive for its success or failure.

The setting constitutes another relevant aspect as regards the portrayal of marriage proposals in the novels analysed, especially when considering that most of them occur outdoors. Mr Rochester proposes to Jane in the orchard of Thornfield Hall, Mr Darcy’s second proposal takes place on a walk with Elizabeth, both Gabriel Oak and Mr Boldwood make their addresses to Bathsheba in open nature, Eleanor Bold receives Mr Slope’s and Mr Stanhope’s proposals at a garden party, Mr Headstone makes his violent declaration of love to Lizzie Hexam whilst taking a stroll through the city and Mary and Fred, too, reach their final understanding out of doors.
Although the climactic scene between Dorothea and Will Ladislaw takes place at Lowick Manor, nature plays an undeniably important role in this case as well. It could, in fact, be argued that it is the setting outdoors that renders the proposal indoors possible in the first place:

They stood silent, not looking at each other, but looking at the evergreens which were being tossed, and were showing the pale underside of their leaves against the blackening sky. Will never enjoyed the prospect of a storm so much: it delivered him from the necessity of going away. Leaves and little branches were hurled about, and the thunder was getting nearer. The light was more and more sombre, but there came a flash of lightning which made them start and look at each other, and then smile. Dorothea began to say what she had been thinking of. (MM 770)

In *Jane Eyre*, nature also features quite prominently in the depiction of the proposal scene. Descriptions of Jane’s feelings are interspersed with references to the evening mood in the orchard of Thornfield Hall, the heroine’s emotional state thus being tied to her surroundings:

"Jane, do you hear that nightingale singing in the wood? Listen!" [...] In listening, I sobbed convulsively; for I could repress what I endured no longer. (283)

A waft of wind came sweeping down the laurel-walk, and trembled through the boughs of the chestnut: it wandered away – away – to an indefinite distance – it died. The nightingale’s song was then the only voice of the hour: in listening to it, I again wept. (285)

The chestnut tree, which also features as the setting for the proposal scene, presents another and perhaps more typical example of pathetic fallacy (see Spence 10-11). It symbolises the relationship between Jane and Mr Rochester, initially "Eden-like" (278) and strong, and "circled at the base by a seat" (279) – reminiscent of a wedding ring. After Jane has accepted Mr Rochester's proposal, however, the narrative description of the setting changes from tranquil to stormy, foretelling of the approaching turmoil:

But what had befallen the night? The moon was not yet set, and we were all in shadow: I could scarcely see my master's face, near as I was. And what ailed the chestnut tree? it writhed and groaned; while wind roared in the laurel walk, and came sweeping over us.
"We must go in," said Mr. Rochester: "the weather changes. I could have sat with thee till morning, Jane." (287)

The thunderstorm during the night then actually destroys the tree – "half of it split away" (288) by lightening – which serves as a harbinger of the impending break in their relationship.
Mr Darcy’s first proposal, on the other hand, takes place indoors and so does Lydgate’s to Rosamond and essentially Mr Casaubon’s to Dorothea, since it is made in the form of a letter – written, read and answered indoors. Interestingly, Mr Darcy’s proposal is unsuccessful and both Lydgate’s and Casaubon’s marriage prove to be unhappy. Lundeen, quoting the case of Mr Darcy’s first (indoor and unsuccessful) and second (outdoor and successful) proposal, suggests that the shift from the parlour into the open air can be regarded as symbolic of Elisabeth’s and Darcy’s changed relationship from "narrow prejudices to generosity". She argues that, "[t]hough they preserve the propriety of the parlour when outdoors, they relate to each other with more ease and freedom in the natural setting" (71-72).

Yet the mere fact of a marriage proposal occurring out of doors again does not guarantee its success. Both Mr Slope and Mr Stanhope are rejected by Eleanor Bold and so are Gabriel Oak and Mr Boldwood by Bathsheba. Where a suitor in the novels analysed decides to make his addresses seems, in reality, primarily tied to the wish of obtaining a private interview with the lady in question. The frequent occurrence of outdoor marriage proposals in 19th-century novels may thus be attributed to the restrictions of contemporary decorum and conventions rather than any deliberation about the setting’s possible influence on success or failure. Moreover, since open nature would have allowed for a less restrained manner of conversation, its frequent application as setting for marriage proposals was undoubtedly also fuelled by the possibility of authors to portray more interesting dialogues between heroines and their suitors.

The degree of emotionality is another point of interest regarding a marriage proposal’s eventual success or failure. Overbearing romantic behaviour is frequently treated with suspicion or disdain, and in some cases even irony, on the part of the narrators. Jane Austen’s novels are generally famous for satirising heroines who put emotion before reason, but also other works of 19th-century fiction analysed seem to advocate a more self-controlled demeanour on the part of suitors. This is undoubtedly again tied to the strict moral code of the 19th century and its restrictive notions of proper conduct, which did not allow for any excess of emotion:

Never indulge too freely in proclaiming the charms of your partner; but, whilst you may yourself be deeply sensible of her attractions, keep a respectful silence on the subject;— and, except when any one presumes to detract from her merits, let not your tongue be employed in her praise. (*Etiquette* 68)

Conduct books of the time also caution against the worthlessness of fervent avowals, given in the heat of passion, and argue in favour of a certain maturity in love which need not find expression in emotional words: "An honest and sincere attachment will manifest
itself by a desire to avoid display. Genuine love is ever shy, modest, and retiring" (Etiquette 80).

The sudden declaration of love by Mr Darcy, for example, completely overwhelms Elizabeth. Instead of restraining his emotions and slowly intimating to her the nature of his affections, he is described as first pacing the room in obvious excitement and then beginning his address by bursting out: "In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you" (157). Lundeen refers to this as "an undignified burst of emotion" (74), whereas she describes his second proposal as "calm, humble, dignified" (72), since he manages to convey the depth of his feelings for Elizabeth, but "does so with a welcomed restraint" (72). Lundeen thus attributes at least some of the success of a marriage proposal to its degree of emotionality and even argues that, "When the principal lovers in Austen's novels arrive at the threshold of commitment [...] [t]heir past foibles are ghostly witnesses at their betrothal which guard them from the passionate oblivion which would later render them fools" (75).

Eleanor, too, is described as "annoyed [...] by the excess of [Mr Slope's] ardour" (405) and Bathsheba is "frightened as well as agitated at [Mr Boldwood's] vehemence" (101). Similarly, the narrator's descriptions of Mr Headstone's proposal to Lizzie serve to convey an impression of his violently passionate state and her repugnance and dread at being subjected to it:

"Are you quite decided, and is there no chance of any change in my favour?"
"I am quite decided, Mr Headstone, and I am bound to answer I am certain there is none."
"Then," said he, suddenly changing his tone and turning to her, and bringing his clenched hand down upon the stone with a force that laid the knuckles raw and bleeding; "then I hope that I may never kill him!"
The dark look of hatred and revenge with which the words broke from his livid lips, and with which he stood holding out his smeared hand as if it held some weapon and had just struck a mortal blow, made her so afraid of him that she turned to run away. But he caught her by the arm. (MF 390-391)

As described before, Mr Rochester is initially very detached in tone, and even dishonest in his statements, while attempting to evoke an emotional reaction from Jane. Having succeeded in doing so and assured of her affection, he immediately becomes earnest and passionate. This abrupt change in emotionality, and the avid manner of his subsequent proposal, do not further his cause but actually prove hindering. Mr Rochester does not succeed in making himself clear and only arouses Jane's own passionate temper by his sudden fervour. As in the case of Mr Darcy's first offer, a calm and collected manner of proposal would have undoubtedly served understanding better.
At various other instances throughout the novel, too, Jane is portrayed as distrustful of Mr Rochester’s overly romantic notions, speeches and gestures. When he presents her with a love song, sung in her honour and ending with the lines,

My love has sworn, with sealing kiss,  
With me to live – to die;  
I have at last my nameless bliss:  
As I love – loved am I! (305)

she does her best to shake him out of his overly emotional state by deliberately assuming a passionless demeanour herself and reacting very differently from what he had expected:

He rose and came towards me, and I saw his face all kindled, and his full falcon-eye flashing, and tenderness and passion in every lineament. I quailed momentarily—then I rallied. Soft scene, daring demonstration, I would not have; and I stood in peril of both: a weapon of defence must be prepared—I whetted my tongue: as he reached me, I asked with asperity, "whom he was going to marry now?"
"That was a strange question to be put by his darling Jane."
"Indeed! I considered it a very natural and necessary one: he had talked of his future wife dying with him. What did he mean by such a pagan idea? I had no intention of dying with him—he might depend on that." (305-06)

Jane, although unquestionably very passionate in her own feelings to Mr Rochester, thus consistently attempts to curb any excess of emotional display between them. In at least one instance, however, Mr Rochester also exhibits a slight aversion against too sincere an expression of feelings. When, for the first time and in all earnest, Jane tells him that she loves him, he replies that this "has penetrated [his] breast painfully" because her expression was "the very sublime of faith, truth, and devotion". He tells her, "Look wicked, Jane: as you know well how to look: coin one of your wild, shy, provoking smiles; tell me you hate me—tease me, vex me; do anything but move me: I would rather be incensed than saddened" (315).

On the other hand, the portrayal of wooing scenes in 19th-century novels, providing hints as to the established modes of the time, does seem to suggest that a certain degree of emotionality was expected from a suitor. Mr Collins, for example, though not seriously in love, is portrayed as professing himself to be so and Mr Slope, too, seems to act out a rather clichéd idea of the enamoured lover. On the part of the ladies as well, there seems to have been at least some degree of expectancy. Eleanor Bold, for example, though infuriated by Mr Slope’s emotional intemperance, is described as equally incensed at Bertie Stanhope’s lack of it:

Mr. Slope had annoyed her by the excess of his ardour. It was quite clear that no such danger was to be feared from Mr. Stanhope. Prudential motives alone
actuated him. Not only was he about to make love because his sister told him, but he also took the precaution of explaining all this before he began. (BT 405)

In any case, the emotionality of a marriage proposal once again cannot be regarded as crucial. Mr Casaubon’s proposal is passionless and successful, whereas Will Ladislaw’s is very passionate, yet equally successful. Mr Slope and Mr Stanhope are both unsuccessful, even though the former comports himself in a very sentimental and the latter in a very prosaic way.

All aspects analysed so far thus cannot be considered as truly decisive in terms of a marriage proposal’s success or failure. In fact, it may even be argued that a heroine’s reception of a proposal has very little to do with the male characters at all and, instead, depends entirely on her plans for the future and her attitude to marriage.

Mr Casaubon, for instance, displays little concern about Dorothea’s point of view in his proposal to her. By saying, "Such, my dear Miss Brooke, is the accurate statement of my feelings; and I rely on your kind indulgence in venturing now to ask you how far your own are of a nature to confirm my happy presentiment" (MM 44), he already presumes to know her feelings on the subject and – similar to Mr Collins – merely wishes to obtain her confirmation thereof. In contrast to Elizabeth, however, Dorothea does not take offence: "My dear Mr. Casaubon, - I am very grateful to you for loving me, and thinking me worthy to be your wife. I can look forward to no better happiness than that which would be one with yours. If I said more, it would only be the same thing written out at greater length." (45)

Regarded merely in the light of Mr Casaubon’s proposal, Dorothea’s reply does not make any sense. It becomes understandable only when considered from her own special viewpoint and philosophy of life:

How could it occur to her to examine the letter, to look at it critically as a profession of love? Her whole soul was possessed by the fact that a fuller life was opening before her. (44) [...] Dorothea’s faith supplied all that Mr. Casaubon’s words seemed to leave unsaid: what believer sees a disturbing omission or infelicity? The text, whether of prophet or of poet, expands for whatever we can put into it, and even his bad grammar is sublime. (50)

This example clearly supports the view that the manner of a proposal actually has very little impact on its success or failure. When prompted by adequate reasons, a heroine may accept the most egoistical or ill-delivered offer. A suitor’s wording and tone might thus occasionally affect the manner, but hardly ever the nature, of a lady’s answer.
As Elizabeth Bennet so famously states in her reply to Mr Darcy,

"You are mistaken [...] if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner. [...] You could no have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it." (PP 159)
8. Male-female power relations

All novels analysed in this thesis convey an impression of the prevailing gender roles of the time and the disadvantaged position of women. Mr Casaubon’s statement on the desirable qualities of the female sex in his proposal letter to Dorothea serves as a perfect illustration in this context:

> You have all – nay, more than all – those qualities which I have ever regarded as the characteristic excellences of womanhood. The great charm of your sex is its capability of an ardent self-sacrificing affection, and herein we see its fitness to round and complete the existence of our own. (MM 50)

The heroines are faced with numerous restrictions due to their gender: they are dependent on men for their social standing and economic welfare, have limited opportunities as regards occupation and self-fulfilment and, if choosing not to conform to society’s expectations and displaying instances of subversive behaviour, become the targets of social scorn or even condemnation.

To the only relatives still living, Jane Eyre is a disagreeable liability, soon cast off to Lowood School. Left to fend for herself from an early age on, she has to acquire not only self-constraint but also self-sufficiency. When she admits to feeling deprived of men’s privileges, longing for "a power of vision [...] which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life" and "more of practical experience" (125), she is aware of the reactions such sentiments are prone to evoke:

> Who blames me? Many, no doubt; and I shall be called discontented. [...] Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do [...] and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (125-26)

Bathsheba Everdene in *Madding Crowd* is portrayed as an independent, ambitious and self-reliant woman who decides to run the farm she inherited from her uncle herself, instead of appointing a new bailiff – a decision met with incomprehension and prejudice by her surroundings:

> Those of the farmers with whom she had no dealings [...] were continually asking each other, ‘Who is she?’ The reply would be— “Farmer Everdene’s niece; took on Weatherbury Upper Farm; turned away the bailiff, and swears she’ll do everything herself.” The other man would then shake his head.
"Yes, 'tis a pity she's so headstrong, [...] 'Tis such a shapely maid, however, that she'll soon get picked up." (71-72)

The incessant and rather crude schemes and tactics employed by Mrs Bennet to advance her daughters toward wedlock might be the source of frequent amusement to the reader, but are, in fact, completely reasonable. The estate of Mr Bennet being entailed to the next male relation, Mr Collins, the best option for the Misses Bennet lies in an advantageous marriage. Given the social conditions of the time, Signora Neroni in *Barchester Towers*, too, cannot but acknowledge the necessity of matrimony: "A woman, too generally, has no other way of living" (126) - although her own experience has left her disillusioned and crippled.

Bella Wilfer in *Mutual Friend*, finds herself the subject of a rich man’s whimsical will, which stipulates her marriage to his only son as condition for the latter's inheritance of the property. Although being thus "willed away, like a horse, or a dog" and "made the property of strangers" (371), Bella is prepared to enter into this marriage because of the economic benefit for her and her family: "I hate to be poor, and we are degradingly poor, offensively poor, miserably poor, beastly poor" (45).

Of all the heroines depicted, however, Dorothea in *Middlemarch* suffers perhaps the most from the rigid constraints put upon women and her perceived inability to achieve anything of value on her own. She accepts Mr Casaubon’s proposal as a way out of this misery, as a means to finally being able to contribute her share in life:

She was going to have room for the energies which stirred uneasily under the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance and the petty peremptoriness of the world’s habits. Now she would be able to devote herself to large yet definite duties; now she would be allowed to live continually in the light of a mind that she could reverence. (44)

Women are frequently portrayed also as being treated as commodities, either for their good looks or for their fortune, which men can come and claim without much consideration to the sentiments of the lady in question. In many novels, the heroine’s point of view is not considered at all by the suitors, as in the case of Mr Boldwood in *Madding Crowd*:

I may have been called a confirmed bachelor, and I was a confirmed bachelor. I had never any views of myself as a husband in my earlier days, nor have I made any calculation on the subject since I have been older. But we all change, and my change, in this matter, came with seeing you. I have felt lately, more and more, that my present way of living is bad in every respect. Beyond all things, I want you as my wife. (99)
Mr Casaubon’s proposal, too, is void of any consideration regarding the requirements Dorothea might stipulate for her future husband, talking only of a "consciousness of need" having arisen in his life and Dorothea’s "eminent and perhaps exclusive fitness to supply that need" (43). Similarly, in his proposal to Elizabeth, Mr Collins considers the matter only as regards his own motives:

My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly – which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness. (PP 89)

In the latter case, the suitor experiences reproof for this conduct ("You are too hasty, Sir [...] You forget that I have made no answer") and is reminded that there exists another point of view ("You could not make me happy", 90). In the case of Dorothea, however, a character described as "entirely without hidden calculations either for immediate effects or for remoter ends" (MM 50), Mr Casaubon’s selfish proposal actually proves to be successful:

It was this which made Dorothea so childlike, and, according to some judges, so stupid, with all her reputed cleverness; as, for example, in the present case of throwing herself, metaphorically speaking, at Mr. Casaubon’s feet, and kissing his unfashionable shoe-ties as if he were a Protestant Pope. She was not in the least teaching Mr. Casaubon to ask if he were good enough for her, but merely asking herself anxiously how she could be good enough for Mr. Casaubon. (50-51) [...] Mr. Casaubon was touched with an unknown delight (what man would not have been?) at this childlike unrestrained ardour: he was not surprised (what lover would have been?) that he should be the object of it. (49)

In all fairness, however, it needs to be stated, that men, too, are occasionally the objects of mere mercenary considerations or sexual desire on the part of female characters. Bathsheba is taken with Troy’s manly demeanour and sword-wielding skills as a soldier (as Mr Boldwood states: "Dazzled by brass and scarlet—Oh, Bathsheba—this is woman’s folly indeed!"; 161) and Bella Wilfer is determined to make a good match, irrespective of her personal likes or dislikes. She tells her father that she will not accept Mr Lightwood because of his insufficient wealth:

"I don't care for him," said Bella.  
"That's enough," her father interposed.  
"No, Pa, it's not enough," rejoined Bella, giving him another shake or two. "Haven't I told you what a mercenary little wretch I am? It only becomes enough when he has no money, and no clients, and no expectations, and no anything but debts." (MF 454)
Rosamond, too, does not really care to understand Lydgate or his ambitions in life, but regards him primarily as someone who, being well-born, will ensure her the social standing and lifestyle she has always dreamt of.

8.1 Active men, passive women?

With regard to the question of power in male-female relations, Jane and Mr Rochester constitute a very interesting example of 19th-century fiction. Mr Rochester is Jane's superior in wealth, social standing, age, knowledge and experience, but nevertheless meets his equal in her on numerous occasions.

In the proposal scene, Rochester is depicted as taking full advantage of his superior position. He begins their conversation by speaking to Jane as her employer, equipped with the power to dismiss her as "a dependent" (282), and fools her into regarding his marriage to Blanche Ingram and her own departure from Thornfield Hall as certain and inevitable events. He eventually succeeds in driving her to the brink of despair, but her declaration does not take the form of a dejected and bashful confession, but rather of a confident and honest assertion:

"I grieve to leave Thornfield: I love Thornfield: - I love it, because I have lived in it a full and delightful life, - momentarily at least. I have not been trampled on. I have not been petrified. I have not been buried with inferior minds, and excluded from every glimpse of communion with what is bright and energetic, and high. I have talked, face to face, with what I reverence; with what I delight in, - with an original, a vigorous, and expanded mind. I have known you, Mr Rochester; and it strikes me with terror and anguish to feel I absolutely must be torn from you for ever." (283)

It is thus she, who first declares her love for him and does not do so in a halting, restrained or modest manner, which would be in keeping with the conventions of the time, but is generous with her compliments and lets him know her full opinion of and feelings for him, without any regard for this supposedly "unfeminine" conduct or concern for her pride. This way she clearly subverts the female gender role of the time. She does so in another, much more shocking and prominent way, namely by asserting her equality with him:

"I have as much soul as you, - and full as much heart! [...] I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: - it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal - as we are!" (284)
In one swipe Jane negates and annihilates all the pretensions upon which his superior status rests. Mr Rochester does not contradict her, but later on in their conversation even affirms her claim by saying, "My bride is here [...] because my equal is here, and my likeness" (285). At a later point, he also openly admits the powerful influence she has on him:

"I never met your likeness. Jane, you please me, and you master me – you seem to submit, and I like the sense of pliancy you impart; and while I am twining the soft, silken skein round my finger, it sends a thrill up my arm to my heart. I am influenced – conquered; and the influence is sweeter than I can express; and the conquest I undergo has a witchery beyond any triumph I can win." (293)

On the other hand, those heroines who adhere to prevailing conventions are indeed dependent on the actions of men. Rosamond has designs on Lydgate from the very beginning of their acquaintance and does her best to impress him with her many accomplishments, but she is powerless when he chooses to abstain from visiting her father's dinner parties for a time:

She felt that she was beginning to know the pang of disappointed love, and that no other man could be the occasion of such delightful aerial building as she had been enjoying for the last six months. [...] Any one who imagines ten days too short a time – not for falling into leanness, lightness, or other measurable effects of passion, but – for the whole spiritual circuit of alarmed conjecture and disappointment, is ignorant of what can go on in the elegant leisure of a young lady's mind." (MM 290-291)

Jane Bennet, too, serves as a good example of the absolute dependence on men for initiative and the powerlessness women faced when staying within the confines of proper conduct.

8.2 Gaining power

8.2.1 Male characters

As concerns courtship within the confines of 19th-century propriety, men had the benefit of action, whereas women were left largely with only the power to react. By their very nature, marriage proposals can thus be argued to constitute an exercise of power on the part of the men. To a certain extent, this also features in the novels analysed.

The main power of the suitors lies in their ability to choose the time, place and manner of their proposal. This puts them at a clear advantage, as they are in possession of a premeditated plan of action and operate under conditions favourable to them. The heroines, on the other hand, are mainly taken by surprise and have to face the most
important decision of their lives mainly unprepared. In a matter of minutes, they have to rally their thoughts, assess the value of the proposal, carefully weigh their options and inspect their feelings, before then voicing them in a manner befitting the occasion. There are, of course, instances where heroines are either offered some time for consideration or request it themselves, yet such cases form the exception in the novels analysed and mostly result in their being subjected to further pressuring tactics on the part of suitors.

Mr Collins’ proposal to Elizabeth Bennet presents an interesting example in this context as it exhibits many of the strategies employed by male characters to assert their power during such interviews. Apart from choosing time and place of the proposal and thus having the advantage of preparation over Elizabeth, he also refers to her parent’s permission and so establishes a duty on her part to listen to him: "[A]llow me to assure you that I have your respected mother’s permission for this address" (PP 89).

By reasoning completely from his perspective, using nothing but the first pronoun, he automatically assumes the leading role and establishes himself as the powerful party: "My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) [...] Secondly, that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness [...] Thus much for my general intention in favour of matrimony" (89; emphasis added). As Herrle states, "Where is Elizabeth in this passage? There are seven words that are variations of the first-person singular, but no references to the second-person singular" (245). Elizabeth is thus denied a voice in the matter and her view is blocked out completely. In fact, Mr Collins proves himself so utterly unable to put himself in her place that he even fails to comprehend her repeated refusals.

In addition to utterly ignoring a heroine’s point of view, suitors may also assume an "ideal subject" (Fairclough 41) as a means of constituting power. This technique, as outlined by Fairclough in *Language and Power*, refers to certain beliefs or values being projected unto an audience, which then has to negotiate a relationship with them. Fairclough argues that in many cases the audience will accept the position created for them, rather than oppose it. Thus in the context of marriage proposals, suitors may choose to establish a heroine’s character for her and so put her into a disadvantaged position – her only options being to conform to it or not. Rejecting the imposed ideal, however, does not only involve effort but also potential opposition, unpleasantness or even social scorn.

In his proposal Mr Collins, for instance, is continually trying to press Elizabeth into a specific pattern by conjuring up the image of the ideal woman, speaking of her "modesty" and "natural delicacy", and the "usual practice of elegant females" (88-91).
Even compliments relating to her actual character are immediately attenuated; he comments favourably on her "wit and vivacity", which he thinks will please his noble patroness, but immediately adds, "especially when tempered with the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite" (89).

Mr Casaubon, in his letter, speaks of Dorothea’s "eminent and perhaps exclusive fitness" to supply the need he has come to feel in his life and compliments her on her "elevation of thought" and "capability of devotedness" (43). Both suitors thus paint a certain picture of the heroines' characters, thereby forcing an ideal on them which they have to negotiate a relationship with. In contrast to Dorothea, however, who seeks to conform to Mr Casaubon’s view of her ("I am very grateful to you for [...] thinking me worthy to be your wife. I can look forward to no greater happiness than that which would be one with yours", 45), Elizabeth vehemently rejects Mr Collins’ restrictive estimation of her character: "I assure you that I am not one of those young ladies [...] all praise of me will be unnecessary. You must give me leave to judge for myself, and pay me the compliment of believing what I say" (90).

Another strategy used by suitors in the novels analysed is that of telling rather than asking. As Stovel points out, "A marriage proposal, broken down to its lowest common denominator, consists of seven words, 'I love you. Will you marry me?' – three words of telling and four words of asking" (32). Interestingly enough, it is the asking part that is often neglected by suitors. Citing several examples in Austen’s novels, Stovel argues that a heroine frequently "refuse[s] a marriage proposal because the question has never actually been asked", the male character in question being "so infatuated with his vision of himself as a suitor, so impressed with the wisdom of his choice, that he tells the woman that she is his chosen rather than asks her to be so" (30; emphasis given). Successful proposals, on the other hand, typically "show the man asking a genuine question" (33). As asking involves the participation of another and "[a] genuine question [...] presupposes the speakers are equals" (29), it is often easier to tell.

Mr Collins’ proposal in *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, can be described as a declaration rather than request and Mr Darcy’s first proposal, too, does not allow for adequate involvement on Elizabeth’s part until she forcibly seizes it herself. In the case of his second proposal, however, Mr Darcy begins his address by eliciting a declaration from Elizabeth first. Inquiring whether her feelings for him have at all changed, he poses a genuine question and, this time, is met with a favourable answer.

The flattering and occasionally even subservient speech of suitors often disguises their actual power position, yet there are also instances where it is openly claimed and
asserted. A suitor may, for example, refer to a heroine’s duty to her family or to the consequences a refusal would entail. Mr Collins thus candidly points out to Elizabeth that the establishment and connections he offers are highly desirable and that, due to her lack of fortune, "it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made [to her]" (91). In the case of Mr Headstone, a very physical kind of predominance is exerted. He first disregards Lizzie's unwillingness to speak with him, coercing her into listening to his proposal, and later even forcibly retains her when she attempts to leave.

It is thus important to note that heroines, despite the servile manner and speech of suitors, are often subjected to attentions, and the verbalisation of the same, against their will. The emotional outpour of men is frequently forced upon them, even if they harbour an aversion to the man in question and express their unwillingness to listen to his proposal. Their inability to thwart such potentially very passionate outbursts can have several reasons. The heroine might not be able to dissuade the suitor from his course because she is physically unable to remove herself from the scene:

Eleanor saw that she was pursued, and as a deer, when escape is no longer possible, will turn to bay and attack the hounds, so did she turn upon Mr. Slope. (BT 380)

Bathsheba immediately contrived to withdraw, and glided along by the river till she was a stone’s throw off. She heard footsteps brushing the grass, and had a consciousness that love was encircling her like a perfume. Instead of turning or waiting Bathsheba went further among the high sedges, but Boldwood seemed determined, and pressed on till they were completely past the bend of the river. (MC 98)

The passion of the suitor may also be such as to render it impossible for the heroine to halt his verbal torrent or even make her afraid of opposing him, such as in the case of Mr Headstone or Mr Boldwood:

The wild energy of the man, now quite let loose, was absolutely terrible. He stopped and laid his hand upon a piece of the coping of the burial-ground enclosure, as if he would have dislodged the stone.
'Mr Headstone, I have heard enough. Let me stop you here. It will be better for you and better for me. Let us find my brother.'
'Not yet. It shall and must be spoken. [...]'
She yielded to the entreaty—how could she do otherwise! (MF 389)

His tone was so excited that she almost feared him at this moment, even whilst she sympathised. It was a simple physical fear – the weak of the strong. (MC 279)

There may, however, also be more harmless reasons, such as the heroine’s inability to restrain her emotions and speak collectedly:
The idea of Mr. Collins, with all his solemn composure, being run away with by his feelings, made Elizabeth so near laughing that she could not use the short pause he allowed in any attempt to stop him farther, and he continued. (*PP 89*)

The heroines are then under an obligation to endure these scenes with all the awkwardness and disagreeability involved, and are not only called on to react, but also held responsible for any possible consequences their reply might evoke. Mr Headstone and Mr Boldwood both put their whole existence and chances of happiness so absolutely into the hands of the women they love that a refusal of them must be seen as equalling their destruction. As Bathsheba tells Gabriel, when discussing Boldwood’s proposal:

> I believe that if I don’t give my word, he’ll go out of his mind [...] and Heaven knows I say it in a spirit the very reverse of vain, for I am grieved and troubled to my soul about it – I believe I hold that man’s future in my hand. His career depends entirely upon my treatment of him. [...] I tremble at my responsibility, for it is terrible. (*MC 280*)

Having been forced to state their feelings and to supply the suitors with an answer, the female characters are not infrequently subjected to further harassment and pestering on the part of the men, who are unwilling to accept their decision.

### 8.2.2 Female characters

Although women in the 19th century were faced with severe restrictions and disadvantages due to their gender, the heroines in the novels analysed are not portrayed as merely passive and dependent on men’s actions, nor wholly restricted to reaction. Instead, they take active influence on the courtship process by initiating, encouraging or discouraging developments and are sometimes also depicted as indulging in wilful practices, such as leading a man on, kindling jealousy and rivalry between suitors or playing the disdainful mistress.

Bathsheba, for example, can never quite make up her mind about whether or not to accept Mr Boldwood, thus raising false hopes in him, and, for the greater part of the novel, enjoys the silent adoration and loyal devotion of Gabriel Oak without harbouring any serious designs on him. Mr Boldwood, a wealthy and handsome farmer, is described by Bathsheba’s maids in the following way:

> Never was such a hopeless man for a woman! He’s been courted by sixes and sevens – all the girls, gentle and simple, for miles round, have tried him. Jane Perkins worked at him for two months like a slave, and the two Miss Taylors spent a year upon him, and he cost Farmer Ives’s daughter nights of tears and twenty pounds’ wroth of new clothes; but Lord – the money might as well have been thrown out of the window. (*MC 59*)
The portrait Trollope paints of Signora Neroni is most definitely not that of a weak and submissive woman either:

'The signora was a powerful spider that made wondrous webs, and could in no way live without catching flies. Her taste in this respect was abominable, for she had no use for the victims when caught. She could not eat them matrimonially, as young lady-spiders do whose webs are most frequently of their mother's weaving. [...] It was necessary to her to have some man at her feet. It was the one customary excitement of her life. She delighted in the exercise of power which this gave her; it was now nearly the only food for her ambition". (BT 242)

Also in her dealings with suitors, the signora is consistently portrayed as the superior party. With regard to Mr Slope, for instance, Trollope comments that "[i]n age the lady was younger than the gentleman; but in feelings, in knowledge of the affairs of love, in intrigue, he was immeasurably her junior" (242). Towards the end of the novel, Signora Neroni even decides to take in hand the counselling of others on matters of love and marriage. She thus advises Mr Arabin with regard to Eleanor, encouraging him to become active: "Why do you let the Slopes of the world outdistance you? [...] Is not the blood in your veins as warm as his? Does not your pulse beat as fast? Has not God made you a man and intended you to do a man's work here, ay, and to take a man's wages also?" (365-366).

Bella Wilfer, too, does not see herself as a helpless victim of men's whims and fancies, but as an active agent in the matters of love and matrimony:

'Mr Lightwood would propose to me, if I would let him.'
'Then I understand, my dear, that you don't intend to let him?'
Bella again saying, with her former emphasis, 'Why, of course not!' her father felt himself bound to echo, 'Of course not.' (MF 454)

The majority of heroines portrayed thus do not regard themselves as inferior to men or under any obligation to accept the first offer they receive. In fact, they are often quite conscious of their own power, Bathsheba in Madding Crowd rejecting Gabriel Oak for the following reason: "It wouldn't do, Mr Oak. I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent; and you would never be able to, I know" (26).

Eloquence presents an important tool by which women gain power. Given the rigid conventions of male-female social intercourse, proposal scenes frequently present an opportunity for the characters to clarify existing misconceptions and obtain a more accurate idea of each other. As Jones puts it in her introduction to Pride and Prejudice: "Elizabeth's and Darcy's fraught fascination with each other generates a tantalizing sexual energy, an energy which, like Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre and Rochester later in the century, finds expression in a series of highly articulate confrontations. Elizabeth and
Darcy engage in verbal struggles to assert their own definitions of people, principles – and each other" (viii-ix).

In many cases, power is thus assumed through the use of language, heroines positioning themselves as equal subjects by their wit and articulateness. For example, Harris argues that "[Elizabeth's] quick verbal facility" – which "derives in no small measure from the fact that her father, having almost entirely abdicated his patriarchal authority, admires and encourages her wit" (11) – allows her to "speak just as boldly to Mr. Darcy, tease him, laugh at him" (57). Although Elizabeth eventually regrets "every saucy speech she had ever directed towards [Mr Darcy]" (PP 263), her wit and outspokenness are what constitute her as his equal in lieu of wealth or social standing.

The power women achieve by linguistic means also includes irony, laughter and deliberate silence. In her conversations with Mr Darcy, Elizabeth asserts her power not only by openly contradicting him, but also by "ironically call[ing] into question [his] judgment" (Fergus 104). For instance, she ridicules the self-flattering description he gives of his own character by stating "I am perfectly convinced [...] that Mr. Darcy has no defect. He owns it himself without disguise" (PP 51). Apart from irony and laughter, Elizabeth's silence, too, presents a powerful tool:

"[I]t has been the study of my life to avoid those weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule."
"Such as vanity and pride."
"Yes, vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride—where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation."
Elizabeth turned away to hide a smile. (50-51)

Trying to be taken into Mr Rochester's confidence, Jane Eyre refers to some of the tactics employed by women to manipulate their suitors:

"You are welcome to all my confidence that is worth having, Jane: but for God's sake, don't desire a useless burden! Don't long for poison – don't turn out a downright Eve on my hands!"
"Why not, sir? You have just been telling me how much you liked to be conquered, and how pleasant overpersuasion is to you. Don't you think I had better take advantage of the confession, and begin and coax, and entreat – even cry and be sulky if necessary – for the sake of a mere essay of my power?" (JE 294)

Although Jane does not employ any such strategies herself, she does have her own way of dealing with Mr Rochester throughout their courtship. She decides not to let him shower her with gifts or flattery ("I had rather be a thing than an angel" 294) and, instead of adopting artifical behaviour in his presence, chooses "to show him divers rugged points in [her] character", so that "he should know fully what sort of a bargain he
had made" (306). Jane thus manages to maintain a position of power and is also confident to be able to do so when they are married:

Mrs Fairfax, I saw approved me: her anxiety on my account vanished; therefore I was certain I did well. Meantime, Mr Rochester affirmed I was wearing him to skin and bone, and threatened awful vengeance for my present conduct at some period fast coming. I laughed in my sleeve at his menaces: "I can keep you in reasonable check now," I reflected; "and I don't doubt to be able to do it hereafter: if one expedient loses its virtue, another must be devised." (307)

Jane chooses not to conform to the idealised picture of a 19th-century woman, displaying "a lamb-like submission and turtle-dove sensibility" to Mr Rochester, and states that, "while fostering his despotism more", it "would have pleased his judgment, satisfied his common-sense, and even suited his taste, less" (306-07). In this way Mr Rochester is comparable to Mr Darcy who admires Elizabeth especially for her honesty and outspokenness.

There are also instances where heroines are depicted as actively subverting the courtship rituals of the time. Jane and Dorothea can both be seen as taking the first step towards a proposal, as they declare themselves before the men do. Dorothea, for example, chooses to disregard the conventions of the time which would necessitate an eternal separation between herself and Will Ladislaw due to the suspicions cast upon them by Mr Casaubon’s will. In their last interview, when Will is reluctantly about to take his leave, she breaks through the rigid constraints of proper conduct and bursts out, "Oh, I cannot bear it [...] I don’t mind about poverty – I hate my wealth [...] We could live quite well on my own fortune" (MM 772), thus actually proposing to him and taking the step he did not dare to take. Similarly, Elizabeth Bennet can be said to bring about Mr Darcy's second proposal, as she indirectly asks him whether his involvement in Lydia's marriage had anything to do with her. In a later conversation, she also admits to having taken the initiative by saying: "I wonder how long you would have gone on, if you had been left to yourself. I wonder when you would have spoken, if I had not asked you!" (PP 307; emphasis given).

Bathsheba in Madding Crowd in fact displays several instances of subversive behaviour. In jest, she sends Mr Boldwood a Valentine card with a seal saying "Marry Me" (77), which arouses the hitherto dormant passions of that gentleman, and goes to Gabriel’s lodgings in order to dissuade him from leaving her. Bathsheba is also depicted as being aware of the unusualness of her conduct: "Why, Gabriel [...] it seems exactly as if I had come courting you – how dreadful!" (313).
However, the behaviour of subversive heroines is occasionally condemned in the novels and characters prone to such demeanour are frequently subjected to certain events and experiences in their lives that force them to adopt a more "appropriate" self-perception and way of comporting themselves, such as in the case of Bella Wilfer, Elizabeth Bennet or Bathsheba Everdene.

In several instances, strongly subversive behaviour is commented on either by other characters or by the authors themselves. Mr Slope, for example, being rejected by Eleanor before he had actually had a chance to verbalise his proposal, is described as thinking that "the widow was bearing herself [...] with too high a hand, was speaking of herself in much too imperious a tone" (BT 383). When she then strikes him for his presumptuous and impudent conduct, this quite shockingly unfeminine act is commented on at some length by the voice of the author:

And now it is to be feared that every well-bred reader of these pages will lay down the book with disgust, feeling that, after all, the heroine is unworthy of sympathy. [...] It were to be wished devoutly that she had not struck Mr. Slope in the face. In doing so she derogated from her dignity and committed herself. Had she been educated in Belgravia, had she been brought up by any sterner mentor than that fond father, had she lived longer under the rule of a husband, she might, perhaps, have saved herself from this great fault. As it was, the provocation was too much for her, the temptation to instant resentment of the insult too strong. She was too keen in the feeling of independence, a feeling dangerous for a young woman, but one in which her position peculiarly tempted her to indulge. [...] But, nevertheless, she should not have raised her hand against the man. Ladies' hands, so soft, so sweet, so delicious to the touch, so grateful to the eye, so gracious in their gentle doings, were not made to belabour men's faces. The moment the deed was done Eleanor felt that she had sinned against all propriety, and would have given little worlds to recall the blow. (BT 384-85)

Gabriel Oak in Madding Crowd, too, does not silently suffer Bathsheba’s pretensions to superiority. When she dismisses him from her farm but then faces a crisis, where his skills as a shepherd are desperately needed, she eventually gets the better of her pride and calls for him. Gabriel, however, sends the messenger back after having told him that "beggars mustn't be choosers" and that he will not come unless requested "civilly and in a proper manner, as becomes any 'ooman beggins a favour" (109). After another argument between them at some later point, she again tries to dismiss him but instead of complying to her wish, he reproves her:

"You shall go, sir—your lecturing I will not hear! I am mistress here."
"Go, indeed—what folly will you say next? Treating me like Dick, Tom and Harry when you know that a short time ago my position was as good as yours! Upon my life, Bathsheba, it is too barefaced." (152)
As Hardy states, "The only superiority in women that is tolerable to the rival sex is, as a rule, that of the unconscious kind". He does, however, add that "a superiority which recognises itself may sometimes please by suggesting possibilities of capture to the subordinated man" (20). Frank Troy, for example, is initially very much taken with Bathsheba’s self-confident and independent demeanour, but loses his interest in her, when she has been successfully tamed: "Why, Bathsheba, you have lost all the pluck and sauciness you formerly had, and upon my life if I had known what a chicken-hearted creature you were under all your boldness, I’d never have—I know what" (205).

8.3 The role of male relations

As briefly outlined in the first chapter, women in the 19th century were regarded as the appendage of men rather than as subjects in their own right. For many areas of their lives, the main decision-making power thus lay in the hands of their male relations – even in matters of courtship and marriage.

Interestingly enough, however, none of the male relations or guardians portrayed in the novels analysed can be said to play a determining role in the initiation, evolvement or resolution of the main romance plots. They may voice preferences and dislikes and may even try to counteract or obstruct unwanted developments, but their interferences are never decisive. Jane Eyre’s uncle in Madeira perhaps constitutes an exception in this context, as it is mainly due to his influence that the existence of Mr Rochester’s wife Bertha is brought to light and the marriage of Jane thus prevented. He is, however, a character of no consequence until that point in the story and also acts primarily to obstruct Mr Rochester, not Jane. By and large, the heroines are not portrayed as meek and subservient females who passively and unquestioningly submit to the wishes of their male relations, as would be in keeping with the gender roles of the time.

For one thing, this may have to do with the rise of feminist movements in the 19th century and the emergence of new female role types in literature. Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Eyre are famous examples in this context because of their subversive tendencies, such as their independence, outspokenness and self-sufficiency. However, the novels of the male authors analysed do not portray any dominant father figures, either. Bathsheba Everdene, an orphan and rich heiress after the death of an uncle, is her own mistress and responsible to no one until she decides to marry Frank Troy. Similarly, Lizzie Hexam’s father dies rather early on in the novel and she is left to fend for herself and (initially) her younger brother, without parental protection and guidance.
When the heroine does have a father, the relationship between the two is often portrayed as an exceedingly loving and indulgent one, such as in the case of Eleanor Bold and Bella Wilfer. Mr Bold and Mr Wilfer are very fond and proud of their daughters and do in no way interfere in their love interests. In fact, they are both left completely in the dark concerning the intentions of their daughters until after a decision has been made, of which they are then merely informed.

Eleanor at one point promises her father that he would be the first to know should she have any serious designs on a man, but, as Mr Rokesmith in Mutual Friend points out to Mr Wilfer, "Young ladies sometimes [...] choose without mentioning their choice to their fathers" (374) and when assured of Mr Arabin’s affections for her, she engages herself to him before spending a thought on her father: "Fickle Eleanor! where was the promise that she would make no choice for herself without her father’s approval? She had chosen, and now demanded his acquiescence" (BT 473). When she eventually tells him that she is going to marry and he wants to know to whom (“Come, Nelly, come; tell me who it is”), she does for a second hesitate but is immediately assured of his consent, whoever it may be: "But will you love him, papa?" - "Dearest, I must love any one that you love" (242). Eleanor thus seeks her father’s blessing rather than permission: "Oh, papa, it’s done, and mustn’t be undone" (473).

Bella Wilfer, too, discusses the marriage proposal she received with her father only after she has made her choice and does not seem to regard him as an authoritarian figure – legally equipped with the power of dictation, let alone coercion – but rather as a confidante with whom she can privately joke about her suitors:

"Who do you think has [...] made an offer to me?"
Pa looked in her face, and looked at the ground, and looked in her face again, and declared he could never guess.
"Mr Rokesmith."
"You don't tell me so, my dear!"
"Mis—ter Roke—smith, Pa," said Bella separating the syllables for emphasis. "What do you say to that?"
Pa answered quietly with the counter-question, "What did you say to that, my love?"
"I said No," returned Bella sharply. "Of course."
"Yes. Of course," said her father, meditating. (MF 453)

"Have you said No to anybody else, my dear?"
"No, Pa."
"Yes to anybody?" he suggested, lifting up his eyebrows.
"No, Pa."
"Is there anybody else who would take his chance between Yes and No, if you would let him, my dear?"
"Not that I know of, Pa." (MF 455)
The novels written by female authors feature father-daughter relations of a similar nature. Mr Garth in *Middlemarch*, for example, does not try to influence his daughter in any way, but actually advises her to consider what her own heart tells her, without regard to the wishes of others:

"Your mind is quite settled, then, Mary? [...] There's no other wish come into it since things have been going on as they have been of late? [...] because better late than never. A woman must not force her heart – she'll do a man no good by that." (786)

Mary has set her mind on marrying Fred Vincy, despite his obvious flaws, the existence of another (potential) suitor, Mr Farebrother, and the fact that her father does not wholly approve of her choice. As in the case of Bella and Mr Wilfer, the dialogue is more playful than serious and does not portray any instances of patronising, or domination, on the part of the father:

Caleb screwed up his mouth and turned his head aside wisely.
"Now, father, you did praise him last Wednesday. You said he had an uncommon notion of stock, and a good eye for things."
"Did I?" said Caleb, rather slyly.
"Yes, I put it all down, and the date, anno Domini, and everything,"said Mary. "You like things to be neatly booked. And then his behaviour to you, father, is really good; he has a deep respect for you; and it is impossible to have a better temper than Fred has."
"Ay, ay; you want to coax me into thinking him a fine match."
"No, indeed, father. I don't love him because he is a fine match."
"What for, then?"
"Oh, dear, because I have always loved him. I should never like scolding any one else so well; and that is a point to be thought of in a husband." (786)

The same fond and indulgent paternal attitude is also found in *Pride and Prejudice*. Although called on by his wife to intercede favourably on part of their daughter's suitor ("You must come and make Lizzy marry Mr. Collins", 94), Mr Bennet famously takes Elizabeth's part: "An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. – Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do" (94). In the matter of Mr Collin's character and his suitability as a potential husband, Elizabeth and her father are of one mind. Concerning Mr Darcy, however, their views are initially opposed. Elizabeth accepts his proposal and her father, upon learning so, disapproves of her decision, but merely cautions his daughter against it and does not think of seriously forbidding the match:

"Lizzy [...] what are you doing? Are you out of your sense, to be accepting this man? Have not you always hated him? [...] I have given him my consent. He is the kind of man, indeed, to whom I should never dare refuse any thing, which he condescended to ask. I now give it to you, if you are resolved on having him. But let me advise you to think better of it." (303)
Mr Bennet is generally a quite peculiar father figure as he endeavours to keep out of his daughters’ affairs as much as possible. Mr Collins, for example, obtains the consent for a private interview with Elizabeth from her mother: "May I hope, Madam, for your interest with your fair daughter Elizabeth, when I solicit for the honour of a private audience with her in the course of this morning?" (88).

*Middlemarch* features yet another example of a rather compliant guardian. Although Mr Casaubon, in his letter to Dorothea refers to the permission he received from her uncle to address her on the subject of marriage, Mr Brooke has, in fact, very little to say. He personally favours Sir James Chettam as a husband for Dorothea, whom she rejects. When he learns that Dorothea has accepted Mr Casaubon’s proposal, he simply asks her, "Have you thought enough about this, my dear? [...] Then Chettam has no chance?" (45). Instead of attempting to persuade her of the match with Chettam, Mr Brooke tries to understand his niece’s choice: "[Y]ou must have a scholar, and that sort of thing? Well, it lies a little in our family. I had it myself – that love of knowledge, and going into everything". (46)

Although there are no truly dominant father figures to be found in the novels analysed, heroines do occasionally experience interference from other male relations. Lizzie Hexam’s brother, for example, despite being some years her junior and able to attend school only through her financial support, endeavours to use his influence over her to further Mr Headstone’s, and ultimately his own, cause:

"Lizzie, Mr Headstone has something to say to you. I don't wish to be an interruption either to him or to you, and so I'll go and take a little stroll and come back. I know in a general way what Mr Headstone intends to say, and I very highly approve of it, as I hope—and indeed I do not doubt—you will. I needn't tell you, Lizzie, that I am under great obligations to Mr Headstone, and that I am very anxious for Mr Headstone to succeed in all he undertakes." (*MF* 387)

When he learns that Lizzie has rejected the proposal, he tries to persuade her into accepting it after all, at first good-naturedly but soon tyrannously and by means of threats. Lizzie does not relent and, having failed to impose his authority over her, he decides to cast her off:

"I am determined that after I have climbed up out of the mire, you shall not pull me down. You can't disgrace me if I have nothing to do with you, and I will have nothing to do with you for the future. [...] You are an inveretvately bad girl, and a false sister, and I have done with you. For ever, I have done with you!" (396)
In both *Middlemarch* and *Barchester Towers*, the heroines have no brothers themselves but experience interferences by their brothers-in-law. Eleanor Bold explicitly and scornfully rejects Dr Grantly’s expressed concerns regarding her acquaintance with Mr Slope. When she learns that she has not merely been subjected to his lectures herself, but that he has also discussed the matter with his friend, Mr Arabin, she describes his conduct as "most officious" and "most impertinent" and furiously states that, "Dr. Grantly has no sort of jurisdiction over [her] whatsoever" (282). In *Middlemarch* it is Sir James Chettam who, having unsuccessfully tried to woo Dorothea himself, later attempts to influence her decisions as a brother-in-law on a number of occasions. He is especially opposed to her marriage with Will Ladislaw, but cannot detain her from it any more than her late husband’s will.

In conclusion, despite the disadvantaged position of women in the 19th century, one cannot help but notice that the heroines depicted in the novels of the time play a much more active and involved part in the whole courtship process than contemporary conventions would have suggested or allowed for.
9. Conclusion: A question of gender?

The literary task of portraying a marriage proposal scene arguably requires a certain capacity for feeling, or even romance, on the part of an author – an attribute commonly ascribed to women rather than men. This raises the intriguing question of whether the marriage proposals depicted in the three novels written by female authors differ in any substantial way from those found in the novels of male authors, thus if they bear any characteristically "feminine" features – most prominently, perhaps, concerning the question of sentiment.

An analysis of the proposal scenes in question shows that this cannot be convincingly argued to be the case. First of all, the depictions of the female authors are not at all similar. The proposals of both Mr Rochester and St John Rivers in Jane Eyre, for example, are rendered in great detail, whereas Jane Austen does not portray any full (serious) proposal scenes at all in Pride and Prejudice – Mr Darcy’s actual words not being rendered in the first and Elizabeth’s response in the second instance. The general tenor of the dialogues, as well, differs considerably.

George Eliot, for her part, portrays the widest range of proposals found in any of the novels analysed. There is Mr Casaubon’s rather sober and self-absorbed proposal to Dorothea in letter form, Mr Lydgate’s unusual and wordless way of arriving at an understanding with Rosamond, Mary and Fred Vincy’s bantering and rather practical discussion and, finally, Will Ladislaw’s and Dorothea’s rather awkward and forced, but eventually decisive, interview. In contrast to Pride and Prejudice and Jane Eyre, Middlemarch also “extend[s] an unusual focus on the period after marriage, rather than on the marriage plot”, as Schor points out, and portrays "an unusual picture of at least one truly disastrous marriage" (181).

Concerning the question of sentiment, Mr Rochester’s proposal is undeniably very passionate in its nature, yet convincingly so, and a slightly humorous flavour is achieved through his sarcasm and initial deception. Mr Darcy’s first proposal to Elizabeth, too, may be argued to be quite emotional, but it is also highly unpleasant – for both parties involved. St John Rivers’ offer to Jane constitutes a mere business proposal and Mr Collin's offer, obviously intended for comic effect, can certainly not be described as touching either. Except perhaps for the scene between Will Ladislaw and Dorothea in Middlemarch, none of the proposal scenes depicted by female authors can thus be said to be truly sentimental.
By contrast, Trollope's depiction of the proposal scene between Eleanor and Mr Arabin in *Barchester Towers* seems quite mawkish:

"Eleanor!" he again exclaimed, and in a moment he had her clasped to his bosom. How this was done, whether the doing was with him or her, whether she had flown thither conquered by the tenderness of his voice, or he with a violence not likely to give offence had drawn her to his breast, neither of them knew; nor can I declare. There was now that sympathy between them which hardly admitted of individual motion. They were one and the same − one flesh − one spirit − one life.

"Eleanor, my own Eleanor, my own, my wife!"

She ventured to look up at him through her tears, and he, bowing his face down over hers, pressed his lips upon her brow; his virgin lips, which since a beard first grew upon his chin, had never yet tasted the luxury of a woman's cheek. (466)

Interestingly enough, this scene shows traces of influence from *Jane Eyre*. The description of Eleanor and Mr Arabin being "one flesh − one spirit − one life" is reminiscent of Brontë’s portrait of Jane's matrimonial bliss, in which she is described as "absolutely bone of [Mr Rochester’s] bone, and flesh of his flesh" (500), although both authors, of course, ultimately refer to a well-known passage in the Bible. Mr Arabin's exclamation "Eleanor, my own, Eleanor, my own, my wife!", too, bears a strong resemblance to Mr Rochester’s outcry, "Oh, Jane! my hope − my love − my life!" (357). Yet while Brontë’s pathos is persuasive, Trollope’s portrayal appears overdrawn. As he is frequently ironic in tone − especially in emotional scenes, such as when depicting Mr Slope’s amorous advances − the reader is left with a substantial sense of doubt as to the seriousness of his portrayal in this particular case, which renders the scene rather unconvincing. Trollope also speaks of Eleanor as "clasped to [Mr Arabin's] bosom", which brings to mind Mr Rochester’s similar expression regarding Miss Ingram. Again, the intended effect is clear in the latter case, as the deliberate grandiloquence of wishing "to take Miss Ingram to [his] bosom" (281) is in keeping with Rochester's sarcastic nature, and Brontë’s contextualisation, such as the side-remark about Miss Ingram being "an extensive armful" (281), makes the ironic stance obvious. Trollope, though highly romantic in tone, thus lacks the force and persuasion that Brontë's portrayal exhibits, rendering his proposal scene rather trite and sentimental in comparison. Bella’s emotional outburst in *Mutual Friend*, which is induced by Mr Boffin’s mock firing of John Rokesmith and serves as an eventual acceptance of his former half-averted marriage proposal, can be described in similar terms:

"Oh Mr Rokesmith, before you go, if you could but make me poor again! O! Make me poor again, Somebody, I beg and pray, or my heart will break if this goes on! [...] Don't give me money, Mr Boffin, I won't have money. Keep it away from me, and only let me speak to good little Pa, and lay my head upon his shoulder, and tell him all my griefs." (584)

---

9 Cf. Genesis 2:24: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." (*King James Version*).
This pathetic utterance does not only present a sentimentalised depiction of female nature, women’s inherent helplessness and dependence on male support, it is also not at all in keeping with Bella’s usual self-reliant and confident conduct. On the other hand, Dickens also proves capable of truly convincing, strong emotionality in his proposal scenes. Mr Headstone’s offer to Lizzie, for example, presents the longest and arguably best articulated proposal of all the novels analysed. In contrast to Trollope’s proposal scene, there is no hint of doubt as to the seriousness of his portrayal, no irony whatsoever between the lines. As Mr Headstone himself states, "I am in thorough earnest, dreadful earnest" (390).

The male-female power relations depicted constitute another interesting aspect in the context of a gender-specific analysis. Rather surprisingly, however, the power relations between female and male characters in the novels analysed do not seem to be tied to the gender of the authors any more than the question of sentimentality. Jane Eyre and Elizabeth Bennet, as has been pointed out before, present famous examples for the emerging new female role types in 19th-century literature, but Hardy’s heroine Bathsheba does not act in accordance with contemporary gender roles either, nor do Dickens’ Bella Wilfer or Trollope’s Eleanor Bold. Bella is presented as a strong-minded and outspoken heroine who frequently challenges the views of male characters around her and Eleanor, too, opposes the advice of her male relations on several occasions and exhibits instances of subversive behaviour in the rejection of both Mr Slope and Mr Stanhope.

Instead of portraying a typical damsel-in-distress situation, Brontë, quite famously, has Jane assist Mr Rochester at their first encounter and later even save him from burning to death in his sleep. Yet Hardy, too, depicts a heroine saving her suitor's life: due to his own negligence, Gabriel Oak would have suffocated in his cabin if Bathsheba had not appeared on the scene. Male authors therefore cannot be claimed to portray mainly dominant men and compliant women; their novels also feature active, independent-minded and thus powerful female characters.

Regarding the motives that guide the fictional suitors in their choice of a marriage partner, there is no clear indication of a difference between the depiction of female and male authors either. Rather, most authors strike a balance in their representation of such intentions by portraying different kinds of motivation, from plainly practical or even mercenary considerations to sincere love and occasionally also obsessive passion. While Mr Darcy is motivated by genuine affection, Mr Collins acts out of mere pragmaticism. The same is true in the case of Mr Rochester and St John Rivers. Mr Casaubon, too, regards Dorothea primarily in the light of a helpmate, whereas Will Ladislaw is actually in
love with her, and Gabriel Oak continually acts as a most loyal friend to Bathsheba, while Troy and Boldwood are mainly attracted to her appearance. Mercenary considerations versus honest affection in the choice of a marriage partner feature as a main theme in Dickens' *Mutual Friend*, and Trollope as well presents fortune-hunters, such as Mr Slope and Bertie Stanhope, alongside truthful suitors, such as Mr Arabin. In their portrayal of proposal scenes, both female and male authors thus depict various kinds of suitors, guided by different motives for proposing.

Male authors do, however, tend to present devious, base or maniac suitors more often than their female colleagues. Whereas in the works of the female authors analysed, some attempt is usually made to explain the views and conduct of suitors such as St John Rivers or Mr Casaubon, no actual "excuse" is offered for the behaviour of Captain Troy in *Madding Crowd* or Mr Slope in *Barchester Towers*. In Mr Boldwood and Mr Headstone, Hardy and Dickens also portray two highly unstable suitors whose fervour shows signs of mental imbalance and is presented as frightening to the heroines as well as off-putting to the heroines. This unsparing, merciless depiction of the suitors' conduct and intentions – versus attempted explanation or even justification – thus presents a discernable difference in the portrayal of proposal scenes by female and male authors.

Any discussion involving the gender of authors is, due to its essentialist nature, admittedly problematic and a truly informative conclusion must also be based on the analysis of a much wider sample. With regard to the novels analysed, at least, it can definitely not be maintained that female authors resort to a more emotional tone or romantic language in their portrayal of marriage proposals or that the motivation of suitors, and not even the power relations between the sexes, differ in any truly substantial way from those of their male peers. Nor is there evidence of any traceable development throughout the 19th century, as no features occur in an augmented fashion at one particular point in the course of the century but not another, thus are common only to the earlier or later novels.

The idea of a marriage proposal may seem rather straightforward: a suitor elicits an interview with the lady of his choice, proposes to her and is met with either rejection or acceptance. Yet despite the circumstance that all suitors embark on the same mission with hopes for the same desired outcome, no marriage proposal in the novels analysed is like the other. There may be some recognisable patterns or even instances of resemblance, but at the end of the day, proposing marriage remains a highly personal and individual affair – a fact that, as has been shown, finds ample reflection in both the diversity and uniqueness of marriage proposals featured in 19th-century fiction.
10. Bibliography

Primary literature


Secondary literature


11. Index

A

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman 7, 98
accept 2, 6, 18, 19, 20, 25, 26, 28, 31, 32, 33, 36, 39, 42, 43, 44, 45, 50, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 75, 76, 78, 79, 82, 85, 86, 92, 93, 96, 98
advice manuals 13, 18, 20, 23
affection 8, 9, 17, 26, 31, 45, 48, 54, 57, 59, 61, 62, 64, 68, 70, 73, 77, 91, 97, 98
articulateness 28, 29, 30, 36, 49, 87
Austen, Jane 3, 7, 8, 12, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 29, 32, 33, 36, 39, 41, 43, 44, 47, 50, 53, 55, 56, 59, 62, 64, 69, 70, 72, 76, 79, 80, 84, 85, 87, 89, 94, 95, 96, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102
Austen, John L. 35
B

Barchester Towers 4, 14, 25, 30, 33, 40, 43, 44, 52, 54, 56, 60, 64, 78, 94, 96, 98, 99
bargaining 62
Bathsheba 14, 29, 64, 70, 85, 86, 88, 89, 90, 97, 98
Bella 25, 26, 69, 70, 78, 79, 86, 89, 91
Boldwood 14, 17, 78, 79, 84, 85
Brontë, Charlotte 3, 7, 33, 50, 95, 96, 98, 100, 101
career 21, 63, 84
Casaubon 16, 17, 21, 23, 25, 38, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 62, 78, 80, 84, 86, 87, 88, 92, 98, 104, 106, 109
career pairing 20
carerisation 4, 39, 53
comic effect 4, 48, 53, 94
compatibility 20, 60
conduct books 10, 19, 20, 22, 26, 65, 74
conventions 10, 14, 16, 17, 19, 32, 33, 34, 52, 58, 64, 66, 74, 80, 90, 96, 98
"Cooperative Principle" 4, 37, 38, 39
courtship 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 15, 16, 24, 28, 60, 61, 91, 95, 98
D

Darcy 8, 12, 16, 18, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 30, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40, 43, 50, 53, 60, 63, 65, 66, 69, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 85, 93, 97, 98, 99
decorum 48, 49, 71
Dickens, Charles 3, 14, 24, 25, 33, 50, 52, 96, 97, 98, 101
disdainful mistress 84
disposition 1, 14, 15, 17, 20, 27
distance 16, 32, 36, 51, 79, 85
divorce 3, 10, 11, 12, 25
Divorce Act 10, 12
Dorothea 15, 17, 20, 21, 23, 25, 33, 39, 42, 46, 49, 51, 78, 79, 80, 84, 86, 87, 88, 92, 98
duration 45, 46, 49
E

education 9, 10, 17, 18, 99
Ellenor 13, 20, 27, 31, 40, 43, 49, 51, 59, 61, 63, 64, 67, 70, 76, 78, 79, 80, 82, 83, 94, 96, 99
Elliot, George 3, 41, 44, 50, 52, 94, 98, 101
Ellis, Sarah Stickney 9, 98
elegance 3, 27, 28, 47, 48, 85
eventuality 4, 5, 62, 81, 82, 83, 84
engagement 11, 22, 32, 65
England 9, 10, 12, 13, 56
etiquette 4, 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20, 31, 40, 57, 58, 65, 71, 72, 98
F

futility 5, 33, 44, 47, 55, 59, 78, 80, 81, 84
family 9, 11, 16, 17, 20, 24, 26, 27, 38, 45, 52, 71, 75, 87, 93
fervour 30, 72, 97
fiction ii, 3, 9, 30, 32, 34, 37, 40, 44, 50, 81, 89
financial security 62
fortune 19, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 71, 73, 87, 93
frame 4, 39, 40, 62
G

gender ii, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 42, 86, 90, 95
Grice, H.P. 4, 37, 38, 39, 99
H

Halliday, M.A.K. 41, 99
Hardy, Thomas 3, 17, 18, 28, 39, 41, 42, 45, 46, 48, 52, 68, 99
heroine 4, 5, 9, 13, 24, 28, 30, 35, 36, 37, 40, 42, 43, 47, 50, 51, 56, 57, 63, 67, 69, 71, 75, 76, 79, 84, 87, 92, 93, 94
husband 9, 10, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, 30, 31, 32, 51, 64, 69, 78, 88
I

ideal subject 81
intention 14, 24, 29, 32, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40, 43, 54, 55, 56, 59, 67, 73, 81, 90, 96, 97
irony 50, 71, 86, 96
J

Jane Eyre 3, 7, 9, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 25, 31, 32, 39, 43, 56, 63, 64, 67, 69, 78, 79, 86, 97, 101
Jews 11
jurisdiction 12, 93
laughter 86, 99
law 10, 11, 24, 26, 104, 111
legal 3, 6, 10, 11, 13, 24
love ii, 8, 9, 14, 17, 18, 19, 23, 28, 30, 31, 34, 35, 38, 40, 41, 48, 50, 56, 61, 63, 67, 68, 69, 71, 72, 74, 79, 81, 82, 83, 84, 89, 90, 93, 94, 95, 96, 101
Lydgate 15, 21, 23, 25, 33, 39, 50, 61, 62, 80, 89, 90, 106

M
Madding Crowd 3, 14, 17, 20, 21, 28, 30, 41, 42, 45, 48, 63, 68, 76, 86, 87, 96, 99, 100
male relations 89, 92, 96
marriage ceremony 11
marriage proposal ii, 4, 5, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 39, 43, 44, 50, 55, 56, 57, 60, 61, 62, 78, 80, 81, 84, 93
mercenary 24, 25, 39, 78, 96, 97
Middlemarch 3, 16, 20, 25, 33, 38, 46, 47, 67, 87, 99
mode 4, 9, 12, 27, 32, 57, 59, 72, 73, 75, 79, 81, 99
moral 6, 8, 13, 14, 25, 40, 64, 71, 98
motives 8, 21, 42, 53, 63, 73, 78, 96, 97
Mutual Friend 3, 14, 31, 38, 41, 44, 51, 63, 66, 70, 77, 87, 99

O
Oak, Gabriel 16, 18, 20, 28, 41, 42, 45, 46, 48, 52, 53, 68, 69, 76, 78, 79, 80, 95, 96, 99, 100

narratological ii, 3, 4, 42, 45, 53

P
passion 7, 18, 72, 81, 83, 90, 94
passive 79, 84, 89
patricrash 86
planning 4, 29
Pool, Daniel 11, 12, 21, 23, 98, 101
position of women 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 23, 76, 93
power 5, 6, 9, 26, 49, 51, 69, 71, 77, 86, 89, 91, 92, 93, 95, 96, 97
Presbyterian 11
pressuring tactics 81

Pride and Prejudice 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 20, 22, 24, 30, 33, 34, 36, 37, 39, 41, 44, 46, 73, 93, 99
property 10, 11, 16, 24, 25, 26, 41, 87
propriety 9, 14, 28, 48, 49, 71, 80, 88

R
reader expectations 41
refuse 61, 62, 63, 64, 66, 69, 82, 91
rejection 8, 57, 61, 64, 65, 66, 70, 74, 75, 76, 77
relationship 6, 13, 16, 17, 18, 25, 52, 57, 79, 80
rituals of courtship 4
rival 21, 29, 51, 58, 66, 84, 89
Rochester 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 32, 39, 43, 50, 53, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 67, 69, 70, 71, 78, 79, 80, 82, 83, 89, 90
Rokesmith, John 25, 41, 55, 58, 67, 68, 69, 90, 95
romantic 4, 24, 30, 48, 59, 71, 73, 95, 97
Rosamond 15, 16, 17, 23, 25, 33, 39, 50, 62, 67, 80

S
schema 39, 40
Schor, Hilary M. 9, 10, 94, 101
script 6, 40
Searle, John R. 35, 101
setting 5, 69, 70, 71
silence 31, 47, 55, 65, 67, 71, 82, 86
sociolinguistics 41
speech act 4, 35, 36, 37, 39, 41, 101
spontaneity 29
Stanhope, Bertie 21, 27, 31, 51, 59, 70, 76, 78, 79, 80, 83, 84
strategy 63, 82
submissive 8, 9, 85
subversive 4, 5, 7, 9, 23, 27, 28, 91, 96
success 5, 25, 37, 38, 42, 49, 52, 63, 65, 69, 71, 72, 74, 78, 82, 89, 93
suitability 13, 17, 20, 60, 91
suitor 4, 5, 12, 13, 15, 24, 26, 28, 44, 47, 49, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 63, 64, 65, 67, 69, 71, 73, 77, 78, 80, 83, 84, 88, 93, 94
summary 10
suspenze 4, 41, 43

T
Teachman, Debrah 9, 10, 23, 102
tone 4, 5, 7, 9, 23, 27, 28, 30, 31, 34, 41, 45, 48, 50, 51, 55, 57, 58, 61, 63, 66, 69, 72, 74, 83, 84, 88, 92
Trollope, Anthony 3, 24, 25, 9, 39, 43, 50, 55, 58, 85, 95, 96, 98
V

victim 85
Victorian 10, 52, 98, 99, 100, 101

W

wealth 6, 11, 17, 18, 23, 24, 78, 79, 84, 86, 87
wedding 11, 14, 52, 60, 62, 70
wife 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 29, 32, 44, 46, 56, 57, 59, 60, 62, 64, 73, 74, 77, 83, 89, 91, 95
wit 3, 82, 86
Wollstonecraft, Mary 7, 98
wooing 29, 73

Y

Yule, George 35, 36, 37, 40, 41, 48, 102
12. German abstract


Stilistisch gesehen werden die Beispieltexte auf ihren Inhalt, Ausdruck und Ton untersucht, sowie auf unterschiedliche Aspekte wie Planung, Klarheit und Emotionalität. Gegenstand dieser Arbeit ist auch die Erörterung möglicher Faktoren, die zum Erfolg oder Misserfolg eines Antrags beitragen. Die Analyse der Beispieltexte lässt darauf schließen, dass die Person des Verehrers oder die Art des Antrags nur begrenzt eine Rolle spielen, wohingegen die Zukunftspläne der Frauenfigur, sowie ihre Einstellung zur Ehe, von weitaus größerer Bedeutung sind. Was die Reaktion der männlichen Charaktere betrifft,
lässt sich festhalten, dass nur die wenigsten – den damaligen Anstandsregeln entsprechend – Ablehnung widerspruchslos hinnehmen.

Von besonderem Interesse ist auch die Tatsache, dass die dargestellten Dialoge in den Heiratsantragsszenen überhaupt „funktionieren“. Da die männlichen Charaktere sich des Öfteren in einem starken Gefühlszustand befinden oder unvorbereitet an die Sache herangehen, sind ihre Äußerungen häufig unklar, zusammenhangslos oder lediglich bruchstückhaft. Die beteiligten Interaktanten müssen also mehr verstehen, als explizit gesagt wird. In diesem Zusammenhang werden drei linguistische Ansätze vorgestellt, die alle auf ihre Weise mögliche Erklärungsversuche darstellen.


Trotz der benachteiligten Stellung der Frauen im 19. Jahrhundert, zeigt eine nähere Analyse der Machtbeziehungen zwischen männlichen und weiblichen Charakteren in den ausgewählten Romanen, dass die dargestellten Frauenfiguren durchwegs subversive Tendenzen an den Tag legen und eine weitaus bedeutendere Rolle spielen, als ihnen zeitgenössische Vorstellungen der Moral und Sittlichkeit eigentlich erlaubt hätten. Auch die Werke männlicher Autoren weisen selbständige und selbstbewusste Frauenfiguren auf, die aktiv in das Geschehen eingreifen, anstatt sich passiv dem Gutdünken der Männer zu beugen.
CURRICULUM VITAE

Persönliche Daten:
Name: Andrea Rebecca Alberts
Geburtsdatum: 26.10.1984
Geburtsort: Santa Cruz, Kalifornien
Staatsbürgerschaft: USA
E-Mail: ar_alberts@yahoo.com

Ausbildung:
1998 – 2003 Handelsakademie: Vienna Business School, 1010 Wien,
mit Auszeichnung maturiert
2004 – 2011 Universität Wien: Anglistik und Amerikanistik,
Internationale Entwicklung, Unterrichtsfach
Englisch und Geschichte

Auslands-/Berufserfahrung:
7-8/2003 Zweimonatiger Sommerkurs: Hawaii Pacific University
2003 – 2004 Au-Pair Aufenthalt: Cooper City, Florida
2005 – 2011 Englisch/Deutsch/DaF: Nachhilfe, Maturavorbereitung,
Intensivkurse für Wiederholungsprüfungen,
Erwachsenenbildung

Wien, April 2011