

*Chapter Two :*

## CONFRONTATIONS

“Yes, it will be a droll day, and more modern than anything yet, when the conscience of women perceives objections to men’s being in love with them.” \*

*The Bostonians* (1886)

*The Tragic Muse* (1890)

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\* *The Tragic Muse*, pp. 593-594.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* Isabel Archer, despite her feminine appeal strikes Ralph Touchett as 'rather presumptuous',<sup>1</sup> while in *Washington Square* Catherine Sloper's outward timidity cloaks what her father defines as an inner 'obstinacy.' Resistance to male domination is the source of conflict in these novels and it is a struggle that becomes increasingly apparent in James's subsequent works *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Tragic Muse* (1890). In these novels the 'ideal of womanhood' that prescribes obedience, piety and self-sacrifice as natural attributes of the female sex<sup>2</sup> is a doctrine that comes under attack. Women protest against restrictions placed upon personal liberty and in doing so they question the validity of existing social structures. In his essay 'The Womanly Woman' (1891) George Bernard Shaw champions the cause of female emancipation and he draws a comparison between the condition of women and that of a caged parrot :

If we have come to think that the nursery and the kitchen are the natural sphere of a woman, we have done so exactly as English children come to think that a cage is the natural sphere of a parrot: because they have never seen one anywhere else .... Still, the only parrot a free-souled person can sympathize with is the one that insists on being let out as the first condition of making itself agreeable. A selfish bird, you may say..... All the same, you respect that parrot in spite of your conclusive reasoning; and if it persists, you will have either to let it out or kill it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James, Henry. *The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Murray, Janet H. op.cit., p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Shaw, George Bernard. 'The Womanly Woman', *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, in *Major Critical Essays*, London, 1948, pp. 39-40.

In *The Bostonians* and *The Tragic Muse* women's desire for greater autonomy necessarily provokes conflict with men who evince unwillingness to relinquish those social and political advantages that accord them superiority over the female sex. In both novels the overt struggle for power that emerges reflects changing social conditions - changes that, in turn, generated an evolution of consciousness within individuals. By the 1870s women in both America and England had begun to voice their dissatisfaction with existing social structures<sup>4</sup> and consequently the conventional passive, ornamental persona became increasingly inappropriate to the attainment of individual liberty. Reflecting this shift in social awareness, James's principal characters in *The Bostonians* and *The Tragic Muse* are presented as aberrations from the type traditionally identified as 'ladies.' In *The Portrait of a Lady* James characterizes Madame Merle through Isabel Archer's eyes and writes :

If for Isabel she [Madame Merle] had a fault  
it was that she was not natural ... her nature had  
been too much overlaid by custom and her angles  
too much rubbed away ... she had rid herself of  
every remnant of that tonic wildness ...<sup>5</sup>

In Madame Merle's nature, it is implied, culture has overthrown nature, thereby destroying spontaneity which has been sacrificed to an ideal of perfect womanhood. The fear that nature may be perverted by an 'excessive' overlay of culture is reinforced in *The Portrait of a Lady* by Ralph Touchett's negative impression of the married Isabel : 'The free, keen girl had

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<sup>4</sup> Rossi, Alice S. (ed.) *The Feminist Papers : From Adams to de Beauvoir*, New York, 1973, p. 241. In America the Seneca Falls Convention, 1848, saw the women's movement officially initiated. In England women's rights began to be asserted in the late 1840s with the formation of two colleges for female education. Murray, Janet H. *op.cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>5</sup> James, Henry. *The Portrait of a Lady*, p.167.

become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something .' <sup>6</sup>

In *The Bostonians* and *The Tragic Muse* James depicts the evolution of other 'free, keen girls.' However, unlike Isabel, these heroines contrive to *preserve* 'tonic wildness' - the acquisition of which proves instrumental in determining the outcome of their individual destinies. Verena Tarrant in *The Bostonians* and Miriam Rooth in *The Tragic Muse* are anomalous figures, and each is given an unconventional background - the bohemianism of which makes conferment of the status 'lady' a somewhat dubious title in respect of either woman. Contrasting the pattern of a genteel upbringing Verena Tarrant, we are told :

... had been nursed in darkened rooms, and suckled in the midst of manifestations; ... She had sat on the knees of somnambulists, and had been passed from hand to hand by trance-speakers; she was familiar with every kind of 'cure', and had grown up among lady-editors of newspapers advocating new religions, and people who disapproved of the marriage-tie.<sup>7</sup>

The daughter of a mesmeric-healer, Verena's social background is not that of a 'genuine' lady, but her essential innocence, combining as it does with the 'gift' of a dazzling personality, makes the hierarchical status of this charismatic creature a matter of minor importance.

Recognizing Verena's power to transcend social barriers one character asserts :

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>7</sup> James, Henry. *The Bostonians*, London, 1952, p. 82.

“When a girl is as charming, as original, as Miss Tarrant, it doesn’t in the least matter who she is; she makes herself the standard by which you measure her; she makes her own position.”<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in *The Tragic Muse* Miriam Rooth’s personal history is equally unconventional and, though her mother asserts the highest social connections - the nebulous ‘Neville-Nugents of Castle Nugent’<sup>9</sup> - the lifestyle of the girl has been nomadic and impoverished :

“I have spent my life in cafes! .... Mamma and I have sat in them for hours, many a time, with a *consummation* of three sous, to save fire and candles at home. We have lived in places we couldn’t sit in, if you want to know - where there was only really room if we were in bed ... We have been in places! I have learned a great deal that way; sitting beside mamma and watching people...”<sup>10</sup>

In these novels unconventional women are contrasted with others who conform to social expectations, or with those who - experiencing dissatisfaction - are yet unable to break from concepts that support a conventional ideal of womanhood. In both works an individual’s ability to respond spontaneously to instinctive impulses is linked with the preservation of ‘tonic wildness’ - a quality which, the author suggests, offers to balance the polarities between instinct and intellect, nature and culture.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>9</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, London, 1948, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 158-159.

Set in America in the 1870s, *The Bostonians* depicts women's demands for suffrage and for equal rights. Regarding the novel James has said :

I wished to write a very *American* tale, a tale very characteristic of our social conditions, and I asked myself what was the most salient and peculiar point in our social life. The answer was : the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of sex, the agitation on their behalf.<sup>11</sup>

Lionel Trilling in his 'Introduction' (1952) to *The Bostonians* asserts that the sexual situation was for James 'the sign of a general diversion of the culture from the course of nature'<sup>12</sup> - a phenomenon that was, in turn, indicative of a 'cultural crisis'<sup>13</sup> which needed to be addressed. In this novel opposition between the sexes manifests itself through Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom, characters whose mutual antagonism finds expression in the fight to obtain possession of the unconventional heroine, Verena Tarrant. James portrays Olive Chancellor as a woman whose nature is 'entangled in contradictions'<sup>14</sup> wherein the ingrained prejudices of a bourgeois background conflict with idealistic notions and the desire for a meaningful existence. Intensely afraid of life and of her own instinctive impulses, she nevertheless possesses reserves of desperate courage : 'Olive had a fear of everything, but her greatest fear was of being afraid.'<sup>15</sup> Like Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Olive fears exposure to the 'dark corners' of her mind and consequently, we are told, her intelligence is undermined by a self-imposed obliqueness. The origin of Olives's fears however, is never identified by the narrator, who observes :

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<sup>11</sup> Bell, Millicent. 'The Bostonian Story', *Partisan Review*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 1985, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> Trilling, Lionel. Introduction. *The Bostonians*. ed.cit., p. xi.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>14</sup> James, Henry. *The Bostonians*, p. 140.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

It proved nothing of any importance ... to say that she was morbid; any sufficient account of her would lie very much to the rear of that. Why was she morbid, and why was her morbidness typical? Ransom might have exalted if he had gone back far enough to explain that mystery.<sup>16</sup>

Ransom, in fact, never uncovers the source of Olive's suffering which nevertheless permeates the novel and appears to arise from contradictions that effect within her an emotional paralysis. Presumably, nature wars with culture in this woman, who favours intellect over instinct, and whose emotional insecurity imposes the desire to control events and people. Moreover, Olive's indefinable, yet almost hysterical fears reflect a more general condition of anxiety that pervades the society which James depicts. Basil Ransom perceives, and consequently resents its pressures, which he identifies as 'feminine' :

"... it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been."<sup>17</sup>

In *The Bostonians* James portrays an era of intense agitation by women reformers in America. Social inequalities that restricted autonomy and prevented economic independence<sup>18</sup> for the majority of women were vigorously denounced in public 'political' meetings that attempted to raise the consciousness of individuals in order that necessary changes might take effect.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>18</sup> In *The Portrait of a Lady* Henrietta Stackpole obtains gainful employment which bolsters self-esteem. However, as James advises, this American journalist is compelled to work and her successful career in the 1870s (judging from women's agitation in that era) was rather more the exception than the rule.

Agitation by feminists inevitably provoked confrontation in the lives of men, causing a disturbance that forced them to acknowledge and consider women's demands for equality. As early as 1838 the American abolitionist and reformer Sarah Grimke had written :

“... the noble faculties of our minds are crushed, and our reasoning powers are almost totally uncultivated.” Furthermore, man “has done all he could to debase and enslave her [woman's] mind; and now he looks triumphantly on the ruin he has wrought and says, the being he has thus deeply injured is his inferior.”<sup>19</sup>

Woman's emergence from the private sphere of the home was a gradual evolution in America that began in the 1820s where demands for social justice developed ‘from evangelical revivals to moral reform, abolition, temperance, and woman's rights’.<sup>20</sup> It was, however, the movement for woman's rights that provoked the most violent reactions in society because dissension in this area threatened the foundations of patriarchal control.<sup>21</sup> In 1853 Elizabeth Cady Stanton observed :

I feel, as never before, that this whole question of woman's rights turns on the pivot of the marriage relation, and, mark my word, sooner or later, it will be the topic for discussion.<sup>22</sup>

Within the 1870s society that James depicts in *The Bostonians* Basil Ransom is portrayed as a reactionary figure. Exaggerated notions of ‘chivalry’ serve to disguise a brutal masculinity in this man while (as a Southerner) defeat in the Civil War has led to poverty and subsequent loss

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<sup>19</sup> Grimke, Sarah. Quoted in Korsmeyer, Carolyn W. ‘The Appeal to Reason and Experience’, in Osborne, Martha Lee (ed.) *Woman in Western Thought*, New York, 1979, p. 143.

<sup>20</sup> Rossi, Alice S. (ed.) *op.cit.*, p. 273.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. *Ibid.*, p. 392.



of status. Thrust into a competitive world, women represent for him the last bastion of comfort and support. Moreover, their subordinate position bolsters his diminished self-confidence and accordingly, while other men prepare to adapt to changing social conditions, Ransom's peculiar circumstances and dogmatic disposition dictate that, for him, female emancipation can never be condoned.

In *The Bostonians* the movement for women's rights is treated satirically by James and consequently his reforming women are portrayed either as self-interested or as generally muddled and confused individuals. The *apparent* moral earnestness of the reformers is undercut by the author's derisive treatment of fundamental motivations whereby he exposes to ridicule their essentially egotistical desires. While charlatanism and delusion characterizes the majority of these women, Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant are initially presented as young persons whose energies are ostensibly wholly devoted to the cause of social reform. Olive's interest in the movement springs from her need to generate meaning within an otherwise empty existence. Unable to derive pleasure from the usual distractions of fashionable society, she seeks a purpose amongst the reformers, to whom she expresses the passionate plea :

“I want to give myself up to others; I want to know everything that lies beneath and out of sight, don't you know? I want to enter into the lives of women who are lonely, who are piteous. I want to be near them ... I want to do something - oh, I should so like to speak!”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> James, Henry. *The Bostonians*, p. 43.

Simultaneously, however, the desire to be heroic and to take assertive action is contradicted by intense fear of public opinion :

“Oh, dear, no, I can’t speak; I have none of that sort of talent. I have no self-possession, no eloquence; I can’t put three words together. But I do want to contribute.”<sup>24</sup>

In *Women and Fiction* Patricia Stubbs accuses James of anti-feminism and she cites *The Bostonians* as a novel in which this attitude is most pronounced. Identifying Olive Chancellor as a lesbian, Stubbs maintains that James intentionally annihilates sympathy for the women’s movement by portraying her as such :

But Olive is a lesbian. So her feminism, her intensely magnetic personality and the power this gives her over Verena are immediately rationalized as the product of ‘perversion’.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout this novel James certainly characterizes Olive Chancellor as a woman who is hostile to conventional relationships, while her hatred of men ‘as a class’, induces within her a state of neurosis that borders upon hysteria.<sup>26</sup> Lesbianism, however, is never overtly referred to by James, but the behaviour adopted by Olive towards Verena Tarrant *is* suggestive of some ‘abnormality.’ Receiving Verena for the first time into her home Olive abruptly proposes: “‘Will you be my friend, my friend of friends, beyond every one, everything, forever and forever?’”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Stubbs, Patricia. *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920*, Sussex, 1979, p. 166.

<sup>26</sup> Regarding the prevalence of hysteria among women Elizabeth Cady Stanton opines : ‘I think if women would indulge more freely in vituperation, they would enjoy ten times the health they do. It seems to me they are suffering from repression.’ Quoted in Rossi, Alice S. (ed.) *op.cit.*, p. 381.

<sup>27</sup> James, Henry. *The Bostonians*, p. 80.

Bonding between females in the nineteenth century was not an uncommon practice<sup>28</sup> and James's declared intention in writing *The Bostonians* was to make "a study of one of those relationships between women which are so common in New England."<sup>29</sup> However, the element of fanaticism with which he invests Olive's attachment to Verena has, inevitably, a tortured quality that repels, and even Verena is moved to remark: "Perhaps you like me too much."<sup>30</sup> Patricia Stubbs sees Olive Chancellor as 'an ardent feminist, totally and passionately committed to emancipation',<sup>31</sup> but James takes pains to convey - through the use of irony - the discrepancy that exists between Olive's professed intentions and her true designs. Bound, on the one hand, to the conventions of bourgeois morality, Olive paradoxically loathes many of the conventional attitudes embraced by people in society. She despises the fashionable bourgeoisie and cultivates romantic illusions relating to 'the people', that 'mysterious democracy' which, in reality, she also fears and hates. Like Catherine Sloper in *Washington Square* Olive's self-esteem is low - "I have no facility; I am awkward and embarrassed and dry"<sup>32</sup> - and she overcompensates personal deficiencies by assuming the defence of prideful arrogance.

It is presumably the repression of 'tonic wildness' - the quality which allows for spontaneous expression - that results in Olive's bondage to emotional torment: 'Her only consolation was that she expected to suffer intensely; for the prospect of suffering was always, spiritually speaking, so much cash in her pocket.'<sup>33</sup> Olive's expressed desire for martyrdom demonstrates a propensity for masochism and, while James refuses to identify the source of her suffering, critic Janet Gabler articulates a modern reader's response when she suggests: 'Olive's desire for suffering may stem from her subconscious need to punish herself for

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<sup>28</sup> Bell, Millicent. 'The Bostonian Story', op.cit., p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> James, Henry. Quoted in Bell, Millicent. Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>30</sup> James, Henry. *The Bostonians*, p. 80.

<sup>31</sup> Stubbs, Patricia. op.cit., p. 166.

<sup>32</sup> James, Henry. *The Bostonians*, p. 127.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

feelings she considers taboo.’<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, ‘ardent feminism’ in this novel becomes a mask for self-interest. Olive’s fundamental desire is for ‘a friend of her own sex with whom she might have a union of the soul’<sup>35</sup> and thus the cause of female emancipation serves to provide common ground upon which to unite the hearts and minds of two otherwise dissimilar young women.

In contrast to Olive Chancellor, Verena Tarrant is portrayed as an unconventional and seemingly free-spirited individual. The antithesis of Olive: ‘there was a strange spontaneity in her manner, and an air of artless enthusiasm, of personal purity. If she was theatrical, she was naturally theatrical.’<sup>36</sup> A bohemian upbringing has provided Verena with a wider range of experience than would be permitted to a more conventional counterpart. Nevertheless, despite her relative freedom, James depicts Verena as an unspoilt ‘flower of womanhood.’ When Olive Chancellor, at their first interview, asks the girl to come and live with her, the unworldly Verena assumes that such extravagant invitations are the customary practices of the rich. Similarly, ignorance of social ‘exclusiveness’ makes her impervious to the distinctions of class:

Verena had no vivid sense that she was not as good as anyone else, for no authority appealing really to her imagination had fixed the place of mesmeric healers in the scale of fashion.<sup>37</sup>

Optimism and a lively curiosity - qualities that give the girl her great capacity for life - have been developed by her upbringing within an alternative society which (theoretically at least) endorses the growth of individual freedom. Mr. Tarrant discloses the magic formula upon which his child has flourished when he instructs Olive Chancellor :

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<sup>34</sup> Gabler, Janet A. ‘James’s Rhetorical Arena: The Metaphor of Battle in *The Bostonians*’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 27, Fall, 1985, p. 280.

<sup>35</sup> James, Henry. *The Bostonians*, p. 79.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

“... let her act out her nature. Don't all the trouble of humanity come from our being pressed back? Don't shut down the cover, Miss Chancellor; just let her overflow!”<sup>38</sup>

Verena's innate simplicity and buoyancy of spirit inevitably attracts the attentions of Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom and, within the 'nervous, canting age' that James depicts, Ransom, among others, sees clearly that her distinctive 'naturalness' is a highly attractive and marketable commodity that is ripe for exploitation. It is, accordingly, against the 'strenuous' efforts of Olive Chancellor to possess the heart and mind of Verena, that Basil Ransom is positioned by James, and sexual attraction motivates the Southerner to detach the girl from Olive's influence in order to secure her affections for himself.

Between the demands of two rigid egotists Verena is forced to confront the nature of her own desires and thus the attraction between herself and Ransom becomes a force that tests the validity of her allegiance to intellectual ideals. Verena is, we are told, 'the most extraordinary mixture of eagerness and docility'<sup>39</sup> - qualities which, ironically, conspire to render the bohemian a 'womanly woman', whose lack of discriminatory power makes her highly vulnerable to attack :

What *was* a part of her essence was the extraordinary generosity with which she would expose herself, give herself away, turn herself inside out, for the satisfaction of a person who made demands of her.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 326.

By succumbing to the ‘demands’ of Basil Ransom, Verena’s instincts overpower her intellectual allegiance to the cause of women’s emancipation and to Olive Chancellor. Ransom undermines Verena’s faith in herself when he identifies her desire to please others as the cause of enslavement to what he considers a false philosophy - one that overlays her true nature and prevents thereby fulfilment as a woman :

“... you ought to know that your connexion with all these rantings and ravings is the most unreal, accidental, illusory thing in the world ... It isn’t *you* ... but an inflated little figure ... whom you have invented and set on its feet ... Ah, Miss Tarrant, if it’s a question of pleasing, how much you might please some one else by tipping your preposterous puppet over and standing forth in your freedom as well as in your loveliness!”<sup>41</sup>

Ransom’s rhetoric proves devastating because his analysis of Verena’s character and situation reveals much that is true. According to his logic, however, she is to exchange the ‘burden’ of pleasing others for what is, in effect, the ‘burden’ of pleasing only Basil Ransom! As a reactionary male he refuses to concede that there is also a measure of sincerity in Verena’s commitment to the cause of female emancipation, or that fulfilment for a woman might be possible outside the conventions of patriarchy.

While other men offer Verena marriage it is, ironically, the *reactionary* male who succeeds in capturing her affections. Despite their innocuous appearance, however, both Matthias Pardon and Henry Burrage would also, James implies, exploit Verena’s charms. Pardon seeks to capitalize her talents on the public platform, while Burrage - relishing the peculiar beauty of the girl - desires to possess her as rare *objet d’art*. By refusing to ally herself with either of these ‘feminized’ males James ensures that - in choosing Basil Ransom - Verena is responding to the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 291.

‘sentiment of sex’; a reaction that seemingly justifies the Southerner’s zealous preservation of ‘masculinity.’

In this novel woman’s intellectual desire for freedom is undermined by ‘natural’, biological instincts that, presumably, dictate her ‘enslavement’ to man.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, in a public address Verena’s discourse takes the form of a passionate plea wherein she declares that women “‘require simply freedom; we require the lid to be taken off the box in which we have been kept for centuries.’”<sup>43</sup> Ransom predictably interprets this speech - which exerts a positive effect upon the fashionable audience - as merely so much ‘chatter’, and he rejoices in what he perceives to be the absurdity of her argument. For Ransom, the preservation of male superiority depends upon his despising the sentiments of the speaker, even as he exults in her personal beauty :

... it was a proof that her apostleship was  
all nonsense, the most passing of fashions,  
the veriest of delusions, and that she was meant  
for something divinely different - for privacy,  
for him, for love.<sup>44</sup>

In this novel, Verena Tarrant’s great capacity for life is ultimately thwarted when - succumbing to the universal passion - she contracts an alliance that will inevitably restrict the development of individual identity. Nevertheless, Verena’s choice is presented by James as the lesser of two evils. In choosing Basil Ransom the girl identifies with ‘nature’, escaping thereby the neurosis that James attaches to the condition of pseudo-intellectualism; a condition the author takes pains to render so unwholesome in the character of Olive Chancellor. *Nature* itself plays a dominant role in the courtship of Basil and Verena who are continually represented within

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<sup>42</sup> Conway, Jill. ‘Stereotypes of Femininity in a Theory of Sexual Evolution’, in Vicinus, Martha (ed.) *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, p. 153. Conway observes that ‘no matter how the new social science changed its methods, biology remained the determinant of female function.’ Accordingly, this attitude ensured ‘the conclusion that for women biology controlled social destiny.’

<sup>43</sup> James, Henry. *The Bostonians*, p. 233.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

outdoor settings - in gardens, near lakes, and finally at the sea-side where, at one point, they embark together in a small sailing craft that temporarily removes them from outside influence and sets them apart within the powerful ambience of sea and sky. Against these elemental forces the intellectual satisfactions of Olive Chancellor's back parlour grow dim, but they are never entirely extinguished. Verena's wistful description of her intellectual life there evokes a different, but also, an attractive world of sympathetic feminine endeavour :

“Olive had six celebrated, high-minded women staying in her house ... and in the summer evenings we sat in the open windows, in her parlour, looking out on the bay, with the lights gleaming on the water, and talked over the doings of the morning, the speeches, the incidents, the fresh contributions to the cause. We had some tremendously earnest discussions ... Then we had some refreshment - we consumed quantities of ice-cream!.... Those were great nights!” she added between a laugh and a sigh. <sup>45</sup>

Within the patriarchal society that James depicts male supremacy largely depends upon preventing female solidarity. Divide and conquer is a principle that serves Basil Ransom's purpose in this novel and Olive sees his passion for Verena as an inversion of male hatred for women's emancipation. She tells Verena : ““They hate it ; they will try to stamp it out whenever they can ... it is a war upon us to the knife”” <sup>46</sup> and Ransom - unashamedly committed to the sabotage of Reformist strategies - fully justifies her fears :

He didn't care for her [Verena's] engagements, her campaigns, or all the expectancy of her friends; to 'squelch' all that, at a stroke, was the dearest wish of his heart. It would represent

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 207-208.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 126.



to him his own success, it would symbolize his victory.<sup>47</sup>

Jealousy is a predominant element in Ransom's feeling for Verena. Accordingly he desires to 'stop her mouth' and thus to silence forever her remarkable voice which exerts its powerful effect upon others. The tyrannical nature of male jealousy was a feature of nineteenth century society that attracted the condemnation of Englishman, John Milne, who in 1857 was moved to remark:

... it is reckoned insulting for a woman to be superior to her master. Most men are ashamed to acknowledge, nevertheless do acknowledge, that at heart they wish her to continue as dependent on them as now - to continue their inferior in every way ... In the hearts of how many is there this jealous spot! <sup>48</sup>

In *The Bostonians* Basil Ransom is triumphant when Verena finally chooses to renounce Olive Chancellor and what has been presented to her as an 'independent' life. By rejecting Olive, Verena embraces physical bondage with an autocratic male who ultimately employs 'muscular force' to dislodge her from her 'friends'. In this novel James places his guileless heroine in a double-bind situation from which, given the characters involved, no 'fortunate' resolution is possible. Although Verena chooses her fate, her decision is insufficiently informed by awareness of possible options, and lacking such knowledge, the girl is overwhelmed and coerced into submission by wills that are stronger than her own. While Verena's alliance with Ransom is presumably intended to restore the 'sentiment of sex' (and with it the condition of male dominance), there is nevertheless an ambiguity in this union which suggests that - between two people so peculiarly constituted - harmonious interaction is unlikely to result.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 336.

<sup>48</sup> Milne, John. *Industrial and Social Position of Women in the Middle and Lower Ranks*, London, 1857, p. 330.

Verena Tarrant's choice inevitably consigns her to the cage of domesticity and to the restrictions of private life. Conversely, Olive Chancellor's ultimate crisis offers an opportunity to confront personal phobias once and for all, and to step from the cage of fear that constitutes her prison. Abandoned by Verena, Olive is activated by terror when she rushes from the wings of the Music Hall and onto its stage. At this critical point, however, James also abandons Olive - but the potential to speak out, and the pressure to do so, present a potent opportunity for emotional release. Olive's 'rush to the front'<sup>49</sup> is greeted by a 'respectful hush' in which, we are told, 'the great public waited.'<sup>50</sup>

Throughout this novel Basil and Olive engage in a fight 'to the death' and, by winning Verena from her, Ransom metaphorically 'kills' Olive Chancellor, who rushes to her 'death' at the hands of an unruly mob. It is thus that Olive's dream of martyrdom is fulfilled. Depicted as a woman who has repressed instinctual desires and sacrificed personal expression to an ideal of bourgeois womanhood, Olive denies 'nature' and fears life. Consequently, James implies, she must ultimately confront this unnatural condition - either to overthrow it or to 'perish' in the attempt. Olive's premonitions of martyrdom are, in many respects, the result of an inner compulsion, whereby prejudices born of fear must be acknowledged and renounced if real humanity is to be espoused. Accordingly, Olive must be broken open by a sublime 'sacrifice' of self (that is not without its sexual connotations) and which is undertaken in the cause of female emancipation. Ironically it is Ransom's victory over the women's movement that brings Olive Chancellor to the brink of an abyss that offers the possibility of personal evolution.

While the bohemian Verena Tarrant chooses the conventional destiny of woman, Olive Chancellor's fate is suspended and left hanging in the balance. In this novel, the struggle of women to achieve equality with men necessarily provokes confrontation that demands from

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<sup>49</sup> James, Henry. *The Bostonians*, p. 384.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

individuals an acknowledgement and integration of both the forces of nature and the insights of intellect. Balance between instinct and intellect, passion and reason, is presented by James as ultimately essential for truly harmonious relations, and while 'tonic wildness' is perceived to be an important quality which allows spontaneity, so intellectual discrimination is also necessary to refine and clarify action. In *The Bostonians* all the characters suffer, in varying degrees, from an imbalance that affects the quality of individual experience, while confusion, anxiety and self-interest express the tensions of a changing age. Although social inequalities require *practical* solutions, James, as author, is primarily concerned with those more subtle malaises that effect human beings in their efforts to arrive at personal autonomy. Accordingly his characters stumble toward self-fulfilment and, within the 'age of conscience' that he depicts, advancement is perceived to be an ongoing process of discovery.

In *The Bostonians* self-interest and lack of awareness contribute significantly to the entrapment and frustration of women characters. *The Tragic Muse*, published four years later, departs from the issue of social reform and female 'agitation' in America to consider the world of art and artists as it manifests within European society, particularly within England and (to a lesser extent) France. In this novel the artist is represented as a creature who seeks to uncover the truth of situations - a being for whom the experience of life is justified primarily by: 'the beauty of having been disinterested and independent; of having taken the world in the free, brave, personal way.'<sup>51</sup>

The power of art to transform individual consciousness is briefly glimpsed in *The Bostonians* at Mr. Burrage's tea-party, when Olive Chancellor is temporarily overwhelmed by its potent charm :

... there was a moment when she came near being happy ... Mrs. Burrage asked her son to play 'some little thing', and he sat down to his piano ... there was a faint fragrance from the

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<sup>51</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 144.

burning logs, which mingled with the perfume of Schubert and Mendelssohn; (and) ... It was given to Olive, under these circumstances ... to surrender herself, to enjoy the music ... to feel as if the situation were a kind of truce .... Civilization, under such influence, in such a setting, appeared to have done its work; harmony ruled the scene; human life ceased to be a battle. <sup>52</sup>

In *The Tragic Muse* the seductive power of art pervades the atmosphere in which the struggle between the sexes takes place and, as the creator of beauty, the artist is seen to exert a profound influence upon the lives of 'lesser' mortals. In this novel the 'ideal of womanhood' becomes an issue of less significance for James when it encounters the 'ideal of beauty' - a concept that directly affects the individual's relation to artistic integrity. Consequently, when the artist portrayed is also a woman, individual genius (or conscience) dictates that she must go beyond the boundaries of mere convention. As one character says of Miriam Rooth : "“She’s an artist ... You must always give an artist his (her) head.”” <sup>53</sup>

In *The Bostonians* James depicted an 'age of conscience' that saw nineteenth century American women unite in vociferous protest against perceived social injustice. Nevertheless women in this novel fail to attain liberation on a *personal* level and their defeat is depicted as largely due to a general lack of awareness - to a provincialism that is accompanied by the inability to discriminate properly. Conversely, Miriam Rooth in *The Tragic Muse* combines in her person qualities attributed to both Verena Tarrant and Olive Chancellor. In Miriam's nature 'tonic wildness' (or spontaneity) is complemented by a wider knowledge of the world, and for her nature and culture are not opposing forces because they are synthesized and brought into balance through the medium of Art.

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<sup>52</sup> James, Henry. *The Bostonians*, p. 140.

<sup>53</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 254.

While Verena Tarrant's charismatic 'gift' found expression primarily in the desire to please other people, Miriam Rooth is also represented as a charismatic personality. However, for Miriam, the 'gift' of pleasing others is channelled into the medium of Art where work as an actor gives purpose and direction to her abundant energy. In this novel women characters also challenge existing male supremacy, but social agitation gives way to artistic endeavour, providing the heroine with *practical* means through which to embody, and therefore to realize, her ideas. The artist - the bohemian nature, James implies, must have absolute autonomy and thus Miriam Rooth is sustained and 'enobled' by her dedication to something 'higher': 'the figurative impulse in the mother had become conscious, and therefore higher, through finding an aim, which was beauty, in the daughter.'<sup>54</sup> The artist, rather than the feminist reformer, seemingly evokes from James a more sympathetic response, and consequently Miriam Rooth emerges as a more formidable figure than her counterpart in *The Bostonians*. Moreover, for the heroine of *The Tragic Muse*, the possession of a charismatic personality not only provides the opportunity to please others but, more importantly, it offers escape from a life of obscurity, and the chance to secure economic independence.

Desire for economic independence in fact provides the basis for Miriam's single-minded pursuit of artistic perfection. As impoverished gentlewomen, the Rooths are compelled to satisfy the demands of the imagination for beauty by creating their own reality. While Mrs. Rooth escapes into the fantasy world of fiction, her daughter survives the effects of an unpleasant reality by transforming the life around her into Art. Consequently, as she informs the diplomat, Peter Sherringham, she is eager to extend her range: "Do you wonder that I should want to do something, so that we can stop living like pigs?"<sup>55</sup> Miriam endorses Peter's description of her as a 'strange girl', elaborating further:

"Doesn't one have to be, to want to go  
and exhibit one's self to a loathsome crowd,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

on a platform, with trumpets and a big drum,  
for money - to parade one's body and one's soul?"<sup>56</sup>

The personal characteristics and the unconventional background of James's heroine combine to present her as an anomalous figure amongst other 'respectable' women, and Bidy Dormer is compelled to inquire of her cousin, Peter: "And is she a lady?"<sup>57</sup> Sherringham himself is nonplussed by the personal style of the girl, whose manner strikes him as altogether symptomatic of a new type:

Miriam Rooth was neither fish nor flesh : one  
had with her neither the guarantees of one's  
own class nor the immunities of hers. What  
was hers, if one came to that?<sup>58</sup>

At the close of *The Tragic Muse* (published in 1890) the Jamesian narrator declares : 'These matters are highly recent'<sup>59</sup> - a statement that appears to identify the 1880s as the period under discussion. During the seventies and eighties middle and upper-middle class women had become increasingly visible and vocal in Western society<sup>60</sup> but, despite the cultivation of new forms of assertion, conventional attitudes prevailed among conservatives who upheld moral purity as fundamental to social acceptability.<sup>61</sup> 'Respectability' therefore becomes a major issue in this novel - particularly for the 'tragic muse', whose work in the theatre demands an understanding of human nature that is drawn from the direct observation of life: "One must see everything, to be able to do everything."<sup>62</sup> Accordingly Miriam's admirer and patron,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 618.

<sup>60</sup> Cominos, Peter, T. 'Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict', in Vicinus, Martha (ed.) *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, p. 171.

<sup>61</sup> Weeks, Jeffrey. *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*. London, 1981, pp. 86-87.

<sup>62</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 288.

Peter Sherringham, believes that a woman: “‘can’t be everything, a consummate actress and a flower of the field. You’ve got to choose.’”<sup>63</sup>

In *The Tragic Muse* James explores the issue of Respectability and the ways in which it directly affected women’s behaviour in society. Besides Miriam Rooth, a number of other women characters are introduced who - in various ways and for different reasons - also experience difficulty in resolving society’s demand for ‘propriety’ with their instinctive desire for individual liberty. Action in this novel takes place initially in France, where social mores are depicted as even more repressive towards women than in England, and where accordingly, the actress is viewed as a morally reprehensible person who is ostracized by polite society. It is at the Theatre Francais that Miriam encounters women who live outside the fashionable world - actresses who inhabit the ‘world of art’ that comprises an intellectual elite, much frequented by fashionable men, but entirely ignored by those women who aspire to ‘untarnished’ reputations. Within the setting of the Actors’ Green Room Miriam is introduced to the highly accomplished actress Mademoiselle Voisin - a woman who, despite her intelligence and her distinguished manner, ‘never enters a lady’s drawing-room.’<sup>64</sup> Instead she entertains gentlemen and, according to Peter Sherringham, she leads the ‘fullest life.’

“An intense artistic life. The cleverest men in Paris talk over her work with her; the principal authors of plays discuss with her subjects and characters and questions of treatment. She lives in the world of art.”<sup>65</sup>

Despite the personal beauty and flawless finish that characterizes Mademoiselle Voisin’s professional manner, the actress is ostracized from respectable society - ostensibly because she

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

has lovers and because she appears in public for money.<sup>66</sup> Peter Sherringham fears the effect of her dazzling personality because her very perfection undermines the validity of existing social strictures, while her independent lifestyle offers an alternative that threatens Peter's own ambitions regarding his impressionable protege. Consequently he attempts to sabotage the meeting of two artists:

“Come away, before she comes ... She's success - this wonderful Voisin - she's triumph, she's full accomplishment : the hard, brilliant realization of what I want to avert for you.”<sup>67</sup>

Sherringham both fears and admires the qualities that make Mademoiselle Voisin a woman of the world who enjoys many of the freedoms that pertain to his own sex. His reaction to the French celebrity reveals the duplicity inherent in a society that countenances freedom for one half of humanity but denies it to the other,<sup>68</sup> and while actresses in France receive extravagant accolades from fashionable gentlemen, they are nevertheless excluded from associating with the 'virtuous' wives and daughters of these same 'respectable' men.

From the austere manners and decided opinions of the French, James transports his heroine to the more tolerant clime of England where, happily for Miriam Rooth, some actresses *do*, upon occasion, go into 'society.'<sup>69</sup> Accordingly, it is within an English social setting that James's

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<sup>66</sup> Davidoff, Leonore. *op.cit.*, p. 81. The author notes : 'No women who appeared in 'public' could be really respectable no matter what her actual sexual behaviour. This attitude may help to explain some of the ambiguity felt toward actresses.'

<sup>67</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, pp. 280-281.

<sup>68</sup> Thompson, William. *op.cit.*, p. 189. Thompson attacks social and moral hypocrisy when he writes : 'He [man] has a system of domineering hypocrisy, which he calls morals, which brands with the name of vice your [woman's] enjoyment, while it lauds with the name of virtue, or gilds with that of innocent gratification, his.'

<sup>69</sup> Kent, Christopher. 'Image and Reality', in Vicinus, Martha (ed.) *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, London, 1977. pp. 103-106. As Kent notes, the 1860s had been 'a peculiarly transitional decade in English theater both artistically and socially.' Furthermore: 'If the 1860s witnessed the arrival of a genteel generation in the profession, the late 1870s saw many of its stage women already established in positions of influence. The great era of the actor-manager had begun.'



other female characters struggle for autonomy, and in Julia Dallow he depicts a woman whose 'natural' abilities are frustrated by conventions that prohibit active participation for women in the world of public affairs.<sup>70</sup> The fundamental conflict residing in Julia's condition is expressed by Nick Dormer when he describes his cousin as: "A real English lady, and at the same time she's a very political woman."<sup>71</sup> As a respectable and wealthy woman Julia must seek the satisfaction of personal desires vicariously - by securing and promoting, in her stead, a suitable male consort who will politically embody her ideas. Like Miriam Rooth, Julia desires a 'public' rather than a 'private' life, but her acceptance of traditional patterns of 'womanly' behaviour overrides more instinctive impulses to control and direct the lives of others. The resulting tension between nature and culture is communicated by James's depiction of Julia's physical presence :

If it had not been for her extreme delicacy  
of line and surface she might have been called  
bold; but as it was she looked refined and quiet -  
refined by tradition and quiet for a purpose.<sup>72</sup>

Julia Dallow's intellectual intensity - accompanied as it is by a defensively imperious manner - betrays a tendency towards 'neurosis' that, in *The Bostonians*, was a significant (though more highly developed) feature of Olive Chancellor's persona. Nick Dormer observes that:

... if she had the appearance of a cold woman  
she had also on certain occasions a liability to  
extreme emotion. She was very still, but every  
now and then she would fire off a pistol.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Speech of 4 May 1870, Hansard, Vol. 201, p. 227, states: "... what would become, not merely of woman's influence, but of her duties at home, her care of the household, her supervision of all those duties and surroundings which make a happy home; all these matters must be neglected if we are to see women coming forward and taking part in the government of the country." Quoted in Banks, J.A. and Olive Banks, op.cit., p. 46.

<sup>71</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 236.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-77.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 339.

Frustration characterizes Julia's behaviour which evokes comparisons with Henrik Ibsen's heroine, Hedda Gabler, in a play that was also, significantly, completed in 1890. In both works the cult of ideal womanhood, with its emphasis on respectability, imposes unrealistic demands upon women. However, for Julia Dallow, James contrives a more conventional resolution in the shape of her cousin, Nick Dormer.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, as women began to demand conditions of greater equality,<sup>74</sup> resistance was mounted which strove to present the 'strong-minded' woman in an unattractive and an 'unnatural' light. In 1870 one critic maintained :

The political woman, the blue stocking, the woman who has exchanged the family for the public, stands already before us in the road on which we are urged, as a warning and a scarecrow.<sup>75</sup>

Assertion in women was deemed 'unfeminine' and, as an article in 'Girls Own Paper', 1884, concludes : '...a feminine man, or a masculine woman ... is an aversion to both sexes.'<sup>76</sup> As early as 1825 William Thompson had deplored the hypocrisy which aimed to restrict women's development of their faculties, declaring :

... whatever qualities are useful to *yourselves alone* ... these, in you, man's sexual system of morality condemns. He sneers and calls these

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<sup>74</sup> Dennis, Barbara and David Skilton, (ed.) *Reform and Intellectual Debate in Victorian England*, London, 1987, p. 131. 'Stirrings of reform had begun by 1848 [in England] with the foundation of Queen's College ... devoted primarily, though not exclusively at all, to the training of governesses.'

<sup>75</sup> Morris, F.O. 'The rights and wrongs of women', in Dennis, Barbara and David Skilton, (ed.) *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>76</sup> Leach, E.B., 'Woman: What is her Appointed Position and Work?' in *Girl's Own Paper*, (March, 1884) p. 340. Quoted in Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, London, 1982, p. 120.

qualities *unfeminine* - a word, in its ordinary moral application, of supreme folly, which merely means that he does not wish that you should possess these qualities, - but attempts not to show that they are not of extreme utility to the possessors.<sup>77</sup>

In *The Tragic Muse* Julia Dallow's 'coldness' is accompanied by a conscience that is depicted as more than usually 'earnest' and predictably, sexual passion for this woman is presented as problematic. Like Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Julia fears passion will undermine intellectual ambitions and therefore - unlike Verena in *The Bostonians*, - she resists the impulse to surrender personal ambitions for love. More realistic than Olive Chancellor, she cultivates self-awareness: "I want to understand, I want to know what I'm doing,"<sup>78</sup> but ultimately James mitigates the estrangement between Julia and Nick and negotiations for compromise on the part of a 'real' English lady are meant to suggest the growth of a 'deeper' understanding. Negotiation rather than unconditional surrender constitutes a 'development' in the relationship of this couple and, for Julia, love is presented as a humanizing process that addresses what could otherwise become, James implies, a 'dangerous' imbalance.

Like Julia Dallow, Lady Agnes Dormer is a formidable woman who has devoted a lifetime to the pursuit of power. An embattled British matron of frustrated ambitions, she exhorts her son: "Be great ... Go in for a great material position. That will simplify everything else."<sup>79</sup> While other characters struggle to realize personal ideals, Lady Agnes is a pragmatist who adheres rigidly to a materialist viewpoint: "What freedom *is* there in being poor? How can you do anything without money?"<sup>80</sup> The product of an earlier generation, her energies have been absorbed in promoting the ambitions of her husband but, as the widow of Sir Nicholas Dormer, she is subject to British laws of primogeniture and consequently :

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<sup>77</sup> Thompson, William. *op.cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>78</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, pp. 343-344

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

It was not into her lap ... that the revenues of Bricket were poured. There was no dower-house attached to that moderate property, and the allowance with which the estate was charged on her ladyship's behalf was not an incitement to grandeur.<sup>81</sup>

Lacking personal power, the advancement of offspring - whose economic survival is inextricably linked to her own - becomes a dominant obsession for this woman. However, feminine behaviour within a patriarchal society necessitates discretion and therefore her authoritarian disposition seeks alternative methods of persuasion. Accordingly, for Lady Agnes :

... a part of the worn look that sat in her face came from her having schooled herself for years, in her relations with her husband and her sons, not to insist unduly. She would have liked to insist, nature had formed her to insist, and the self-control had told in more ways than one.<sup>82</sup>

A worldly woman, Lady Agnes has superficially constructed her life upon an ideal of womanhood which serves to invalidate her strenuous efforts towards self-determination. Despite energy, drive and ambition she is 'stalled' and thus doomed to frustration because the lack of real opportunity and the need to preserve 'appearances' combine to negate constructive action. The essential impotence of her condition is conveyed in the observation which James attributes to Nick Dormer who, sighting his mother pacing the vast lengths of an empty hall,

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

instinctively feels that her 'tall, upright black figure'<sup>83</sup> metaphorically resembles nothing so much as 'an exclamation-point at the bottom of a blank page.'<sup>84</sup>

Within the fashionable society that James depicts respectable young women were cultivated exclusively for the marriage-market, a fact which was noted by John Milne, who writes in 1857 :

There is a sort of social expectation of every young woman, that she shall find a husband; it is a duty that, as it were, lies to her, both for her own sake and the sake of the relatives on whom she is dependent.<sup>85</sup>

As the daughters of Lady Agnes, Grace and Bidy Dormer personify this chiefly ornamental caste of womanhood. Grace Dormer, however, lacks charm and she is 'not pretty'.

Consequently her prospects are decidedly bleak within a society that sees marriage as the only desirable form of 'independence' for a woman. Dull but zealous, Grace is depicted as an anxiety-ridden figure who, lacking affairs of her own, endeavours to arrange the lives of others. Conversely, her sister Bidy epitomizes Peter Sherringham's conception of 'a flower of the field',<sup>86</sup> but despite her engaging qualities Bidy's future is also jeopardized by her inability to attach the affections of this man.

Portrayed as a timid but potentially modern young woman, Bidy Dormer is endowed with imagination and flexibility. She therefore resists conservative attitudes that might classify her a 'stiff, scared English girl'<sup>87</sup> which, we are told, is 'not the type she aimed at.'<sup>88</sup> Bidy's tentative efforts to emerge from the sphere of the home reflect a growing tendency among

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Milne, John. op.cit., p. 126.

<sup>86</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 168.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

women in the seventies and eighties to engage in outside activities.<sup>89</sup> Desiring to grow as an individual, the girl increasingly withdraws from a conservative environment, preferring instead the artistic alternative of her brother's studio. Attempts at clay-modelling are undermined, however, by the restrictions imposed by 'respectability' and, as Biddy laments: "How can I learn to model, mamma dear, if I don't look at things and if I don't study them?"<sup>90</sup>

Biddy Dormer's efforts toward independence and 'enlightened spinsterhood' receive little encouragement from others.<sup>91</sup> Lady Agnes is openly disapproving while Peter Sherringham is merely amused by her amateurish attempts at art and his patronizing attitude draws from the girl an expressed belief that: "men want women not to be anything."<sup>92</sup> Lacking independent means of support, Biddy and Grace must compete for partners on the marriage-market; a feminine predicament to which Beatrice Webb was to refer:

... in the seventies and eighties the London season, together with its derivative country house visiting, was regarded by wealthy persons as the equivalent, for their daughters, of the university education and professional training afforded for their sons, the adequate reason being that marriage to a man of their own or a higher social grade was the only recognized vocation for women not compelled to earn their own livelihood.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Webb, Beatrice. *My Apprenticeship*, Harmondsworth, 1971, p. 133. The author notes the difficulties against which women struggled: '... the entire time and energy of an unmarried daughter ... was assumed to be spent, either in serving the family group, or in entertaining and being entertained by the social circle to which she belonged.'

<sup>90</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 15.

<sup>91</sup> Thompson, William. *op.cit.*, p. 54. Thompson draws attention to the injustice of woman's condition when he writes: '... women have been made to obey the general law of subjection to force, and have hitherto submitted to be considered blanks in the creation, entitled to no physical, intellectual, or sympathetic enjoyments, on their own account, and for their own sakes, but simply as rendering them more useful instruments, more stimulating provocatives to the ignorant selfish propensities of men.'

<sup>92</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 509.

<sup>93</sup> Webb, Beatrice. *My Apprenticeship*, p. 67.

As the daughters of Lady Agnes, Bidy and Grace Dormer have high social status, but they are nevertheless in straitened circumstances financially. Moreover, their mother, by refusing any longer 'to drag her girls about to country-houses, in a continuance of the fidgety effort to work them off',<sup>94</sup> intimates her sense of defeat : 'She had done her best for them, and it had all been vain and cruel, and now the poor creatures must look out for themselves.'<sup>95</sup>

Within the competitive world that James depicts women are increasingly compelled to 'look out for themselves', and in this novel two minor figures are portrayed as doing exactly that. Mrs. Gresham and Florence Tressilian are both 'respectable' ladies who utilize personal resources in order to promote and maintain their status of gentility. Mrs. Gresham is a shadowy figure existing on the margins of fashionable society, but she is also presented as an independent and intelligent woman who, conducting her affairs with charm, is distinguished by a style of her own. Smart and conciliatory, Mrs. Gresham discreetly 'assists' her friends :

She slipped in and out, accompanied at the piano, talked to the neglected visitors ... She had all sorts of acquaintances and in small establishments she sometimes wrote the *menus*. Great ones, on the other hand, had no terrors for her : she had seen too many. No one had ever discovered whether anyone else paid her.<sup>96</sup>

The smiling capability of this woman conceals the reality of her condition, which is one of economic dependency. However, by a deliberate assertion of will that denotes a highly disciplined nature, Mrs. Gresham is able to preserve an illusion of gentility while profiting materially from the services that she renders with all the expertise of a professional.

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<sup>94</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 574.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

The situation of Florence Tressilian is not one of economic dependence but it is nevertheless indicative of social developments that saw some women negotiating for alternatives to the conventional 'norm' of home and family life.<sup>97</sup> Described by Biddy Dormer as :  
 “‘tremendously nice and tremendously clever, but also tremendously old and tremendously safe’,<sup>98</sup> Florence Tressilian, as an ‘enlightened spinster’,<sup>99</sup> avails herself of the advantages of a newly constructed flat. Biddy Dormer’s admiration of her friends new found independence is boundless : ‘Florence could do without a chaperon now (she had two latch-keys and went alone on the top of omnibuses, and her name was in the Red Book)’<sup>100</sup> and the progression of this ‘respectable’ woman toward a condition of greater autonomy strikes Nick Dormer as a sign of modernity which indicates that, however modern he may have thought himself, ‘there were evidently currents more modern yet.’<sup>101</sup>

Within the society that James depicts women’s desire for independence inevitably conflicts with the need to preserve conventional ‘appearances.’<sup>102</sup> The notion of ‘respectability’ therefore serves as a form of intimidation - a controlling force upon female behaviour which radiates outward from a nucleus of sexuality to embrace other aspects of human endeavour.<sup>103</sup>  
 By the 1860s feminist reformers had begun to challenge the double-standard of morality

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<sup>97</sup> Banks, J.A. and Olive Banks, *op.cit.*, p. 12. The Banks’ attribute the gradual emergence of women from the home to the increased prosperity of the middle class which occurred between 1850-1870 and resulted in increased leisure for women.

<sup>98</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 365.

<sup>99</sup> Westminster Review, 121, (1884) p. 154. ‘The Future of Single Women’. The article declares: ‘The unmarried woman of today is a new, sturdy and vigorous type. We find her neither the exalted ascetic nor the nerveless inactive creature of former days ... The world is before her in a freer, truer, and better sense than it is before any individual male or female.’ Quoted in Auerbach, N. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Cambridge, 1982, p. 146.

<sup>100</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 601.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Beales, H.L. ‘Victorian Ideas of Sex’, in *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, p. 354. This writer observes: ‘Behind the Victorian barricade of conventional rectitude is the vast reality of prostitution.’ Also: Gordon, Linda and Ellen DuBois. ‘Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth Century Feminist Sexual Thought’, *Feminist Review*, No. 13, February, 1983, p. 44. The authors note that women’s ‘equation of prostitution with any illicit sex indicates that a crucial element of their fear was loss of respectability ... (and) ... the loss of purity ... damaged prospects for marriage.’

<sup>103</sup> Weeks, Jeffrey. *op.cit.*, pp. 86-87.



practised by a patriarchal society<sup>104</sup> and the 'purity' campaigns of the 1870s sought to expose social injustice in the treatment of prostitutes, whose existence was considered essential to the preservation of 'virtuous' womanhood.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, middle-class morality decreed that respectable women were not only chaste but also 'pure-minded'<sup>106</sup> - a doctrine that derived from Christianity, which stigmatized unorthodox sexuality as 'sinful'.<sup>107</sup> The unequal conditions pertaining to women politically, economically and morally made them highly vulnerable to attack, and accordingly social taboos could be defied only at the cost of personal reputation.<sup>108</sup>

In *The Tragic Muse* women characters make tentative attempts to enlarge their field of activity but it is, significantly, only the actress Miriam Rooth who is able to extend conventional boundaries. The nature of her temperament and the requirements of her art necessitate a larger canvas upon which to draw but nevertheless, like other women characters, Miriam is dependent upon men to implement for her conditions within which artistic ideas can be embodied. It is Peter Sherringham's patronage that initially activates the girl's career and he is instrumental in facilitating intellectual and emotional growth. Artistic success, however, - with its resultant economic independence - combines to transform the gauche, shabby girl into a 'brilliant young lady'<sup>109</sup> who is conscious of her powers and determined to execute them. Nevertheless convention exerts its claims even upon Miriam Rooth's bohemian nature and, recognizing its power, she is prompted to acknowledge her condition of bondage: "My

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<sup>104</sup> Murray, Janet H. op.cit., p. 426. 'The Commission Report of 1871 affirmed a double standard of medical examination [for prostitutes] in terms of sexual morality: "... there is no comparison to be made between prostitutes and the men who consort with them. With the one sex the offence is committed as a matter of gain; with the other it is an irregular indulgence of a natural impulse'"

<sup>105</sup> Cominos, Peter T. 'Late-Victorian Sexual Respectability and the Social System', in *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 8, 1963, p. 230.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Banks, Olive. *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*, Oxford, 1981, p. 71.

<sup>108</sup> Gordon, Linda and Ellen DuBois, op.cit., p. 46. The authors note that the efforts of feminist reformers to alleviate the plight of prostitutes was tantamount to 'opening a crack in the wall of sexual 'innocence' (which accordingly presented) ... a challenge to the punitive and woman-hating morality that made sexual 'ruin' a permanent and unredeemable condition for women.'

<sup>109</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 316.

weakness is my exalted conception of respectability.”<sup>110</sup> Accordingly the actress embraces the ‘safeguard’ of marriage - but she does so with the conscious intention of ensuring thereby the continuance of her career: “‘It seemed simpler! It was clear there had to be some one.’”<sup>111</sup>

Mutual convenience rather than romantic illusion forms the basis of Miriam’s union with Basil Dashwood, but loyalty and enthusiasm for a shared idea suggests that - as Miriam shrewdly estimates - the working relationship of this couple will allow them to “‘pull beautifully together.’”<sup>112</sup> In *The Tragic Muse* artistic solidarity enables Miriam Rooth to reject the importunities of personal passion and thus Sherringham’s inducements to renounce the public platform fail to sway the actress, who contrives to transcend conventional limitations through the power of the creative imagination.

In attempting to induce Miriam to abandon herself wholly to his care, Sherringham’s arguments incorporate aspects of the rhetoric employed earlier by Basil Ransom in *The Bostonians*, while the essence of his dialectic may be distilled in the proposition: “‘...You’re a magnificent creature. Just quietly marry me, and I’ll manage you.’”<sup>113</sup> Miriam’s response also echoes that of Verena, although it demonstrates the superior control of the actress :

“... because I please you, you must adapt me  
to your convenience, you must take me over,  
as they say. You admire me as an artist and  
therefore you wish to put me into a box in which  
the artist will breathe her last. Ah, be reasonable;  
you must let her live!”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 520.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 609.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 543.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 542.

In this final confrontation Sherringham is exposed as a humbug; a man whose inflated self-image can imagine nothing more important than his own 'great affairs', the supposed magnitude of which strike his artistic associate as merely 'infantile'. Within a patriarchal society, compromise is traditionally reserved for women, for whom 'the deepest domesticity of private life'<sup>115</sup> was thought to offer sufficient compensation for the renunciation of self-will.<sup>116</sup> However, in this novel the ambitions of the artist prove more tenacious and for Miriam Rooth personal autonomy is fundamental to artistic survival :

"It isn't to my glories that I cling; it's simply to my idea, even if it's destined to sink me into obscurity. I like it better than anything else - a thousand times better .... than tossing up my head as the fine lady of a little coterie."<sup>117</sup>

The life of the imagination and the world of ideas are more attractive to Miriam than Peter's diplomatic posturings. Additionally, a public career will liberate the girl from the restrictions assigned to other women, and even Sherringham can grudgingly admit: "Oh, yes, she'll have got out of her hole; she won't have vegetated."<sup>118</sup> As the 'tragic muse' Miriam aspires to that state of 'full accomplishment' (glimpsed briefly in *Mademoiselle Voisin*) which results from complete self-mastery, and consequently her refusal to renounce personal ambition is, James implies, largely owing to the artistic conscience that governs her: "The world be hanged; the stage, or anything of that sort (I mean one's faith), comes first."<sup>119</sup> In this novel the artist's capacity for spontaneous expression - her retention of 'tonic wildness' - contributes significantly to her emancipation from unnecessarily restrictive doctrines and while

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 546.

<sup>116</sup> Thompson, William. *op.cit.*, p. 79. Thompson exposes patriarchal mythology when he writes : 'Home ... is the eternal prison-house of the wife: the husband paints it as the abode of calm bliss, but takes care to find, out-side of doors, for his own use, a species of bliss not quite so calm, but of a more varied and stimulating description.'

<sup>117</sup> James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, p. 549.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 439.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323.

other women negotiate for conditions of compromise, Miriam evades classification by escaping into that dimension which pertains to the world of art.

Art in *The Tragic Muse* is presented as a medium that liberates. Furthermore, the power of art to evoke insight and understanding makes it an indispensable element of human experience; one that contributes significantly to the evolution of consciousness. Peter Sherringham's understanding undergoes change owing to his exposure to Miriam's power as a dramatic artist, and it is by 'the intense light of genius'<sup>120</sup> that he is finally reconciled to his fate and to her emergence into the public arena as an independent entity :

The great trouble of his infatuation subsided,  
leaving behind it something tolerably deep  
and pure ... He began to come back to it  
[reality] from a period of miserable madness.  
He had been baffled, he had got his answer;  
it must last him - that was plain.<sup>121</sup>

In *The Tragic Muse* and *The Bostonians* the struggle for power between the sexes manifests itself in confrontations that register women's dissatisfaction with existing social conditions. By the 1870s and 1880s the conventional ideal of womanhood - which promoted passivity and chastity - had begun to be openly questioned<sup>122</sup> and 'respectability' itself was perceived by some as a form of coercion that unnecessarily restricted the freedom of women.<sup>123</sup> Accordingly James's heroines, Verena and Miriam, are represented as anomalous figures

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 616.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Article in the *Englishwoman's Review*, 15 November, 1889, asserts : 'The woman has as much right to live her individual life before God as the man ... no man is a good husband who does not respect the individuality of his wife, body, soul, and spirit, as much as his own.' Quoted in Banks, J.A. and Olive Banks, op.cit., p. 102.

<sup>123</sup> Pearson, Karl. 'Woman and Labour', *Fortnightly Review*, 1 May 1895, p. 568. The author maintains there had 'arisen two quite diverse movements; the one to restrain the sexual freedom of men; the other - of course, less outspoken and manifest, but very active in many quarters - to give greater sexual freedom to women.' Quoted in Cominos, Peter T. 'Late-Victorian Respectability and the Social System', op.cit., p. 48.

whose spontaneous actions question the validity of existing social values. In both novels the *ideas* of women are seen to pose as a threat to male predominance and therefore Peter Sherringham seeks to 'manage' Miriam's life, while Basil Ransom determines to 'squelch' Verena's ideas.

In *The Bostonians* the desire of women characters to achieve autonomy is unsuccessful and women are depicted as essentially muddled - refusing or unable to see themselves or their situation with any real degree of clarity. However, in *The Tragic Muse* women characters *do* attempt to confront themselves and they acquire thereby a measure of control over individual destiny. Unlike Verena Tarrant, Miriam Rooth refuses to sacrifice personal ideals for passion, preferring the rigours of public life to confinement within the domestic sphere. In this novel Miriam, Julia and Bidy are *all* characters who chaff under society's restrictions, while Florence Tressilian's new flat - with its accompanying latch-keys - opens up possibilities that augur well for an age of independence. In *The Tragic Muse* the individual will (or conscience) that informs Miriam's decision is made possible by her commitment to Art. Nevertheless, her conscious advance into the wider dimensions of public life acts as a precursor for other women characters. Verena Tarrant in *The Bostonians* perceives Olive's reformist friends as anxious beings, perpetually driven, 'always apparently straining a little, as if they might be too late for something',<sup>124</sup> and the impression gleaned from a reading of both novels suggests that growing dissatisfaction with existing conditions is precipitating change - the desire for which reflects a development in the consciousness of women within late nineteenth century society.

In his essay 'The Womanly Woman', George Bernard Shaw maintains that :

... unless Woman repudiates her womanliness,  
her duty ... to everyone but herself, she cannot  
emancipate herself ... and as man's path to freedom  
is strewn with the wreckage of the duties and ideals

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<sup>124</sup> James, Henry. *The Bostonians*, p. 160.

he has trampled on, so must hers be ... A whole basketful of ideals of the most sacred quality will be smashed by the achievement of equality for women and men ... And the advantage of the work of destruction is, that every new ideal is less of an illusion than the one it has supplanted; so that the destroyer of ideals, though denounced as an enemy of society, is in fact sweeping the world clear of lies.<sup>125</sup>

Shaw believes that a *false concept of duty* rather than *Man* himself is the cause of woman's enslavement. However, the restrictions that served to disadvantage women - preventing freedom of action and equal opportunity - were intricately woven into the fabric of nineteenth century patriarchal ideology; a system that sought to concentrate power in the hands of men. Codes of conduct are invariably formulated to preserve an existing status quo, and thus the doctrine of 'Respectability' which upheld an 'ideal of womanhood', acted as a subversive influence which impeded the progress of female emancipation. Learning to *question* existing social mores is a practice that is instigated in the confrontations effected by women characters in these novels.

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<sup>125</sup> Shaw, George Bernard. op.cit., p. 40.