



**At Odds:
Women Independence and Power in Margaret
Oliphant's Novel *Hester* (1883)**

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CONTENTS

0. Introduction	1
1. New Business Woman: A Subtle Revolution	4
2. New Woman Fiction: A New Sensibility	8
3. <i>Hester's</i> Ending: A Denied Career	11
3.1 The Ironic Closure	16
4. Conclusions and Further Research	18
Works Cited	20

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Abstract

Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* (1883) depicts the life of Catherine Vernon, a Victorian lady in her sixties who has run her family's bank for 35 years being also a prestigious and acclaimed figure in her hometown Redborough. Despite living a successful business life as an independent unmarried woman, Catherine seems to fail at the very end of the novel when she has the opportunity to leave the bank to her young relative Hester but decides not to. Regardless of the fact that in Victorian times women were denied a professional career, some ladies during that era were capable of going against the odds when belonging to the upper-classes. Therefore, I argue that even though Catherine represents a liberating example for women, she fails in the end when she leaves her legacy to one of her male relatives instead of Hester. In relation to this, special attention will also be paid to the ending sentence of the novel which can be interpreted in an ironic or literal sense, thus changing the meaning of the whole novel.

Key Words: *Hester*, Margaret Oliphant, Hester Vernon, Catherine Vernon, Women Labour, Feminism, Victorian Literature, Women Careers.

0. Introduction

*This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.*

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Hester (1883) is a novel written by Victorian author Margaret Oliphant, who lived a successful and extremely productive life as a writer producing more than 120 works during her lifetime. The novel studied in this dissertation focuses on the life of the Vernon family, more especially on the matriarch Catherine Vernon, the head of the Vernon Bank, and her ambitious relative Hester, Catherine's cousin daughter. Thus, Oliphant explores the human condition and Victorian customs creating these two protagonists who certainly challenge Victorian conceptions about women. Ironically enough, one may be misled by the title of the novel, *Hester*, since the author clearly explores and puts more emphasis on the life of Catherine than Hester's, as this dissertation demonstrates.

Before Catherine's intervention in the family business, the bank was being managed by her cousin John Vernon, whose series of irresponsible decisions and careless behaviour led to the almost closure of the bank. After his escape due to his inability to face failure and public shame, the bank fell into the hands of young Catherine, who all of a sudden had to turn herself into a novice businesswoman. Apart from being the cause of Catherine's professional career, John Vernon was also the man whom Catherine was secretly in love with during her youth. However, John decided to

marry a lady who would end up becoming Hester's mother and who is also portrayed as Catherine's antagonist: incurious and only concerned about marriage matters and having social presence.

Forced to leave Redborough because of John Vernon's scandal, Mrs. John raises her daughter Hester on her own and years later, when Hester turns fourteen, is unexpectedly invited to return to her former hometown by Catherine Vernon. Tempted to relive a well-off lifestyle again, Mrs. John does not hesitate and decides to join again the Vernon family. When the first encounter takes place, Catherine shows a rather spiteful and defensive attitude towards Hester who at the beginning, simply represents to Catherine the offspring of the man she loved and the naive Mrs. John.

Hester is portrayed as a woman with a special sensibility who does not find comfort in what the Victorian society can offer her: "It seemed incredible that her entire existence should be concentrated in a weekly assembly so frivolous, so thoughtless, and nonsensical and that all those grave and troublous thoughts should seek interpretation in a dance. But so it was" (Oliphant, 1984: 399). Unlike the other women that appear in the novel, Hester finds herself misunderstood by her relatives, especially her mother. Mrs. John wishes Hester to marry following the logical steps for a lady of her age according to the values of that period. Oliphant, in contrast, creates an assertive character that maintains her beliefs towards marriage throughout the whole novel firmly: "Oh, do not ask me! I will never marry" (Oliphant: 493). This assertiveness is more strengthened when Hester receives not only one but two marriage proposals; one from Harry, her good-hearted cousin, and the other from Roland Ashton, a responsible stockbroker. Even though Hester can choose from two good men, her character does not feel tempted and maintains her desire to remain single.

Despite the rough and tense relationship that Catherine and Hester initially have, Hester gradually feels inspired by Catherine's career since the option of marriage by no means appeals to her. The turning point of the novel takes place when Catherine, before passing away, decides to leave the family business to Harry, Hester's cousin, in spite of believing in Hester's abilities to take charge of it and of her own immense power and influence in Redborough. By doing so, Catherine refuses to leave the Vernon Bank to a female heiress and opts for continuing the tradition in which men were the only individuals who could become business people.

Previous research about *Hester* has not addressed the importance of Catherine's final decision and the implications that it has on her character. The fact that Catherine leaves the bank to Harry represents a mismatch between her career and her will regarding the future of the bank. Very necessarily, Catherine's career demonstrates to the Victorian audience that women are as capable as men of running prestigious businesses and that by achieving this, they can also be respectable people in society.

Since one of the main points of this dissertation deals with the role of women in Victorian society, further research has been carried out in the first section concerning Victorian women's careers, even in the field of finances, to demonstrate that an alternative ending in the novel could have been plausible. In addition to this, it would have also corresponded with the inspiring message that Catherine represents in this story.

The second section deals with the aim of this dissertation, which is to argue how Catherine's last will goes against the role that she embodies in the novel as the ultimate powerful woman. The moment happens to be even more dramatic due to Catherine's misleading comments about Hester and her possible future career: "It is a great pity,"

she said, "a girl like you, that instead of teaching or doing needlework, you should not go to Vernon's, as you have a right to do, and work there." (Oliphant: 492).

Lastly, this dissertation also highlights the importance of the very last line that can be found in *Hester*: "What can a young woman desire more than to have such a possibility of choice?" (Oliphant: 495). Against Hester's wishes, in the end she ends up having two suitors instead of her long-desired future on her own developing herself personally and career wise. Moreover, the ending of the story can be interpreted differently depending on the reading of its last line. Oliphant masterfully closes her novel with a misleading line which can be literally or ironically understood. If it is interpreted literally, the message in the novel would defend the idea of marriage and how lucky a woman is if a man of good fortune proposes to her and finally she becomes a wife, which goes very much against the tone of the novel. On the contrary, an ironic reading of this sentence would play in Hester's favour, claiming that having this possibility of choice represents no real happiness or self-fulfilment for a woman's life. Thus, this dissertation also explores how a certain interpretation of this line can change the message conveyed in the whole novel and defends its ironic connotations. As a brief last remark, the subtext in the novel is also analysed in order to explore Oliphant's intentions and moral in *Hester*.

1. New Business Woman: A Subtle Revolution

One of the most remarkable features of *Hester* is the powerful statement it makes with the creation of Catherine Vernon. The fact that Oliphant opts for portraying a woman character as the owner and director of a bank was certainly controversial and groundbreaking since women could not take over such positions. Thus, one of the main

issues in *Hester* is women's labour and careers in a not very flexible and equal society. For this reason, the historical context and the circumstances when it comes to women labour cannot be overlooked when discussing the novel.

In Victorian England women mainly had jobs as governesses, textile workers or nurses (Neff, 2006). Other positions were thought to be exclusively for men since unjust gender differences were very much present in society. However, some changes had taken place when this novel had already been written which represented some progress for the period favouring women's rights. The two most significant events closer to the year in which *Hester* was published occurred in 1882 and 1883. The Married Women's Property Act in 1882 offered married women the right of owning property for the first time while in 1883 the Co-operative Women's Guild was founded, which defended women's presence and equality in different areas in society such as politics or labour (Murdoch, 1970). Despite the advances that were being attained, women were still in an extremely inferior position compared to men since the *Angel in the House*¹ ideal woman was still deeply rooted in the Victorians' minds.

This preconception, however, did not prevent some Victorian women from finding their place in society and turn themselves into unique and inspiring cases for the history of women's careers in the same manner as Catherine Vernon did: developing a successful professional life in the world of finances and money. Oliphant herself also took notice of the subtle awakening that some women were experimenting, as it can be observed in *Hester*. Williams collects this in his book of Oliphant's own

¹ *The Angel in the House* (1862) is a Victorian poem written by Coventry Patmore which portrays women as innocent and angelic creatures who should devote their lives to their homes and family.

autobiographical notes: “A ‘singular and scarcely recognised revolution’, Margaret noted a few years later, had ‘taken place in the position and aspirations of women during the last generation’, with hosts of young and ardent minds’ now struggling ‘for their own career and destiny’” (1986: 138). Lewis Shiman also describes this as it follows:

Many of the women leaders in the second half of the nineteenth century, with other women from affluent families, were beneficiaries of a new role of money in the economy. In previous times only a few females could have personal control of property; now, as the nineteenth century progressed, a number of women inherited their own fortunes (1992: 87).

One notable instance of this was the case of Miss Amy E. Bell in 1888, only five years after Oliphant published *Hester*. Bell managed to become a stockbroker, or as Bateson describes, “the only lady stockbroker in this country [England]” (2012: 70). Due to The Married Women’s Property Act (1882), women were able to start gathering their own property and their own sums of money. This young upper-class woman even founded a business in the stockbroking market with admirable results. Lewis Shiman gives us a glimpse of Bell’s trajectory:

Unlike many women who go into unconventional employment, Miss Bell's family was not in stock broking. From a family of surgeons and public servants, she came to work in finance because she developed a great interest in it; although not allowed to have a seat on the Stock Exchange, she had her own office and a female clerk (1992: 88).

Following the same line, another Victorian woman who also happened to be a great figure in the financial world was Harriot Mellon, whose career was extremely similar to Catherine’s. Mellon spent her early life working as an actress having a reputation for being a person of a distinguished philanthropic nature. In addition to this, she also developed a great interest in the world of finances, which she eventually knew well. Mellon’s turning point in her life was her marriage to the banker Thomas Coutts, owner of the Coutts & Co bank founded in 1692, which is still active nowadays. When

Coutts fell ill, he made the decision to leave his inheritance to his wife, renamed Harriot Coutts, also including the bank. Perkin describes the event as it follows: “When he died in 1822, he left the whole of his immense fortune, worth nearly £1 million, in trust to his wife, including his senior partnership in the Bank” (2000: 23). Instead of simply enjoying her fortune, Mrs Coutts decided to take an active role in the bank taking great responsibility in it. Coutt’s legacy then is “one of the most astonishing careers of any woman in her time” (Perkin, 2000: 25).

With the exception of these unique cases in history, it is also of great importance to observe the general role that women took in the bank as legal workers. Ten years after Oliphant published *Hester* women started being hired in banks. The Bank of England explains how they were gradually employed in 1893 taking over new types of jobs apart from the traditional ones formerly mentioned:

However as the Bank [of England] looked forward to its third century, economic concerns were pressing and therefore a revolutionary suggestion was made in April 1893: women, who could be given smaller wages, should be employed. Their work was to be that then done by boys of 15-18: the astoundingly boring job of sorting and listing returned notes (“Women in the Bank” 2017: online).

Therefore, despite the inequality that women had to suffer in Victorian times, it is true, however, that some privileged women had the opportunity to pursue a career, proving that they were as capable as men of running any type of business. These remarkable examples in history are crucial when arguing Catherine’s will and career in the novel. As William argues, one may be tempted to think that the ending is in fact adequate due to the social circumstances of the era: “It is impossible, in normal circumstances, for a girl to have a profession because society will not permit it” (1986: 158). Nonetheless, as it has been discussed, there was certainly room in the fictional world of literature to create an ending in which a young lady inherits a good fortune and the possession of a bank, thus inspiring Victorian women readers.

2. New Woman Fiction: A New Sensibility

This subtle revolution and inconformity towards specific roles in society was certainly being reflected in Victorian literature, especially by some women writers who depicted in her novels the ordeals which women had to go through because of their gender. Consequently, the label *New Woman Fiction* was born, a concept which ended up being a genre on its own during Victorian times due to its active and revolutionary tone. Moran unfolds its connotations in the following passage:

New Woman fiction described a version of this modern femininity, incorporating women's achievements in reform but also signalling their aspirations for the future, and particularly their desire for personal empowerment. The imagined construct known as the New Woman rejected conventional respectability, embraced economic, sexual and educational independence, and declined to consider marriage and maternity as the only 'natural' route to fulfilment (2006: 124-125).

As we can intuit, the definition of this new type of fiction fits perfectly with the both female protagonist characters that we find in *Hester*. As a consequence, Oliphant's life and features as a writer have also been the focus of analysis for several critics. Her distinct portrayals of alternative roles for women characterize her as a writer, whose tone tends to be subversive:

Thus, while Oliphant does reiterate certain conventions of sensation fiction in the use of legitimate means and human acts to create the drama, she is able to rely only on those that she believed were also socially and morally responsible. Her insistence on social and moral responsibility becomes even more apparent in her development of the two main female characters in *Hester* (Bauer-Gatsos, 2003: 182).

One of the central concerns in *Hester* is undoubtedly the role of women and their expected behaviour and expectations as such. The novel depicts the life a woman who has remained unmarried and a young lady whose goal is not becoming a wife whatsoever. However, it is crucial that one does not fall into thinking that Oliphant completely rejects marriage. What is interesting about Oliphant's novels is the alternative options for women that she shows to her readers: "If Mrs. Oliphant tales do

not represent marriage as the reward for woman's moral progress neither do they repudiate marriage and motherhood as desirable goals" (Jay: 1995, 73).

As Jay points out, the manner in which Oliphant plays with perspectives on marriage in *Hester* is also significant. Oliphant cleverly develops these different perspectives throughout the novel with the creation of different characters who experience marriage differently. While Hester simply does not set marriage as her goal in life, other characters like Captain Morgan and his wife, her neighbours, convey a rather positive and tender image of it:

Captain Morgan was an old sea-captain, with all the simplicity of homely wisdom which so often characterizes his class; and his wife a gentle old woman, entirely devoted to him, and by this time, not capable of much more than to keep the record of all his distinctions and to assert his goodness. It was he who helped her down stairs every day to the chimney corner in winter, and in summer to the large chair in the window (Oliphant: 81).

Therefore, rather than representing marriage as an option that women should avoid, Oliphant chooses to create different types of women who, like Hester, have simply different concerns in life. Apart from having different concerns, Hester also demonstrates being a decisive character when Edward Vernon, Catherine's disciple in the bank who is treated as if he was her son, appears in her life and courts her. Even though they both feel attracted to each other, Hester does not rush into marriage when she realizes that Edward is involved in some obscure businesses related to money and demands her to run away with him. Therefore, Hester is not simply worried about finding a man she loves, her possible suitors should also be decent and kind-hearted people.

It can be confirmed, then, that what distressed Oliphant about her society was the sole destiny of marriage for women. Thusly, the uniqueness of the novel resides in "her refusal to accept romance as the sole goal of a woman's life, her insistence on living without illusions about life's sorrows and terrors." (O Mealy, 1996: 250).

Nonetheless, it is evident that Oliphant decides to focus her writing on alternative women models rather than happily married women. It is notable as well the manner in which Oliphant portrays Catherine, a character who carries a great part of the subversive tone of the novel and is representative of the alternative options women could have. While some single women were often depicted as a failure and offensively labelled as “spinsters”, Oliphant completely subverts this notion with Catherine, who overcomes John Vernon’s rejection and becomes an assertive and respectable woman.

Hester is also portrayed as a person with an immense sensibility who is eager to learn and cultivate herself as an individual. Bauer-Gatsos discusses this in the following passage:

Hester and Catherine’s performances do not faithfully reiterate sensation conventions about women, which constructed images of women as either impure, fleshly, and passionate or jealous, petty, and mean-spirited. Instead, Oliphant creates women who are noble, strong in purpose, and devoted to fulfilling their duties. Ultimately, these two women are empowered with the responsibility of restoring order within the novel (2003: 182-183).

As a whole, it can be asserted that Oliphant simply prefers to concentrate on all possibilities that life can offer to women and defend less tight social norms regarding society’s expectations as Williams indicates: “[Oliphant’s stories] They are about alienation between husbands and wives, parents and children, and about women, sometimes weak and sometimes strong, with heavy burdens to bear. She was increasingly unwilling to write love stories with happy endings.” (1986: 151).

As Williams argues, another characteristic feature of Oliphant’s works is the type of ending they illustrate. *Hester* also closes with an ending which cannot be labelled as happy or even satisfactory when it comes to Hester’s fulfilment and expectations in life. Rather than this, she finds herself in a dilemma she never asked for when two men proposed to her. Consequently, this is how Oliphant highlights on the boundaries and

burdens of the time and chooses to finish her novel putting more emphasis on the limitations of the Victorian era rather than showing an optimistic and revolutionary end.

3. *Hester*'s Ending: A Denied Career

With *Hester*, Oliphant not only spreads a powerful and inspiring message for women but she also creates two female powerful protagonists: Catherine endorses women independence and Hester embodies the perfect candidate to follow Catherine's footsteps.

Catherine Vernon is an exceptional character who manages to live a successful life against all odds. Because of her uniqueness and strength, she has often been compared to Oliphant herself: "Like Catherine in *Hester*, and like Margaret Oliphant, she is a lavish spender, the mainstay of a tribe of friends and relations, a woman who has a blank in the 'innermost room' but has undeniably made a success of her life." (Williams, 1986: 161). Catherine's most distinctive feature is not only her career but the success that she was able to achieve, just as Oliphant since "in general, composing was not the kind of job that gave women steady, lifelong employment" (Van Remoortel, 2015: 18).

Apart from success, Catherine also enjoys the finest reputation in her hometown, since everyone respects and admires her deeply: "As she got older she became almost the most important person in Redborough. The people spoke of her, as they sometimes do of a very popular man, by her Christian name" (Oliphant: 20). Essentially, Catherine is portrayed as almost a sovereign in her hometown; a woman with a great fortune, mansions and a bank of her name. Catherine is also aware of her reputation and influence in the novel as she herself declares in several occasions throughout the story:

"What can you do? Are you able to do it?" she said.

"Able!" said Catherine, raising herself upright with a sort of smile. "I am able for everything that has to be done" (Oliphant: 447).

It is also interesting to draw our attention to the fact that most of the times, Oliphant decides to describe the female powerful character in her novel in terms of a man, since the model of a woman who had banking knowledge and ran a prestigious business was very much absent in society and unconceivable: "Do you think a man ever talks to women about these things? Oh, perhaps to a woman like Catherine that is the same as a man." (Oliphant: 404).

On the other hand, Hester remains truthful to herself and keeps rejecting entering the world of weekly balls and seduction games with men. From the very beginning, Hester shows herself as a special woman with an attitude and aspirations in life which differ from the conventional ones. Hester's main controversy in the novel is the fact that she does not wish to marry but instead, pursue a professional career as a teacher, even though no one surrounding her tolerates it. What is more, Hester is very firm in spite of her mother's insistence to marry: "It is teaching I have always wanted, never a companion's place." (Oliphant: 144), "I would rather not marry — anyone. I don't see the need for it." (Oliphant: 147), "I don't know what you mean by having my chance — and I don't want any chance," (Oliphant: 220), and even in the very end of the novel: "Oh, do not ask me! I will never marry," Hester cried. (Oliphant: 493). This insistence and apparent rejection to marriage has also been connected to the own author's life when her future husband proposed to her for the first time. Oliphant explains the situation herself in her autobiography and the similarity between hers and Hester's first proposal is indeed very much alike:

When Frank made me the extraordinary proposal for which I was totally unprepared, that we should, as he said, build up the old Drumthwacket together, my only answer was alarmed negative, the idea never having entered my mind. But

in six months or so things changed. It is not a matter into which I can enter here (in Coghill, 1988: 28).

Oliphant emphasizes Hester's distinct nature including characters such as Emma, granddaughter of the Morgans, who spends her days waiting for social events and in the constant search of a handsome suitor, with no other aspirations in life. Hester's special sensibility is crucial when taking into consideration her dreams and hopes as a woman since she really demonstrates that she is different and refuses to adapt into society's expectations. Hester finds pleasure and joy when discovering new knowledge and maintaining interesting conversations with her only true friend, Captain Morgan. Thus, Hester demonstrates her inquisitiveness and curiosity towards the world: "Perhaps I am not so gentle as women ought to be. My mother would be content, but I am not. I want to know everything, to help you to think [Edward], to understand it all." (Oliphant: 408). Furthermore, Hester also reflects this special conception of the world she has when she argues the role of women and the limitations they had to experience as this conversation between Hester and Roland demonstrates:

"Besides," she said, "it was not a hero I was thinking of. If anybody, it was Catherine Vernon."

"Whom you don't like. These women, who step out of their sphere, they may do much to be respected, they may be of great use; but"

"You mean that men don't like them," said Hester, with a smile; "but then women do; and, after all, we are the half of creation — or more." (Oliphant: 331).

It is for these reasons that the ending of the novel ends up being even more shocking since Hester is eager and able to continue with the family business. As formerly mentioned, it is relevant to bear in mind Catherine's power and influence in Redborough and Hester's assertiveness throughout the whole novel to understand the implications of Catherine's final decision and the contradiction it represents regarding her own trajectory. Initially interested in a teaching position, Hester gradually becomes more interested in her Catherine's career feeling deeply inspired by her achievements:

"I should like, not that, but to do as Catherine Vernon did," she cried, lighting up in every line of her animated countenance. "I should like to step in when ruin was coming and prop it up on my shoulders as she did, and meet the danger, and overcome it " (Oliphant: 330).

In the same line, Catherine's misleading comments about Hester may lead the reader to think that in the end she will name Hester the new director of the bank: "There are some people who would not take much interest in it [the Bank]" Catherine continued," but you do. I think you are like me, Hester. We were kept apart by circumstances; perhaps it is possible we might have been kept apart on purpose." (Oliphant: 493). Furthermore, there is a moment in which Catherine even mentions her life and Hester's as a repetition of one another, implying again that eventually she will become the new Catherine when she passes away:

"It is a great pity," she said, "a girl like you, that instead of teaching or doing needlework, you should not go to Vernon's, as you have a right to do, and work there."

"I wish I could," Hester said, with eager eyes.

"They tell me you wanted to do something like what I had done. Ah! you did not know it was all to be done over again. This life is full of repetitions. (Oliphant: 492).

Most importantly, when Catherine's beloved Edward finally disappears and runs away with the money of the bank, just as John Vernon did, Catherine relies on Hester and seeks for her help to establish normality again in the bank:

(...) You are young, and you are a Vernon too. Bend your mind to it. Think of nothing but the business in hand."

"I will," said Hester, with solemnity, as if she were pronouncing the words before a judge.

Catherine took hold of her dress when she was going away.

"One thing," she said. "I think you and I have hated each other because we were meant to love each other, child."

"I think I have always done both," said Hester. (Oliphant: 480).

Despite of this, in Catherine and Hester's last conversation we learn that Catherine will not leave the family business to Hester but to Harry. In addition, Catherine's arguments for doing it do not seem to have enough foundation since she

does not even mention the problems Hester would have to face because of society's prejudices:

(...) Women have never worked for their living in our family, and, so far as I can help it, they never shall."

"You did yourself, cousin Catherine," said Hester, who stood forth to learn her fate, looking up with those large eyes, eager and penetrating, of which Miss Vernon still stood in a certain awe.

"That was different. I did not stoop down to paltry work. I took a place which — others had abandoned. I was wanted to save the family, and thank Heaven I could do it. (Oliphant: 76).

As Catherine declares, she took the place others had abandoned and was wanted to run the Vernon Bank. Just like Catherine, Hester finds herself in the same situation: Catherine is about to die and abandon her position meaning that somebody else will be wanted to continue directing the bank. Before this negative response, Hester answers to Catherine the following:

"Why cannot it be? You did it. I should not be afraid——"

"I was old. I was past my youth. All that sort of thing was over for me. It could be in one way — if you could make up your mind to marry Harry "

"I could not — I could not! I will never marry."

"It is a great pity you cannot — I think it is a mistake. (Oliphant: 492-493).

Once again, Catherine's arguments do not seem very convincing and as a result, as Johnson states: "It is disappointing, then, that Catherine does not leave her that role" (2010: 12). She insists on defending her decision and tells Hester that because of her age, she should not dedicate her life to business matters and ought to marry her cousin Harry. Apart from Edward's disappointment, Hester has the privilege of having two new suitors, Harry and Roland, but she does not even contemplate the option of marrying them since she simply does not cherish them as lovers.

Catherine also goes further and even describes not getting married as a "mistake", despite having lived a happy and full life as a single woman. Due to these reasons, Catherine ends up contradicting the role that she has assumed during her life: being an independent, unmarried and respectable woman, exemplifying in this manner that it was

indeed possible to embody this role in the Victorian era. Instead of continuing fostering this new role for women, “Unfortunately, the novel's ending ultimately forecloses the expanded role for women that Oliphant begins to suggest. While the sensation plot offered Hester the opportunity to enter the world of work, she is forbidden from entering it fully” (Bauer-Gatsos, 2003: 188).

3.1 The Ironic Closure

After this unexpected plot twist, Oliphant decides to close her novel with a final line charged with irony, if we assume that the author laments Hester’s position at the end of the novel: “What can a young woman desire more than to have such a possibility of choice?” (Oliphant: 495). Lastly, Hester finds herself with the possibility of choosing between two men to marry and even though she is expected to feel pleased, she rather feels frustrated when Catherine denies her the opportunity to enter the bank as a worker. Jay highlights the novel’s ironic closure stating that:

"The ending does, however, pay full tribute to the paradox of a woman's position. If Catherine has been 'saved' from her masculine trait of using her intellect to distance herself from her emotions, by capitulating to a woman's distinctive organ, 'the heart', where does this leave Hester? The novel's ironic closure calls attention to this by leaving Hester to be wooed by two men, 'good men both, who will never wring her heart... What can a woman desire more than to have such a possibility of choice?" (1995: 102-103).

The irony, then, comes with the fact that Hester has repeatedly stated that she will not marry in spite of her mother and Catherine’s hopes. She herself is a great example of what a woman can desire more than a possibility of choice, which is in Hester’s case personal self-growth and a professional career.

Nevertheless, the very last line of the novel can also be read from a different point of view which indeed defends what the sentence is implying: there is nothing better than having the possibility to choose between two good men given the circumstances of the

period. However, the ironic interpretation goes much more in hand with the tone and message that Oliphant expresses throughout the novel.

The irony of the ending line is also reinforced when taking into account Catherine's experiences with men during her lifetime. The two great loves of Catherine's life, John Vernon and Edward Vernon, both end up becoming a fraud and a disappointment since they both almost ruin the Vernon Bank and later disappear for the rest of their lives, creating Catherine serious difficulties with the business. Edward's case is even more dramatic since Catherine deeply adores and offers him all he wishes, even the full control of the bank.

The interesting part about *Hester*, then, is what Oliphant exposes about the situation of women and the unrealistic goals they had to set which supposedly guaranteed happiness and self-fulfilment. Although Catherine decides to not leave the family business to Hester, it is also true and another form of transmitting an inspiring message that in this manner, *Hester* also represents the limitations of the period to her readers:

Oliphant frequently forces her audience to read between the lines, a common rhetorical strategy often attributed to Victorian women writers. Perhaps Oliphant's concealment strategies were very sophisticated because most of her critical work was published by *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, a conservative, male-oriented periodical. Oliphant's ambiguous, suggestive subtext occurs too frequently and too consistently to be pre-Freudian slips; her subtext is often more significant than the text itself. (Spencer, 1996: 5).

Thus, *Hester* also happens to be a powerful tool in which Oliphant exposes the limitations of the time, in spite of the bitter feeling that Catherine creates in the novel with her last decision and the repercussion it has in Hester's future. Oliphant, then, decides to sacrifice Hester's career in order to expose the injustices and inequalities during the Victorian period.

4. Conclusions and Further Research

This dissertation has especially focused on Catherine Vernon's final decision regarding the future of the Vernon Bank and has also argued that despite embodying freedom and independence for Victorian women, Catherine's role in the novel fails in the end due to the contradiction that her persona and her last decision represent. It is because of that decision that Catherine interrupts a revolutionary tradition that she herself established: women invading the labour market and being successful in it. In addition to this, Catherine advises Hester to marry even though she could have offered her the opportunity of leading the Vernon Bank and remain single, just as she wished. The very last line in the novel has also been analyzed in order to highlight how Oliphant decides to close her novel with an ironic line, emphasizing thus Hester's unhappy ending and failure at achieving her dreams.

In order to defend the idea that Hester could have been in fact the heiress of the bank, some research has also been presented in order to demonstrate that an ending which had fitted Hester's expectations could have also been possible. The cases that have been explained appear and are extremely relevant in order to suggest that a happy ending for Hester could have been plausible and also needed so that Victorian readers could start reading about revolutionary stories in which women gain power. Nevertheless, this dissertation also suggests that Oliphant opts for this ending so that she can expose the limitations of the Victorian era regarding women's rights and careers. By doing this, the author also manages to create an impact in her readers' minds.

All in all, this dissertation has highlighted the revolutionary ideas and subversive tone of *Hester* to demonstrate how, despite the time passage, Victorian literature is very much necessary in our current society since the revolutionary stories that we can enjoy

from the era are timeless and surprisingly enough, deal with issues which still can be found in today's society. Consequently, it is crucial that research keeps focusing on the critical tone of Victorian works so that they let us explore more the writers' concerns about their period. They ultimately also serve as an example to contemporary readers inspiring individuals to develop awareness towards injustices in society. Among many other fictional stories, *Hester* reminds us to fight against inequalities, also triggering human's most powerful tool: critical thinking during unjust times.

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