

Mahzuza Rahaman

April 7th, 2019

English 110- Professor Tolliver

The Power of an Inheritance to a Woman

Louisa May Alcott, Henry James, and Louis Auchincloss are very different writers from different time periods however three of their novels touch upon a similar theme of inheritance. In *The Inheritance* Alcott writes about a servant girl named Edith who learns about a confounding truth about herself which could change her entire life. In Henry James' novel, *Washington Square*, James tells the story of Catherine and her struggles and rebellion against authority to achieve her freedom. In *The Heiress* Auchincloss narrates the story of Agnes and her struggle to attain her freedom as well as her wish to escape from the roles assigned to her by her family. In all three of the novels, an inheritance was passed down to the protagonist, but instead of being a blessing, or an object of value, their inheritance was seen as a burden to them. The protagonists yearn to be free from the situations that they seem to be stuck in, and do this by rebelling against the authority which is detaining them from their freedom. Although the novels seem to share similarities in the theme and idea of the novel, each author portrays the situation in somewhat different ways.

Alcott, James and Auchincloss all explore the theme of inheritance and how women react to it or what they do with their inheritance. In all of the novels, the authors portray the protagonists as women who are rebelling against their inheritance as it is a representation of authority which controlling and holding them captive from their freedom. They are trapped in a situation on which they wish to be free. In *The Inheritance*, Edith finds her father's will which

states that she inherits all the property that her father had owned, but then she burns it. She burns the will because she did not want to ruin the family dynamic. She thought that if she were to abide by the will, she would not be held in the same regard by the rest of the family, and may even resent her. She would rather keep the love and respect of her family than obtain material possessions which her father's will provide her. In both *Washington Square* and *The Heiress*, the protagonists are willing to give up their inheritances for a man who they claim to love. Both the authors portray the man to be taking advantage of the women, pursuing them in order to gain access to their inheritances. In *Washington Square*, Dr. Sloper tells Catherine that Morris "thinks you have eighty thousand a year" (James 12). Despite her father's warnings, she falls in love with Morris. She is willing to give up her inheritance for her love, even though she is warned that Morris only wants her for her inheritance. In *The Heiress*, Agnes risks losing her everything that she has worked for her whole life, so that she would find love and freedom. She is willing to be in a relationship with Miles despite her father forbidding her to do so. She knows that Miles was only with her because of her money as he had told her so, "I'd use your money to get you out of all this! To make you free!" (Auchincloss 39). Although she knew that Miles was using her, she was more drawn to the idea of being free than the fact that Miles only wanted her money. In both of these novels, the protagonists yearn to be free from authority, and in this instance the fathers are the ones in power and use the inheritances as leverage to stay as authoritative figures. In all three of these novels, the authors portrayed the protagonists as women who are craving to be free from their inheritances which are trapping them into a difficult situation.

Although all three novels touch upon the theme of inheritance and freedom from authority, the authors illustrate these themes through very different characters. All the women,

Edith, Catherine, and Agnes were characterized very differently by the authors. All three females may have been strong and independent by the end of the novels however not all of them started that way. In *The Inheritance*, Alcott romanticized Edith. She was seen as a very poor, honest, pure soul who could do no wrong. Alcott writes Edith describing herself as “one so poor and humble” (Alcott 60). Portraying Edith as such can represent her kindness and innocence, but on the other hand, it can illustrate the character as irresponsible or even in a childlike light. She is so innocent and humble that she rejects her father’s will and all of the property and money that it bestows upon her. Her innocent personality may show that she does not know what to do with the discovery of her father’s will. However, by the end of the novel Edith figures out what she wants and she sees the world as it is. She realizes that wants to keep everything the way that it is because she believes that that is how it should be. Henry James’ character in *Washington Square* is very different from the way that Edith is characterized. Catherine is seen as very naive and innocent in the beginning of the novel. She is very easily manipulated by her father, but starts to demand freedom through her relationship with Morris. Although she is characterized as a very naive and gullible character in the beginning, she realizes her own power by the end of the novel as she rejects her father’s wishes. In *The Heiress*, Agnes is seen as a weak character in the beginning of the story because she was stuck in the roles that were created for her, however she becomes stronger when she begins to break out of these roles and pursue what she wants, her freedom. All three authors write their protagonists as weak in the beginning and stronger and more independent by the end, however the characterization of the characters were done differently. By doing this, it affects the way the reader sees the characters and it affects the way the reader understands the theme of inheritance, power, and freedom.

When put together, all of the novels touch upon the negative aspect of an inheritance. An inheritance passes down a legacy through possessions, property and money. In these novels, the authors focus on how women react to their inheritance. All the protagonists feel entrapped by their inheritance, and rebel against it for freedom and for love. By doing this, the authors represent the irresponsibility of women with something of such importance, an inheritance. The women are all willing to throw away their inheritance for the sake of love and their independence. This is such an important thing during the settings of these novels. Property and money are things of such utter importance, especially since women were not able to inherit these things during these times. Women did not used to have the right to inherit these things as they were supposed to be handled by a man. The authors portray the theme of inheritance in such a way, that women do not wish to inherit because it is a factor which is keeping them trapped and denying them their freedom. The women are fighting against their authority, which is represented through the inheritances, for their right to be independent.

Works Cited

Alcott, Louisa May. *The Inheritance*. Dutton Books, 1997.

Auchincloss, Louis. *Manhattan Monologues*. Houghton Mifflin Company. 2002.

James, Henry. *Washington Square*. IUniverse Inc, 2016.