

# Søren Kierkegaard's *The Seducer's Diary*: The Socratic Seduction of a Young Woman

Vanessa Bowns Poulsen

## Abstract

In this paper I will present and discuss what I consider to be a new interpretation of Søren Kierkegaard's "The Seducer's Diary". I will demonstrate how the Socratic "maieutic" method isn't only implemented in Kierkegaard's method as the indirect message to the reader, but also to the main character's seduction of the young woman Cordelia. With support from historical literature on 19<sup>th</sup> century society, I argue that Kierkegaard, with the help of the Socratic method, indirectly points out the exclusion of women from intellectual matters and encourages a discussion hereof. I haven't found an interpretation which specifically combines the conception of the female gender in 19<sup>th</sup> century with the use of the Socratic method exercised by Johannes the Seducer. As far as I know, this interpretation is new and contributes significantly to our understanding of "The Seducer's Diary".

## Introduction

"The Seducer's Diary"<sup>1</sup> is a part of *Either/Or*<sup>2</sup> (1987) [1843] (the original Danish version will be referred to as SV2), Kierkegaard's first pseudonymous work. Throughout the paper, the main character's seduction of Cordelia will be at the centre of our attention. With the support of Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony*<sup>3</sup> (1989) [1841] (the original version will be referred to as SV1), I put forth his use of Socrates' "maieutic" method, also known as "midwifery". This inspiration has already been examined to some extent in the secondary literature<sup>4</sup>. In *The Point of View of my Work as an Author*

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<sup>1</sup>Orig. title: "Forførelers Dagbog".

<sup>2</sup>Orig. title: *Enten-Eller*.

<sup>3</sup>Orig. title: *Om Begrebet Ironi*.

<sup>4</sup>See for instance the articles "Kierkegaard's Seductions: The Ethics of Authorship" (Berthold 2005), "Kierkegaard on Indirect Communication" (Broudy 1961) and the books *Svimmelhedens Etik* (Søltoft 2000) and *Søren Kierkegaard's Inspirationskilder* (Bertung 2013). Bertung points out that Socrates appears throughout the authorship, from the beginning to the end (2013: 14).

(1962) [1859]<sup>5</sup> (the original version will be referred to as SV18), Kierkegaard directly proclaimed his use of the Socratic method. I will demonstrate how this method, and Kierkegaard's interpretation of Socrates, is strongly reflected in Johannes' character and method of seduction<sup>6</sup>.

In "The Seducer's Diary", the object of seduction is the young woman, as opposed to the young man in the case of Socrates. In addition to the common interpretation, I add the argument that Cordelia's defeat can be regarded, not only as the natural consequence of a woman's lack of ability to independent reflection – a common view at the time<sup>7</sup> – but also as the lack of society's will to let her reflect, even if she gained this ability. I demonstrate how the maieutic seduction can be regarded as Kierkegaard's indirect exposure of dominant gender standards of 19<sup>th</sup> century society<sup>8</sup>. Johannes' characterizations of Cordelia, and of women in general, seem to be somewhat double faced. Sometimes they appear rather misogynistic<sup>9</sup>, agreeing with, and even exaggerating, the contemporary notion of women. At other times, the characterizations suggest an emancipatory perspective and a more egalitarian view on genders. Thus Johannes puts forward capabilities which were commonly linked to the man. Is it possible for the "pupil" to reach redemption, if the pupil is a woman? By taking the gender standards at the time into account, I aim to facilitate new considerations on Kierkegaard's purpose with "The Seducer's Diary".

## 1. The indirect message and the many interpretations

In his pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard doesn't offer clear and straightforward answers to what his intentions are. Johannes Sløk maintains that even the obviously authentic writings, including the journals, the religious works and the retrospective writings on his own authorship are not necessarily as authentic as assumed (Sløk 2013: 13). In "Public Confession"<sup>10</sup> (1842) (references will be made to the original version as

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<sup>5</sup> Orig. title: *Synspunktet for min Forfatter-virksomhed*.

<sup>6</sup> This argument is well known in the secondary literature. For instance, Berthold (2005) and Søltøft (2000) both point to the use of Socratic irony in Johannes' seduction of Cordelia.

<sup>7</sup> I will illustrate this throughout the paper.

<sup>8</sup> My argument differs from for instance Bertung (1987), who claims Johannes to be the extreme example under which a woman *can* be regarded by the man, and further more claims that this type of view is specifically tied to the aesthete.

<sup>9</sup> The article "Kierkegaard and the Feminine Self" (Howe 1994) makes a counter argument against the view on Kierkegaard and his writings as fundamentally misogynistic.

<sup>10</sup> Orig. title: "Aabenbart Skriftemaal" in *Bladartikler, der står i forhold til „Forfatterskabet”*

SV18), Kierkegaard makes it clear that he, in spite of public assumptions, isn't the rightful author of a number of particular publications (SV18: 9). He pleads the public to avoid associating him with any writings that don't bear his name (Ibid.: 11). "Public Confession" takes on an increasingly humorous fashion by referring ironically to Hegel's "system" and the conviction of his contemporary time as complete (Ibid.: 14). The use of irony gives the impression that the whole writing could be an expression of irony. Kierkegaard later admitted that no one but himself had ever claimed the authorship of the writings in question (Kierkegaard 1848 NB6: 16,13). Hence the confession possibly served merely to confuse the reader about the authenticity of authorship. This is a particularly good example of Kierkegaard's intended confusion of the reader.

In the pseudonymous writings, not least *Either/Or*, the deliberate lack of explanation is particularly dominant. This has led to a variety of creative, and often contrasting, interpretations. The continuous irony adds to the variety. As Carl Henrik Koch underlines, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship is generally based on irony (Koch 1992: 108). Johannes is an outstanding example of how Kierkegaard incorporates the ironical approach in his characters. Thus, the reader can neither be sure if the work implies a certain opinion, nor whether this opinion reflects Kierkegaard's own.

Even if Kierkegaard's final aim (the importance of true Christianity) isn't the main subject of this paper, a short illumination is beneficial to the understanding of Kierkegaard's method and obscured intentions. In spite of the acknowledgment that none of Kierkegaard's writings are necessarily fully authentic, the intentions, which he makes clear in his retrospective writings, will be taken into account in what follows.

In *The Point of View of my Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard emphasizes his religious aim from the beginning and throughout the authorship. He declares his discontent with what he regarded as a misunderstood Christianity in Denmark (SV18: 81). He saw it as a general conceit in the people and he held the opinion, according to the retrospective writings, that a conceit could only be met with an initial deceit. As he had already clarified in his early religious work, *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (1844)<sup>11</sup> (references will be made to the original version as SV4), published immediately after *Either/Or*, he chose to hide his intentions, based on the conviction that faith cannot be passed from one person to another (SV4.: 19). As each individual must find

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(1962) [1842].

<sup>11</sup> Orig. title: *To Opbyggelige Taler* (1963) [1843].

his own path to God, so does the understanding of the pseudonymous writings lie in the mind of each individual reader. As I mentioned earlier, Kierkegaard's indirect message and the "maieutic" method are inspired by Socrates. For Kierkegaard it is clear that Socrates is his teacher whereas his faith is with Jesus Christ (SV18.: 106). Kierkegaard maintained that all of his pseudonymous writings are "maieutic" (Ibid.: 65), that is, meant to create self-reflection in the reader and eventually an acknowledgment of the true nature of faith.

## 2. **Either/Or**

The following introduction to *Either/Or* serves the purpose of showing the context in which "The Seducer's Diary" is placed.

The famous work *Either/Or* holds an aesthetic part, consisting of eight passages of a considerable variety, and an ethical part, consisting of two long letters and a sermon. In the preface of *Either/Or*, we meet the pseudonym Victor Eremita. Eremita appears to be the author of the preface only, in which he enlightens us on his acquaintance with the writings as well as introducing us to the contents and themes of the book. Because of their striking difference in content and appearance, he categorizes the writings in an aesthetic part and an ethical part, written by two different people (SV2: 12). The name of the aesthetic writer doesn't appear. Eremita names him "A". He finds out that the ethicist is a former court judge named William<sup>12</sup>. He names him "B". One of the aesthetic writings is "The Seducer's Diary", which A claims only to be the publisher of. The author of the diary is an aesthete called Johannes. B addresses the letters to his "young friend", and Eremita assumes the friend to be A. However, he suspects Johannes of being a pseudonym of A:

Here we meet new difficulties, inasmuch as A does not declare himself the author but only the editor. This is an old literary device to which I would not have much to object if it did not further complicate my own position, since one author becomes enclosed within the other like the boxes in a Chinese puzzle. (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 8).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Orig. name and title: Assessor Wilhelm.

<sup>13</sup> Orig. quote: "Her møde nye Vanskeligheder, idet A ikke erklærer sig for Forfatter, men kun for Udgiver. Det er et gammelt Novellist-Kneb" (SV2: 14).

The quote could indicate that A is trying to hide his problematic thoughts and actions behind the pseudonym<sup>14</sup>. Whereas the aesthetic life emphasizes pleasure, the ethical life emphasizes an obligation. His letters seem to be a consideration of A's aesthetic outlook and an ethical appeal to A.

### 3. The Seducer's Diary

"The Seducer's Diary" is the final tale of the aesthetic part of *Either/Or*. The reader of the diary becomes acquainted with Johannes' character and his reflections. As an aesthete, he emphasizes a life of pleasure. He is a seducer, but, contrary to Don Juan, a selective one. His favourite targets of seduction are young virgins, and his favourite occupation is the erotic prelude with the individual girl. Johannes is always aware of possibilities of erotic observation and reflections thereupon.

However, it is the young Cordelia Wahl who, throughout the diary, is the main target of seduction. Johannes meets Cordelia by coincidence. He notices her in the street, is immediately attracted to her and maps out the long and cunning strategy of seduction. Through her aunt, and the young admirer Edward<sup>15</sup>, Johannes gains access to Cordelia, and with his eloquence and twisting powers he succeeds, with the aunt's acceptance, at winning Cordelia's hand in engagement. The engagement lasts five months and three weeks which approximately corresponds to Johannes' opinion about the duration of love: "(...) that no love affair should last more than a half year at most and that any relationship is over as soon as one has enjoyed the ultimate" (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 368)<sup>16</sup>. Johannes is a highly reflective person whose inner world stays unknown to others. He creates an infatuation in the girl he intends to seduce by convincing her of his own infatuation<sup>17</sup>. He reveals to the diary that he will stay a riddle to Cordelia who shall never grasp his real intentions (SV2: 324). The ultimate aim of the seduction is Cordelia's full submission and the climax combining sexual conquest and mental transformation. Within this synthesis of contrasts lies the notion of the "interesting"<sup>18</sup> which is what Johannes strives for: "The more devotedness one can bring to erotic love, the more interesting" (Kierkegaard 1987, I:

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<sup>14</sup> An interpretation supported by Nathaniel Kramer (2015: 161).

<sup>15</sup> Orig. name: Edvard.

<sup>16</sup> Orig. quote: "(...) at enhver Kjærlighedshistorie i det Høieste varer et halvt Aar, og at ethvert Forhold er forbi, saasnt man har nydt det Sidste" (SV2: 341).

<sup>17</sup> An interpretation supported by Søltøft, P. (2014: 124).

<sup>18</sup> For Kierkegaard's orig. conception of "det interessante", see in particular: SV2: 320.

342)<sup>19</sup>. The engagement is used as a means to push the erotic to its limit and to let Cordelia acknowledge and finally break the confined limits of love that engagement suggests. After full submission, Cordelia is abandoned.

While the tale gained popularity in its time, it was also met with indignation. It can be perceived as mainly a story of a cruel and calculating seducer who deceives a young girl and/or as a critical work which analyses and confronts philosophical concepts and social standards. Like Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works in general, "The Seducer's Diary" holds a number of direct and indirect references<sup>20</sup>. Some interpreters regard the diary as primarily an ironic reference to Hegel,<sup>21</sup> whereas others emphasize a reference to Goethe and a distortion of his stories and characters, founded on the romantic idealization of nature<sup>22</sup>. As already mentioned, Kierkegaard's reference to Socrates is well-known. In the following section, I will go further into this subject, with the overall purpose of understanding Johannes and the seduction.

#### 4. The Socratic reference

##### 4.1. The irony

Johannes is characterized by a fundamentally ironic approach to the world. In "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage"<sup>23</sup>, which is part of the ethical writings in *Either/Or*, Judge William confronts the aesthete's irony:

That is, you are no enemy of marriage, but you misuse your ironic look and your sarcastic taunting to ridicule it. In this connection, I concede that you are not shadow-boxing, that you land some solid blows, and that you are keenly observant, but I also want to say that this is perhaps your error. Your life will amount to nothing but tentative efforts at living. (Kierkegaard 1987, II: 6–7)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Orig. quote: "Jo mere Hengivelse man kan bringe ind i Elskoven, jo interessantere" (SV2: 316).

<sup>20</sup> Among these are for instance Hegel, Goethe, Plato and Socrates.

<sup>21</sup> See Koch, C.H. (1992: 105).

<sup>22</sup> See Roos, C. (1955: 31) and Hultberg, H. (1998: 48–49).

<sup>23</sup> Orig. title: "Ægteskabets æstetiske Gyldighed".

<sup>24</sup> Orig. quote: "Du er saaledes ingen Fjende af Ægteskabet, men Du misbruger Dit ironiske Blik og Din sarkastiske Spydighed til at spotte det. Jeg vil i den Henseende gjerne indrømme Dig, at Du ikke fægter i Luften, at Du rammer sikkert, og at Du har megen Observation, men jeg vil tillige sige, at dette maaskee er Din Feil. Dit Liv vil gaae op i lutter Tilløb til at leve" (SV3: 12–13).

Thus William acknowledges the ability to reflect and analyse, but he also reveals his rejection of the aesthete's ironic, distanced observation and lack of decision. There is a parallel between William's analysis of the aesthete and Kierkegaard's analysis of Socrates. According to Kierkegaard, we should understand Socrates' sentence "know yourself" as "separate yourself from the other" (Kierkegaard 1989: 177)<sup>25</sup>. This underlines the importance of individual subjectivity, but also points out the risk of isolation for the individual who relies on absolute irony. Kierkegaard addresses the difficulty of reconstructing the existence of the ironist, whose outer appearance doesn't reflect his inner world (SV1: 71). He also emphasizes how the secrecy that accompanied Socrates made it difficult to form retrospective judgments on his actions (SV1: 71).

Kierkegaard stresses the indifference with which Socrates meets the established institutions. A marker of this is the idea of an inner voice – the abstract "daimon" – opposed to the established religion and the concrete individualities of the gods (SV1: 193). Furthermore, the daimon has a warning appearance rather than a commanding one. This gives rise to negativity, rather than positivity, as it creates scepticism and distance instead of action (SV1: 194). Johannes has, in a similar manner, chosen the distant, ironical and sceptical position towards society. He listens only to himself, and the "divinely" becomes an internal matter. Likewise, the viewpoint of Socrates is characterized by subjectivity and an inner thinking world reflecting on itself (SV1: 196).

The ironist tears down established standards, but offers nothing in their place. In Kierkegaard's view, Socrates wasn't there to save the world, but to judge it (SV1: 204). The ironist's relationships are characterized by an unbalance because he simulates ignorance and never unfolds himself. According to Kierkegaard, Socrates seeks the random encounter with anyone on whom his irony can be exercised (SV1: 211). His relationships are momentary and move dialectically between attraction and repulsion. Kierkegaard points out how Socrates, by avoiding commitments, maintains his freedom (SV1: 212). Since his real intentions are not being directly expressed, the ironist is untouchable. The following quote exemplifies the same kind of characteristics in Johannes. The irony is clear:

I am honest and reliable, have never deceived anyone who has confided in me. It goes without saying that there is always a little

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<sup>25</sup> Orig. words: "kjend dig selv" and "adskil dig selv fra Andet" (SV1: 208).

joking, but that, after all, is a legitimate perquisite. And why do I enjoy this confidence? Because I know Latin and do my homework, and because I always keep my little stories to myself. And do I not deserve this confidence? After all, I never abuse it. (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 373)<sup>26</sup>

The Socratic method and its associated irony will be further exposed in the following, when we take a look at the seduction of Cordelia.

#### 4.2. The seduction and the deceit

Crucial to the ironist's notion of love is infatuation and conquest. As Kierkegaard points out, the relationship of the ironist is characterized as "the beginning of love". For Socrates, as well as for Johannes, love ends as soon as it reaches a point where the other person rightfully expects a commitment. There is no interest in possessing the other person. As Johannes emphasizes, he wants to enjoy Cordelia as one enjoys a piece of art (SV2: 344). Like Socrates, Johannes has a preference for the youth:

(...) I continually seek my prey among young girls, not among young women. A woman is less natural, more coquettish; a relationship with her is not beautiful, not interesting; it is piquant, and the piquant is always the last. (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 324)<sup>27</sup>

Johannes seeks the virgin and the erotic charm she possesses "without her knowing". This was a desirable characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century unmarried young woman – a subject which will be dealt with in section 5. Johannes goes a step further. His interest is only awoken if the girl has the potential of developing the contrasting masculine reflection. Johannes helps Cordelia develop it with the use of the maieutic method. In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard unfolds this Socratic method (SV1: 219). Socrates guided the individual to intellectual redemption. Just as the young men were in need of

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<sup>26</sup> Orig. quote: "Jeg er ærlig og paalidelig, har aldrig bedraget Nogen, der har betroet sig til mig. Lidt Gjækkeri falder der altid af, naa det er jo lovlige Sportler. Og hvorfor nyder jeg denne Tiltro, fordi jeg kan Latin og passer mine Studier, og fordi jeg altid holder mine Smaa-Historier for mig selv. Og fortjener jeg ikke denne Tiltro? jeg misbruger den jo aldrig" (SV2: 345).

<sup>27</sup> Orig. quote: "(...) jeg bestandig søger mit Bytte blandt de unge Piger, ikke blandt de unge Koner. En Kone har mindre Natur, mere Coquetteri, Forholdet til hende er ikke skjønt, ikke interessant, det er pikant, og det Pikante er altid det Sidste" (SV2: 300–301).

Socrates' guiding, so is Cordelia in need of Johannes' guiding, since she is not able to reach redemption by herself. At least according to Johannes:

When it comes to the labyrinth of her heart, every young girl is an Ariadne; she holds the thread by which one can find the way through – but she possesses it in such a way that she herself does not know how to use it (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 400–401).<sup>28</sup>

The interpretation of the quote will be expanded in section 5.3, particularly with regard to the female gender.

Johannes claims to want nothing which isn't the gift of freedom (SV2: 340). Both Socrates and Johannes want the youth to gain the same kind of negative freedom which they themselves enjoy. The maieutic method is supposed to help the person letting go of established standards and face a new and unknown life, in a freedom without specific directions. However, within this action lies the paradox that the young people aren't necessarily able to enjoy this freedom. Kierkegaard points out the possible consequences: "(...) but the freedom he personally enjoyed in ironic satisfaction the others could not enjoy, and thus it developed in them a longing and a yearning" (Kierkegaard 1989: 176)<sup>29</sup>. Socrates freed the young men from what they had hitherto found sufficient (SV1: 205). In a similar way, Johannes frees Cordelia from the social standards. He lets her "realize" that her breaking up the engagement is favourable for their true love in freedom (SV2: 340). By holding Cordelia responsible, Johannes keeps his freedom intact and is liberated from further responsibility. When Johannes discloses the dangerous consequences of love, and advances the claim that love is only found once (SV2: 334), it can be understood as a reference to the romantic conduct implying the notion of "the one and only".

After obtaining Cordelia's interest, Johannes gradually, and with intentional rationality, resigns from the relationship: "As long as I am with her, she enjoys listening to me; after I am gone, she perceives very well that she is being deceived, that I am different. In this way one withdraws one's

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<sup>28</sup> Orig. quote: "Enhver ung Pige er i Forhold til sit Hjertes Labyrinth en Ariadne, hun eier den Traad, ved hvilken man kan finde Veien derigjennem, men hun eier den saaledes, at hun ikke selv veed at bruge den" (SV2: 370).

<sup>29</sup> Orig. quote: "(...) den Frihed han selv nød i ironisk Tilfredshed, kunde de Andre ikke nyde, og den udviklede derfor i dem Længsel og Forlængsel" (SV1: 206).

shares of stock” (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 423)<sup>30</sup>. Johannes abandons Cordelia like Socrates abandoned the young men. Kierkegaard strains Socrates’ lack of ethical responsibility with respect to the future lives of the disciples<sup>31</sup>. He points out that the irony and negativity isn’t ethically justifiable in itself, but he endorses it as a stepping stone towards an awareness of something better. Hence, in *The Concept of Irony*, he emphasizes how Jesus, by introducing Christianity, presented a new positivity to people, unlike Socrates who only showed the way to negative freedom (SV1: 217). Even if Kierkegaard’s own overall idea of the “better” was the true Christian faith, this isn’t the immediate issue of Johannes’ character. In fact, the religious aim doesn’t directly appear in the aesthetic writings.

## 5. The exposure of gender standards

We’ve seen how the seduction and deceit is a reference to Socrates. On the basis of the Socratic seduction and deceit, this analysis can be taken a step further when we take into account that the object of seduction is a young woman.

### 5.1. Erotic indications as a part of the interaction

In the book *Seduction* (2001) [1979]<sup>32</sup>, the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard presents an interpretation of Johannes’ seduction of Cordelia. According to Baudrillard’s hypothesis, Johannes defends himself against the seductive power of the woman’s ornament. His defence lies in the strategic calculation (Baudrillard 1990: 104). Baudrillard writes: “(...) like God she possesses a matchless vantage – As a result, because naturally endowed with all seduction, she becomes the object of a savage challenge and must be destroyed” (Baudrillard 1990: 98).

When consulting historical literature that unfolds gender standards, love, marriage and sexuality in 19<sup>th</sup> century Western society, the woman was supposed to seduce the man with her implicit erotic signs. Baudrillard is onto something here. But is the woman’s capability of seducing the man into marriage the only question at play?

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<sup>30</sup> Orig. quote: “Saalænge jeg er hos hende, finder hun Nydelse i at høre paa mig; naar jeg er gaaet, mærker hun vel, at hun er bedragen, at jeg er forandret. Paa den Maade trækker man sine Actier ud” (SV2: 390).

<sup>31</sup> An interpretation which is supported by Søltøft, P. (2000: 123).

<sup>32</sup> Orig. title: *De la Séduction*.

The woman's restrained erotic signs played an essential role in 19<sup>th</sup> century society as an invitation to the man's marriage proposal. The standards of gender and sexuality required certain rituals and protocols on how the genders were supposed to express their interests in one another. The erotic signs became an important part of the introductory phase and they appear throughout "The Seducer's Diary". According to literary historian Jens Hougaard, 19<sup>th</sup> century society was dominated by the conception of woman's nature as a harmonious synthesis of body and soul. This harmony was broken if reflection intervened (Hougaard 2008, III: 218). According to Hougaard, the conception presupposes ignorance, often presented as innocence. A woman had to appear as if she wasn't aware of her own sexuality. The erotic can be described as the outer expression of restraint sexuality, as if the body isn't supposed to appear immediately sexual. The resistance was displayed as the boundary of chastity and served as an element in the erotic interaction between the genders, placing the erotic on the dangerous border of sexuality. Hougaard points out that eroticism, and its restrained sexuality, served the purpose of creating an acceptable contact. As an underlying tacit phenomenon, it was used as a means of contact. In the following section, the commonly held conception of the "true being" of man and woman will be unfolded.

## **5.2. Complementary genders and sexual restraint**

In *Marriage, a History* (2005), historian Stephanie Coontz unfolds the history of marriage in Western culture. Changes in the understanding of love and sexuality, through various ages, are brought to light. According to Coontz, the increased secularization, and focus on civil rights in 18<sup>th</sup> century, contributed to the acknowledgment of a marriage based on love. This broke with the traditional marriage where love was a secondary aspect. Unattended company between young unmarried men and women was gradually tolerated (Coontz 2005: 157). One of the consequences was an increase in children born out of wedlock. The middle class and the upper class were worried about the development; the individualistic values embedded in the ideals of freedom, together with the idea of romantic love, was considered a threat to the stability of society (Ibid.: 157). Male restraint and female virtue became strong values for especially the middle class (Ibid.: 159) and sexual restraint for both sexes became a common value (Ibid.: 171). In contrast with earlier times, where the husband was the dominator of the family, a new configuration, with a subtler kind of dominance, evolved: Man and woman

became complementary (Ibid.: 154). As historian Kai Aalbæk-Nielsen writes in *Kærlighed i det 19. – 20. Århundrede* (translatable to: *Love in the 19th – 20th Century*) (2003), the public space, where the man operated, was considered dangerous and immoral which required the moral and neutralizing effect of the housewife (Aalbæk-Nielsen 2003: 90). Man and woman attained separate domains. The woman was responsible for upholding morality (Ibid.: 168) and out of respect for her supposedly gentle nature, she was kept out of politics and economy (Coontz 2005: 153). The man became the role of the protective breadwinner (Ibid.: 162) who was rational and dynamic, while she was passive and compassionate. The contrasts of the genders were considered a strength when combined (Ibid.: 156). A common assumption in 19<sup>th</sup> century was the frigidity of the woman. The female gender was considered passive and non-sexual, but still supposed to awaken a desire and interest in the man. This contradictory structure, which has been difficult to balance, is, directly and indirectly, unfolded in “The Seducer’s Diary”.

### 5.3. The diary’s exposure of the conception of woman

Johannes reveals a considerable insight about women and the commonly held standards of contact between the genders. His thorough characterizations of women as well as his actions are, however, somewhat double faced. A fair amount of the quotes can simultaneously be interpreted as devaluing and emancipatory. The following quote from the diary emphasizes 19<sup>th</sup> century’s typical idea of a synthesis between the earthly body and the divine soul and is loaded with erotic indications.

(...) the cheerful smile, the roguish glance, the yearning eye, the tilted head, the frolicsome disposition, the quiet sadness, the profound presentiment, the ominous depression, the earthly homesickness, the unshriven emotions, the beckoning brow, the questioning lips, the secretive forehead, the alluring curls, the concealing eyelashes, the heavenly pride, the earthly modesty, the angelic purity, the secret blush, the light step, the lovely buoyancy, the languorous posture, the longing dreaminess, the unaccountable sighing, the slender figure, the soft curves, the opulent bosom, the curving hips, the tiny feet, the elegant hands. (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 428–429)<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Orig. quote: “(...) det muntre Smil; det skjelske Blik; det attraende Øie; det hængende Hoved; det overgivne Sind; det stille Veemod; den dybe Ahnen; det varslende Tungsind; den jordiske Hjemvee; de uskriftede Rørelser; de vinkende Bryn; de spørgende Læber; den

Johannes explains how he, by resigning, leaves the erotic seduction to Cordelia: "When the turn is made and I begin to pull back in earnest, then she will summon up everything in order really to take me captive" (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 411)<sup>34</sup>. According to Johannes, Cordelia has no other means than the erotic (SV2: 380). The word "captive" could be understood in at least two ways; as the attainment of someone's heart and as imprisonment in the literal sense – a possible reference to the prison of marriage, which Johannes deliberately avoids.

As brought up earlier, the following quote can be regarded as a reference to Socrates and the maieutic method, but in addition it can be understood a reference to the common conception of the female gender: "When it comes to the labyrinth of her heart, every young girl is an Ariadne; she holds the thread by which one can find the way through – but she possesses it in such a way that she herself does not know how to use it"<sup>35</sup>. This possibly refers to a girl's sexual and intellectual limitations and capabilities.

If the woman appeared obviously conscious of her own sexuality the harmony between body and soul was broken and the woman's social value decreased. The view on gender and the social standards of proposal is illustrated in the following:

(...) woman is substance, man is reflection. Therefore, she does not choose without further ado; rather, man proposes, she chooses. But man's proposal is a questioning; her choosing is actually an answer to a question. In a certain sense, man is more than woman, in another sense infinitely much less. (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 431–432)<sup>36</sup>

The quote also underlines the idea of the reflecting man and the sensuous passive woman. The typical conception of woman is further emphasized

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hemmelighedsfulde Pande; de besnærende Lokker; det skjulende Øienhaar; den himmelske Stolthed; den jordiske Blufærdighed; den englelige Reenhed; den lønlige Rødmen; den lette Gang; den yndige Svæven; den smægtende Holdning; den længselsfulde Drømmen; de uforklarede Sukke; den slanke Væxt; de bløde Former; den yppige Barm; de svulmende Hoster; den lille Fod; den nydelige Haand" (SV2: 395).

<sup>34</sup> Orig. quote: "Naar nu Vendingen er gjort, og jeg begynder for Alvor at trække mig tilbage, da vil hun opdrive Alt for virkeligt at fængsle mig" (SV2: 380).

<sup>35</sup> See page 11.

<sup>36</sup> Orig. quote: "Qvinden er nemlig Substants, Manden er Reflexion. Hun vælger derfor heller ikke uden Videre, men Manden frier, hun vælger. Men Mandens Frier er en Spørgen, hendes Vælgen egentlig kun Svar paa et Spørgsmaal. I en vis Forstand er Manden Mere end Qvinden, i en anden Forstand uendelig meget Mindre" (SV2: 398).

when Johannes states: “Cordelia hates and fears me. What does a young girl fear? Intellect [Aand]. Why? Because intellect constitutes the negation of her entire womanly existence” (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 362)<sup>37</sup>. In the following quote, another example of exposure of the common gender standards is expressed:

Our relationship is not the tender and trusting embrace of understanding, not one of attraction; it is the repulsion of misunderstanding. There is actually nothing at all in my relationship with her; it is purely intellectual, which for a young girl is naturally nothing at all. (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 351)<sup>38</sup>

With the knowledge of 19<sup>th</sup> century’s common understanding of man and woman, I believe that the exposure on Kierkegaard’s part doesn’t only serve to address the aesthetic type, but seeks to address common views present in his contemporary society.

#### **5.4. The risk of “falling”**

From the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and especially throughout the 19<sup>th</sup>, a sharp distinction between the virtuous and the “fallen” woman was withheld: “A woman who slipped briefly off the pedestal got no second chance”, as Coontz puts it (Coontz.: 169). Sexual intercourse before marriage could cause serious problems for the woman’s reputation (Ibid.: 169). In the German middle class, a man could even refuse to marry a woman, if she had permitted him sexual intercourse before their marriage. The young unmarried man and woman had to be physically segregated. Only a few parts of the body were allowed to be accessible to physical touch and the erotic indications could be expressed with the aid of clothing and accessories. A large part of the body was covered, while some parts were on the edge of coverage and could serve as a means to erotic indication. The veil and the fan are typical examples of this (Hougaard 2008, III: 120). In “The Seducer’s Diary”, both coverage and semi-coverage serve as erotic indications. The erotic function of the veil is present in the diary:

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<sup>37</sup> Orig. quote: “Cordelia hader og frygter mig. Hvad frygter en ung Pige? Aand. Hvorfor? fordi Aand udgjør Negationen af hele hendes qvindelige Existents” (SV2: 335).

<sup>38</sup> Orig. quote: “Vort Forhold er ikke Forstaaelsens ømme og trofaste Omfavnelser, ikke Attractioner, det er Misforstaaelsens Repulsioner. Mit Forhold til hende er egentlig slet Intet; det er et reent aandeligt, hvilket naturligviis er slet Intet i Forhold til en ung Pige” (SV2: 325).

If you tilt your head a little, it might be possible to penetrate up under this veil or this piece of lace. Be careful; such a glance from below is more dangerous than one that is *gerade aus* [direct]! (...) Watch out! There comes a man – drop your veil; do not let his profane glance defile you. (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 318–319)<sup>39</sup>

The quote illustrates the daily risk for a woman in this period and the responsibility she held for preserving a good reputation.

### 5.5. Johannes' acknowledgment of Cordelia's masculine traits

If Johannes was convinced by the common idea of woman, why would he seek to develop both her sexual and intellectual capacities? On the one hand, he sharply points out the contrast between man and woman. On the other hand, he attempts to combine the feminine, restraint sexuality with masculine reflection. The contradictory behaviour of Johannes is somewhat illustrated in his thoughts on Diana, the virginal Roman goddess of hunting. Diana holds a masculine character and therefore doesn't capture Johannes' erotic interest. However, he expresses a desire to meet her on intellectual terms (SV2: 402). Johannes has an interesting point about Diana's virginity: "She knew, namely, that her game in life is bound up with her virginity; therefore it is preserved" (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 436)<sup>40</sup>. The quote thus emphasizes how a woman's power is linked to her virginity. When losing interest in Cordelia, after taking her virginity, there is a parallel between his view on Diana and his own behaviour. Johannes' intellectual midwifery would be superfluous with Diana who is already a reflective being and thereby not interesting to Johannes. The underlying thought is that it is impossible for a woman to be, at the same time, an intellectual and a sexual individual.

Johannes imagines Cordelia's ideals to be somewhat masculine: "Her soul is still nourished by the divine ambrosia of ideals. But the ideal hovering before her is certainly not a shepherdess or a heroine in a novel, a mistress,

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<sup>39</sup> Orig. quote: "Naar man bøier Hovedet lidt til Siden, var det vel muligt at trænge op under dette Slør eller denne Blonde. Tag Dem iagt, et saadant Blik fra nedem er farligere end et gerade aus (...) Tag Dem iagt; der kommer et Menneske hist, slaa Sløret ned, lad ikke hans profane Blik besmitte Dem" (SV2: 295).

<sup>40</sup> Orig. quote: "Hun vidste nemlig, at hendes Spil i Livet ligger i hendes Jomfruelighed, derfor bevares den" (SV2: 402).

but a Joan of Arc or something like that” (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 344–345)<sup>41</sup>. Johannes suggests that Cordelia envies the man and wishes to be one herself (SV2: 317). He even expresses a desire to turn her into a man, if he had the divine abilities to do so (SV2: 410). Through the diary he serves as the midwife of Cordelia’s “masculine” capabilities, and, in a sense, tries to follow through with this desire.

## **6. Does the Socratic method fail if the object of seduction is a woman?**

### **6.1 Johannes as the guide to emancipation**

How should we interpret Johannes’ endeavour to develop Cordelia’s intellectual abilities? Can it be regarded as an acknowledgment of woman’s intellectual capacities? In that case, does he encourage these to develop?

Johannes and Socrates don’t submit to anyone, but they develop the mental reflection in the other person, which can lead him or her to freedom, even if it’s of a negative sort. Johannes presents this freedom as an opposition to the life with a faithful husband: “What good would it have been if this girl had fallen into the clumsy oaf of a faithful husband. What would have become of her? Nothing” (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 385)<sup>42</sup>. By referring to the married woman as “nothing”, Johannes character stresses the passive role of the woman as “being for the other”, as Kierkegaard calls it, and thereby being nothing in herself. A more substantial conception of the female gender is a possibility. Thus an acknowledgment of a woman’s subjective reflection is in play.

We can interpret the following statement as a reference to Kierkegaard’s declared deceit of the reader for a higher purpose; a false submission as a means to the other person’s enlightenment: “My dear Cordelia! I am defrauding you of something beautiful, but it cannot be otherwise, and I shall give you all the compensation I can” (Kierkegaard 1987, I: 372)<sup>43</sup>. This interpretation emphasizes “The Seducer’s” Diary” and the Socratic deceit as emancipatory.

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<sup>41</sup> Orig. quote: “Hendes Sjæl næres endnu af Idealers guddommelige Ambrosia. Men det Ideal, der foresvæver hende, er vel just ikke en Hyrdinde eller en Heltinde i en Roman, en Elskerinde, men en Jeanne d’Arc eller noget Saadant” (SV2.: 319).

<sup>42</sup> Orig. quote: “Hvad hjalp det denne Pige, om hun var falden i Hænderne paa en Klodrian af en trofast Ægtemand? Hvad var der blevet af hende? Intet” (SV2: 356).

<sup>43</sup> Orig. quote: “Min elskværdige Cordelia! jeg bedrager Dig for noget Skjønt, men det kan ikke være anderledes, og jeg skal give Dig “alt det Vederlag, jeg formaer” (SV2.: 344).

## **6.2. Society's problem with a woman's mental capabilities**

After letting Cordelia tear down her standards and set herself free, Johannes offers her nowhere to go. Like Socrates' disciples, she is abandoned in an empty space. Furthermore, her value as a woman in society's eyes is decreased. She has lost her innocence (in a physical and intellectual sense). The lost female virtue, which accompanies the entrance of mental reflexion, reveals how an emancipation could turn out to be fatal for the woman's reputation and life. Even if Cordelia reaches intellectual redemption, it will be of no value to her because she is a woman.

When the woman is described as an Ariadne who owns the thread which leads through the labyrinth – but a thread she doesn't know how to use – it can be viewed as the picture of a life excluded from intellectual matters and from independent thinking.

## **7. Conclusion**

I have throughout this paper suggested what I consider to be an original interpretation of "The Seducer's Diary". I have put forth how Kierkegaard's use of the Socratic, maieutic method is being exercised with Johannes and the seduction of Cordelia and that Kierkegaard points out and encourages discussion of the commonly held conception of woman in 19<sup>th</sup> century. I argue that the Socratic deceit can be regarded as an acknowledgment of a woman's capability of independent thinking. Whether or not Johannes, and "The Seducer's Diary", is of a repressive or emancipatory character is, because of the irony, not clear. As stated in section 1, the reader cannot be sure that the work implies a certain opinion or if this opinion reflects Kierkegaard's own. However, I suggest that Johannes' characterizations of women is an exaggerated picture of the common conception hereof. "The Seducer's Diary" not only acknowledges a woman's intellectual abilities. It also reveals a society which excluded women from intellectual matters. The presented interpretation emphasizes "The Seducer's" diary" as emancipatory in the sense that it brings the common standards and conceptions to discussion.

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Vanessa Bowns Poulsen  
Department of Education, Teaching and Philosophy  
Aarhus University  
[poulsenvanessa@gmail.com](mailto:poulsenvanessa@gmail.com)