Women’s literature in the 19th century

Majić Mazul, Kathrin

Sveučilište J.J.Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet

Preddiplomski studij mađarskog jezika i književnosti i engleskog jezika i književnosti

Kathrin Majić Mazul

Women's Literature in the 19th Century

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jadranka Zlomislić

Osijek, 2015

CONTENTS

Abstract

The paper discusses the impact of female authors in the nineteenth-century who used literature as a medium to incite changes in the unjust position of women in the society. The paper's focus is on two women writers, Charlotte Brontë, whose novel *Jane Eyre* demonstrated the obstacles women had to overcome in order to gain independence and equality before entering marriage, and Kate Chopin, whose heroine in *The Awakening* experienced a shift in her attitude towards the role of a mother and a wife in a stereotypical Victorian marriage by rejecting the prescribed roles and freely expressing her sexuality. By taking a closer look at the public reception of the female authors in the nineteenth-century, as well as the common themes that Chopin and Brontë used to expose the narrow-mindedness of the patriarchal society and the lack of basic human rights to freedom in this period, the novels raise awareness to the oppression of women and help in the establishment of a path towards the long-awaited female independence and gender equality.

.

Keywords: *The Awakening*, *Jane Eyre*, gender equality, independence, female authors

Introduction

When the nineteenth-century emerged, female authors were outnumbered by patronizing male authors who thought that women had no adequate intellectual skills to produce a quality literary work worth competing with. However, the beginning of the century brought tremendous changes in politics, economics, and the social hierarchy, which provided a better education for women, and an opportunity to escape the confines of domestic fiction. The new, modern changes raised women's awareness of gender inequality, and their oppressed role and position in the nineteenth-century society. In order to step on the male-dominated literary stage and stand alongside the men, female authors had to use male pseudonyms or write anonymously to avoid the condescending judgments of critics. As the century progressed, women tried to break the social, political, and legal constraints which society imposed on them. Various social reform movements led by women who demanded equal rights for men and women served as an inspiration for their literary output. They wanted to provoke the necessary changes through literature, and make an impact on the society to accept women as beings with equal rights as men to freedom, independence, and self-expression. It was the beginning of the gender consciousness and feminist attitudes. Towards the end of the century, female authors explored the themes of love and sexuality through the feminist context of independence and equality, thus making women's literature appealing to all readers regardless of their gender. Both Kate Chopin and Charlotte Brontë in their novels *The Awakening* and *Jane Eyre* successfully illustrated the hardships and struggles women had to endure and overcome to become liberated and equal to men. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which is often regarded as a landmark of early feminism, portrayed the outbreak of women's sexuality in a conservative Creole society and rejection of stereotypical women's roles, whereas the protagonist of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* sought equality and independence before entering a marriage. In fact, both novels mirrored the situation of the nineteenth-century society, and portrayed the women's path towards equality, independence, and power.

I. The Rise and Reception of Female Authors

Nowadays it is completely normal for a woman to choose whether she wants to be a role model housewife or perhaps a successful business woman completely oriented on her career; however, that was not the case during the Victorian Era in Industrial Britain. A woman had only one role, and that was to stay at home, take care of her family and maintain a comfortable atmosphere in the home for her husband to relax and rest after a strenuous day of earning money in business ventures. It was the Victorian ideology of "separate spheres" according to which women belong to the "domestic sphere" and men to the "public sphere," and that those two were never to be confused. Such a set of established non-written rules in nineteenth-century society brought rigid gender roles that oppressed women, confined them to the domestic activities, and prevented them from being equal to men in all aspects of life. This discriminating ideology stirred feminist attitudes, and caused women to start demanding their rights, whether legal, political or social. Until then, women were treated as their husband's property: "the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during her marriage, or at least is incorporated or consolidated into that of her husband, under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything" (Blackstone 430). Due to such restrictive rights, moreover, due to the lack of existential rights that grant freedom in every sense, women were limited in expressing dissatisfaction with the prescribed gender roles. They sought for a way to make their voices heard and they found it in the literature. Literature became a medium that best conveyed the unexplored, complex lives of women in the nineteenth-century society.

Sarah Grand, a writer and public speaker, introduced into the fiction a new term, the "New Woman," which was used to describe a woman that rejected the role of a stereotypical Victorian woman and joined the stream of a new, empowered, more masculine woman. In the collection of essays entitled "The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-siecle Feminisms," Richardson, Angélique, and Willis portrayed the New Woman as an independent, masculine, educated, and intelligent woman who is rebellious and compliant at the same time:

> The New Woman was by turns: a mannish amazon and a Womanly woman; she was oversexed, undersexed, or same sex identified; she was anti-maternal, or a racial supermother; she was male-identified, or manhating and/or man-eating or self-appointed saviour of benighted masculinity; she was anti-domestic or she sought to make domestic values prevail; she was radical, socialist or

> revolutionary, or she was reactionary and conservative; she was the agent of social and/or racial regeneration, or symptom and agent of decline. (Richardson and Willis, xii)

The character of the New Woman became the main protagonist of every literary work written by a woman. She criticized discriminating Victorian stereotypes about gender roles and the position of women in society, and exposed to the readers all her inner desires and thoughts, including her sexuality and need for independence:

> New Woman fiction dealt frankly with sex and marriage as well as women's desires for independence and fulfillment. Many New Woman novels strongly opposed the idea that home is woman's only proper sphere. The female authors revealed the traps of conventional Victorian marriage, including the condition of marriage which tolerated marital rape, compulsory or enforced motherhood, and the double standard of sexual morality. Many female protagonists of the New Woman fiction experienced conventional marriage as a degrading and oppressive institution because women suffered inferior status and were often victims of domestic violence and other threats. (Diniejko)

In their novels, female authors finally mirrored the real situation of the oppressive society, and exposed to the public the desires and attitudes most women felt and thought, but did not have the courage to express them aloud. The themes of independence and female sexuality presented through the constitution of marriage and love became extremely appealing and entertaining to the all readers who demanded more and more novels every day. The huge demand of the public gave rise to the vast production of novels written by women that made female authors extremely popular and best-selling authors that exceeded all eexpectations:

> In the 1820s, James Fenimore Cooper's publisher stated that "the utmost limits to which the sale of a popular book can be published" would be 6,500. In 1850, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* shattered that prediction, going through 14 editions in two years and becoming the first novel to reach the one million mark in sales. (Lynn)

However, as the production of novels written by women increased, male authors felt threatened because they feared that the women will "rob men of their markets, steal their subject matter, and snatch away their young lady readers" ("Women's Literature in the 19th Century: British Women Writers"). Every piece of fiction written by women was instantly criticized and belittled by patronizing male reviewers who believed that skillful writing was a trait possessed

only by men. They saw female fiction as a personal diary of an over-emotional woman who is subjective and lost in her own thoughts:

> A great creator like Shakespeare or Dickens has a wide impartiality towards all his puppets . . . If a novelist take sides, he or she is lost. Then we get a pamphlet, a didactic exercise, a problem novel – never a work of art. The female author is at once self-conscious and didactic. For reasons which are tolerably clear . . . the beginning of a woman's work is generally the writing of a personal diary. (Thompson 8)

Furthermore, predominantly negative assessments of female fiction compelled female authors to use male pseudonyms or write anonymously to avoid critical degradation based on their sex. Charlotte Brontë used the pseudonym of Currer Bell when she published her novel *Jane Eyre,* thus avoiding focus on her femininity instead on the literary value of the book. However, *Jane Eyre*'s huge popularity prompted readers to wonder who the actual author is. They were delighted with the novel when it was published, but after the identification of the author, the public reception and criticism of the book changed negatively. In her book *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing,* prominent literary critic and feminist, Elaine Showalter, wrote that "the presentation of female sexuality and human passion disturbed and amazed readers. If Currer Bell was a woman, they could not imagine what sort of woman she might be" (Showalter 92).

From these observations, we can see that female fiction in the nineteenth-century was looked upon as trivial and artless. It was a general opinion that female authors were devoid of innate ability to produce highly valued literary works of art. Fortunately, women were indeed persuasive in exposing complex political and social issues, as well as traps of domestic life and marriage through the literature, thus producing some of the best literary works of art, and most importantly, inciting society to make unavoidable changes towards the equality of the sexes.

II. Independence and Equality as the Dominant Themes in *Jane Eyre*

Although writing was considered a man's business, women took advantage of the huge demand for fiction and started producing novels that reflected the actual woman's position in the prevailing Victorian society. Many male critics who thought that a novel by a woman should be feminine, concern the women's proper sphere and eulogize a domestic angle (Xiaoije 65) met female fiction with disapproval. Degrading criticism that made women inferior to men did not prevent women from seeking independence and equality through the characters of their female heroines, thus making those two themes the dominant themes of the women's literature in the nineteenth-century. Charlotte Brontë also used the aforementioned themes to demonstrate the unjust position of women in her autobiographical novel about a plain girl called Jane:

> In this novel, the author shapes a tough and independent woman who pursues true love and equality. Jane Eyre is different from any other women at that time. She strives for her life and defends her fate in hardships and difficult conditions. In the Victorian period, the image of Jane Eyre cast a sharp contrast to the man-dominated society. She stands for a new lady who has the courage to fight for her own rights and love. (Gao 1)

Jane Eyre is a Bildungsroman in which we follow the internal development of the young orphan girl Jane on her quest for independence and equality in the patriarchal Victorian society. As an orphan without a warm home and caring family, Jane longs for love and affection, but she does not want to lose herself in replacement for love and a sense of belonging. She "does not fit the ideal picture of a small girl at the time, she has a strong sense of justice and she questions too much; traits not suitable in a little Victorian girl who was supposed to be a pretty ornament" (Andersson 6). That she does not quite belong to the picture of the ideal Victorian woman, Jane shows in her young age when Mrs. Reed excludes Jane until she "acquire[s] a more sociable and childlike disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner—something lighter, franker, more natural" (Brontë 7). Even though Jane did not do anything at all to be excluded from the ideal picture, she was yet cast aside simply because she questioned things, which was not expected from women to do at that time.

In addition, men in the novel played a huge role in exposing the unjust position of women. John Reed portrayed the oppression and rigidity of the Victorian society. He blatantly showed his dominance over Jane who said that she was "habitually obedient" to him, and "every nerve [she] had feared him, and every morsel of flesh in [her] bones shrank when he came near"

(Brontë 10). Brontë used the character of John to demonstrate how intelligent women who questioned things felt in the superior male-dominant society which tried to suppress women's interest and desire for knowledge and power; and women who sought equality and independence were not desirable. This inequality was best shown in the incident when John physically attacked Jane, but she was the only one who was punished: "My head still ached and bled with the blow and fall I had received: no one had reproved John for wantonly striking me; and because I had turned against him to avert farther irrational violence, I was loaded with general opprobrium" (Brontë 16). After spending the night in the horrifying Red Room as a punishment, Jane realized that she needs freedom and independence because they never ceased to remind her that she was "dependent," "[had] no money," she "ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children" (Brontë 11). The imprisonment in the Red Room transformed Jane over night from a child to a more mature person. She realized that she was considered different, and no matter how hard she tried to fit into their frame of socially accepted behavior for young women, they would never accept her as an equal (Andersson 7). For the first time Jane wondered how she managed to suffer for so long without trying to escape their torture and oppression. Her questioning could be also interpreted as Brontë's reflection of the beginning of feminist attitudes and the need for the necessary changes in the society.

Furthermore, the transformed and more mature Jane decided to start her quest for the long-desired independence and equality, and went to a school for girls called Lowood Institution. Departure to Lowood Institution was Jane's first step towards independence and freedom, and for the first time in her life, she felt truly happy and liberated: "Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhoped-for liberty" (Brontë 40). However, there she had to stand up to yet another man, Mr. Brocklehurst, who tried to suppress her and modify her behavior so it fitted the picture of the ideal Victorian woman. Mr. Brocklehurst used religion to threaten girls and "to teach them to know their place in society and repress their individuality and identity" (Andersson 8). Jane had to overcome the burden of her unfortunate past and find a place for herself in the society where she was considered too passionate and rebellious. However, Jane remained strong in her pursuit and "even in the face of powerful and authoritative people like the chief inspector of this charity school, Brocklehurst, as long as her esteem and dignity hurt ruthlessly, she will never submit but rebel against it decidedly" (Gao 4). Education at Lowood Institution provided Jane with knowledge necessary to be financially independent, but her true quest, quest for equality and love just began.

After the years spent in the Institution, Jane decided to leave it in order to become a governess and start earning her own money, and finally be independent without anyone telling her what to do or how to behave. She arrived to Thornfield and was employed as a governess to young Miss Adele. There she fell in love with Mr. Rochester, the owner of the property, who felt the same for her. Jane had the opportunity to have a decent life with a person who truly loved her, but rejected it because she had not yet completely reached her independence and equality. She did not want to marry Rochester until she had the same social and financial status as he had; she wanted to be equal to him:

> Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh;—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal,—as we are! (Brontë 279)

Rochester was another male figure that tried to establish his power over Jane who was trying to assert her own identity in the male-dominant society. When she accepted Rochester's proposal, he immediately set himself as her master, and thus undermined Jane's quest. The "harassing" trip to the Milcote Warehouse is a simple example of his power over Jane who wrote that he "obliged" her to go there with him, and she was "ordered" to choose half-a-dozen dresses (Brontë 295). Rochester was completely stubborn in his intentions to rule over Jane, and did not respect her opinion or wishes: "I told him in a new series of whispers, that he might as well buy me a gold gown and a silver bonnet at once: I should certainly never venture to wear his choice. With infinite difficulty, for he was stubborn as a stone, I persuaded him to make an exchange in favour of a sober black satin and pearl-grey silk" (Brontë 295). Such behavior stirred up Jane's emotions; she felt "a sense of annoyance and degradation," and her decision to be completely independent and equal reinforced (Brontë 295). She continued to be persevering in her quest and did not allow Rochester to establish his dominance. "I will not be your English Céline Varens. I shall continue to act as Adèle's governess; by that I shall earn my board and lodging, and thirty pounds a year besides. I'll furnish my own wardrobe out of that money, and you shall give me nothing but . . . your regard" (Brontë 297).

In order to achieve complete equality and independence, the feminist dream, she had to leave Rochester and embrace the final step towards it. She left Thornfield to be completely alone

on the street, without any shelter or money, and she had to beg. This final event symbolized "the nameless, placeless and contingent status of women in a patriarchal society" (Gilbert et al 364), and Jane's desire to confront and change it. It was a true test of her desire to break the Victorian anticipated stereotypical behavior. At Marsh End she finally belonged to a home and felt loved, but her cousin, St. John Rivers, was the essence of a dominant, powerful man who tried to suppress Jane's personality. He was almost too dominant for Jane who barely struggled against his influence:

> By degrees, he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind: his praise and notice were more restraining than his indifference. I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by, because a tiresomely importunate instinct reminded me that vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him. I was so fully aware that only serious moods and occupations were acceptable, that in his presence every effort to sustain or follow any other became vain: I fell under a freezing spell. When he said "go," I went; "come," I came; "do this," I did it. But I did not love my servitude: I wished, many a time, he had continued to neglect me. (Brontë 437)

However, Jane's determination and passion challenged both St. John and Rochester, which helped her establish her own identity and prevent them to assert their dominance in gender relations. Moreover, she inherited a large sum of money from her long-lost father and returned to Rochester who became blind in the meantime. She had reached complete independence and equality, both financial and social. She had as much money as Rochester, and had to take care of him who was then dependent on her. Her dream to be an equal part of a loving and caring family was finally fulfilled. Jane devoted her whole life to the pursuit of freedom; many obstacles prevented her from asserting her, female, identity within a patriarchal society, but she did not give in. Like many other women in the nineteenth-century, she fought boldly against injustice and made a great step towards the better position and status of women in society.

III. The Rejection of Stereotypical Women's Roles Through *The Awakening*

Distinction between the two sexes has never been larger than it was in the Victorian era. According to the Victorians, women naturally belonged to the "domestic sphere" and men to the "public sphere," thus forming two opposite sides that almost never overlapped. The "domestic sphere" included in general the maintenance of the home, children and duties connected with taking care of the family and keeping a comfortable atmosphere in the home, while the "public sphere," the man's sphere, included public life, earning money, and acquiring all those skills expected from men to possess. The ideal Victorian woman was a perfect wife, caring mother, with an amiable and charming personality, but weak and submissive to her husband. She was expected to incline to the "domestic sphere" by her birth, and engage in all activities necessary to fit the picture of an ideal Victorian woman. The term coined by Victorian poet Coventry Patmore, "the Angel in the House," best described the image of the Victorian women who were "Confined to the home, women were expected to be domestic, innocent, and utterly helpless when matters outside the home were concerned" and in their homes they "…would be protected from the dangers of the outside world… where they could keep their innocence and be a beacon of morality for their husbands" ("The Angel in the House"). Moreover, they had no existence outside the context of their home and their husband was their whole world (Hartnell 460).

Women that tried to escape the confines of the domestic life to make something more out of their lives were considered social outcasts. The primary and only goal in a woman's life should have been marriage, however, some women failed to adapt to the social conventions expected from them. The main protagonist of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, was one of those women who could not act the role of a perfect, devoted housewife who would prioritize the care for her husband and children over herself. At the very beginning of the novel, Chopin also defined the ideal women: "It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 12). Edna did not fit into this definition of "mother-women," as Chopin called them. She accepted the prescribed gender roles regardless of her inner desires and thoughts, but she revealed to the readers that "her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident," and that she did not miss her children: "their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (Chopin 22, 23).

Although at the beginning of the novel the character of Edna seemed to be an ideal Victorian wife, Chopin used her heroine to demonstrate the general rejection of gender roles and social conventions. Her novel served as a beginning of feminist attitudes and shaped future discussions on women's position in the society. Moreover, she created the character of Adelle Ratignolle to intensify the gap between women who did not see themselves in the role of a housewife and those whose life goal was creating and maintaining a happy family life. Throughout the novel, Chopin contrasted and challenged two different types of women. While Adelle enjoyed being a caring mother and a passive wife, Edna slowly started realizing that her whole life she wanted to be liberated from such social conventions. The clash between the traditional women's roles and the modern mindset which demanded liberation was visible in Edna's realization that she "would give up the unessential; . . . would give (her) money . . . would give (her) life for (her) children; but (she) wouldn't give (herself)" (Chopin 52). The confines of a domestic life depressed Edna who believed that she has so much more to offer besides the role of a typical Victorian woman. She wanted to feel the freedom of thought, expression, and choice:

> Edna felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving them. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle,—a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium. (Chopin 61)

The rejection of stereotypical roles continued throughout the novel. Edna's first rebellious act was her rejection of submitting to her husband's demands. He commanded her to go to sleep, but she rejected it, thus making him angry and irritated. It was a wife's duty to obey her husband in every wish or whim without questioning it. Her awakening slowly arose in her, and she felt like she started waking up from a bad dream. The need for change grew relentlessly in her:

> She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did. (Chopin 36)

Another instance of her rejection was her lack of interest in her children, which her husband could not comprehend since it was a wife's duty to adore and completely take care of her children: "He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (Chopin 10). In other words, Chopin openly exposed the narrow-mindedness of social conventions imposed on women and rejection of the same. The heroine sought liberation from the prescribed roles since from the beginning of her life she "had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (Chopin 18).

Moreover, Chopin used symbolism to demonstrate the rigid conventions and frustrations women encountered on their path towards the liberation. The symbol of the Farival twins who were dressed as nuns and played religious songs represented one of the virtues women in the Victorian society had to possess: chastity. The choice of songs they played and the apparel they wore was the embodiment of the society's expectations of women: chastity and purity. Another symbol created to mirror the women's position was a parrot in a cage. It obviously demonstrated the confinement of women in society. A parrot only repeated the words, which was the reflection of the women's position in the nineteenth-century; they were never given the freedom to voice their own opinion and attitudes. They blindly had to obey social conventions and roles expected from them. Perhaps the most important symbol in the novel is the sea and Edna's inability to swim. Being vast and infinite, the sea could be interpreted as "life's delirium," the freedom to experience all life's opportunities to self-realization and self-expression: "The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin 18). Chopin described the sea as "seductive," implying to Edna's desire to taste the beauty of freedom and self-discovery. She could not withstand the call of the seamless sea to explore and experience it. The inability to swim demonstrated the beginning of her personal growth. She was not strong enough to break the social constraints and move beyond them, she had to acquire a certain determination and strength to step out from her stereotypical role. However, when she swam for the first time, it changed her completely: "A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (Chopin 32). In her essay *The Female Artist in Kate Chopin's The Awakening: Birth and Creativity*, Carole Stone, discussed the meaning of the sea imagery by stating that:

> In these early scenes by the sea Chopin also establishes the sea as a central symbol for Edna's birthing of a new self. The connection in her mind between the

> grass and the sea foreshadows the autonomy she achieves by learning to swim, as well as her final walk into the sea at the book's end. Symbolically, the sea is both a generative and a destructive force in The Awakening; it represents danger inherent in artistic self- expression--losing oneself in unlimited space--as well as the source of all life, facilitating rebirth, so that Edna in her first moments of being able to swim feels like a child who has learned to walk.

However, the ultimate rejection of stereotypical women's roles is her abandonment of the role of a wife and moving to another house, the "pigeon house" as she called it. There she finally felt liberated and contented because the "pigeon house" served as an escape from prescribed stereotypical roles and rigid social conventions that did not fit her. Although moving to another house left her feeling somewhat uncomfortable regarding her social status, it in fact opened her mind to vast opportunities that life offers and it made her contented and satisfied:

> The pigeon house pleased her. . . . There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to "feed upon opinion" when her own soul had invited her. (Chopin 99)

Moving to another house meant that Edna managed to break the social constraints imposed on her. She realized that she had to leave her role of a wife and a mother or otherwise she would never be truly happy. She was a woman ahead of her time. However, the pressure of society on her was too much and she could not handle it properly. The only solution she saw was to commit suicide. She would rather be dead than perform the unfitting role of a stereotypical woman.

IV. Marriage And Sexuality in *The Awakening* and *Jane Eyre*

As previously stated, the ultimate life goal of most nineteenth century women was marriage. Every woman from her early youth was groomed for the role that will take up her entire life: a submissive wife and a nurturing mother. To be considered a suitable spouse, i.e., an ideal Victorian wife; it was preferable if a woman possessed domestic skills such as cooking, sewing, cleaning, and more importantly, virtues of innocence, chastity, morality, and femininity. Also, "women were . . . not allowed to be educated or gain knowledge outside of the home because it was a man's world" (Apell).

Similarly, the two heroines, Edna and Jane, belonged to the world of Victorian society in which marriage was an institution to which most women strived. Although both women experienced married life, Chopin and Brontë depicted their perspectives on the institution of marriage quite differently. While Chopin's heroine Edna rebelliously struggled against the whole institution of marriage and found it imprisoning and limiting for expressing freely both her sexuality and new feminine identity, Brontë's heroine Jane silently fought her way towards the marriage in which she will be equal to her spouse as well as independent. Their perspective on marriage contrasted in many instances. Edna observed marriage from a perspective of a wealthy aristocratic woman, who did not have to struggle to find a desirable spouse, but it was not a true mutual affection, it was a traditional Victorian marriage of convenience: "Her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate. It was in the midst of her secret great passion that she met him" (Chopin 22). At the very beginning of her marriage she realized that marriage does not necessarily mean love and passion. She was aware of the fact that social conventions dictated that one should be married to a spouse who possess certain desirable qualities, regardless of love and romance: "As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams" (Chopin 22). On the other hand, Jane, being an orphan with a poor social background, did not want to accept marriage without love:

> Consent, then, to his demand is possible: but for one item—one dreadful item. It is that he asks me to be his wife, and has no more of a husband's heart for me than that frowning giant of a rock, down which the stream is foaming in yonder gorge. He prizes me as a soldier would a good weapon; and that is all. . . . Can I bear the consciousness that every endearment he bestows is a sacrifice made on principle? No: such a martyrdom would be monstrous. (Brontë 445)

Also, the two heroines' views on financial matters and dependency upon their husbands considerably differed. It was a man's duty to provide for his family, and Edna accepted that social norm without questioning it: "She liked money as well as most women, and, accepted it with no little satisfaction" (Chopin 11). As a matter of fact, the more the husband earned, the more he was considered to be a better husband: "It was filled with friandises, with luscious and toothsome bits—the finest of fruits, pates, a rare bottle or two, delicious syrups, and bonbons in abundance. . . .And the ladies . . . all declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better" (Chopin 11, 12).

In contrast, Jane was determined in her desire to be financially independent. Though her job as a governess was not especially rewarding in the financial sense, she constantly sought for a way to further educate and develop her mind because she could not bear the fact that she is just an object to her husband, performing stereotypical women's activities:

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 121, 122)

Although at the beginning of *The Awakening* Edna seemed to be enjoying her stereotypical Victorian marriage, the truth was completely different. As her desire for liberation grew, it affected both her and those around her. Here we clearly saw Chopin's aggressive attitude towards the marriage. She shaped her heroine to be narcissistic and selfish in her determination to achieve social and sexual freedom. Edna showed her rebellious side in many aspects of marriage. Besides the fact that she neglected her children and domestic activities, she also rejected the participation in maintaining a clean social image, an important aspect of every Victorian marriage. Her stripping down of her "reception gown" symbolized both her rejection of social conventions as well as the exposal of her sexuality. Consecutively, her husband heavily disagreed with Edna's lack of interest in marital duties: "I should think you'd understand by this time that people don't do such things; we've got to observe les convenances if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession" (Chopin 55). Furthermore, Chopin also exposed to the readers the disturbing but common nineteenth-century belief that all women who wanted to experience life outside the margins of their marriage were considered mentally ill and therefore

should have been medically treated. When Edna ceased to care about her marriage, her husband immediately went to the doctor and was desperate to somehow cure Edna: "She lets the housekeeping go to the dickens . . . She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women . . . She has abandoned her Tuesdays at home . . . and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in after dark. I tell you she's peculiar. I don't like it; I feel a little worried over it" (Chopin 70, 71).

On the other hand, Brontë did not display such an aggressive attitude towards the marriage as Chopin did, but she also showed the traps of Victorian marriage through the character of Bertha Mason. Some critics argued that Bertha represented the independent and passionate woman, who rebelled against the submissiveness and the minimization of women only to domestic roles, while others believed that Bertha represented in fact Jane's hidden sexuality: "…Bertha Mason as the heroine's double in a dual sense: as Jane's suppressed desire, thus acknowledging Jane's capacity to feel sexual arousal, or as Jane's dark side, thus implying Jane's conscious efforts to negate her sexuality" (Miquel-Baldellou). Due to her moral and religious upbringing, Jane did not show her sexuality freely as Edna did, she has always suppressed it to fit the social norms of the time: "The passions may rage furiously, like true heathens, as they are; and the desires may imagine all sorts of vain things: but judgment shall still have the last word in every argument, and the casting vote in every decision" (Bronte 222).

In contrast to Jane, Edna did not restrain her sexual side. It was plainly visible through her interactions with Alcee who served her as a vent through which she could let off her passion and sexuality: "They became intimate and friendly by imperceptible degrees, and then by leaps. He sometimes talked in a way that astonished her at first and brought the crimson into her face; in a way that pleased her at last, appealing to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her" (Chopin 83). In addition to that, the symbol of the "seductive" sea also depicted Edna's rebirth as a new, sexually imbued person: "The sensual and self-reflective aspects of the sea directly link Edna's sexuality to her understanding of herself, and the repeated imagery reinforces the connection, suggesting an inner-reflection of individualism beyond gender" (Williams 61). Although she fulfilled her every whim, she never managed to completely control and assert her new identity in the patriarchal society, while "the marriage between Rochester and Jane (blurred) the lines between controlling and being controlled, and power and powerless" (Wang 8). Moreover, her inability to stand against the rigid society and the fact that she will never be free to express herself and her new identity within the framework of marriage compelled her to rather commit suicide than to sacrifice herself to meet the expectations of the conservative society.

On the other hand, Brontë optimistically opted for a happy ending which proved that women can be independent, equal and happily married at the same time. Although Chopin and Brontë had different perspectives on marriage and sexuality, they both had the same themes in mind when they were writing their novels: independence, gender equality and sexual liberation. One could say that both novels successfully provoked necessary changes towards the granting of equal legal, political, and social rights for men and women.

Conclusion

The path towards female independence and gender equality was not an easy one for women in the nineteenth-century. Legal, social, and political constraints imposed on them by society prevented them from having freedom of thought, choice, and self-expression. However, the ability to educate themselves provided women with knowledge and confidence to openly address issues concerning women's unjust position in the oppressive nineteenth-century society. Female authors who used this opportunity to expose the narrow-mindedness and rigidity of the society had to hide behind their pen names or write anonymously to avoid negative critics based solely on their sex.

Kate Chopin and Charlotte Brontë also used literature to raise public's awareness of the traps patriarchal society was hiding. In her novel, *The Awakening,* Kate Chopin openly rebelled against the stereotypical roles women had to perform regardless of their inner desires or attitudes. Her heroine, Edna, dismissed the role of a stereotypical mother and a wife by openly showing her sexuality and determination to break the confinements of the society. On the other hand, Brontë's heroine Jane in autobiographical novel *Jane Eyre* showed that women can perform the stereotypical roles expected from them, and be independent and equal to men at the same time. Both novels stirred feminist attitudes among many women in the nineteenth-century by instilling the idea of liberation and equality into their minds. Step by step, literature incited women to demand their legal, political, and social rights granted to them by their birth, thus causing the world to abandon the old patriarchal beliefs and attitudes, and embrace a new world in which women are equal to men and have freedom of thought, choice, and self-expression.

Works Cited

"The Angel in the House." *Victorianpoetrypoeticsandcontext*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Aug. 2015.

"Women's Literature in the 19th Century: British Women Writers." Encyclopedia. HighBeam Research, Jan. 2005. Web. 7 Aug. 2015.

Andersson, Angela. *Identity and Independence in Jane Eyre.* Thesis. Mid Sweden University, 2011. N.p.N.d. *www.diva-portal.org*. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.

Blackstone, William. "Of Husband and Wife." *Commentaries on the Laws of England. Book the First.* Ed. 1. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon, 1765. 430. Print.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Champaign, Ill.: Project Gutenberg, 1990. Print.

Diniejko, Andrzej. "The New Woman Fiction." *The New Woman Fiction*. Web. 6 Aug. 2015.

Gao, Haiyan. "Reflection on Feminism in Jane Eyre." *TPLS Theory and* Practice *in Language Studies* 3.6 (2013): 926-31. Print.

Gilbert, Sandra M, and Gubar, Susan. *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteen Century Literary Imagination*. Second edition. New Haven; London; Yale University Press, 1984. Print.

Hartnell, Elaine. "Nothing but Sweet and Womanly: A Hagiography of Patmore's Angel." *Victorian Poetry* 34.4 (1996): 457-476. Print.

Lynn. "Women Writing in 19th Century America." *Women Writing in 19th Century America*. 7 Mar. 2010. Web. 6 Aug. 2015.

Miquel-Baldellou, Marta. "Words of Madness / Female Worlds:Hysteria as Intertextual Discourse of Women's Deviance in Jane Eyre." Spec. issue of *Cycnos* 25 (2010). Web.

Richardson, Angélique, Chris Willis, eds. *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-siecle Feminisms*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. Print.

Showalter, Elaine. "The Double Critical Standard and the Feminine Novel." *A Literature of Their Own : British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing.* Princeton UP, 1977. Print.

Stone, Carole. "The Female Artist in Kate Chopin's The Awakening: Birth and Creativity." Women's Studies 13 (1986): 23-32. Rpt. In Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 127. Detroit: Gale, 2002. From Literature Resource Center.

Thompson, Nicola Diane. "Responding to the Woman Questions: Rereading Noncanonical Victorian Women Novelists." *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question.* Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.

Wang, Ya-huei. "Women, Marriage and Economy in Jane Eyre." *Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics* 3.1 (2011). *www.scientificjournals.org.* ISSN 1948-5778. Web. 25 Aug. 2015.

Williams, Christina R. (2013) "Reading Beyond Modern Feminism: Kate Chopin's The Awakening," The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English: 10. 1. Article 5.

Xiaoije, Li. "Jane Eyre: 'Improper' Sphere for a Victorian Woman Writer." *Polyglossia* (2010). Web. 8 Aug. 2015.