‘[A]lthough she has been advised to take exercise, she prefers always sitting in her room reading’ (*Madame Bovary*). Consider the attitude towards, and representation of, women readers in any of the set texts. You might want to think about how these change over time.

**ABSTRACT**

This paper surveys the image of the woman reader in two iconic works of nineteenth century fiction: Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (actually written in 1798). This essay was partly inspired by Jonathan Culler’s question, ‘what difference does it make if the reader is a woman?’, and draws on other concepts in reader-response theory such as Judith Fetterley’s ‘resisting reader’ and Wolfgang Iser’s ‘textual blanks’. Divided into three parts, this study first examines how the novels portray the act of reading - particularly for women - as being historically perceived as dangerous. The second considers how androcentric texts have been used to subjugate women, and how Flaubert and Austen’s heroines might be seen as model readers who resist their hegemony. Finally, this paper challenges the contemporary interpretation that the novels’ heroines are corrupted by the fiction that they read. It is argued that both authors instead defend fiction in their works as a means of escaping an oppressive reality. This paper concludes that the images of, and attitudes towards, women readers in *Madame Bovary* and *Northanger Abbey* are strikingly modern, and in many respects seem to anticipate how critics after the reader-response theory of the 1960s began to assign significance to a reader’s gender.

**KEYWORDS:** Women Readers; Dangerous Reading; Reader-Response Theory; Gender; Feminism.

This essay will examine the attitude towards, and representations of, women readers in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. In particular, it will analyse Emma Bovary and Catherine Morland as readers in their formative years. It will be argued that
both texts offer a modern representation of the woman reader as a liberated figure. Even though they were written some 50 years apart, they challenge the same persisting stereotype, espoused by conservative educationalists, of the woman reader as a passive and malleable subject. Historically, women have been trained to read as men, resulting in the implantation of a ‘false consciousness’ that serves to perpetuate male hegemony. Emma and Catherine, however, actively read as women and therefore offer an alternative model reader. Their capacity to ‘resistantly’ and subversively read androcentric texts ‘emasculates’ and emancipates them. Flaubert and Austen celebrate reading for its power of escapism. Emma and Catherine are able in books, not just to retreat from mundane reality, but to evade patriarchal culture.

**The dangerous act of reading**

A distinction can be made between ‘social reading’, the sharing and discussion of books, and ‘private reading’ as an individual pastime. Once she leaves the convent, Emma’s secluded lifestyle dictates that she falls into this latter category. Charles complains, ‘although she has been advised to take exercise, she prefers always sitting in her room reading’.\(^1\) It is significant that this comment is voiced as a complaint. He clearly privileges the notion of exercise in juxtaposition with reading. As a medical man, Charles implies that Emma’s preference is physically unhealthy. Yet one can interpret this to be an expression of a deeper male anxiety towards the woman reader at this time. James Conlon writes that ‘the woman reading - any woman engaged in a text - can only be threatening to men. The book takes her out of the conventional world of male dominance and places her in a textual world where pleasure and wisdom are, literally, in her own hands’.\(^2\) Emma’s private reading is not ‘unhealthy’ so much as it is dangerous - to Charles as patriarch. His attitude towards his wife’s reading also reveals a perceived cultural relationship between a woman reader’s body and her mind. Jacqueline Pearson explains that ‘Even in the age of Romanticisms, female


imagination could seem a site of anxiety, assimilated to insanity and sexuality’. Men in the nineteenth century genuinely feared that women becoming too emotionally invested in their reading would cause permanent damage to their sensibility. The association of private reading with eroticism is another factor in men’s historical effort to regulate women’s reading. Emma experiences a fetishistic encounter with the ‘keepsakes’ shared at the convent: ‘She shivered as she blew the tissue paper off each engraving’. In Flaubert’s day, for a woman to independently derive pleasure - sexual or otherwise - would have been seen to undermine man’s role as material and sexual provider.

As well as reading privately, we are told Emma ‘would even bring her book to the table and turn over the pages while Charles ate and talked to her’. To a modern reader, this perhaps just seems unsociable. This act, however, is symbolic. Pearson highlights another reason novels were seen as dangerous: ‘they wasted ‘thousands of hours’ in ‘misapplication of time’’. As well as having the potential to morally corrupt women, the addictiveness of fiction was considered a threat to a woman’s gender-prescribed duty as house-keeper. In this context, the image of Emma reading at the dinner table is a striking one - she is directly rejecting her arbitrary domestic role.

In contrast to Emma, Catherine represents a social reader. Austen describes her as a heroine in training who has ‘read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with quotations’. Austen identifies reading with self-cultivation; even a kind of self-creation - Catherine is trying ‘to read herself’ as a heroine. The quantitative nature of her reading is particularly significant as it reflects a radical change to literary consumerism in the late eighteenth century. The popularity of circulating libraries at this time encouraged ‘rapid, dip-and-skip reading’ where

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4 Flaubert, p. 35.
5 Flaubert, p. 52.
6 Pearson, p. 83.
readers would ‘memorize literary fragments to show off their fashionable sensitivity’. When Austen records the ‘lessons’ that Catherine has supposedly extracted from Pope, Gray, Thompson and Shakespeare, David Blair argues she ‘is taking a sceptical, ironic look at the ways of reading - at what readers read for’. The young Catherine does come across as a vain reader seeking to be fashionable. This is perhaps understandable given her lack of material wealth. But whether or not Austen outright condemns this is questionable. For all its shallowness, Catherine’s ambition as a young reader can be admired. She is not reading trivial romances, the ancestors of ‘Mills and Boon’; she is reading ‘the greats’. Yes, she might see these authors as ‘badges’ to wear in conversation, but reading offered women like her in this period a rare avenue for social advancement. This potential alone made reading a ‘dangerous’ pastime among the lower-classes.

Emma and Catherine as ‘resistant readers’

Both Emma and Catherine effectively embody Judith Fetterley’s concept of the ‘resisting reader’. To explain this theory, Emma’s response to the religious literature of her convent education might first be examined. Throughout history, religious texts have played the decisive role in ‘moralising’ women and children. Religion itself can be seen as the divine archetype of patriarchy. Its fables have been employed for centuries by conservatives to guide, inspire and scare the ‘uneducated’ into submissiveness. As Conlon writes though, ‘even if the text is a thoroughly patriarchal product, the act of reading it need not be. The Bible can be read with either a submissive or subversive eye’. It is fair to say that Emma has this subversive eye. Contrary to the convent’s moralising intentions, her pious fascination with religious texts centres on their illustrations rather than their messages. It is ironically through religion that she becomes an aesthete. She is drawn to ‘the sick

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11 Conlon, p. 40.
lamb, the Scared Heart pierced by sharp arrows, and poor Jesus, stumbling under the burden of his cross’. The intensity and nature of her interest is interpreted anxiously by the nuns who fear its inherent blasphemy. But the objects of her enchantment also seem to share a morbid, sadomasochistic quality. One that foreshadows her renewed fetishistic attitude towards religion at the end of her life, and of course her suicide. On her death-bed, she embraces the priest's crucifix with ‘the most passionate kiss of love that she had ever given’. From a young age, Emma is a ‘resisting reader’ of religion, exploiting its texts as an aesthete for her own end. In doing so, she ironically exposes its intrinsic romanticism and materialism. This itself poses a threat to the prescription of religious texts as ‘pure’ and ‘safe’ reading material. Flaubert's novel highlights the futility of authorities’ attempts to regulate a reader's response to a text.

The concept of the ‘resisting reader’ is directly linked in feminist theory with the ‘gendered reader’. This dual notion characterises both Catherine and Emma as readers in their response to history. Pearson explains how history was part of the literary diet conservative educationalists recommended for young women ‘as training in compliance to a male-dominated culture and its discursive practices’. History at this time was considered to be ‘masculine’ and rational; in stark contrast to ‘feminine’ and irrational fiction. Catherine, however, deconstructs this dichotomy. She says to Eleanor, an avid reader: ‘I often think it odd that it should be so dull for a great deal of it must be invention’. To a modern reader, this comment about subjectivity seems an obvious one. But in Austen’s day, history was often presented to naive readers as objectively factual. Catherine’s distrust for history amounts to a challenge of male authority. Austen makes this clear in Catherine’s ‘unintentionally penetrating’ justification for her dislike of it. She complains it is full of ‘men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all’. This observation exposes history as a male

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12 Flaubert, p. 33.
13 Flaubert, p. 289.
14 Pearson, p. 50.
15 Austen, p. 78.
16 Blair, p. 17.
17 Austen, p. 78.
narrative told with the motive of perpetuating cultural hegemony. Patrocinio Schweickart would suggest that the consequence of a woman ‘passively’ reading this narrative - or any ‘male text’ - is a metaphorical schizophrenia. To relate to such a narrative’s perspective would be to imagine oneself male. For a woman, exposure to an androcentric literary education then can cause ‘grave psychic damage’.

Austen’s critique of history, voiced by Catherine, suggests that novels are valuable precisely because they better represent women.

Like Catherine, Emma challenges the pretence of history as objective fact and views it as a collection of stories. Unlike Catherine, she is drawn to its women like Mary Queen of Scots and Joan of Arc. She feels ‘a passionate admiration for women who were famous or ill-starred’. This inclination establishes her as a gendered ‘resistant reader’ of this male-dominated narrative.

Jonathan Culler proposes that ‘to read as a woman is to avoid reading as a man, to identify the specific defences and distortions of male readings and provide correctives’. While Catherine is consciously aware that history is androcentric, she ‘avoids reading as a man’ by not reading it at all. It is Emma who represents a model for the woman reader - her particular attention to women in history is an attempt, subconscious or not, at a ‘corrective’ response. This challenge illustrates Schweickart’s point that ‘The process of immasculation is latent in the text, but it finds its actualization only through the reader’s activity’. In other words, a text is not intrinsically gendered one way or the other - it is neutral and inert. It is the reader who ‘genders’ the text. Histories ever since the founding work of Thucydides have traditionally been promoted and therefore received as ‘masculine’. But this discourse is simply a social construct. Schweickart adds, ‘the woman reader is the agent of her own immasculation’. Emma’s resistance as a reader liberates her as a woman.

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19 Flaubert, p. 34.

20 Jonathan Culler, “Reading as a Woman”, in On Deconstruction (London: Routledge, 1983), pp. 43-64 (p. 54).

21 Schweickart, p. 81.

22 Schweickart, p. 81.
The development of Catherine’s character in *Northanger Abbey* can be seen in parallel to her maturation into a ‘resistant reader’. At first she is an extremely gullible reader who concedes her critical faculty to the authority of a text. In doing so, she loses her grip on reality and indulges in ‘idle fancy’. Austen best illustrates this in the scene of her first night at Northanger. Upon discovering a ‘roll of paper’ in her room, Catherine identifies it as a ‘precious manuscript’ of an ‘ancient date’. Unable to read it when her candle-light extinguishes, she spends a sleepless night inventing its possible meaning; only to be ‘humbled to the dust’ in the morning when she learns it is only a collection of laundry receipts. This moment of realisation can be read as a lesson for Catherine’s childish imagination. Alternatively, her experience with the ‘manuscript’ can be seen as a brilliant metaphor for Wolfgang Iser’s concept of textual ‘blanks’. Iser theorises that it is the reader who creates meaning by ‘filling in the gaps’ of a text. In the darkness of Catherine’s room, the ‘manuscript’ itself constitutes a completely ‘blank’ text: it is ‘the unsaid [that] comes to life in [her] imagination’. While the scene is humiliating for Catherine, it is also the moment she learns that as a reader she has power over a text. This lesson is validated in her reading of Isabella’s letter. Catherine is able to read between the lines and detect ‘a strain of shallow artifice’ with ‘inconsistencies, contradictions, and falsehood’. She has become a ‘resistant reader’. Juliet McMaster observes that ‘she has been through a process that enables her not just to swallow her fiction - hook, line, and sinker - but to choose to suspend her disbelief’. It is this newly acquired consciousness that liberates Catherine. Austen’s championing of the reader prefigures the much later reader-response criticism associated with Iser and Stanley Fish from the 1960s.

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23 Austen, p. 122.

24 Austen, p. 123.


27 Austen, p. 159.

A defence of fiction against reality

Both Flaubert and Austen defend fiction as a way of escaping an oppressive reality. In Emma’s case, this is an unhappy marriage. Naomi Tadmor writes that fiction reading ‘set impossible expectations of marital bliss, which were doomed to failure’.29 This statement echoes the view of contemporary critics that blamed Emma’s reading for her corruption. It is certainly fair to say that Emma expects Charles to be the Prince Charming or Romeo of her romance novels; when in reality, ‘He did not know how to swim, or fence, or shoot a gun’.30 She seeks ‘bliss’, ‘passion’ and ‘ecstasy’ - ‘words that she found so beautiful in books’ - but finds them intangible to her in real life.31 Mary Orr points out that Charles is not the problem; the problem is that ‘Emma can only see in Charles everything opposite to her desires’.32 While Emma’s inflated expectation of marriage is the novel’s tragedy, these expectations cannot be blamed solely on her reading. Furthermore, they are not completely unreasonable. One has to consider the reality of her situation and in particular her social standing. Emma has grown up in relative poverty and isolation on a farm with her father. When he marries her off to Charles, he is under no illusions about love. He considers her future husband as ‘a bit of a loser’ but agrees to the match on financial grounds.33 Emma belongs to a world where marriage provides her only hope of escape and social advancement. Within this context, it is only natural that she should welcome Charles as something of a saviour. The romance novel provides Emma with a narrative template to identify with; a way of glamorising her mundane reality. But it is the nature of her society that arbitrarily casts her as the downtrodden damsel and Charles as Prince Charming. Flaubert does not condemn her reading for her expectations; he condemns society itself for demanding unrealistic and impossible gender roles.

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30 Flaubert, p. 38.

31 Flaubert, p. 32.


33 Flaubert, p. 23.
Flaubert’s portrayal of Emma’s suicide can be viewed within the context of the 1850s Realism movement and its rejection of the Romanticism that she embodies. This is how Margaret Cohen reads Madame Bovary, identifying an ‘attack on the sentimental fantasies of lady readers’.\textsuperscript{34} This interpretation suggests that Emma’s suicide represents a deterrent to other women who might similarly act upon their unsavoury reading. Contrary to this view, it was received as an immoral novel that promoted, indirectly or not, the behaviour displayed by Emma. It is difficult not to detect the inherent sympathy Flaubert shows towards his eponymous heroine, even without knowing his iconic remark: ‘c’est moi’. Stephen Heath writes that ‘Flaubert is anti-realist at the heart of realism, with romanticism as the impetus and the edge of his critique’.\textsuperscript{35} To read Flaubert’s ending as a romantic one reverses the interpretation of Emma’s death as a condemnation of her reading. If Catherine is Austen’s champion reader, Emma can be read as Flaubert’s martyred reader. Heath urges us to ‘recognise the value of her reading as the refusal of her oppressive life as Madame Bovary’.\textsuperscript{36} Throughout the novel, Emma aspires to become a heroine in a wholly unheroic world. Her suicide, modelled on the romantic martyrdoms of fiction, achieves this end.

If Emma’s reading offers her a way to mask and escape reality, Catherine’s reading of Radcliffean gothic helps her to see through its superficiality, in particular patriarchal culture. The male-directed education of women throughout history has been the implantation of a ‘false consciousness’. Schweickart highlights that ‘women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values’.\textsuperscript{37} Catherine’s childhood, however, was unconventional. Her father ‘was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters’, and she was allowed to ‘shirk’ away from lessons in writing and French, in favour of ‘masculine’ pastimes such as cricket and baseball.\textsuperscript{38} Growing up, Catherine was relatively shielded

\textsuperscript{34} Margaret Cohen, “Flaubert lectrice: Flaubert Lady Reader”, MLN, 4, 122 (2007), pp. 746-758 (p. 750).
\textsuperscript{36} Heath, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{37} Schweickart, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{38} Austen, p. 3, 4.
from patriarchal culture. Joanne Cordón writes that ‘Catherine’s aversion to the prescribed literature of her childhood gives her a kind of immunity to the “masculine” ideals inscribed by her culture’.\textsuperscript{39} One has to disagree. She is a ‘heroine so innocent but ripe for impression’.\textsuperscript{40} Once inevitably acquainted with some measure of evil, Catherine’s inexperience could have actually proved detrimental to her character. Fortunately, it is her reading of the gothic that crucially first acquaints her with evil - through a completely safe medium. The gothic is a sensational representation of male hegemony and female victimisation, where the patriarch plays the monster or hero. As its reader, Catherine is able to vicariously experience oppression at the hands of male dominance. This becomes a point of reference and, as Cordón identifies, ‘a way to understand her own feelings of discomfort around General Tilney by seeing him as a gothic villain.’\textsuperscript{41} Yes, Catherine completely misreads his crime, but without her reading she would have been even more vulnerable. The fact Catherine is first acquainted with patriarchy in fiction is significant because its fictitious guise might just encourage her to see through the fabricated nature of male supremacy in reality too.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In conclusion, this essay has identified in \textit{Madame Bovary} and \textit{Northanger Abbey} a liberal attitude towards the woman reader. Even though Flaubert and Austen were writing some 50 years apart, and in different countries, they expose the same male-crafted, culturally reoccurring stereotype of the woman reader as a passive and malleable figure. Their attitude towards reading as a source of emancipation for women is strikingly modern. In many ways, they would have unintentionally justified the anxieties of conservative educationalists by illustrating how it is impossible to regulate and control women’s reading. Both authors seem to anticipate the reader-response criticism of the 1960s in their creation of model gendered and ‘resistant’ readers. Emma’s subversive reading of


\textsuperscript{40} McMaster, p. 17.

\textsuperscript{41} Córdon, p. 51.
religion and history - literature prescribed to cultivate her submission to patriarchy - demonstrates her ability to read as a woman rather than as a man. Likewise, Catherine's development into a 'resistant reader' is celebrated for granting her the capacity to read reality more perceptively too.

Word-count: 2990.
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