

Seductive Convention: Reading, Romance And Realism In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*,
George Eliot's *The Mill On The Floss* And Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*

by

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To my parents, Ingrid and Robert, for all their love and support.

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Abstract

This study analyses the oscillations between realism and romance in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*. In these novels, the shift from realism to romance is often mediated by scenes of female reading. This thesis explores the relationship between female reading and genre and argues that the conventional story patterns of past texts exert a strong influence on a woman's ability to conceptualize her own identity and shape her life story.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Narrative structures and subjects are like working apparatuses of ideology, factories for the 'natural' and 'fantastic' meanings by which we live. Here are produced and disseminated the assumptions, the conflicts, the patterns that create fictional boundaries for experience.

- Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985)

Jane Austen's Catherine Morland, of a respectable and "plain" family, is not "born to be an heroine" (13). However, her reading prepares her for a heroine's life of romance and excitement: "from fifteen to seventeen she was in training for a heroine; she read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives" (15). *Northanger Abbey* (1817) proceeds to satirically detail Catherine's story and compare her actual experiences to her reading-induced fantasies and expectations. According to Rachel Brownstein, women often read in this way, for "[g]irls, enjoined from thinking about becoming generals and emperors, tend to live more in novels than boys do, and to live longer in them. It is not megalomaniacal to want to be significant; it is only human" – "to want to be a heroine is to want to be something special" (xv). Many critics, including Brownstein, Blau DuPlessis, and Suzanne Juhasz, affirm that

Innumerable women have bought, borrowed, and read novels, and novels, in return, have determined women's lives. Generations of girls who did

not read much of anything else, whose experience was limited by education, opportunity, and convention, have gone to fiction to escape a stifling or a boring or a confusingly chaotic reality, and have come back with structures they use to organize and interpret their feelings and prospects. (Brownstein xviii)

The narrative patterns of a heroine's life – of the life of an “ideal feminine self” (Brownstein xx) – influence the female reader's fantasies and her expectations for her own, real, life.

Many critical studies have been conducted on the topic of female reading and the trope of the female reader in novels. These studies can be roughly classified as psychological or historical. Critics such as Juhasz and Jean Wyatt rely on psychology to explain the female reader's interest in novels and heroines. Juhasz argues that women read novels to achieve “the preoedipal bond between mother and child: what psychologist D. W. Winnicott referred to as the ‘facilitating environment’ of the mother-infant matrix” (240 “Texts”). The reader seeks the book as the heroine seeks the hero; both require the “mother love” of someone who can say “‘Oh, it's you!’ – for the self to know she is there” (9 *Reading*). Juhasz criticizes *Jane Eyre* and writes that “Charlotte Brontë tries to write the fantasy, to give herself and her heroine the father love that she herself had sought all her life” (119), rather than focusing on the more liberating fantasy of mother love. Similarly, Wyatt argues that female readers are attracted to novels, and romance novels in particular, because such patterns repeat “structural features of a daughter's relationship to her father in a patriarchal nuclear family organization” (202); “a fictional pattern attracts us because it corresponds to an unconscious fantasy we already possess.

Our fantasy structures – which govern our desires – reflect early family configurations” (200). Such studies analyze the psychological causes and effects of feminine reading.

On the other hand, there are those who take a more historical approach to the woman reader. As Brownstein writes, girls were not permitted to think of “becoming generals and emperors,” thus they turned to books to “feel special.” In this framework, the way women read is largely linked to their historical and cultural background – to what it means, during their time, to be a woman. For example, during the nineteenth-century, theories of gender associated women with the physical body. Thus, reading was thought to be “an enemy to ‘health and beauty’, likely to ‘hurt [the] eyes’ or ‘spoil [the] shape’ of the woman reader. Immoderate reading caused fainting and even dangerous changes in pulse rate” (Pearson 4). In addition, DuPlessis states, “as a gendered subject in the nineteenth century, [the woman reader] has barely any realistic options in work or vocation” (14); therefore, she tends, more than her male counterparts, to “live” in books and build fantasies based on stories. Indeed, historical studies of the nineteenth-century woman reader, such as those by Kate Flint and Jacqueline Pearson, emphasize the contemporary concern that women were overly influenced by their reading. The perception of reading was socially defined and

demonstrates contradictions and paradoxes which inhered within nineteenth-century notions of gender. From one point of view, reading was...associated with the possession of leisure time, and thus contributed to the ideology...of the middle-class home. Yet it could also be regarded as dangerously useless...Although a means of extending one’s knowledge and experience beyond the bounds of one’s personal lot – hence, perhaps,

becoming a fitter marital companion in the process – reading was often, none the less, unavoidably associated with woman’s ‘inappropriate’ educational ambition. (Flint 11)

However, the primary concern was often not an increase in “educational ambition” but in a sort of emotional ambition. Critics argued that women, “peculiarly susceptible to emotionally provocative material” (22), would become “preoccupied with the importance of romance” and “seek perpetually for excitement” (24):

Tellingly, novel-reading was warned against because of its capacity to raise false expectations, and engender dissatisfaction with one’s present mode of life. [I]n...*Sesame and Lilies* (1865)...‘The best romance,’ Ruskin wrote, ‘becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act.’ (74)

Catherine Morland yearns to visit a haunted abbey, like the ones she has read about, and is disappointed and confused when Northanger Abbey is like any other modern house. Austen is satirizing (and to some extent reinforcing) contemporary criticism which feared that reading – particularly romance reading – would lead women to want more than their lives, as those of middle-class nineteenth century females, could properly offer them.

The problem of feminine reading, whether approached historically or psychologically, is an issue of the relationship between life and literature. In this project, I endeavour, through an analysis of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* (1915), to explore the

relationship between female reading practices and the genres of realism and romance. The three works under study can all be classified as female *Bildungsromane*: they are “narratives which trace a process of individual self-development within society” (Felski 134). While the male-centered *Bildungsroman* illustrates development based on education, apprenticeship and choice (Fraiman 5), the female-centred *Bildungsroman* tells the story of a character with limited mobility, education, and freedom (Abel 8, Fraiman 6). Thus, for these heroines “marked by acquiescence, dependency, and powerlessness” (Felski 137), there is a strong “sense that formation is foisted upon them, that they are largely what other people, what the world, will make of them” (Fraiman 6). One way in which “formation is foisted upon” the protagonist is through literature. All three novels describe heroines who are avid readers. This focus on the role of reading in the story of female development is feminist in that it demonstrates “the wish ‘to articulate a self-consciousness about women’s identity both as inherited cultural fact and as process of social construction ‘ and to ‘protest against the available fiction of female becoming’” (Nancy Miller qtd. in Heibrun 18). I am interested in the ways in which these heroines’ reading influences their ability to distinguish between life and literature, and to what degree their lives and self-understandings are determined by generic conventions. I argue that the force of past stories, be they realistic or romantic, shapes the heroine’s expectations and, ultimately, her possibilities. In addition, by presenting heroines who are readers, Brontë, Eliot and Woolf hint at the force of their own stories and attempt to answer the questions of “what does reading do?” and, more specifically, “what does reading do *for women?*”

In the chapters that follow, I analyse the tensions between realism and romance in *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Voyage Out* and the ways in which this genre struggle is mediated through literature and reading. First, however, it is necessary that I define my terms, for realism and romance may have a myriad of meanings and are employed in particular ways throughout this project.

Romance and realism are often theorized as opposite to one another. As Laurie Langbauer recounts, “[b]eginning with Dr. Johnson and Congreve, and moving through Clara Reeve, Sir Walter Scott, all the way to Northrop Frye in the present day, a staple of critical discussion has been to compare the novel to that related form, romance” (16-17). Romance is depicted as the older, inferior form, associated with feminine irrationality while realism is the mode of masculine logic – the romance “has been traditionally considered a woman’s form” (66) and is defined as the novel’s “other” (3). Romance, set in “the world of the imagination and of dream” (Beer 7) and peopled by stereotypical “dream-characters” (Frye *Anatomy* 206), is set up in stark contrast to realism, which “purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals” (Watt 27). Romance tells of extreme adventures of pleasure and pain while realism presents the everyday and “middling” (Levine *Realistic* 5); romance shows an irrational excessive world of “the wish-fulfillment dream” (Frye *Anatomy* 86) and realism attempts to imitate “the real,” emphasizing “a causal connection operating through time” (Watt 22). As Sir Walter Scott phrases it, “‘Romance,’ with its emphasis on the ‘marvellous,’ [can be set] against the ‘Novel,’ whose ‘events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events and the modern state of society’” (qtd. in Levine *Realistic* 42-3). Thus, “[s]ome familiar qualities of fictional realism, for example, are chronology, particularity,

interiority, viewpoint, and everyday subject matter” (Ermarth xi), and romance, on the other hand, is characterized by “suspensions of natural law” (Frye 36), “stylized” characters (304) and “the sense of individual detachment from routine existence” (185). While the romance “is written primarily to entertain” (Beer 3), Victorian realists “took very seriously what Michael McKeon has described as a ‘pedagogical end’ of realism, that is, the teaching of precept by example” (Levine *How* 59) – in particular, realism was supposed to teach morality and sympathy. For these reasons, “much nineteenth-century realism defined itself against romance” (Levine *Realistic* 9).

These general distinctions between realism and romance remain consistent throughout the three chapters: in all three novels, the romantic is associated with the wild and fanciful, and the realistic with the ordinary and every-day. However, *Jane Eyre* focuses most on romance in terms of fairy or folk tales and Gothic romance; *The Mill on the Floss* emphasizes the “vague” and “dream-like” romance of Byron and Scott; and *The Voyage Out* equates romance with the love or courtship plot. Indeed, in all three chapters, there is a considerable overlap between romance in terms of genre, as defined above, and the romance of the love plot. When Jane falls in love with Rochester, Maggie with Stephen, and Rachel with Terence, the tone of the novel shifts from realistic to romantic. This overlap occurs because the novels under study are largely realist novels: all three, despite their romantic episodes, are stories written in a realistic style about events that could happen to real people. Courtship is the only adventure permitted for the female protagonist; within a mostly-realistic novel about a woman, romance surfaces in the courtship plot because only falling in love allows the heroine to escape the laws of her day-to-day reality and feel that she is special and significant.

In Chapter Two, I read Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* for its oscillations between realism and romance, and the relationship between these genres and Jane's reading. The dialogue between realism and romance occurs on two notable levels. The first is between narrator-Jane and protagonist-Jane: young Jane states the romantic and adult Jane retorts with the real. In showing how one continuous character can unite in her person both realism and romance, Brontë works at "exposing and complicating oppressive binary categories within culture" (Warhol 858). The second oscillation between realism and romance occurs in the dialogue between Jane and Rochester. By associating Jane with the real and Rochester with the romantic, Brontë detaches these genres from their usual gendered positions as she identifies definitively masculine Rochester with the romantic and small bird-like Jane with the realistic. Not only does the text itself blend realist and romantic elements, but also the story of Jane's development culminates in her learning to balance her own realist and romantic impulses. Jane acquires this generic control and equilibrium as she grows from reader, to character in Rochester's story, to autobiographer. Reading is crucial to this process: as Jane moves from Gateshead to Ferndean, she develops particular relationships to texts and conventional genres. By the end of her development, Jane, as a woman, is able to write her life story. Rather than reading and subsequently being written by gendered generic conventions, she is able to use and revise genre/gender categories such as realism and romance in the writing of her own life story.

In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, discussed in Chapter Three, Maggie Tulliver is less able to acquire this generic control. While in *Jane Eyre*, there is a near-constant oscillation between realism and romance, in *The Mill on the Floss*, romance only

enters the novel in short episodes, which include Maggie's fantasies about Byron and Scott, her boat scene with Stephen, and the flood that concludes the novel. All three of these are associated with a dream-state in which semi-conscious Maggie becomes detached from the particular facts of her real-life existence and enters a world of ease. These romantic episodes parallel Maggie's romantic reading strategy. Though as a child, Maggie reads critically, as she grows up she learns a docile, passive and distinctly feminine mode of reading that is more about "dreaming over" a text than thinking critically about it. This entry into the world of romance is dangerous; for Eliot, realism is the mode necessary for moral sympathy. Thus, when Maggie enters the "enchanted land" of romance, her capacity for sympathetic engagement with her surroundings is severely diminished. For this reason, romance is portrayed as a tempting but morally irresponsible mode throughout the novel. However, the final scene in the novel, that of the romantic flood, ends not with condemnation, but with a peaceful image of a loving embrace in "daisied fields." Eliot concludes her novel in this way because Maggie, unlike orphan Jane, is a profoundly relational self¹. Maggie consistently perceives herself as part of a family and a town; it is only when she slips into the romantic mode that she abandons this realist relational self-conception. Thus for Maggie, resolution is not about achieving control over one's personal narrative – about becoming an autobiographer – but about finding a relational mode of existence that does not compromise and crush her individual self. In her real world, this resolution is unachievable. The only available closure for Maggie is that of the flood: a romance that allows for the sympathetic demands of realism.

¹ According to psychoanalysts such as Nancy Chodorow and Jean Baker Miller, "[w]hereas boys define their identity by contrast, not relation, to the earliest caretaker, girls persist in defining themselves relationally and thus do not develop the precise and rigid ego boundaries common to males" (Abel 10).

In Chapter Four, I shift from an analysis of reading, romance and realism in the Victorian period to a reading of Virginia Woolf's Modernist *The Voyage Out*. I include Woolf in this ostensibly Victorian study because I am interested in how the tension between realism and romanticism continues and develops across time. While many critics still follow Elaine Showalter's distinction between nineteenth and twentieth century women's writing – she argues that Modernist women's writing “required an ironic inversion of some of the most cherished Victorian notions” (243) – there has been a growing body of criticism that looks at Modernist women writers, such as Woolf, alongside Victorians. I am interested, like the former group of theorists, in apprehending Woolf's novels not as a radical break from Victorian tradition, but rather more as a continued development of the work of novelists such as Brontë and Eliot. In *The Voyage Out*, the conventional Victorian love plot has become the “shadowy enemy” haunting the frame of the primary genre; just as Brontë and Eliot's realist novels treat romance as the older, illogical form that somehow has a beauty and meaning that cannot be dismissed, Woolf struggles with the romance of the Victorian courtship plot. Though Rachel attempts to develop her independent and unconventional self through selective, physical and sympathetic reading, she cannot avoid the limited generic shapes that her life, as a woman's life, must take. Falling in love with Terence and into the conventional love plot, Rachel is led to her death by fever. Her death, represented in a modernist-romantic mode that reads much like a surreal, existential dream sequence, is arguably caused by the force of past narratives.

Jane Eyre, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *The Voyage Out* all display a genre struggle between realism and romance that hinges on the issue of gendered reading. How do

women read? How does reading influence a woman's self-perception and life expectations? By analysing these three novels, I explore the ways in which plot shapes affect a reader's self-understanding, and how such plots are over-determined by gender. All three novels portray romance as a "shadowy enemy," to borrow Langbauer's term, of realism. While realism defines itself in opposition to romance – and all three novels portray romance as in some way dangerous – as George Levine explains, romance and the marvellous are "a part of ordinary human experience uncontainable by principles of [realist] ordering" (*Realistic* 43). The less-than-middling desires which have no place in the traditional realist framework continually surface through romance. While Brontë, Eliot and Woolf are critical of romance to different degrees, all three ultimately recognize the temptation and necessity of romance; *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Voyage Out* neither glorify nor refuse the consolations of romance and present a complex and ambivalent understanding of the role of romance in women's life stories and self-understanding.

Chapter Two

“Oh, Romantic Reader, Forgive Me For Telling The Plain Truth!”
Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre; An Autobiography*

You advise me too, not to stray far from the ground of experience as I become weak when I enter the region of fiction; and you say ‘real experience is perennially interesting and to all men...’

I feel that this is also true, but, dear Sir, is not the real experience of each individual very limited? And if a writer dwells upon that solely or principally is he not in danger of repeating himself, and also of becoming an egoist?

Then too, Imagination is a strong, restless faculty which claims to be heard and exercised, are we to be quite deaf to her cry and insensate to her struggles? When she shews us bright pictures are we never to look at them and try to reproduce them? – And when she is eloquent and speaks rapidly and urgently in our ear are we not to write to her dictation?

- Charlotte Brontë, in a letter to George Henry Lewes, 6 November 1847

In her correspondence with George Henry Lewes, Charlotte Brontë discusses the conflict between the realistic and romantic novelistic impulses. While she “determine[s] to take Nature and Truth as [her] sole guides...restrain imagination, eschew romance, repress excitement” (*Vol 1*. 559), she concludes that Jane Austen, as a novelist “without ‘sentiment’, without poetry, may be -- is sensible, real (more real than true) but she cannot be great” (*Vol. 2* 14).² Brontë makes this crucial distinction between the “real” and

² Charlotte Brontë’s letters are arranged in two volumes: volume 1 runs from 1829-1847, volume 2 from 1848-1851.

the “true.” A strictly realist account of the world may be “sensible” and “real” but it cannot be “true”; the “great” artist recognizes that “truth” includes both realism and romance. There is romance in the everyday and everyday truth in the romance. A great artist must balance realism and romance and *Jane Eyre* details the achievement of this balance: not only does the text itself blend realist and romantic elements, but the story of Jane’s development culminates in her learning to balance her own realist and romantic impulses and desires. Jane acquires this generic control and equilibrium as she grows from reader, to character in someone else’s story, to autobiographer – though *Jane Eyre* is often evaluated as a *Bildungsroman*, many critics tend to overlook that it is a *Künstlerroman* as well. *Jane Eyre* tells of Jane’s development not only into a heroine and a fulfilled woman, but into a woman *writer*. Reading is crucial to this process: as Jane moves from Gateshead to Ferndean, she develops particular relationships to texts and conventional genres. By the end of her development, Jane, as a woman, is able to write her life story. Rather than reading and subsequently being written by gendered generic conventions, she is able to use and revise genre/gender categories such as realism and romance.

Jane Eyre thus seeks to balance verisimilitude – often figured as masculine – and the romantic imagination, notably referred to in this essay’s epigraph as “she.”

Accordingly, Brontë published *Jane Eyre*, with the truth-claiming subtitle *An Autobiography*, under the male (or at least androgynous) pseudonym of Currer Bell. As Gilbert and Gubar argue, female writers who used male pseudonyms, such as George Sand, George Eliot, and Currer Bell, “protested not that they were ‘as good as’ men but that, as writers, they *were* men” (65) – as writers, they could work within the “male”

genre of realism. While many readers were unsure as to the gender of the elusive Currer Bell (most believed he was male, but some, including Lewes, assumed she was female³), nearly all contemporary readers and reviewers believed that the author must have experienced the events detailed in the text first-hand: the work was lauded for its realism. As George Henry Lewes wrote in his 1848 review,

we have not the shadow of a doubt... as to the *reality* of many of the scenes and personages so artistically depicted; the characters are too life-like to be the mere creations of fancy, and sketchy as some of them are, they are wondrous *telling*: several of them we almost feel persuaded to have met with in real life. (297)

Lewes claimed that *Jane Eyre* was “decidedly the best novel of the season” due to its “natural tone” (297). Indeed, the novel continues to be apprehended as realism by many Victorian critics; as Jerome Beaty neatly proves, the novel fits perfectly into the historical realist genre of the governess novel (640) and exposes the plight of the 24,770 actual governesses in England at the time (631).

However, as perhaps even more readers and critics have noted, *Jane Eyre*’s fate bears little resemblance to the realistic end of those many real-life British governesses: it can be safely assumed that most did not inherit money, fortuitously find their true family, engage in telepathic communication, or marry a gentleman. As Ellen Moers phrases it, *Jane Eyre* is “a romance, a melodrama, or, in its greatest pages, a fantasy of female childhood” (15). The novel is often read “[s]uperficially...[as] a paean to romantic wish

³ While Thackeray, Lewes, and a reviewer from *Christian Remembrancer* were certain that Currer Bell was female, A. W. Fonblanque, Elizabeth Rigby, and reviewers from *Era*, *Critic*, and *People’s Journal* believed him to be male. Edwin Percy Whipple even asserted that the pseudonym referred to a brother-sister team (Allott 70-111).

fulfillment, the fictional apotheosis of many an adolescent's cherished dreams" (Rowe 77) or "as a stereotypical Gothic romance" (Rule 166). *Jane Eyre* is often theorized as participating in two distinct categories of romance: the fairy-tale romance of wish-fulfilment dream and the Gothic romance of nightmare and terror. Fundamentally, both dream- and nightmare-based romances work to lift the heroine out of and beyond her ordinary reality: "David H. Richter argues that Gothic is situated at the junction of a 'major shift in response of readers to literature, a shift' ... from reading 'for the sake of entry into a verisimilar world' toward 'reading as an escape from the world one inhabits'" (Pearson 101). While critics such as Karen Rowe, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Suzanne Juhasz, Nancy Cervetti and Dorothy Mermin argue that Brontë's novel rewrites the fairy-tale love story romance, others such as Robert Heilman, Eugenia DeLamotte and Robyn Warhol theorize that the novel revises the conventions of the Gothic romance. Many, if not all, of these studies follow Heilman in arguing that Brontë subverts and toys with the conventions of romance, be it Gothic or fairy-tale, in order to account for feminine interiority, complexity, and "psychological realism" (Rule 166). As Heilman phrases it, Brontë creates a "new Gothic," which "is no longer oriented in marvellous circumstance but moves deeply into the lesser known realities of human life" (199). Though few state it explicitly, most of these theorists laud Brontë for her feminist hybridization of the tenets of realism and romance.

Eugenia DeLamotte is among the few critics under study who directly addresses Brontë's "conflation of realism and romance" (193). She argues that Brontë blends these two modes as a strategy for the assertion of "the identity of ordinary women's lives and... the problem of the self and its boundaries specifically in the context of the modes

of transcendence available to women” (193). In other words, *Jane Eyre* utilizes the conventions of both realism and Gothic romance in order to illustrate women’s reality in the romantic, to expose the distinctly feminine realism at the root of Gothic romantic imagery. The perils of the Gothic romance, those of imprisonment, haunting and pursuit (194), are, according to DeLamotte, the troubles that real-life British women were facing at the time. Thus, the realist plight of the governess is well-expressed through the Gothic mode, for “most women are ‘confined’ – not to a dungeon but to ‘making puddings and knitting stockings’” (201). The Gothic is a device for expressing women’s reality: “[t]he constant superimposition of realism on Gothic romance equates the darkest, eeriest Gothic mystery with the dullest version of an ordinary woman’s life” (205).

Similarly, Robyn Warhol argues, quite convincingly, that “the two genres [realism and Gothic romance] are not so much in competition as in continuous oscillation with each other, serving to double each other” (858). As she defines it, “[t]o be ‘double’ is to resist categorization as one thing or the other; to invoke ‘doubleness’ is to address binary oppositions without resting comfortably in either of the two terms being opposed” (857). This doubleness hinges on what she terms the “doubleness of perspective” (863) that she aptly perceives in the novel. While narrator-Jane can, with all her comments about how much more she knows now than then, assert realistic explanations for romantic events (such as the incident in the red room, for example), heroine-Jane, who is experiencing these occurrences first-hand, firmly inhabits the genre of the Gothic romance (863-864). Warhol concludes that this “refusal to be *either* realistic *or* Gothic, to write from the position of *either* a narrator *or* a character, is linked to a subversive impulse against a Victorian insistence on being *either* male-identified *or* female-

identified in life and in writing” (871). Brontë uses her double narration and her “oscillation” between realism and romance in order to redefine femininity; she rewrites genre to rewrite gender.

Both of these theories, in their acknowledgement of the “conflation” or “oscillation” between realism and romance, recognition of Brontë’s revision of genre, and astute observations on the link between genre and gender have been essential to this study. However, neither critic acknowledges a third and crucial dimension in this genre/gender revision: reading. While reading in *Jane Eyre* has been the topic of several studies, including those of Cervetti, Mark Hennelly and Antonia Losano, this chapter seeks to integrate a consideration of the various aspects of reading into the oscillation between realism and romance in the novel. Throughout *Jane Eyre*, the connections between realism, romance and femininity are strongly mediated by reading and storytelling. Jane’s understandings of what constitutes the real and what the ideal, both in terms of plot-shapes and characters, are largely derived from her readings and her relationships to texts. Jane’s *Bildung* story, her maturation and development which drives the plot, is a parable of the struggle to learn to read and to understand the boundaries between romance and realism in books and in life⁴. Her journey culminates in her growth from reader to writer as she learns to harness genre and the written word in order to rewrite the paradigms of a woman’s life story.

As mentioned, there is, as Warhol puts it, an “oscillation” between realism and romance in *Jane Eyre*. This movement between genres occurs notably on two levels. The first is that which Warhol focuses on: young protagonist-Jane asserts the romantic, while

⁴ Susan Fraiman’s excellent discussion of Jane’s *Bildung*, on the other hand, apprehends Jane’s life narrative “in relation to ongoing class conflict between ‘vulgar’ and ‘genteel’ interests” (89).

older narrator-Jane tempers these instances with realism. While younger Jane tends to lose herself in conventional romantic generic shapes and tropes, adult Jane is more able to negotiate genre; not only does she, as the narrator, bring realism to the more fanciful events, but she also, as the authoress, deliberately allows for the inclusion of her youthful belief in more romantic explanations. Narrator-Jane could have easily, in theory, rewritten her life story excluding the romantic entirely; however, Brontë is careful that her narrative includes both traditional realism and romantic imagination. For example, when young Jane first enters the red room at Gateshead, the narrator describes the room in realistic detail – as George Levine explains, an emphasis on detail is an essential characteristic of realism (*Realistic* 21) –

[it is a] square chamber...[with a] bed supported on massive pillars of mahogany, hung with curtains of deep-red damask...the carpet was red; the table at the foot of the bed was covered with a crimson cloth; the walls were a soft fawn colour with a blush of pink in it; the wardrobe, the toilet-table, the chairs were of darkly polished old mahogany. (13)

Within this very real (and very red) room, young Jane believes she perceives a fantastical spectre, “a herald of some coming vision from another world” (16). Narrator-Jane is quick to “conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern, carried by some one across the lawn: but then, prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation” (16) she believes that she must be seeing Mr. Reed’s ghost. Jane does not only believe in this romantic apparition because she is young and agitated but because her mind was “prepared” for horror.

Young Jane's mind is shaped and prepared for fear, horror and Gothic romance due to the joint forces of stories (through reading books and listening to Bessie's songs and folktales) and her everyday reality at Gateshead. The interaction between these two elements makes her "a miserable little poltroon" (30) who has trouble distinguishing between the terrors of reality and those of romance. At Gateshead, Jane is an avid reader. Indeed, Jane's first action in the novel is to slip into "double retirement" (8) with Bewick's *History of British Birds*. Though, as she asserts, she is attracted to this text because it is a volume "stored with pictures" (7), Losano proves quite convincingly that "[p]ictures in *Jane Eyre* are never simply viewed; they are also read, mined for narrative potential while their visual qualities remain largely forgotten" – "Jane translates the verbal text into visual images" (27). Indeed, young Jane does read these images, but equally noteworthy is that, in a sense, she writes them as well. Jane is drawn to the pictures that mirror her perception of her own life: "the 'cold winter wind' and 'clouds so sombre' (3) of Gateshead reappear in the pictured 'accumulation of centuries of winters' (5) in Bewick" (Hennelly 695). In her real life, she has no agency to define herself or her surroundings. She is a "dependant," a passive thing written on by her circumstances. However, swathed behind curtains and pages, "[w]ith Bewick on my knee, I was then happy" (9); reading makes Jane happy because it allows her to escape the difficulties of her reality, but also because it presents a version of reality in which she can be a writer, not just a reader or written-on object. "It has been said that 'Writing is the act of saying *I*, a 'projection of the person who writes into the public domain of discourse'" (Joan Didion qtd. in Pearson 17); when Jane reads actively, and responds to the text creatively, she is able to write and thus assert her "I." As she looks at the bleak images in Bewick,

“[o]f these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own: shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children’s brains, but strangely impressive” (8). Within the world of the book, Jane can have creative agency that she lacks in her real world; through reading, she can be a writer. But this text-borne agency does not translate to Jane’s reality. In her real world, books are weapons to be thrown at vulnerable Jane and when she tries to apply her literary agency to life, she meets the harsh reality of her subordinate position. After John Reed attacks her, she cries out in a fit of reading-inspired passion: “Wicked and cruel boy!’ I said. ‘You are like a murderer – you are like a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors!’ I had read Goldsmith’s *History of Rome*, and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula &c. Also I had drawn parallels in silence” (11). She is quickly sent to the red room as punishment for her outburst: Jane learns that the agency she feels in her “creative reading responses” (Hennelly 695) does not translate to her reality. The only links between her real world and the world of books are the themes of horror, fear and entrapment.

Notably, the horrifying shadow stories that she concocts as she reads Bewick (of “marine phantoms,” “thieves” and “fiends”) are “as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated...[when she] fed our eager attention with passages of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales and other ballads; or (as at a later period I discovered) from the pages of *Pamela*, and *Henry, Earl of Moreland*” (9). Jane’s romantic reading responses are largely shaped by other stories she has heard or read. Even when she acquires agency over the text, at this young age Jane’s reading and writing are defined by generic conventions. The stories that she can create are responses to the cultural paradigms she internalizes through reading and listening to Bessie.

Consequently, Jane's image of herself is largely circumscribed by such paradigms. When Bessie sings of "the path of the poor orphan child," she delineates the shape of Jane's narrative to come. Even more notable is Jane's experience of looking in the mirror in the red room:

All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie's evening stories represented as coming out of lone, ferny dells in moors (14)

At this moment, young Jane's ability to distinguish between reality and romance is clearly limited and, frightened by her real life situation as entrapped subordinate, she can no longer see her real self but instead sees a "tiny phantom, half fairy, half imp." Jane's image of herself is compromised and she imagines herself as one of the haunted and haunting characters from Bessie's folktales. The trope of the mirror is a significant one, for it recurs throughout the novel and throughout the canon of fairy tale lore. Gilbert and Gubar interpret

the images on the surface of the glass...[as] those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her [woman's] human face both to lessen the dread of her 'inconstancy' and – by identifying her with the 'eternal types' they have themselves invented – to possess her more thoroughly. (17)

In other words, and for the purpose of this argument, the images in the looking glass – the self Jane sees in the mirror – represent the stereotypical images of women perpetrated

through male-authored folktales and romance. To be a fairy, an elf, or a sprite is to be perpetually child-like and inconsequential. Not only do Bessie's stories and Jane's readings shape her imaginative capacity, but they also obscure her self-understanding so that her image of herself is a variant of the characters that have come before her.

Prior to the incident in the red room, reading for Jane is a welcome escape from her real life at Gateshead. In the parallel world of the text, Jane can enter an alternate universe in which she possesses active and self-deciding agency – for her, reading is a form of writing, for she can cease to be an object written-on and rewrite the text. Yet this writing is not entirely free: her creative reading responses are compromised by the force of past stories, and of past generic conventions that deny her, as a poor female, any agency. There is no place for an orphan girl in Bewick's bleak seascapes and Bessie's songs and tales reduce her at best to an "imp" and at worst to a "weary" and doomed "poor orphan child." After the incident in the red room, Jane must recognize the full force of her powerlessness and begins to understand the dangers of conflating the real world and the world of romance.

After her experience in the red room, Jane's reading habits change. As Jane is convalescing, Bessie offers to bring her *Gulliver's Travels*, a text she "had again and again perused with delight; [for she] considered it a narrative of facts" (20). But the book fails to satisfy: "when I turned over its leaves, and sought in its marvellous pictures the charm I had, till now, never failed to find – all was eerie and dreary; the giants were gaunt goblins, the pigmies malevolent and fearful imps, Gulliver a most desolate wanderer in most dread and dangerous regions" (20). A similar experience occurs later when, after Mr. Brocklehurst's visit, Jane attempts to find solace in *Arabian Nights*: "I

could make no sense of the subject; my own thoughts swam always between me and the page I had usually found fascinating” (36). Though there are, of course, differences between these two scenes (in one the book is horrifying; in the other it is merely uninteresting) the fundamental similarity is more useful for this study: Jane no longer finds comfort in books after the real world asserts that the power she feels in reading creatively does not extend to the real world. Exiled to the red room, Jane apprehends that even the realm of magic and romance does not offer her comfort or respite from her real world difficulties. The idea of Mr. Reed’s ghost, “consolatory in theory, I felt would be terrible if realised” (16) and seeing herself as a sprite or an elf, a participant in the world of romance, offers her no more agency than she has as a real-life child.

While Jane’s youthful reading at Gateshead is a mode of rebellion, she is taught a different, more compliant model of reading at Lowood. Jane’s introduction to the “Lowood constraint” (131) begins with a book. When Mr. Brocklehurst stops by Gateshead to meet his newest pupil, he begins his teaching right away: “Little girl, here is a book entitled the *Child’s Guide*; read it with prayer, especially the part containing ‘an account of the awfully sudden death of Martha G --, a naughty child addicted to falsehood and deceit’” (33-4). Mr. Brocklehurst instructs Jane to see the text as a reflection of life and to learn from it as an example. On the surface, this method parallels Jane’s usual youthful readings: it counsels direct inference between text and real life. But while Jane’s Gateshead readings of *Arabian Nights*, *Gulliver’s Travels* and *History of Birds* encourage her to respond creatively to the text, as well as to yearn and dream – to want more than her lot in life – Mr. Brocklehurst’s readings are designed to teach self-sacrifice and acceptance of one’s lowly and subordinate position. His version of religion

“is rigid and repressive, made so by institutionalization” (Peterson 84); thus for him reading leaves little room for creative response. As Mr. Brocklehurst says, “my mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh” (Brontë 61) and one might easily add the “lusts of the spirit” as well.

In this framework, reading is a way for the patriarchy to subdue, define and control women. Many critics, notably Gilbert and Gubar, have noted Mr. Brocklehurst’s strongly phallic description:

I looked up at – a black pillar! – such, at least, appeared to me, at first sight, the straight, narrow, sable-clad shape standing erect on the rug: the grim face at the top was like a carved mask, placed above the shaft by way of capital...*He*, for it was a man, turned his head slowly towards where I stood. (30)

This pillar of maleness uses reading as a tool to teach Jane her proper place. During the nineteenth century, schools carefully regulated female students’ reading materials. Particular texts such as advice manuals and spiritual autobiographies were deemed “safe” and “good” for young girls and were “offered...by conservative educationalists as training in compliance to a male-dominated culture and its discursive practices” (Pearson 50).

While Mr. Brocklehurst’s reading recommendation is clearly an example of nineteenth-century patriarchal control of women’s reading, Miss Temple and Helen Burns, the positive female Lowood characters, teach Jane a very similar reading strategy. Miss Temple and Helen Burns are both associated with the “good” Victorian woman and, consequently, with “good” Victorian female modes of reading that largely align with Mr.

Brocklehurst's oppressive patriarchal model. When Jane first meets Helen Burns, "she was bent over a book, on the perusal of which she seemed intent: from where I stood I could see the title – it was *Rasselas*... I think her occupation touched a chord of sympathy somewhere; for I too liked reading" (47). Though the two girls enjoy reading, they utilize different reading strategies. Jane likes to read romantic and fanciful texts (stories "of a frivolous and childish kind," "about fairies," "genii," and "bright variety" [47]), which allow her creative agency – she reads to feel like a writer, to creatively respond to the text she receives. Helen, on the other hand, is a much more passive, receptive reader. She reads much in the way heralded by Mr. Brocklehurst: she chooses texts which she deems "good" and uses them as examples, to teach her to bear her subordinate status. For example, Helen urges Jane, "Read the New Testament, and observe what Christ says, and how he acts – make his word your rule, and his conduct your example" (55). Though Helen's gentle feminine grace is contrasted with Mr. Brocklehurst's brusque masculinity, the reading the two advise is similar.

Helen does, however, have a romantic side. Like Jane, her readings shape her "fantasy structures... which govern our desires" (Wyatt 200). Jane yearns for a world of travel and adventure, and Helen longs for the solace and peace of heaven. While Jane dreams of going to "remote and mysterious regions" (Brontë 40) (for example, she wishes to find Swift's Lilliput outside of England), when Helen thinks of something "beyond her situation: of something not round her nor before her" (49), she dreams of heaven:

Besides this earth, and besides the race of men, there is an invisible world and a kingdom of spirits... angels see our tortures, recognize our

innocence...and God waits only the separation of spirit from flesh to crown us with a full reward. Why, then, should we ever sink overwhelmed with distress, when life is so soon over, and death is so certain an entrance to happiness – to glory? (66)

Though the girls employ different reading strategies (Jane reads to rewrite her fate, and Helen reads to accept hers), both Jane and Helen's readings engender fantasies about escape to another world. Helen's religious books and Jane's fantastical ones shape their ideas of an alternate, better world, which they can use to temporarily escape or cope with reality.

Yet Jane's readings encourage rebellion and Helen's promote acceptance – while Jane reads to rebel against her position as a conventional female, Helen learns to accept and ultimately embody a feminine generic ideal. The distinctly religious facet of Helen's romance world differentiates it from Jane's – in *Jane Eyre*, religion is highly institutionalized, as represented by Mr. Brocklehurst. As a result, to dream in religious terms involves the straightforward replication of a religious story typology. When Helen daydreams after reading *Rasselas*, she models her self-conception on “the Christian stoicism of Johnson's” text and “recast[s] her experiences in terms of Christian heroism” (Peterson 86). In believing in the spiritual narrative of God and afterlife, Helen relinquishes creative control over her own narrative and understands her life as a Christian journey through privation to God. Conversely, the less religious Jane who asks Helen “Where is God? What is God?” (Brontë 78) has a more creative engagement with the story forms she encounters, be they romantic or realistic. God, as the ultimate author of any religious narrative, carries an unquestionable narrative authority for his reader.

While Jane's fantasy life allows her to rebel and yearn, both Helen Burns and Miss Temple's devotion entails that they exemplify the conventional ideals of Victorian femininity. According to Gilbert and Gubar, "[a]ngelic Miss Temple...with her marble pallor, is a shrine of ladylike virtues: magnanimity, cultivation, courtesy – and repression" (344) and "Helen Burns...presents a different but equally impossible ideal to Jane: the ideal...of self renunciation, of all-consuming (and consumptive) spirituality" (345-346). While Helen and Miss Temple are presented positively in the novel,

Brontë does not endorse Helen's philosophy or hermeneutics. As Jane points out...If the passive and virtuous always submit, then the powerful and wicked will continue to 'have it all their own way' (50). Helen's approach, in other words, is not antithetical to but complementary of and collaborative with Brocklehurst's aggressive, patriarchal hermeneutics. (Peterson 86)

These two women are strongly associated with reading – "they spoke of books: how many they had read! What stores of knowledge they possessed!" (Brontë 70) – but their reading is of a particular "feminine" type, one that "is not antithetical to but complementary of and collaborative with" patriarchal structures. Though our sympathetic protagonist adores Helen and Miss Temple, the reading style they teach Jane is parallel to Mr. Brocklehurst's and leads to the same end, that of feminine acceptance of the patriarchal image in the literary mirror.

The model of reading, and the type of femininity, that Miss Temple and Helen Burns represent is indeed attractive. As Jane remains at Lowood under Miss Temple's tutelage (and with Helen's memory alive in her mind), she falls under a sort of spell: "I

had imbibed from her [Miss Temple] something of her nature and much of her habits: more harmonious thoughts: what seemed to be better regulated feelings had become the inmates of my mind” (80). The mode of reading that Miss Temple represents, that of restraint, compromise and acceptance, for a while seduces and overtakes Jane’s mind. She learns to read literally and to limit her desires. However, the spell is broken after Miss Temple’s death and Jane recognizes that, in accepting conventional Victorian reading and femininity, she is denying part of herself:

I had undergone a transforming process; that my mind had put off all it had borrowed of Miss Temple – or rather that she had taken with her the serene atmosphere I had been breathing in her vicinity – and that now I was left in my natural element, and beginning to feel the stirring of old emotions...Now I remembered that the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils” (80-81).

She revives the passionate yearning of her childhood dreams and seeks the fulfillment of those dreams not in heaven, as Helen Burns does, but in the “real” world. After Jane experiences the visceral reality of Lowood – for mass child deaths by consumption and typhus are not at all fanciful – she “abandons” her desire for liberty and instead “frame[s] a humbler supplication.” At Gateshead, Jane sees that she ought not to rely on fairy tale romance, and at Lowood she recognizes the futility of religious romance. Thus, Jane cries out not for “liberty” but for a new “Servitude! That must be a matter of fact!” (81). Though Jane believes she has shaken off Miss Temple’s and Helen’s influence (and

indeed, to some degree, she has), her new yearnings are jointly shaped by her childhood reading and the reading she learnt at Lowood.

Once Jane leaves Lowood and enters Thornfield, the scenes of actual reading greatly decrease. Though the Thornfield schoolroom is equipped with “one book-case...containing everything that could be needed in the way of elementary works, and several volumes of light literature, poetry, biography, travels, a few romances, &c...all the governess would require for her private perusal” (98), there are few instances at the mansion in which Jane actually reads. However, reading and stories continue to exert a strong force on Jane’s imagination and her ability to distinguish between realism and romance. Again, as when she was a child, she uses her imagination and her capacity to create stories to escape from and rewrite her dreary life. Prior to Mr. Rochester’s arrival, Jane is “weary of an existence all passive” (110). So she opens her “inward ear to a tale that was never ended – a tale my imagination created and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence” (104). This imaginary tale, again like Jane’s youthful creative reading responses, is largely shaped by the stories she read and heard as a child. When she first spots Rochester approaching she notes:

In those days I was young, and all sorts of fancies bright and dark tenanted my mind: the memories of nursery stories were there amongst other rubbish; and when they recurred, maturing youth added to them a vigour and vividness beyond what childhood could give. As this horse approached, and as I watched for it to appear through the dusk, I remembered certain of Bessie’s tales wherein figured a North-of-England

spirit, called a 'Gytrash,' which, in the form of horse, mule, or large dog, haunted solitary ways, and sometimes came upon belated travellers, as this horse was now coming upon me. (106)

Once more, as with young Jane's romantic descriptions at Gateshead, this Gytrash vision is tempered with narrator-Jane's realism. As Rochester approaches, narrator-Jane asserts that "[t]he man, the human being, broke the spell at once" (107). As she proclaims, "oh, romantic reader, forgive me for telling the plain truth!" (105).

Thus, at Thornfield prior to her relationship with Rochester, Jane's reading is much like it was at Gateshead: Jane's creative responses to texts (however limited and shaped by the conventions of those texts) allow her to engage in romantic reveries that are quickly tempered with reality. The balance between realism and romance has yet to be fully achieved. Indeed, Thornfield manor, similar to the red room, is described alternately in realist and romantic terms. When Jane is first shown around the house she thinks, "I thought I caught a glimpse of a fairy place: so bright to my novice-eyes appeared the view beyond. Yet it was merely a very pretty drawing room" (99). As DeLamotte points out, Brontë sets up a strong contrast between Jane's room and the rest of the house (DeLamotte 199): though much of the manor resembles "some Bluebeard's castle" (Brontë 101) – again, note that Jane's romantic imagination is shaped by literature – Jane's room and most of the living quarters are "of small dimensions and furnished in ordinary modern style" (93). As at Gateshead, there seem to be two facets to the space, one representing the more romantically-inclined protagonist-Jane (who, at Thornfield encounters Gothic romance for the first time) and the other the more realistic narrator-Jane.

In showing how one continuous character can unite in her person both realism and romance, Brontë asserts the “doubleness” that Warhol argues; the oscillation between protagonist-Jane and narrator-Jane works at “exposing and complicating oppressive binary categories within culture” (Warhol 858). Young Jane and author Jane engage in a generic dialogue: young Jane states the romantic and adult Jane retorts with the real. Yet there is another, parallel genre oscillation in the novel, which takes place in the dialogue between Jane and Rochester. In this frame, it is Rochester who asserts the romantic – he calls her “witch, sorceress” (140), “a dream or a shade” (240) – and Jane responds with the real – “I have no wish to talk nonsense” (131), “I am not an angel...and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me – for you will not get it, anything than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate” (244). By associating Jane with the real and Rochester with the romantic, Brontë works to detach the genres from their usual gendered positions as she identifies definitively masculine Rochester with the romantic and small bird-like Jane with the realistic.

Most critics regard this shift as revising the genre of the fairy tale romance: Jane’s assertion of realism in the face of Rochester’s romance constitutes Brontë’s resistance to and rewriting of romantic conventions. Nancy Cervetti argues that the portrayal of Jane and Rochester’s love constitutes “a thorough analysis and critique of male privilege and the patriarchal powers concealed in traditional romance” (50). By giving Jane the voice of realism, “[d]eliberately and repeatedly, the novel breaks with the conventions of romance and feminine performance” (Cervetti 59) – Jane resists the romantic impulse. When

Rochester tries to dress her up and transform her, like a heroine in a Cinderella story, she responds “I was not born for a different destiny to the rest of my species: to imagine such a lot befalling me is a fairy tale – a day-dream” (Brontë 243). Rather than writing Jane’s resistance to romance as an unfeminine aberration, Brontë represents Jane’s rebellion against this mode in positive terms: as Linda Hunt observes, “[i]n seeking to avoid the stereotypes and conventions which dominate the imagination of the era, Charlotte Brontë understandably turns first to what I will call ‘counter-ideals’: idealized characterizations which greatly modify or invert the values of traditional femininity” (Hunt 96). In associating Rochester with romance and Jane with realism, Brontë works to empower Jane and rewrite gendered generic ideals.

However it is during this period at Thornfield that Jane, rather than being most empowered, is actually most vulnerable. Even at her most oppressed at Gateshead, Jane still maintains some agency over texts: she engages in a reading practice that is a form of writing. While with Rochester, conversely, Jane falls under a spell similar to that of Miss Temple at Lowood but even more potent. At Lowood, Jane falls under a spell of influence, learning to read as Miss Temple and Helen Burns do. At Thornfield, first Rochester makes Jane into the perpetual reader, then the passive reader, and finally he begins to author her story for her and make her a character in the fairy tale romance he is spinning. This is why the oscillation between realism and romance shifts from protagonist-Jane and narrator-Jane to Jane and Rochester: despite Jane’s resistance, Rochester is essentially the narrator of Jane’s life while she remains at Thornfield with him.

When Jane meets Rochester, she nearly immediately shifts from daydream-writer to perpetual reader. As Carla Kaplan phrases it, “Jane sets out to *find* an ideal listener, but she seems forced to settle, instead, for *being* one” (84); “Jane is usually positioned inside the story she tells *not* as a narrator...but as Rochester’s narratee” (83). With Rochester, Jane enters into a new kind of reading that has an even stronger hold on her imagination and creative consciousness. It seems that Rochester is finally providing the ideal text for Jane:

I, indeed, talked comparatively little, but I heard him talk with relish...he liked to open to a mind unacquainted with the world...and I had a keen delight in receiving the new ideas he offered, in imagining the new pictures he portrayed, and following him in thought through the new regions he disclosed...I felt at times as if he were my relation rather than my master: yet he was imperious sometimes still; but I did not mind that; I saw it was his way...my thin crescent-destiny seemed to enlarge; the blanks of existence were filled up; my bodily health improved; I gathered flesh and strength. (138)

Rochester presents Jane with a sort of ultimate *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Arabian Nights*; his tales become her window to the world.

Yet Rochester’s voice is troubling because of its authority – though Jane feels herself to be his equal, “he was imperious.” Not only does Rochester’s romantic voice subsume all other literary influences, he soon “was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those

days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol” (257). With Rochester, Jane slips into a blasphemous version of the passive reading exemplified by Helen Burns’ religious reading. Rochester becomes the ultimate patriarchal authority for Jane and as such he becomes the narrator of her life: “Rochester frequently tells Jane her own story...As Mary Poovey observes, ‘Rochester’s most serious transgression has been to usurp Jane’s control over what is, after all, primarily her story’” (Kaplan 83). Thus, when Jane looks in the mirror at the Thornfield mansion, she sees not herself nor a self she imagines based on Bessie’s tales but “Jane Rochester,” a prettier version of herself, not “Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin’s jacket – a jay in borrowed plumes” (Brontë 244). Rochester rewrites her life as a monogeneric romance:

It was a little thing with a veil of gossamer on its head...I never spoke to it, and it never spoke to me, in words; but I read its eyes, and it read mine; and our speechless colloquy was to this effect – It was a fairy, and come from Elf-land, it said; and its errand was to make me happy: I must go with it out of the common world to a lonely place – such as the moon, for instance...it told me of the alabaster cave and silver vale where we might live. I said I should like to go; but reminded it, as you did me, that I had no wings to fly. ‘Oh,’ returned the fairy, ‘that does not signify! Here is a talisman will remove all difficulties;’ and she held out a pretty gold ring. ‘Put it,’ she said, ‘on the fourth finger of my left hand, and I am yours, and you are mine; and we shall leave earth, and make our own heaven yonder.’ She nodded again at the moon... ‘Mademoiselle is a fairy,’ he said, whispering mysteriously. (251)

Rochester rewrites Jane's life-story as a complete romance, without realistic interjections. While Jane responds that Adèle should ignore Rochester's nonsense and insists upon showing him the real difficulties of her character, she "would rather have pleased than teased him" (257) – there is something attractive, seductive even, in such a passive, romantic narrative.

Surrender to Rochester's romantic narrative is tempting, but ultimately dangerous for Jane. As a character in Rochester's fairy tale, Jane is in danger of losing her sense of reality, as well as her sense of self. Indeed, Rochester's romance ignores a very relevant reality: the presence of Bertha Mason, Rochester's living first wife. As Karen Rowe explains, Brontë "focuses upon Jane's near surrender to an immoral liaison with Rochester not to approve romantic fantasies but, conversely, to expose the dangers of the psychosexual dependency they encourage" (77); "this immersion in romantic fantasy threatens her integrity. Rochester subsumes Jane in his wish-fulfilling dream, one to which she is susceptible because it resembles patterns instilled by Bessie's nursery fables and reactivated in adolescence" (81). As Jane enters this "wish-fulfilling dream," she experiences a "dissolution of personality" (Gilbert and Gubar 359), for this conventional mode leaves little room for the female agency – the ability to write, or read creatively – that she so yearns for. Typical fairy tale romances "exert a pull toward traditional feminine passivity and dependence by promising happiness to her who sits and waits for the right man to sweep her away to the heights of passion" (Wyatt 201); this frame allows little space for the female independent voice. This overly romantic and passive reading strategy was indeed often associated with women in the nineteenth-century. "Pictures of women reading painted by Western artists during the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries frequently depict the woman reader in question as vanishing into the background scene” – “[g]enerally speaking, pictures of women reading make women *disappear*” (Losano 35) and illustrate “self-loss through reading” (38). This self-loss is indeed tempting and under the influence of Rochester’s voice, Jane seems to fall under a spell, which is only broken when the romantic illusion is shattered. After the revelation of Bertha’s existence, Jane seems to wake up: “till now I had only heard, seen, moved – followed up and down where I was led or dragged – watched event rush on event, disclosure open beyond disclosure: but *now, I thought*” (276). Forced to “reconcile fantasies from fairy tales, as promulgated by Bessie, with the realities of a brutal world” (Rowe 77), Jane wakes from her romantic dream and again begins to narrate her own tale.

Therefore, it would seem that good reading must resist passive surrender to overly romantic tales and focus on the concrete and real. While with Rochester, Jane falls into his romance and, temporarily, becomes a passive character in the fairy tale he is composing; she “had rejected the real, and rabidly devoured the ideal” (Brontë 152). Jane knows that when faced with a choice between being “a slave in a fool’s paradise at Marseilles – fevered with delusive bliss one hour – suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next – or to be a village schoolmistress, free and honest” (337), she made the correct decision when she “adhered to principle and law, and scorned and crushed the insane promptings of a frenzied moment” (337). For to “have surrendered to temptation; listened to passion; made no painful effort – no struggle; - but to have sunk down in the silken snare; fallen asleep on the flowers covering it” (337), to wholly enter the realm of romance, entails a dissolution of self and integrity.

After leaving Rochester and his romance, Jane enters Moor House, which is described as a primarily realist space. There is no goblin-laughter haunting this home, no grand romantic rooms or attics. While Thornfield housed a master more romantic than realistic, Moor House is the home of St John, a man who declares, “Reason, and not Feeling, is my guide” (351). Though it may be argued that his passionate feelings of self-suppression and religious rigour undergird this assertion, nevertheless, St John does advise Jane to follow reason where Rochester urged feeling. However, in this realist space, several of the most unbelievable events in the novel take place: Jane discovers her long-lost family, acquires a small fortune, and hears Rochester’s disembodied voice calling her across the landscape. Interestingly, Brontë (and narrator-Jane) works to present these events as realistic. When St John reveals to Jane that they are cousins and that she is wealthy, the narrative does not treat this incident as fantastical or romantic. Jane thinks, “there are other changes in life far more thrilling and rapture-giving: *this* is solid, an affair of the actual world, nothing ideal about it: all its associations are solid and sober, and its manifestations are the same” (357-358). According to Ellen Moers, “to Charlotte Bronte, whose passions fed on her imagination, the Real meant what it meant to all Victorian women: the workaday world. The issue of working for a living was always present in her thinking about the literary Real” (81). Thus even at the end of the novel when Jane reveals her wealth to Rochester, he exclaims, “Ah! This is practical – this is real!...I should never dream that” (406).

While Jane’s coincidental acquisition of wealth and family can therefore be explained away as realistic, it is more difficult to understand how Brontë expects to qualify Rochester’s disembodied voice as realistic. Brontë argues that there exist

“sympathies...whose workings baffle mortal comprehension. And signs...may be but the sympathies of Nature with man” (208). When Jane hears Rochester calling her she responds, “‘Down superstition!’...as that spectre rose up black by the black yew at the gate. ‘This is not thy deception, nor thy witchcraft: it is the work of nature. She was roused, and did – no miracle – but her best’” (391). Jane asserts that Rochester’s voice coming to her is the work not of magic, but of nature. In Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, she tells of Brontë’s own insistence that this event was real:

Some one conversing with her once objected, in my presence, to that part of ‘Jane Eyre’ in which she hears Rochester’s voice crying out to her in a great crisis of her life . . . I do not know what incident was in Miss Brontë’s recollection when she replied, in a low voice, drawing in her breath, ‘But it is a true thing; it really happened.’ (330)

This assertion of realism is, I believe, less than successful; however, it is a testament to Brontë’s (and narrator-Jane’s) commitment to a narrative that balances realist and romantic impulses.

Also, notably, it is at Moor House that Jane again begins to read. Here she meets Diana and Mary, “each bent over a book” (311). As with Helen and Miss Temple, Jane’s cousins become her reading role models: “[t]hey were both more accomplished and better read than I was; but with eagerness I followed in the path of knowledge they had trodden before me. I devoured the books they lent me” (328). However, Mary and Diana are no Miss Temple and Helen. Though the sisters are definitively feminine and accept their lot in life, they do so not by looking beyond to another world but by focusing on what they can do in this world to increase their happiness. Their names are also significant; as Rowe

puts it, “Diana the classic huntress and Mary the Christian mother, as the names suggest, become Jane’s new avatars of female strength, tenderness and learning. Jane enters into a life more real than fantastical” (85). This real life is grounded in a feminine community of knowledge and reading – unlike with Helen and Miss Temple, there is no one patriarchal authority on which the female reader relies. When Jane reads with Mary and Diana, though the sisters are more knowledgeable than she, the reading is satisfying for Jane because it is followed by egalitarian dialogue: it “was full satisfaction to discuss with them in the evening what I had perused that day. Thought fitted thought; opinion met opinion: we coincided, in short, perfectly” (328). Together they practice German, and read novels such as *Marmion*. Reading in this context is a harmonious and egalitarian dialogue of knowledge.

This mode of reading, however, does not extend to St John. While Mary, Diana and Jane read to establish communal ties and encourage individual development, for St John, reading is a form of isolation: “it was his unsocial custom to read at meals” (369). Also, if Rochester could be said to represent overly-romantic reading, then St John may be the face of the overly-realistic. While Rochester writes Jane into a fairy tale romance in which they run off together for a life of ease on the moon, St John writes Jane into a realist narrative – specifically into the form Linda Peterson calls the “missionary memoir” (92) – in which he takes her to India for a life of difficult, but morally upright, striving. St John represents a more literal and realist approach to Helen Burns and Miss Temple’s religious reading. While those characters, as women, read religious texts and learn to passively accept the lot God gives them, St John, as a man, can take on a more active religious role – that of a missionary. Religious reading, then, is stripped of its

romantic dream-like connotations; religious narratives, for a man, can be taken as a concrete, realistic model for living. A woman's spiritual development requires patience, suffering and gazing towards the afterlife, while a man's allows for a more active expression of faith. For St John, thus, reading is good so long as it is useful: he begins to control Jane's reading by teaching her Hindostanee – as with Mr. Brocklehurst, carefully chosen reading is a tool by which the patriarchal authority shapes and controls women. St John's writing of Jane, like Rochester's, casts a powerful spell over Jane. As she notices, "I felt as if an awful charm was framing round and gathering over me" (375); "[b]y degrees, he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind" (372). The narrative that St John writes her into denies her individual identity. Though missionary work in India is "good" (not only does such work involve helping others and doing God's work, but it is one of the few available avenues for "heroic action" and "serious work outside the home" for women [Peterson 97]), it is not good for *Jane*. Patriarchal conventional narratives, whether they be overly-romantic like Rochester's fairy tale, or overly-realist like St John's bleak trek to India, do not adequately account for feminine individuality. To become the woman of either narrative, Jane must deny part of herself. With St John she realizes, "I felt daily more and more that I must disown half my nature, stifle half my faculties, wrest my tastes from their original bent, force myself to the adoption of pursuits for which I had no natural vocation" (372) and similarly with Rochester, she must continually assert that she is not a sprite, an elf or even Jane Rochester – she is Jane Eyre (244). However,

I was tempted to cease struggling with him – to rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his existence, and there lose my own. I was almost

as hard beset by him now as I had been once before, in a different way, by another. I was a fool both times. To have yielded then would have been an error of principle; to have yielded now would have been an error of judgment. (390)

The loss of self involved in participating in either Rochester's romantic or St John's realist narrative is tempting but Jane learns to resist that temptation. As she notices during her time with Georgiana and Eliza Reed, "Feeling without judgment is a washy draught indeed; but judgment untempered by feeling is too bitter and husky a morsel for human deglutition" (222) – neither Rochester's nor St John's narrative truly encapsulates the meaning of herself and her life and she must construct, on her own, a "true" life story that will balance the real and the romantic.

Jane is able, finally, to construct this true life story – to write – at Ferndean. In this home, Jane can reconcile the realistic with the romantic and take control of the story of her own life. Though Jane's return is profoundly romantic – it is the fulfillment of Rochester's dreams (406) – it is the realistic fulfillment of that romantic dream. When Jane returns, Rochester exclaims "I cannot be so blest after all my misery. It is a dream" (406), but he is mistaken. For his blindness and her riches are testaments to the very real factors that led to this romantic conclusion. Finally, at the end of the novel, Rochester no longer perceives Jane to be merely an elf or a sprite but "fairy-born and human-bred" (410). He recognizes her essential humanity when he says "'You are altogether a human being, Jane? You are certain of that?' 'I consciously believe so, Mr Rochester,'" (408) she replies. With that, Jane is able to take control of texts and become an active writer and healthy reader. Now, rather than being Rochester's perpetual passive narratee, it is

Jane who reads to Rochester (421). She has total control over her narrative; she even refrains from telling Rochester about hearing his call so that his mind's sufferings, "too prone to gloom," need not cope with the shock of the supernatural (418). By the end of the novel, Jane develops into a writer and is able to take control of the narratives that previously wrote her existence. Rather than Rochester writing Jane into conventional generic shapes, Jane becomes her own autobiographer.

Autobiography, the telling of one's life story, involves more than mere reportage:

autobiography implies selection, order, shaping; a complex interplay between the present self and the self as recalled at various stages of the recorded life-story...it must explore the meaning of a person's life, and interpret it, so that both writer and reader are enlightened by the study of an individual's growth to philosophical, as well as physical maturity.

(Sanders 4)

In writing an autobiography, then, Jane blends select novelistic techniques – such as the romantic and realist modes – in order to arrange her life story in a meaningful way.

According to Valerie Sanders, "[m]ost Victorian women saw autobiography as a forbidden area, and deliberately situated themselves outside its formal parameters" (5); the very public nature of autobiography, along with its egoistical focus, entailed that it was not a genre for women. Unlike Jane, most Victorian women who engaged in life-writing titled their work "Recollections" or "Reminiscences." Such titles suggest "something casual, easy, unstructured, resembling family stories at the fireside" and women's "Recollections" were "usually about other people" (6). Jane's story, unlike these feminine modes of life-writing, is undoubtedly an autobiography, regardless of the

gender of its protagonist. As a result, many contemporary critics were troubled by Jane's autobiography for it "allowed an individual to differentiate herself and her experiences from general classes of humanity" (Peterson 87). By writing her story as an autobiography rather than a novel or a series of "Recollections," Jane at once asserts the value and interest of her own life and her right to write that life, rather than have it written for her. As Peterson phrases it, Jane's autobiography "assert[s] an individual's right to interpret her life and experiences against the authority of religion...or the state" (87). I would add that Jane's life story also asserts her right, as a woman, to write her own story against the force of other stories and genres, be they Rochester's romance, or St John's missionary realism.

Thus, Jane's autobiography is revolutionary not only in its treatment of gender – it is a female-centered autobiography, as its title proudly proclaims – but its negotiation of genre. As argued in this essay, *Jane Eyre* is an amalgam of romance and realism that explores the effect of reading and past stories on the ways in which one conceives of one's own life-story. The traditional autobiography is a genre that prioritizes realism and leaves little room for romance; "[t]he formal autobiographers tend to adopt a conservative style...whereas the surreal element in Brontë, for example, constitutes a new way of exploring the anarchic potential of female passion: something no decent Victorian woman autobiographer would directly acknowledge" (Sanders 16). Victorian feminine autobiography "took narrative inventiveness away from the writer" (Peterson 26); in presenting a feminine autobiography that deals with romance as well as realism, Brontë expands the genre and increases the female "autobiographer's authority over what Hayden White calls 'emplotment,' over self-intepretation through narrative construction"

(Peterson 26). *Jane Eyre; An Autobiography* hovers “halfway between what happened in the outer world of Jane’s experience and in the inner world of her imagination” (Tromly 49), between the real and the romantic, and as such represents a new form of feminine autobiography that increases possibilities for feminine authority and self-interpretation, and works towards achieving the “truth” necessary for artistic “greatness.”

Chapter Three

“She Was Dreaming Over Her Book” George Eliot’s *The Mill On The Floss*

As most critics are quick to affirm, “[i]n the English tradition, George Eliot’s works have become synonymous with classical realism” (Langbauer 200). Eliot wrote in her 1856 review of volume 3 of *Modern Painters*, ““The truth of infinite value that he [Ruskin] teaches is *realism*, the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality”” (qtd. in Levine *Realistic* 258). For Eliot, romance, that genre of “vague forms,” “imagination” and “mists of feeling,” cannot offer the “truth” of “substantial” realism. This realistic “truth” has a strong moral imperative. While for Brontë the moral aspect of realism is truth-telling and honesty, for Eliot, realism is tied to moral sympathy. The real is meant to, “in the name of some moral enterprise of truth telling,” extend “the limits of human sympathy” (Levine *Realistic* 8), for “[c]redibility is necessary in order that the moral teachings of the novel be effective” (Colby 36). Eliot emphasized realism as a literary mode of spreading sympathetic understanding.

Accordingly, *The Mill on the Floss* is readily classifiable as realist: not only is Eliot the “great exemplar” (Levine *Realistic* 44) of Victorian realism, but the novel claims to present “a sordid life...this of the Tullivers and Dodsons – irradiated by no sublime principles, no romantic visions, no active, self-renouncing faith; moved by none of those wild, uncontrollable passions...Here, one has conventional worldly notions and habits without instruction and without polish” (286). Eliot’s novel thus “purports to be an

authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals” (Watt 27), and to describe a “‘middling’ condition and define itself against the excesses, both stylistic and narrative, of various kinds of romantic, exotic, or sensational literatures” (Levine *Realistic* 5). As Langbauer phrases it, “Eliot means for her dominant mode of presentation to ensure the primacy of her genre, the [realist] novel”; however, Eliot cannot rid her work of the “excesses” of romance. “Romance is a shadowy enemy, always rising again, because, in fighting it, realism is fighting its own shadow” (Langbauer 200-1); “Eliot describes too the struggle between the realism of her novels and the undispatchable romance within them” (200). The less-than-middling desires that have no place in traditional realism resurface in the form of what I will call romantic episodes. Thus, the largely realistic world of St. Oggs is strongly contrasted with several such episodes, which include Maggie’s boat ride with Stephen Guest and the flood at the end of the novel. During these scenes, Maggie enters an “enchanted land” (462); she enters the romance. While this entry into romance is largely criticized in *The Mill on the Floss*, for romance diminishes the heroine’s capacity for sympathetic engagement with her real-world surroundings, the ambiguous connotations of the flood which ends the novel complicate Eliot’s critique of romance. It seems that romance may be the only available generic possibility for the satisfactory closure of a nineteenth-century woman’s life-story.

The entry into romance is, as in *Jane Eyre*, strongly associated with scenes of reading. While Maggie reads a large number of texts throughout *The Mill on the Floss*, this chapter will focus primarily on her romantic reading of Byron and Scott, for there are notable parallels between Maggie’s readings of such romantic texts, her love scene on the

boat with Stephen, and her ultimate death by drowning⁵. While *Jane Eyre* negotiates the romance of the fairy-tale and Gothic, George Eliot's representation of Byron and Scott in *The Mill on the Floss* stresses the romance of the escapist dream. Both novelists, like Northrop Frye, perceive romance to be characterized by conspicuous "suspensions of natural law" (*Anatomy* 36), and "the sense of individual detachment from routine existence" (185). Also, both stress that while "the romance is the nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream" (186), romance can also wear the menacing aspect of a nightmare. In both *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*, the entry into "the world of imagination and of dream" (Beer 7) operates as a seductive spell on the reading heroine, and is potentially dangerous as it entails a loss of self. However, this loss of self has an added moral dimension in *The Mill on the Floss*. Since Eliot's moral realism extends beyond Brontë's truth-telling to aspects of sympathy, when the tempted heroine surrenders to romantic reading, not only does she experience a dissolution of self, but also a diminishment of her capacity for sympathetic interaction.

Like Jane, Maggie is a precocious young reader. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie is an avid reader and employs a variety of reading strategies: there are those texts she critically engages with, and those she dreams over. The first scene of Maggie's reading – her reading of *The History of the Devil* by Daniel Defoe – is one of the former. When she explains to Mr. Riley about the drowning of witches, young Maggie is quick to understand and critique the text: "if she swims she's a witch, and if she's drowned – and

⁵ Though the works of Byron and Scott belong to the canonical Romantic period, it is important to clarify that my use of the term 'romantic' in relation to their works refers specifically to those elements of their works that are 'romantic' according to the genre definitions I have outlined here. Given the range and complexity of their respective oeuvres, of course individual works of both Byron and Scott engage with romance and realism in ways as complicated as Eliot does in *The Mill on the Floss*, but for the purposes of my discussion here, the key issue is Maggie's tendency to read them as (generically) romantic authors.

killed, you know – she’s innocent, and not a witch, but only a poor silly old woman. But what good would it do her then, you know, when she was drowned?” (23). This type of alert and critical reading strikes Mr. Tulliver with “petrifying wonder” (23); such reading material and reading strategies are inappropriate for a girl – “allays at her book! But it’s bad – it’s bad... a woman’s no business wi’ being so clever; it’ll turn to trouble” (22) – and she is advised to read “prettier books” (24). Such prettier (and more female-friendly) texts include *Aesop’s Fables* and *Pilgrim’s Progress*⁶ when she is a child and the romances of Byron and Scott when she is grown. When Maggie reads these romantic texts, she employs a markedly different reading strategy than the one applied to Defoe. According to Margaret Homans, “[a]s Maggie grows up, learning to be feminine, her way of reading changes” (123). Homans describes this change as a switch from creative and improvisational reading to a more “literal” and “docile” – and thus feminine – reading strategy. As with Jane at Lowood, Maggie learns to temper her creative reading responses. Though Homans’ theory does not explicitly address Maggie’s readings of Byron and Scott, her understanding of Maggie’s adult reading as “passive reiteration...[with] no original words of her own” (124) is still valid in relation to these texts. While Maggie’s alert reading of Defoe leads her to question and critique social standards and processes (an intellectual rebellion that startles her father and Mr. Riley), her romantic reading strategy is more receptive and passive, and thus it perpetuates uncomplicated, if quietly rebellious, fantasies. These two reading methods account for Maggie’s “thoughts [that] generally were the oddest mixture of clear-eyed acumen and blind dreams” (123).

⁶ Gillian Beer, in *The Romance* (1970), describes *Pilgrim’s Progress* “the secular romance... taken over and interpreted into religious experience” (49). Also, Barry Qualls’ *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction* is an extended study of the secularization of the pilgrim’s progress in the nineteenth-century novel.

When Maggie reads romance, she is portrayed less as engaging in an intellectual endeavour, and more as “dreaming over her book” (21), unaware of herself or the world around her. Maggie associates Byron and Scott with the creation of “dream-worlds”: after her father’s financial failure and during his illness,

Sometimes Maggie thought she could have been contented with absorbing fancies; if she could have had all Scott’s novels and Byron’s poems, then perhaps she might have found happiness enough to dull her sensibility to her actual daily life. And yet...they were hardly what she wanted. She could make dream-worlds of her own but no dream-world would satisfy her now. (301)

Reading Byron and Scott produces an anesthetising fantasy of exiting her unhappy real world in favour of a dream existence free of difficulty. Tellingly, she fantasizes about “wild romances of a flight from home in search of something less sordid and dreary; she would go to some great man – Walter Scott, perhaps – and tell him how wretched and how clever she was, and he would surely do something for her” (303). Not only does the actual moment of reading allow for an escape from reality, but Maggie’s romantic readings help her to perpetuate fantasies in which she can enter a new, extraordinary world. While “everyone in the [usual] world seemed so hard and unkind to Maggie...in books there were people who were always agreeable or tender, and delighted to do things that made one happy, and who did not show their kindness by finding fault. The world outside the books was not a happy one” (249). In these instances, Maggie’s reading, rather than a critical or intellectual endeavour, is escapist and related to unrealistic dreams and fantasies.

Eliot suggests that this escapist reading is less a result of the romantic content of the works of Byron and Scott, and more an effect of Maggie's romantic reading *strategy*. Like Jane, Maggie uses her romantic readings to spin "a tale that was never ended – a tale my imagination created and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence" (*JE* 104). Both heroines build fantasy lives out of romances in order to escape their dreary realities. When Jane enters Thornfield, she thinks of Bluebeard; when she first sees Rochester, she imagines he is the Gytrash – she applies specific romantic images and narratives to her everyday life. Maggie, though she often mentions "all Scott's novels and Byron's poems" (301) in conjunction with her fantasy life, does not make such specific references. Though Maggie's remarks about "Rebecca, and Flora MacIvor, and Minna, and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones" (349) show she has been reading widely in Scott, the only particular work by either Byron or Scott that becomes the subject of extended discussion is Scott's *The Pirate* (321), which she does not even complete. Maggie's more complex and adult readings of Byron and Scott will be taken up below. Throughout her youth, when Maggie refers to Byron and Scott, she rarely alludes to particular texts or images, but instead to "vague, mingled images from all the poetry and romance she had ever read" (402). Maggie's fantasies, then, stem not from the romantic content of Byron or Scott, but from the romantic way in which she engages with these texts.⁷

⁷ There is the possibility that Eliot wishes to emphasize Maggie's misreading of the content of Byron's and Scott's works. Though, of course, Byron and Scott represent a variety of feminine behaviour, according to Jacqueline Pearson, both were known to be "anxious about women writers" (35) and "show contempt for women readers" (36). In fact, "[i]n the misogynist utopia in [Byron's] *Ravenna Journal* (1821), women will be kept at home, their reading confined to 'piety and cookery,' with poetry and politics specifically banned" (36). While the romantic narratives of Byron and Scott dramatise a "'search for individual autonomy and liberty' which... was appealing to an upwardly mobile middle-class readership, especially its female members" (34), Byron and Scott, overall, deny women this mobility and agency. In dreaming of an escape through these men, Maggie understands that their plots depict mobility, passion, and opportunity,

Thus, though the work of Thomas à Kempis is not easily labelled as romantic – it is, in fact, devotional literature – Maggie’s reading of Kempis parallels her understanding of Byron and Scott. While the former tell of adventure and excitement, the latter reads: “Forsake thyself, resign thyself, and thou shalt enjoy much inward peace... Then shall all vain imaginations, evil perturbations and superfluous cares fly away; then shall immoderate fear leave thee, and inordinate love shall die” (305). While Byron and Scott, whom Maggie reads romantically in her youth, encourage flights of imagination and passion, Kempis, like the realist, resists such indulgences and demands an awareness of and sympathy for others. Despite this disparity in content, Maggie looks to Kempis to give her “that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain” (305), to satisfy her constant need for love, validation, and agency. The difference is that her reading of Kempis encourages her to find such satisfaction in accepting her real world and facing her lot in life, while her romantic readings encourage her to reject her real world in favour of another more fulfilling dream-realm. However, as with Byron and Scott, Maggie misreads Thomas à Kempis: “[s]he had not perceived – how could she until she had lived longer? – the inmost truth of the old monk’s outpourings: that renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow borne willingly. Maggie is still panting for happiness, and was in ecstasy because she had found the key to it” (306). While Kempis’ message is decidedly unromantic, Maggie’s reading of this text leads her to romance-like fantasies: “[t]he fantasy that there exist intrinsic meaning, individual coherence, personal significance, is the basic fantasy of romance.” (Brownstein 38). As with her fantasies about Byron and Scott, Kempis allows Maggie to feel that she is important and valuable

but she does not recognize that such options are not meant for her as a woman. Her reading of these texts is thus unself-conscious, uncritical, and ultimately uncomplicated.

and “she threw some exaggeration and wilfulness, some pride and impetuosity, even into her self-renunciation; her own life was still a drama for her in which she demanded of herself that her part should be played with intensity” (308). When she sews for the poor, for example, she insists upon buying her materials in public at St. Oggs, on relishing the performance of her self-renouncing virtue. Despite the religious content of Kempis, Maggie reads this text as she reads Byron and Scott, romantically, as a way to elevate herself out of her sordid reality.

Maggie’s reading of Thomas à Kempis helps to complete her growth from unconventional, active, critical child reader to conventional, passive, uncritical feminine reader. As in *Jane Eyre*, uncomplicated religious reading is associated with the development of conventional feminine docility. Under the influence of Kempis, Maggie surrenders to life as she surrenders to the text; she “give[s] up wishing and only think[s] of bearing what is laid upon [her] and doing what is given [her] to do” (317). Her reading of Kempis makes her “so submissive” (309), and, notably allows Mrs. Tulliver to finally tame and beautify Maggie’s “abundant black locks” (310). Through uncomplicated readings, the “‘contrairy’ child” becomes “a sight anyone might have been pleased to look at” (309); she becomes a heroine, “an ideal feminine self” (Brownstein xx) characterized by beauty and self-sacrifice. As Rachel Brownstein points out, the idea of the heroine is at once “dangerous” and “seductive” (xx). Once Maggie becomes this beautiful, socially acceptable female heroine, her story begins to shift from “the history of unfashionable families” (307) to the more “fashionable” marriage plot convention, a romance-realist hybrid tale “about finding validation of one’s uniqueness and importance by being singled out among all other women by a man” (Brownstein xv). In entering this

plot structure and convention, in becoming a heroine through uncritical reading, Maggie “choose[s] a fate that, while perfectly a heroine’s, is rather too simplifying to be perfectly hers” (xxii). Like Jane, she falls under a spell that allows her to be either lady-like Miss Temple or angelic Helen Burns. For Maggie, as for Jane, her uncomplicated readings result in self-erasure.

For both Jane and Maggie, this self-erasure involves succumbing to conventional feminine ideals: Maggie becomes the dark statuesque heroine of a courtship plot and Jane, Mrs. Rochester. However, in *The Mill on the Floss*, there is an added dimension to this self-erasure. As an orphan, all Jane has to lose is herself. Maggie, on the other hand, loses not only herself when she engages in romantic fantasy, but her sympathetic ties to her family. By reading and fantasizing, she can dream of leaving the “sordid life...of the Tullivers and Dodsons” (286) for another world in which she is loved, valued and significant. However, in general, Maggie’s rebellion through romantic fantasy is ineffectual and does not culminate in action. Though she dreams of running away to Walter Scott, “in the middle of her vision her father would perhaps enter the room...The voice pierced through Maggie like a sword; there was another sadness besides her own, and she had been thinking of turning her back on it and forsaking it” (303); while her romantic readings and fantasies bring her into a dream realm in which she can momentarily forget herself and her particular surroundings, Maggie repeatedly returns to the moral obligations of her reality and of the realistic mode more generally. Although “there were few sounds that roused Maggie when she was dreaming over her book...Tom’s name served as well as the shrillest whistle” (21) – repeatedly, sympathy

for others rouses her from her romantic reveries, and the mode of the novel shifts decidedly back to realist.

The self that Maggie loses when she enters the romantic mode is not only an individualistic entity, but a relational one as well. When she dreams, Maggie forgets her roles as sympathetic daughter, niece and sister. The ties of sympathy continuously rouse Maggie from her romantic reveries to teach the moral imperative of Eliot's sympathetic relational realism. This patterned move from romance-based reverie to realism-based sympathy is characteristic of the realist novel. As George Levine argues, "[t]he progress of Maggie's disenchantment echoes the conventional progress of the disenchanted protagonists of realistic fiction: an excessively romantic and egoistic heroine must learn the relation of desire to possibility, of self to society" (*Realistic* 45). Eliot criticizes Maggie's romantic readings of Byron and Scott, in their capacity to transport her into another world, for realism is the mode most conducive to sympathetic and moral action. Maggie must learn that her uncritical readings of romance, and the simplistic fantasies they generate, are morally incorrect.

Many critics have noted the connection between uncomplicated romance reading and escapist fantasies. For women in the Victorian period, whose ordinary possibilities were largely circumscribed by their gender, romance and fantasy could provide an outlet for repressed desires. Indeed, many Victorian literary critics feared this very possibility: as Kate Flint documents,

reading was warned against because of its capacity to raise false expectations, and engender dissatisfaction with one's present mode of life...[in] *Sesame and Lilies* (1865)... 'The best romance,' Ruskin wrote,

‘becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act.’ (74)

Romance reading, and feminine romance reading in particular, was thought to be “dangerous” for its capacity to shape and indulge unrealistic fantasies. As Flint points out, Victorian and even contemporary critics (she lists Elaine Showalter, Rachel Brownstein and Sally Mitchell) tend to associate women with a strong capacity for sympathy and thus understand them as “peculiarly susceptible to emotionally provocative material” (22); reading in this context is restricted to “a form of escapism” (32) that involves “abandoning oneself as reader, and as woman, to a state of passive receptivity” (35). There was indeed concern in the Victorian period about “the female reader’s uncritical identification with novel heroines” (Pearson 84). As Beer theorizes, the pleasure that arises from reading romance “depends upon our willing surrender to his [the narrator’s] power” (7). It is this surrender that engenders romantic fantasies and that is thus dangerous. George Eliot herself wrote about her novel-reading experiences:

‘I shall carry to my grave the mental diseases with which they have contaminated me. When I was quite a little child I could not be satisfied with the things around me; I was constantly living in a world of my own creation, and was quite contented to have no companions that I might be left to my own musings and imagine scenes in which I was chief actress.’
(qtd. in Brownstein xiv)

Eliot infantilizes the mode and is aware of the (dangerous) capacity of uncomplicated romance reading to create dream worlds and fantasies. Romance reading was often

associated with child-like receptivity and the propensity to form “contaminating” fantasies or expectations about reality.

The most notable instance of romantic fantasy in *The Mill on the Floss* is Maggie’s relationship with Stephen Guest. Eliot overtly connects Maggie’s love for Stephen to romantic reading – with him “she felt the half-remote presence of a world of love and beauty and delight, made up of vague, mingled images from all the poetry and romance she had ever read or had ever woven in her dreamy reveries” (402). Also, scenes of romantic reading and scenes with Stephen are described using the same language of dreams. As Jean Kennard puts it, “Stephen is the representative of all the romanticized, self-dramatizing qualities which Maggie finds it so hard to conquer in herself. He is her idea of a figure out of Byron or Scott, whose poems she loves” (*Victims* 120). As with reading Byron or Scott, time spent with Stephen leads Maggie beyond the confines of ordinary “sordid” reality and into an “enchanted land” (462): his “glances and tones bring the breath of poetry with them into a room that is half stifling with glaring gas and hard flirtation” (461). Also, and quite dangerously, Maggie’s experiences with Stephen echo her uncomplicated and passive understanding of Byron and Scott as a young woman. With Stephen, “Maggie only felt that life was revealing something quite new to her, and she was absorbed in the direct, immediate experience without any energy left for taking account of it and reasoning about it” (421-2). She applies her romantic reading strategy not only to books but also to life. Maggie is caught up in romantic fantasy with Stephen, seduced by a world like that in the books in which she can be loved and will not have to struggle. She does not critically interrogate her actions or feelings; “thought did not belong to that enchanted haze in which they [she and Stephen] were enveloped; it

belonged to the past and the future that lay outside the haze. Maggie was only dimly conscious” (487) of her surroundings. Maggie’s relationship with Stephen represents the seductive possibilities of enacting the world suggested by romantic readings and fantasies.

The connection between Stephen’s attractiveness and his musical abilities is also related to romance. According to Frye, romance is characterized by “analogies to falling asleep and entering a dream world. The latter is a world of increased erotic intensity” (*Secular* 68); this erotic sleepy world is akin to that of music, which “has a hypnotic effect, riveting the attention but putting the consciousness to sleep” (149). Stephen’s seduction of Maggie is indeed a musical one: it is when Maggie listens to Stephen sing that “all her good intentions were lost in the vague state of emotion produced by the inspiring duet” (Eliot 435). She slides into this romantic erotic without effort and has “little more power of concealing the impressions made upon her than if she had been constructed of musical strings” (429). As with the reading of romance, through Stephen’s singing, Maggie surrenders to beauty, leaves the ordinary waking world and enters a dream world of romance.

While Stephen seduces Maggie primarily through music, Philip attempts to court her with books. Maggie’s relationship with Stephen mimics her engagement with Byron and Scott: she pays little attention to the actual content and instead uses Stephen/romantic literature to shape an escapist fantasy life. Philip’s literary offerings, however, bear a different significance. Though Philip’s relationship with Maggie is predicated on the lending of books, he encourages her to think critically about the novels she reads, to use them to widen her scope and understanding. His recommendations lead the two into

animated and eager dialogues in which Maggie develops and expresses, rather than denying and erasing, her self. When Maggie meets Philip in the Red Deeps, she “felt herself a child again” (314) not in the sense of child-like receptivity and simplistic acceptance, but in that she reverts to her youthful critical reading habits. He reminds her of another, forgotten, way to engage with literature. When Philip attempts to lend her *The Pirate*, Maggie recalls the interactive reading of youth; when she first picked up the volume, she spent time imagining other endings, rather than just passively surrendering to its content. When she refuses the book, he exclaims, “But you will not always be shut up in your present lot; why should you starve your mind in that way?” (321): he reminds her that reading can teach and expand the mind. While her reading of Thomas à Kempis has encouraged her to “give up wishing,” Philip reminds her of her younger self, saying “we can never give up longing and wishing while we are thoroughly alive” (317) and “her heart began to beat with something of Philip’s discontent” (318). Within a year, her tone regains some of the playful confidence of her childhood self and she reads with a more critical eye. After briefly perusing *Corinne*, Maggie sounds like a more superficial version of her young self, criticizing female paradigms in Defoe. She does not wish to be a muse for they were “uncomfortable goddesses...obliged to carry rolls and musical instruments about with them” (348). Though her time with Philip in the Red Deeps does not undo her education in feminine reading, Maggie does briefly revert to the more critical reading strategies of her past. Yet, Maggie falls in love with Stephen and not Philip. She sees Philip as “a brother and a teacher” (312) rather than a lover because the men who exist in her real world – the world Philip’s reading style brings her back to – are not lovers, but brothers, teachers, fathers. As quoted earlier, while in the romantic “world

of books,” there are those who are loving and tender, who “made one happy,” the real world “had no love in it” (249). Maggie perceives love as something that can only happen in the world of romance: “[i]t seemed so far off – like a dream – only like one of the stories one imagines – that I should ever have a lover” (351).

The similarities between romance reading and Maggie’s relationship with Stephen are most manifest when Maggie floats away with Stephen on the boat. During this event, “Maggie felt that she was being led down...by this stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will” (486-7); “the boat glided without his help” (487); they speak in “strange, dreamy, absent tone[s]” (488) – as she is borne along by “the swift, silent stream” (488), Maggie can surrender to a world of ease, fantasy and dream. She leaves the harsh real world of St. Oggs, and enters what seems to be another world, in which she can forget her individualized self and the particular features of her everyday life:

Behind all the delicious visions of these last hours which had flowed over her like a soft stream and made her entirely passive, there was the dim consciousness that the condition was a transient one and that the morrow must bring back the old life of struggle...But now nothing was distinct to her; she was being lulled to sleep with that soft stream still flowing over her, with those delicious visions melting and fading like the wondrous aerial land of the west. (493)⁸

⁸ This quotation is similar to one from *Jane Eyre*: when Jane falls in love with Rochester, she thinks, “I was tossed on a buoyant but unquiet sea, where billows of trouble rolled under surges of joy. I thought sometimes I saw beyond its wild waters a shore, sweet as the hills of Beulah; and now and then a freshening gale wakened by hope, bore my spirit triumphantly towards the bourne: but I could not reach it, even in fancy – a counteracting breeze blew off land, and continually drove me back” (143). Though Brontë does not use the image of sleep as Eliot does, both writers associate the passions of romance with the force of the sea, and recognize the reality that consistently lurks beneath such fantasies.

As Maggie drifts into this soporific fantasy, this tempting semi-conscious existence, her individualized self and her awareness of her environment dissolve; she commences a “suspension of self” often connected to “a specifically feminine reading practice” of over-identification with the text and its protagonist (Pearson 84). In this dream world, “nothing was distinct”; like the landscape, Maggie too is “melting and fading” in this unreal space. Maggie loses not only her individual self, but her relational self. The particular facts of herself and her life, for example her intense love for Tom, or her histories with Philip and Lucy, threaten to dissipate in this world of “dim consciousness” as she passively lets go of reality in favour of fantasy and romance. Indeed, Beer and Frye note the “tendency” of romance to “simplify and allegorize character, to offer tableaux instead of the processes of choosing” (Beer 69); “[t]he romancer does not attempt to create ‘real people’ so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes” (Frye 304). In this sequence on the boat, Maggie lets go of the complexities of self and surroundings that make choosing difficult – the complexities characteristic of realism – and becomes a character in a sleepy romance.

Yet, as Maggie dimly recognizes, “the condition was a transient one and...the morrow must bring back the old life of struggle” (Eliot 493). Though the dream world may be seductive,

such feelings continually come across the ties that all our former life has made for us – the ties that have made others dependent on us – and would cut them in two...Many things are difficult and dark to me, [Maggie says,] but I see one thing quite clearly: that I must not, cannot, seek my own

happiness by sacrificing others. Love is natural, but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too. (471)

Though Maggie temporarily surrenders to “this current, soft and yet strong as the summer stream!” (470), as with her fantasy of running away to Sir Walter Scott, she recognizes that it is morally irresponsible to abandon her particular lot in life. Just as her sympathy for her father rouses her from that escapist dream, so too do her visions of “[h]ome – where her mother and brother were, Philip, Lucy, the scenes of her very cares and trials” (503) – pierce the haze of her flight with Stephen and remind her of who is she, where she is from, and her particular moral obligations. While romantic fantasies appeal to her vanity, “there were things in her stronger than vanity – passion, and affection, and long deep memories of early discipline and effort, of early claims on her love and pity; and the stream of vanity was soon swept along” (457). Sympathy for others and an understanding of right and wrong wrench Maggie from the “enchanted land” of her flight with Stephen. A character’s “moral energy” is dependent on their “location among the social ideals and conventions” (Levine *Realistic* 271) of their milieu – to be moral, one must be conscious of one’s social surroundings and relationships. Maggie wants her life to be like uncomplicated romance reading, like surrender to some higher authority or lush easy dream, but she cannot abdicate agency and retain her moral autonomy or standing. Romance does not require the autonomy essential to moral action, and to critical reading. Thus, Maggie must be corrected for her overly simple readings of romance in literature and romance in life, and Eliot returns her to St. Oggs to face the consequences of her actions.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, then, Eliot points to the danger of escapist romantic reading and emphasizes the importance of realism, and the vigorous critical reading such texts encourage. Realism encourages the reader to apprehend and sympathize with the “real.” The narrator says of her presentation of the dreary reality of the Tullivers and St. Oggs:

I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness, but it is necessary that we should feel it if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie, how it has acted on young natures in many generations...The suffering, whether of martyr or victim, which belongs to every historical advance of mankind is represented in this way in every town. (287)

A focus on the “every town,” on the realities of everyday people, is necessary for it helps the reader to feel for others, and understand the workings of individual lives and of history more generally. On the other hand, romantic reading can be, as many Victorian critics supposed, “the medium through which moral poison is frequently administered”, complained the *Saturday Review* in 1867 about this genre with the capacity to blunt a ‘woman’s sense of the broad demarcation between right and wrong’” (Flint 73).

Uncomplicated romance reading can perpetuate romantic fantasies and seduce women into a world much like that which Maggie enters on the boat with Stephen, a world of dreamy ease and morally irresponsible pleasure. As shown through Maggie, “docile” reading (to use Homans’ term) can blur the individualized self and its relation to the real world, and thus severely suspend the reader’s capacity for sympathetic engagement with others.

This understanding of reading strongly opposes many feminist theories on the subject. Contemporary feminist critics tend to understand reading as a vehicle through which women can develop critical capacities and a sense of self. Rachel Brownstein writes that a woman romance reader “looks in a novel for a coherent image of herself” as “special” (xix). Similarly, Suzanne Juhasz asserts that women read romance for self-recognition; a book, like a lover, helps the reader “to find the secret self – the true self” (9). Yet, Maggie’s romantic reading in *The Mill on the Floss* seems to contribute to dissolution of self and stagnation of moral self-development. Nancy Cervetti argues that in *The Mill on the Floss* Eliot represents reading as an “opportunity [for women] to dis-identify with certain oppressive ideologies and reconstruct other roles and relationships” (5). She writes that Maggie’s reading allows her “to question authority, refuse conventional ways of being female, and make decisions different from those socially prescribed for women” (30). Indeed, this is true of Maggie’s critical reading, including her reading of Defoe. However, this theory of feminine reading does not apply to all reading strategies and materials. While Maggie’s romance with Stephen is a form of rebellion, it is a passive, semi-conscious and self-effacing rebellion that ultimately does not depart from the roles “socially prescribed for women.” When she returns to St. Oggs, the women of the town are not so much distressed that Maggie ran off with Stephen, but that she returns without him. It is her rejection of a fantasy life that in fact “refuse[s] conventional ways of being female” by refusing sleepy passive femininity in favour of morally rigorous sympathy and self-abnegation. Uncritical reading, as Homans argues, is part of Maggie’s “education in [conventional] femininity” (123); reading does not

necessarily provide the possibilities for the rebellious revision that Cervetti describes, or the self-development that Brownstein and Juhasz assert.

However, Eliot's critique of this romantic reading style, of entrance into a dream realm, is complicated by the end of the novel. Though Maggie manages to resist the seduction of Stephen Guest, the flood signals a return to the dream world of romance. Maggie's experience during the flood is described in similar terms as her boat ride with Stephen: "[t]he whole thing had been so rapid, so dreamlike, that the threads of ordinary association were broken; she sank down on the seat clutching the oar mechanically, and for a long while had no distinct conception of her position" (541). She enters a world that is the fatal underside of her romantic fantasies, a world "which had made the nightmare of her childish dreams" (542). As with Stephen, "there was no choice of courses, no room for hesitation, and she floated into the current. Swiftly she went now, without effort" (543). Also, Maggie's particular, individualized self is again dissolved and blurred. As Morton Berman writes, in the end "Maggie and Tom are replaced by names on a tombstone whose happy inscription is a monument not only to familial love but to a cosmos that requires its inhabitants to renounce what is precious to them" (558). Maggie and Tom, the unique and developed characters with an often tumultuous relationship, are reduced to versions of Frye's mythical romantic archetypes, enacting and representing grand human desires and truths. The flood is a version of the fantasy world associated with uncomplicated romance reading and Maggie's love plot with Stephen Guest – these worlds are easy and dreamlike for in each Maggie can surrender her will to "any sophistry that will nullify [her] long struggles and bring [her] the defeat that [she] love[s] better than victory" (346).

Again, the shift from realism to romance is strongly linked to feminine reading. Prior to the scene of the flood, Maggie's options in the real world – her possible ending in the realist mode – are sorely limited. Dr. Kenn has succumbed to the force of St. Oggs and can no longer help her. Her future appears to be an endless struggle: “what repose could poor Maggie ever win except by wrestling?” (537). Then Stephen's highly romantic letter arrives and once more, Maggie feels herself surrender to passive reading: “[s]he did not *read* the letter; she heard him uttering it, and the voice shook her with its old strange power” (538-9). The force of romance calls to her almost as music and suddenly she perceives two possible fates for herself: one is “a lonely future through which she must carry the burden of regret, upheld only by clinging faith” – the future realism has in store for her – and the other, “another future, in which hard endurance and effort were to be exchanged for easy delicious leaning on another's strength!” – a permanent return to the romantic dream worlds of her girlhood reading of Byron and Scott, and her boat ride with Stephen. As she contemplates these options, Maggie recites the words of Thomas à Kempis. As Homans astutely notes, at this point in Maggie's development as a reader, “her adult self is a battleground for conflicting texts” (125) and in this scene,

she is reading again, choosing this time between two texts: the letter from Stephen and the words of Thomas a Kempis that would help her resist Stephen's appeal. At this last stage in her growth, her reading is only the passive reiteration of conflicting texts for which she is simply the medium, providing no original words of her own. Ironically, the two texts are really

only representations of her own feelings, but she feels that they come from outside her. (124)

Maggie has grown to be such a passive, feminine reader, that she can only regurgitate and negotiate prior texts that are not her own. With her critical reading capacities severely stunted, it would seem that realism can never be an option for Maggie: she lacks the agency and autonomy required for critical reading, moral action, and full participation in realism. Thus, at first, it appears that the flood is a final entrance into the world of romance.

Indeed, “in the first moment Maggie felt nothing, thought of nothing” (541). Nevertheless, there are distinct differences between the dream world of the flood and those of Maggie’s romantic fantasies about Stephen, Byron and Scott. During the flood, for the first time, the action that she so wishes to surrender to – the force of the current – is concurrent with her ideas of moral sympathy. To get on the boat is not to drift away from the demands of her relational self, but to push forward to save her brother. As with her boat ride with Stephen, and her dream of escape to Scott, sympathy rouses Maggie “to fuller consciousness” (541) during the flood: she wakes from her reverie and says “Oh God, where am I? Which is the way home?” but this time “now she was in action” (542). She is able to break out of her paralyzing romantic haze and she “seized an oar and began to paddle the oar forward with the energy of waking hope” (542). As she approaches home “she must use all her skill and power to manage the boat and get it if possible out of the current” (543). In this final romantic episode, Maggie’s struggle, her action against the current, is not mired in moral conflict. While with Stephen “all her good intentions were lost in the vague state of emotion... – emotion that seemed to make

her at once strong and weak: strong for all enjoyment, weak for all resistance” (435-6), but when she wants to save Tom during the flood, the emotion that blurs her senses is neither vague nor weak: “she was hardly conscious of any bodily sensations – except a sensation of strength, inspired by mighty emotion” (542)⁹. In this final, decidedly unrealistic and romantic scene, there is finally space for female agency – as evidenced in Maggie’s taking of the oars – and such agency can be moral. In Maggie’s previous fantasies, she dreams of action that is essentially running away to rely on some other, stronger, masculine power. Yet these fantasies come up against her reality and the moral encumbrances that accompany it. During the flood, Maggie’s essential fantasy has not changed: she exerts her strength in order to reach her brother who immediately says “Give me the oars, Maggie” (545) and takes over steering the boat. But Maggie finally need no longer resist this fantasy: the end, her death by flood with Tom at the helm, is the ultimate surrender, the ultimate uncomplicated romance. In this final scene, the “conflict between the inward impulse and the outward fact” (290) which has so characterized Maggie throughout the novel is finally over. During the flood, Maggie can completely surrender and cease to struggle, for the desirable surrender of romance is concurrent with the relational sympathetic demands of realism.

This amalgamation of romance and realism is, ultimately, a romantic fantasy. The image of “brother and sister...in an embrace never to be parted, living through again in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love and roamed the daisied fields together” (546) is not in accordance with the truth-telling tenets

⁹ It is possible that Eliot’s own romantic desires, with regards to her relationship with her brother Isaac, shape the novel here. In this study, however, I omit such a biographical approach for I do not believe it to be of primary importance to my discussion of genre and gender. Margaret Homans, however, does an excellent biographical reading of *The Mill on the Floss* in Chapter 6 of *Bearing the Word* (1986).

of realism. Maggie and Tom's childhood relationship was characterized by fighting and difference, not peaceful union and frolicking. The end of the novel demonstrates a complete surrender to the stream of romance that, literally, ends in Maggie's demise. Indeed, Homans posits that the ending is inevitably the product of the "feminine" reading strategies Maggie learns throughout the novel: "complete feminine docility leads to the self's silence and ultimately to death" (125). Maggie has learned to read passively, and to efface herself in reading; thus she is doomed. However, the final image of Maggie's death (that of a loving embrace in daisied fields) is not one of dreary doom. The conclusion of the *The Mill on the Floss*, contrary to the presentation of romance throughout, embraces romance; the end seems to indulge in the seductive, but elsewhere denied, possibilities of romantic fantasy.

Therefore, while many critics argue for Eliot's "refusal of the consolations of romance" (Boumelha 83) in *The Mill on the Floss*, the "flagrantly fantasized and contrived nature of the ending" (87) cannot be ignored. The flood is at once an indulgence in letting go, in surrendering to the seduction of romantic fantasy, and a metafictional comment on the generic possibilities available to women. Though I disagree with Homans' pessimistic argument about reading and Maggie's death, her theory does provide a helpful frame for analysis. She understands "the particular shape that the death will take – her being overtaken by the huge mass of machinery on the flood...[as] the 'machinery of a story'" (131). Like Nancy Miller, Homans conceptualizes the "plots of women's literature" as being "about the plots of literature itself, about the constraints the maxim places on rendering a female life in fiction" (Miller 46).

Along similar metafictional lines, Penny Boumelha argues quite convincingly that the ending can be read as a manifestation of “the formal-cum-ideological impasse that the novel has reached by virtue of its concentration on the development of a woman for whom no meaningful future – no ‘end’ in its other sense – can be imagined” (87). As a novel, Maggie’s story must end; the form requires closure. Yet, she comes up against what Homans terms “the inexorable laws of feminine plotting” (124). As George Levine puts it, “[t]he narrative leads to a situation in which satisfactory resolution is unattainable in the terms her adopted realistic mode would allow” (*Realistic* 45); Maggie’s story, as a woman’s story, cannot reach a satisfactory realist resolution. Levine continues that “[t]he notorious prominence of the sea and drownings in Victorian literature merely emphasizes the inescapability of the extremes realism tries to deny” (206). Maggie’s death by drowning illustrates the limits of the realist mode for women – the excesses and extremes exiled from realism burst up like the waters of the Floss and sweep Maggie to her death and the novel to its close. Boumelha argues that the flood, the expression of Maggie’s “dammed-up energy created by [her] frustrated ambitions and desires, intellectual and sexual” (87), washes away St. Oggs and all of Maggie’s “real world,” “bringing with it the victory of symbol, legend, fantasy” (87). Though I agree that the flood is a romantic manifestation of Maggie’s inner life, and that it does undoubtedly wash away St. Oggs, the end of the novel does not entail the “victory” of fantasy; the flood does not completely undo the rather vehement critique of uncomplicated romance reading and fantasy that has been traced throughout. Rather, the conclusion of the novel suggests that, while romantic fantasies and uncomplicated reading of romance are dangerous in that they involve self-erasure and diminish the capacity for sympathy, they may be all that is

available to women. While the uncomplicated surrender to romance is problematic, it may be the only foreseeable end to the feminine struggle between “inward impulse” and “outward fact.”

Thus the novel as a whole, though critical of uncomplicated romantic reading, recognizes the temptation of such practices: they are one of the few available outlets for women to express repressed desires, and conceptualise the plotting of their lives in a meaningful way. Unlike Jane Eyre, Maggie cannot take control of the plot and genres of her life; she cannot write her own story and control its oscillations from realism to romance, but persists in being written on by the various texts, men and genres she encounters. Maggie is unable to become a writer and to narrate her own story because of her strongly relational self-development. As Fraiman points out, Maggie is unable to “enter the story of self-culture” because she exists in a “stubbornly relational mode” (140). Eliot’s project of morally upright realism – that is, realism that encourages sympathy – depends upon characters being read in “interlocutory terms” (127); each personage is constituted “by manifold social relationships” (125). While *Jane Eyre* is a heroine-centred bildungsroman, *The Mill on the Floss* is, as Jerome Buckley and Charlotte Goodman argue, a doubled bildungsroman: it tells of the development of Maggie and Tom Tulliver. Maggie consistently perceives herself as part of a family and a town; it is only when she slips into the romantic mode that she abandons this realist relational self-conception. Thus for Maggie, resolution is not about achieving personal control over one’s personal narrative – about becoming an autobiographer – but about finding a relational mode of existence that does not compromise and crush her individual self. In the real world of the Tullivers and Dodsons, of St. Oggs, this resolution is

unachievable. She can renounce family and lose herself, by moving away to work as a governess, or she can embrace family and renounce self, by living with her aunt Glegg. The only available resolution for Maggie is that of the flood: a romance that allows for the sympathetic demands of realism. The novel ends neither with a complete glorification or refusal of romance, but with a complex and ambivalent understanding of the role of romance in women's life stories and self-understanding.

Chapter Four

“One Reads A Lot About Love...But What Happens In Real Life?” Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*

In chapters one and two, I analysed *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* in order to illustrate the complex relationship between realism, romance, and feminine reading in these novels. As nineteenth-century women writers, Brontë and Eliot tried, to different degrees, to associate their work with Victorian realism, as opposed to romance. As mentioned, romance was thought to be the older, effeminate, and illogical form, while realism was posited as modern, masculine and logical. However, neither Brontë nor Eliot fully eradicates the romantic impulse in her novels, and romance, shaped by feminine reading, resurfaces in episodes throughout *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*. Laurie Langbauer refers to romance as realism’s “shadowy enemy, always rising again, because, in fighting it, realism is fighting its own shadow” (200-201). Even more than a “shadowy enemy,” romance is necessary for Jane and Maggie as a source of meaning. Though realism, during the nineteenth century, “served precisely the function of making the world ‘meaningful’” (Levine *Realistic* 254), for these female protagonists it is the interplay between romance and realism that lends meaning to the limited real-life experience open to them.

Virginia Woolf, however, is not a nineteenth but a twentieth-century woman writer. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes, “by the twentieth-century, middle-class women are technically – on paper – rather more part of the economic world, rather less legally and politically circumscribed than they were in the nineteenth” (42). In other words, the real-life possibilities for a twentieth-century woman are rather wider than those of a

nineteenth-century woman. One might expect then that twentieth-century women writers would engage in realism whole-heartedly for feminine real-life experience is expanding. However, many theorists including DuPlessis, Elaine Showalter, Nancy Cervetti, and Rachel Brownstein argue that Woolf's fiction strategically deconstructs and reverses the ideals of nineteenth-century writing to invent "a new kind of fiction" (Brownstein 278). DuPlessis, borrowing Woolf's terms, calls this new method "breaking the sequence" which entails "delegitimizing the specific narrative and cultural orders of nineteenth-century fiction" (34); Showalter similarly states that twentieth-century women's literature called for an "ironic inversion of some of the most cherished Victorian notions of male and female codes of living" (243). Most Woolf criticism is thus centred on Woolf's revolutionary modernism¹⁰. Indeed, Woolf herself often asserts the ideological break between the nineteenth and twentieth century. In *Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown*, she argues that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (4) and in "How It Strikes a Contemporary," she famously wrote:

We are sharply cut off from our predecessors. A shift in the scale – the war, the sudden slip of masses held in position for ages – has shaken the fabric from top to bottom, alienated us from the past and made us perhaps too vividly conscious of the present. Every day we find ourselves doing, saying, or thinking things that would have been impossible to our fathers. (238)

Yet, Woolf's work, specifically her first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915), continues to wrestle with and negotiate the nineteenth-century tension between realism and

¹⁰ There is a body of recent scholarly work, including Steve Ellis' *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians* and Allison Booth's *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf*, that explores Woolf as a post-Victorian rather than a strict modernist.

romance, and the role of feminine reading in this struggle. However, while Brontë and Eliot deal with romance as the older, effeminate and illogical form, Woolf treats Victorian realism as such. For Woolf, Victorian realism is the “shadowy enemy” that, somehow, has a certain beauty and meaning and cannot be completely dismissed. Though she is working to produce something new – and her work is undeniably modernist – her novels do not unequivocally dismiss and reverse Victorian conventions and concerns. As Woolf writes in *A Room of One’s Own*, “masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the masses is behind the single voice” (98) and a woman’s novel must be read

as if it were the last volume in a fairly long series, continuing all those other books that I have been glancing at...For books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately. And I must also consider her – this unknown woman [writer] – as the descendant of all those other women whose circumstances I have been glancing at and see what she inherits of their characteristics and restrictions (120)

Taking off from this continuity, this chapter will analyse *The Voyage Out* for the ways in which it continues and responds to the nineteenth-century tension between realism and romance, and the role of feminine reading in this struggle, as exemplified by *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*. Woolf parodies the Victorian realist plot in her portrayal of the Dalloways and of Arthur Venning and Susan Warrington, and Rachel’s own narrative at once resists and is tempted by these conventions. While the novel begins in an Austen-esque realist mode, the final scenes of Rachel’s life are narrated according

to what I will call a modernist-romantic aesthetic. This “new” mode follows Northrop Frye’s assertion that “[t]here may be noticed a general tendency to react most strongly against the mode immediately preceding, and, to a lesser extent, to return to some of the standards of the modal grandfather” (*Anatomy* 62). As many critics such as George Levine and Laurie Langbauer point out, romance was perceived to be the older genre, thus the “modal grandfather” of modernism. Indeed, Woolf’s most modernist passages in *The Voyage Out*, Rachel’s fever sequence, bear a strong resemblance to a more existential romance.

Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*, like *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*, is a female-centered *Bildungsroman*. The heroine, Rachel Vinrace, however, begins the novel at age twenty-four and unlike feisty Jane and Maggie she is “weak rather than decided” and defined by a “lack of colour and definite outline. Moreover [unlike loquacious Jane and Maggie], a hesitation in speaking, or rather a tendency to use the wrong words, made her seem more than normally incompetent for her years” (16). In addition, when first introduced, Rachel is not a reader: “she did not naturally care for books” (30). The novel details her journey from her father’s boat to a South American resort with her aunt and surrogate mother, Helen Ambrose. While in South America, Rachel meets Terence Hewet, an aspiring novelist. The two fall in love, become engaged, and then the novel ends abruptly with Rachel’s death by fever. Helen and Terence, along with the various secondary characters in *The Voyage Out*, influence Rachel’s growth by shaping her reading habits. The novel’s many peripheral characters, from Miss Allan who is compiling a literary anthology to Susan Warrington who reads insipid ladies’ fiction

aloud to her aunt, represent different modes of reading and indeed, Rachel's voyage out is as much a journey into literature as it is into adulthood.

In depicting Rachel's struggle to learn to read as a woman, Woolf also, like Brontë and Eliot, grapples with the "interesting question of realism or romance" ("In a Library" 53). As Joanna Frye points out, "Chapter I begins in the tone of a novel of manners: light and ironic, distanced yet personal" (402) – this chapter does not even mention Rachel and "seems at first to open like a typical Victorian novel" (Kahane 103). The novel begins:

As the streets that lead from the Strand to the Embankment are very narrow, it is better not to walk down them arm-in-arm. If you persist, lawyers' clerks will have to make flying leaps into the mud; young lady typists will have to fidget behind you. In the streets of London where beauty goes unregarded, eccentricity must pay the penalty, and it is better not to be very tall, to wear a long blue cloak, or to beat the air with your left hand. (*Voyage Out* 5)

As the novel continues, however, the tone shifts. While the novel begins in a Victorian realist mode, as the narrative focuses more and more on Rachel's inner life, the genre becomes more romantic, as I have previously defined it – it shifts into a surreal, dream-like realm, characterized by the dissolution of self and a sense of distance from the outside world. This shift from realist to romantic mode, as in the two other novels under study, is linked to scenes of reading and scenes of love or romance.

As mentioned, the novel begins in a primarily realist mode and reads much like a Victorian novel of manners. Rachel is introduced as the product of Victorian society.

Rachel was raised in the countryside by her aunts, who, among other things, feared that her excessive piano playing would ruin her chances of marriage (16), censored her reading (30), and structured her days – she would go for walks or visits during a day that was “cut into four pieces by their meals. These divisions were absolutely rigid, the contents of the days having to accommodate themselves within the four rigid bars” (214). Woolf is, as one would expect, critical of this staid Victorian system:

She [Rachel] had been educated as the majority of well-to-do girls in the last part of the nineteenth century were educated...But there was no subject in the world which she knew accurately. Her mind was in the state of an intelligent man's in the beginning of the reign of Queen Elizabeth; she would believe practically anything she was told, invent reasons for anything she said. (29-30)

In this way, Rachel is very similar to Maggie, who emerges from her “school-life” like all other girls “in the civilized world of that day” with only “shreds and patches of feeble literature and false history; with much futile information about Saxon and other kinds of doubtful example; but unhappily quite without that knowledge of the irreversible laws within and without her” (*MOF* 303). Maggie and Rachel are the products of an unsatisfactory Victorian female education system. And Rachel's ignorance is not limited to intellectual matters: she is so sheltered that she does not even know why men try to kiss women (77). Unlike Maggie and Jane, however, Rachel has little interest in reading or acquiring knowledge of the world and instead prefers to spend all of her time at the piano, and “[a]bsorbed by her music she accepted her lot very complacently” (33).

While Rachel is at this nascent stage of development, her story is primarily narrated in the realist mode. According to the tenets of Victorian realism as defined by Levine and others, the early section of the book tends to emphasize verisimilitude, gentle irony, and moderation. There are no dream-like sequences, or fantastical episodes and the scenes are peppered with semi-ironic Victorian platitudes such as: “[e]ach of the ladies, being after the fashion of their sex, highly trained and promoting men’s talk without listening to it, could think – about the education of children, about the use of fog sirens in an opera – without betraying herself” (14). However, with the arrival of the Dalloways, who bring with them first tastes of love and of literature, Rachel’s “voyage out” commences and the tone of the novel begins to shift.

With the arrival of the fashionable Clarissa and Richard Dalloway, Rachel encounters “almost a parody of the Victorian ideal” of love and marriage (Kennard “Power” 153). Clarissa wonders “whether it is really good for a woman to live with a man who is morally her superior, as Richard is mine. It makes one so dependent. I suppose I feel for him what my mother and women of her generation felt for Christ” (*VO* 48).¹¹ Richard extols his wife’s virtues as the Angel in the House: “I have been able to come home to my wife in the evening and to find that she has spent her day in calling, music, play with the children, domestic duties – what you will; her illusions have not been destroyed. She gives me courage to go on. The strain of public life is very great”

¹¹ Though Clarissa Dalloway and her marriage are overtly associated with Jane Austen in *The Voyage Out*, there is a notable parallel between Clarissa’s language and Jane Eyre’s at the height of her passion for Rochester: “My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol” (*JE* 257). However, while Jane feels this passion intensely and begins to succumb to the dangerous force of romance, Clarissa employs such language as she uses literature more broadly: as superficial feminine decoration. The real and tempting anti-social passion in *Jane Eyre* has been reduced to conventional platitude – while Jane’s assertion disrupts the status quo, Clarissa’s enforces it.

(62). While Rachel openly professes that she “shall never marry” (57), and as such seems to outright reject the life the Dalloways represent, she is undeniably attracted and seduced by the couple. The Dalloways, and the vision of Victorian marriage and femininity which they embody, awaken something in Rachel. They make her realize how little she knows and how much she wants. When Rachel talks to Clarissa,

[s]he was overcome by an intense desire to tell Mrs. Dalloway things she had never told anyone – things she had not realized herself until this moment. ‘I am lonely,’ she began. ‘I want – ’ she did not know what she wanted, so that she could not finish the sentence; but her lip quivered. (57)

Clarissa responds, “[w]hen I was your age I wanted too. No one understood until I met Richard. He gave me all I wanted” (57). Clarissa and Richard suggest the definition necessary for Rachel’s “shapeless” self (J. Frye 403): she ought to fall in love, become a wife. Rachel not only witnesses the love relationship between Clarissa and Richard, but she briefly participates. When alone with Richard Dalloway, “[h]olding her tightly, he kissed her passionately, so that she felt the hardness of his body and the roughness of his cheek printed upon hers” (73). With this kiss that notably *imprints* her, Rachel, like Jane Eyre, experiences the expansion of world associated with love and romance. With Rochester, Jane feels that “my thin crescent-destiny seemed to enlarge; the blanks of existence were filled up” (*JE* 138). Similarly, with this illicit kiss from Richard Dalloway, Rachel feels that “[l]ife seemed to hold infinite possibilities she had never guessed at” (*VO* 73) and “her small world [was] becoming wonderfully enlarged” (80). Woolf recycles Brontë’s now-conventional romantic language in a semi-ironic way. Rachel’s encounter with Richard, like Jane’s with Rochester, does “enlarge” her world (it

introduces her to sexuality) and is morally fraught (both heroines are flirting with married men); however, Rochester is Jane's true love – he is indeed destined to fill up the blanks of her existence – while Richard merely passes through Rachel's narrative. He neither loves Rachel nor does he really know her: his kiss is purely sexual. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane is tempted by the magic of generic romance, by the possibility of entry into an easy and other world; by the time of *The Voyage Out*, such romance for women has become synonymous with the romance of the courtship plot – novels such as *Jane Eyre* and, to a lesser extent, *The Mill on the Floss*, enforce that for women the only possible realistic outlet for romantic desires is love and marriage. For Rachel, then, the romantic language of “enlarging life's possibilities” represents not entry into a vaguely defined dreamy romance world but into a paradigmatic love plot in which Richard, in this case, ought to become her all-fulfilling destiny.

As in *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*, this kiss – this love episode – is accompanied by a shift into the romantic mode. After the kiss, Woolf describes the first in a series of Rachel's fantastical nightmares:

She dreamt that she was walking down a long tunnel, which grew so narrow by degrees that she could touch the damp bricks on either side...she found herself trapped in it, bricks meeting her wherever she turned, alone with a little deformed man who squatted on the floor gibbering, with long nails. His face was pitted and like the face of an animal. The wall behind him oozed with damp, which collected in drops and slid down...she felt herself pursued...A voice moaned for her; eyes desired her. (74)

While in the daylight, Richard's kiss opens up the dream-world of romance and possibility – the beauty and seduction of surrender to the Victorian ideal of marriage and love – by night, the nightmare side of the dream appears. Though as she declares “I liked him, and I liked being kissed” (79), with the kiss, Rachel realizes that as a woman she is “a creeping hedged-in thing, driven cautiously between high walls, here turned aside, there plunged in darkness, made dull and crippled for ever” (79). The romantic paradigm is narrow; it traps women and deforms men. Seductive and entrapping romance is, like in *The Mill on the Floss*, symbolised by water imagery in *The Voyage Out*: Rachel's dream is pervaded with “damp.” When Richard kisses Rachel:

She fell back in her chair, with tremendous beats of the heart, each of which sent black waves across her eyes...Her head was cold, her knees shaking, and the physical pain of the emotion was so great that she could only keep herself moving above the great leaps of her heart.

She...gradually ceased to feel, for a chill of body and mind crept over her.
(73)

With the kiss, “black waves” cross her eyes and she “ceased to feel” – the language here undeniably parallels that of Maggie and Stephen's boat trip. Rachel and Richard's kiss also takes place on a boat; the two are knocked together by turbulent waters, which, like the “machinery” of the story in *The Mill*'s final flood, mimic the forces of conventional genres on female characters. As these waves affect Rachel, she, as Maggie and Jane do, experiences the dissolution of self that often accompanies romance and the love plot. After meeting the Dalloways, Rachel has a very Jane-ian episode in which she looks in the mirror and “come[s] to the depressing conclusion, since the arrival

of the Dalloways, that her face was not the face she wanted, and in all probability never would be” (37) and she wonders if she can be herself, “as a real everlasting thing, different from anything else, unmergeable[,]...in spite of the Dalloways” (81). The Dalloways, and the version of love they introduce to Rachel, entail that she narrow and define herself to fit a particular ideal or mould, to be, like Clarissa, “astonishingly like an eighteenth-century masterpiece – a Reynolds or a Romney” (42).

As was hinted in the previous paragraph, Richard and Clarissa Dalloway *imprint* Rachel with a particular paradigm of love, marriage, and femininity. As Christine Froula puts it, “Richard is the male defender of the marriage plot as Clarissa is the female” (62). Not only do the Dalloways represent a particular type of marriage, but they represent a marriage *plot*. Richard and Clarissa Dalloway initiate Rachel into a realm of distinctly literary love. As such, the two enlarge her world not only by exposing her to marriage and sexuality, but to literature. Prior to their arrival, Rachel is no great reader; she has read “*Cowper’s Letters* – that kind of thing” (77)¹². However, these readings have not taught her the meaning of a man’s kiss or about her destiny as a woman. Both Clarissa and Richard Dalloway respond to this dearth of knowledge by recommending books to Rachel. While the two recommend a number of texts (Clarissa adores Pascal, Shelley and the Brontës while Richard suggests Matthew Arnold and Burke’s *The Speech on the French Revolution – The American Rebellion*), the couple most strongly urges Rachel to read Jane Austen. Clarissa says that while she “couldn’t live” without the Brontës, she would “rather live without them than without Jane Austen” (54) and Richard lauds Austen as “the greatest female writer we possess” for “she does not attempt to write like a

¹² Not only is Cowper a Victorian writer, but he suffered, as Rachel does, from melancholy and mental illness.

man” (58-59). Notably, at the start of the Dalloways’ stay, Rachel proclaims that she does not like Austen for she is “so like a tight plait” (54)¹³. Rachel is resistant not only to the restrictions of Austen-ian femininity, but of Austenian genre; as realist heroine-centred novels, “[a]ll of Austen’s seven story-lines fall within the genre; all are concerned with the quest for an ideal love-match” (Hinnant 298). The only plot choice for an Austen-ian heroine is conventional love.

Yet, as several critics have noted, Woolf herself is not entirely critical of Austen. In fact, she has written several essays on Austen and praises her for “the imagination, the penetration, the insight, the courage, the sincerity which are required to bring before us one of those perfectly normal and simple incidents of average human life” (“Jane Austen 1916” 14) – Woolf lauds Austen for her realism. This suggests that the primary criticism of Richard and Clarissa is not their choice of feminine literature, but their reading strategies. Richard and Clarissa’s appreciation of Austen is representative of their conventional gendered approaches to women’s reading more generally. Richard values women writers as he values women: he appreciates Austen’s capacity to, like his Angel in the House wife, to “take...[his] mind off the guns of Britain, and divert him in an exquisite, quaint, sprightly, and slightly ridiculous world” (59). Within minutes of having *Persuasion* read to him, Richard falls asleep. Richard is representative of a conventionally masculine Victorian approach to feminine literature.

¹³ Woolf seems here to agree with Brontë’s description of *Pride and Prejudice*: “a carefully-fenced, highly cultivated garden with neat borders and delicate flowers -- but no glance of a bright vivid physiognomy -- no open country -- no fresh air -- no blue hill -- no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen in their elegant but confined houses” (*Letters* 10).

Clarissa, therefore, represents a particularly negative stereotype of feminine reading. Though she, unlike Rachel, is evidently well read, Clarissa's engagement with literature is entirely superficial. As Nancy Cervetti explains,

Clarissa refers to *Antigone*, Shakespeare, Shelley, Jane Austen, *Wuthering Heights*, and the Brontës... However, upon closer examination, one sees that Clarissa garbles the Shelley quote and uses Pascal as a sleeping pill... The scene of reading is neither an experiment or a dialogue for Clarissa... Rather, she uses literature in the way she uses other material objects, like her clothes, scents, jewellery, and furs, to fill and maintain the space between her body and others. (104)

For Clarissa, reading is a feminine accessory and accomplishment, not unlike her "scents, jewellery, and furs." When she reads *Persuasion* she perceives it only as her husband does – as a pretty and proper escape – and does not notice that in this novel, according to Woolf, Austen is beginning to recognize a world outside of her usual scope and "discover that the world is larger, more mysterious, and more romantic than she had supposed" ("Jane Austen 1925" 154). Clarissa is the epitome of a superficial female reader.

Though the Dalloways' engagement with literature is vapid and silly, it is also dangerous. For Rachel is affected by their visit, and, upon leaving, Clarissa leaves Rachel a copy of *Persuasion* with the Dalloways' contact information written inside. This book signifies the persuasive marriage plot – and the possibility of entry into the Dalloways' world – that continues to haunt Rachel's *Bildungsroman* as generic romance haunts the realist novel. Throughout *The Voyage Out*, Rachel's narrative wrestles with the shape and conventions of the Victorian realist novel that the Dalloways parody. While the

Dalloways, as representatives of conventional Victorian culture, are treated ironically, the implications of their narrative for Rachel's – a woman's – life are significant. It is worth comparing Mr. and Mrs. Dalloway to Rachel's equally silly and Victorian aunts. Though they receive far briefer treatment in the narrative, they too represent a world which is "so like a tight plait." And Rachel, though she "wanted so vehemently to smash to atoms" that world and all it entails, also admits that "there's a sort of beauty in it... They're all wrong, perhaps, but there's a sort of beauty in it...it was very real" (218). There is something beautiful and affecting about "the fine, closely woven substance of their life at home... with its four meals, its punctuality, and servants on the stairs at half-past ten" (218) that Rachel, and by extension Woolf and the narrative as a whole, cannot completely dismiss.

Soon after the Dalloways' departure, Rachel leaves her father's ship and travels to South America with Helen and Ridley Ambrose. Awakened to the worlds of literature and sexuality, Rachel becomes a reader. It is only during this period, after the Dalloways and before the commencement of her love plot with Terence, that Rachel can read and think freely – though Helen offers her "Defoe, Maupassant, or some spacious chronicle of family life, Rachel chose modern books" (123). When Rachel reads "the moderns," she accesses alternative feminine plots unlike those of the Dalloways, which first introduced her to the worlds of literature, femininity and love. In true Woolf-ian form, this period of intellectual freedom is that in which Rachel has a room of her own, "a room cut off from the rest of the house, large, private – a room in which she could play, read, think, defy the world, a fortress as well as a sanctuary" (*VO* 122). Within this room, Rachel reads Ibsen in one of the most extended scenes of reading in the novel. As Rachel

reads, “her eyes were concentrated almost sternly upon the page, and from her breathing, which was slow but repressed, it could be seen that her whole body was constrained by the working of her mind” (122). This “working of the mind” is her struggle to make the “transition from the imaginary world to the real world” (122). For when Rachel reads, she identifies so strongly with the text that she becomes one of its characters. After closing Ibsen,

She was speaking partly as herself, and partly as the heroine of the play she had just read...Ibsen’s plays always left her in that condition. She acted them for days at a time...Helen was aware that it was not all acting, and that some sort of change was taking place in the human being. (122-123)

For Rachel, then, the imaginary world of the text blends into the real world: like Maggie and Jane, Rachel’s reading is romantic. As Susan Friedman phrases it, “[r]eading what she likes involves for Rachel an identification in which the text becomes life and her life becomes the text” (110). Reading is an intellectual process – “the exercise of reading left her mind contracting and expanding like the mainspring of a clock” (*VO* 124) – but it is also emotional and sympathetic. Most significantly, Rachel’s reading is profoundly *physical*. Rachel reads

with the curious literalness of one to whom written sentences are unfamiliar, and handling words as though they were made of wood, separately of great importance, and possessed of shapes like tables or chairs. (123)

Rachel handles texts as if they are physical entities, as if they are part of the “real” world, rather than the “imaginary.” Words to her have physical shapes; books, like her copy of Balzac, lie “naked in the sun” (174). This physicality is a central part of Woolf’s theory of reading. In “Hours in a Library” (1916), Woolf writes that “the true reader” is one “to whom reading is more of the nature of brisk exercise in the open air than of sheltered study...to him it is not a sedentary pursuit at all” (55). Indeed, after attempting to read Gibbon, Rachel throws the book aside, “rose and walked on” (174).

It would seem, then, that during this period, Rachel is a model reader: sympathetic, physical, intellectual. In “How Should One Read a Book?” (1925), Woolf outlines her theory of the ideal reader. She writes that, in reading, “man and woman are alike” (389): for both, reading “is not merely sympathizing and understanding; it is also criticising and judging” (396). The reading process, Woolf theorizes, can be divided into two essential stages. During the first stage, called “the actual reading,” the reader is receptive to the many twists and surprises of the text: “[o]ne’s judgment is suspended, for one does not know what is coming next. Surprise, admiration, boredom, interest succeed each other in such quick succession that when, at last, the end is reached, one is for the most part in a state of complete bewilderment” (396-397). This is indeed the state which Rachel enters when she reads. So often does she close a book with questions, and ask “What is the truth? What’s the truth of it all?” (*VO* 122), as she does immediately after finishing Ibsen. The second stage of reading is that of the “after reading.” Once the reader has completed the text, “some process seems to have been finished without one’s being aware of it. The different details which have accumulated in reading assemble themselves in their proper places. The book takes on a definite shape...Now one can think of the

book as a whole.” Though the “actual reading” is the more pleasurable and exciting process, it is the “after reading,” in which “we hold the book clear, secure, and (to the best of our powers) complete in our mind,” that leaves a “profound and lasting” effect on the reader (“How?” 397). While Rachel has mastered “actual reading,” she does not continue on to the “after reading” that ought to have such a significant effect on her development. For, at the peak of her reading prowess, Rachel again encounters the conventional Victorian feminine plotline embodied by Clarissa and Richard Dalloway.

In South America, Rachel first re-encounters this plotline as a spectator: “Susan Warrington and Arthur Venning, whose bliss Rachel secretly scorns, act out the conventional courtship-and-marriage plot” (Froula 76). Before her derisive eyes, Susan and Arthur fall in love and enact the Victorian romantic love story. For Arthur and Susan, their love lifts them out of their everyday dismal realities into a dream-like world of romance. When they are together, it seems as if everything “had a kind of meaning” (*VO* 137) and their love feels like “the most perfect thing in the world” (138). Though they are enacting a stereotypical plot, they feel that their union is special for, “there was only one Arthur Venning, and only one Susan who could marry him” (180). The love-state brings them to a state of dream-like semi-consciousness akin to that which Maggie and Jane experience: Arthur looks “as if he were trying to put things seen in a dream beside real things” (138) and Susan sits “with her eyes shut and an absorbed look upon her face, as though she were not altogether conscious” (139). As the two continue their engagement, “the shy happiness and surprise of the engaged couple had gradually been replaced by a comfortable, tolerant state of mind, as if they had already done with the adventure of intimacy and were taking up their parts” (248). The romantic episode of the proposal is

indeed just that, an episode, in the lengthy real-life performance of marriage and gender roles. Rachel is highly critical of this entire spectacle. She says to Terence, “I don’t like that...it makes one sorry for them” (139). Though she does not articulate why she does not “like that,” it can be safely inferred that Susan and Arthur’s courtship functions like Clarissa’s novels and Richard’s kiss to remind her of her narrow status as a “creeping hedged-in thing” (79), as a woman.

Despite her derision of Susan and Arthur, and her avowal that she will never marry, Rachel very shortly enters into a near identical love plot of her own with Terence Hewet. Like Susan with Arthur, Jane with Rochester, and Maggie with Stephen, Rachel, when she is with Terence, seems to lift away from the ordinary world to another, romantic, level. From Terence, “all life seemed to radiate” (175) and with him, she feels an “extraordinary intensity in everything” (200). He “moved as a god” and shows her “a depth in the world hitherto unknown” (227). Rachel, like Susan, believes her love to be special and unique: “[t]hat any one of these people had ever felt what she felt, or could ever feel it, or had even the right to pretend for a single second that they were capable of feeling it, appalled her” (300-301). Just as Susan repeats to herself after her engagement with Arthur “I’m happy, I’m happy, I’m happy” (148), after Terence proposes, Rachel tells herself “This is happiness, I suppose” (290). Also, like Susan, Jane and Maggie, Rachel loses her ability to think critically. She “could not reason about” Terence (175); “the sunny land outside the window being no less capable of analysing its own colour and heat than she was capable of analysing hers” (227).

This state of extraordinary semi-consciousness bears a very strong resemblance to Maggie’s boat ride sequence with Stephen. When Rachel begins to fall in love with

Terence, her mind becomes like “the sliding of a river, quick, quicker, quicker still, as it races to a waterfall” (227). Indeed, though Terence does not propose on a boat, he proposes soon after a boat ride. As they float along the water, he thinks,

Rachel’s presence so near him lulled thought asleep...In some strange way the boat became identified with himself, and just as it would have been useless for him to get up and steer the boat, so was it useless for him to struggle any longer with the irresistible force of his own feelings. He was drawn on and on away from all he knew, slipping over barriers and past landmarks into unknown water...profound peace, enveloped in a deeper unconsciousness (273)

The parallels here to the boat sequence in *The Mill on the Floss* are undeniable. Like Maggie and Stephen, Rachel and Terence are drawn on along the water “without being able to offer any resistance” (274). On this boat, they enter a dream state in which “[h]e did not seem to be speaking, or she to be hearing” (278) – “the whole world was unreal” (289). Wollaeger aptly describes the proposal scene as “a prolonged moment of surreal dislocation in which the pair seems drugged and confused, the landscape uncanny and disorienting” (56-57). While for Maggie the current represents uncomplicated surrender to romantic fantasy, for Rachel, the rushing water symbolizes a similar surrender to the conventions of the Victorian love story.

Though Rachel and Terence are unaware of the force that drives them forward, Helen notes that “the water [is] racing because the earth was shaped to make it race” (227). This might imply that the inclination towards romance is natural, and not culturally constructed. However, a careful reader will have noticed that though Helen is a fairly

emancipated woman – she gives Rachel a room of her own and wants to educate her about “the facts of life” (163) – she is still largely influenced by the gendered cultural ideals of her time. Helen Ambrose, like *Jane Eyre*’s Helen Burns, represents an attractive feminine role model, but one that is ultimately collaborative with the patriarchal system. When Helen thinks about educating Rachel, for example, she “pray[s] for a young man to come to me help” (95). Helen symbolizes “women’s complicity with these [patriarchal] texts” (Froula 81), and “Helen is both a survivor and an enabler of patriarchal culture” (Cervetti 113). Thus, while Helen’s statement that the water rushes because the earth is shaped to make it do so asserts that the inclination towards romance is natural, the novel insists that the romance which attracts women like Susan and Rachel is one that has been carefully plotted by previous texts. Romance in this novel is strictly associated with the romantic love plot; it is profoundly literary and conventional. The novel as a whole argues that the earth is thus shaped by the force of past texts, such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*, and the gender paradigms they represent.

Rachel and Terence’s relationship continues to emphasize the connection between love and literature first introduced with the *Dalloways*. Not only does the world radiate with a new meaning when Rachel is with Terence, but “the very words of books were steeped in radiance” (175). Rachel and Terence’s love has a rather complex relationship to books: while on the one hand, both lovers continually assert the inadequacy of previous literature to express their feelings and the specialness of their romance, on the other hand, their relationship is nearly entirely scripted according to the conventional love narrative. When Terence begins to fall in love with Rachel he reaches for poetry to describe his elation: “[h]e shouted out a line of poetry, but the words escaped him, and he

stumbled among lines and fragments of lines which had no meaning at all except for the beauty of the words” (187). Rachel even explicitly states that “none of the books she read, from *Wuthering Heights* to *Man and Superman*, and the plays of Ibsen, suggested from their analysis of love that what their heroines felt was what she was feeling now. It seemed to her that her sensations had no name” (228-229). However, as Beverly Ann Schlack argues, there are far more similarities between Rachel and her literary predecessors than she imagines:

in her feeling that the passionate, transcendent love of Cathy and Heathcliff offers no enlightenment, there is a significant if only half-realized irony. Rachel’s own love story, like Cathy’s, is consummated in death...Both heroines suffer delirious states in which each fears the self-surrender required by passionate love [sic]. Each resists the concept of domesticity and the demands of married life; each dies with her deepest capacities for expressing passionate love unfulfilled. (19)

Also, in “[f]eeling that ‘he seemed to be Rachel as well as himself’ (353), Hewet reflects the same intense identification that caused Catherine to declare of Heathcliff: ‘He’s more myself than I am’” (Schlack 15). Thus, to a large extent, Rachel and Terence are unaware of the force of past stories on their relationship. Looking back on their engagement, Rachel thinks:

the methods by which she had reached her present position seemed to her very strange, and the strangest thing about them was that she had not known where they were leading her. That was the strange thing, that one did not know where one was going, or what one wanted, and followed

blindly...always unprepared and amazed and knowing nothing; but one thing led to another and by degrees something had formed itself out of nothing....Perhaps, then, everyone really knew as she knew now where they were going; and things formed themselves into a pattern not only for her, but for them (321)

This pattern is that of conventional literary love, or the marriage plot. Past stories are the force which leads her “blindly” through life, which establish the “pattern” which her life, as a woman’s life, must follow.

For despite all of Rachel’s claims that she “never fell in love, if falling in love is what people say it is” (300), her love relationship is largely circumscribed by the conventions of the novels that came before her own. Though in scorning Susan and Arthur, Rachel derides such conventions, “she, a literary character, cannot ‘live’ without a script” (Froula 82). And indeed, Rachel and Terence’s proposal scene reads much like the two are memorizing their lines. As Cervetti notes, “during discussions of love with Terence, Rachel often repeats what he says as though she is trying to learn the script” (115): “‘We are happy together’ ... ‘Very happy,’ she answered.’ ... ‘We love each other,’ Terence said. ‘We love each other,’ she repeated” (*VO* 278). The script continues even past the proposal scene. Once engaged, Rachel and Terence begin to receive letters of congratulations from their acquaintances. Rachel dismisses these letters as lies, for no one could truly understand her relationship with Terence; however, she notices that “[i]t was strange, considering how very different these people were, that they used almost the same sentences when they wrote to congratulate her upon her engagement” (300). Though Rachel criticizes the script that such letters represent, she finds herself writing thank-you

notes that “bore a considerable likeness to those which she had condemned” (302-303). It seems she cannot help but speak through the lens of convention. In entering the surreal world of romance, Rachel is reduced to “woman” (“essentially feminine” [302]) and Terence to “man”:

‘I’m...a man, not a woman.’ ‘A man,’ she repeated, and a curious sense of possession coming over her... This body of his was unreal; the whole world was unreal. ‘What happened?’ he began. ‘Why did I ask you to marry me? How did it happen?’ ‘Did you ask me to marry you?’ she wondered. They faded far away from each other, and neither of them could remember what had been said. (289)

While the “sense of possession” that comes over Rachel can be read as self-possession, the passage as a whole implies that the two of them have become “possessed” by the narrative of romance permissible within the Victorian realist novel: the courtship and marriage plot. By falling in love, like Susan and Arthur, Jane and Rochester, and Maggie and Stephen, Rachel and Terence “fade” away as individuals and dreamily act out the love script provided for them. Though Terence originally stated that he would break the conventional mould and keep Rachel “free” (250),

[o]nce engaged, Terence begins, in spite of himself, to act out the ideological and narrative script of conventional romance, in which he, as the man, instructs and guides the woman. He sharply criticizes her reading of worthless moderns, like Ibsen; he tells her she must answer all the congratulations of their engagement while he works on his novel; he announces that they should have one boy and one girl. (Friedman 113)

As in *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*, uncomplicated surrender to conventional romance constitutes self-surrender and is dangerous in *The Voyage Out*. However, while Jane and Maggie's surrender to romance would be immoral (Jane would become a bigamist, Maggie would be stealing her cousin's beau), Rachel's is not. There are no obvious moral obstacles to Rachel's immersion in romance. In fact, as Jean Kennard notes, "unlike the nineteenth-century heroine...who dies because she cannot marry the right man, Rachel Vinrace...dies because she can" (153). The stream of romance that drives Rachel and Terence together is actually leading them along a smooth and ideal course to the paramount Victorian realist feminine happiness: marriage to the appropriate man. Yet, entry into this literary romance ultimately kills Rachel.

Suddenly, and seemingly without warning, while Terence is reading Milton's *Comus* aloud to Rachel, Rachel's head begins to ache. This headache quickly (and inexplicably) mounts to a state of feverish delirium and leads to Rachel's death. Rachel's death bears a strong resemblance to Maggie's in *The Mill on the Floss*, and, as with that novel, there are several divergent critical theories which attempt to account for the meaning of the heroine's mysterious demise. The primary similarity between Maggie and Rachel's deaths is the recurrence of water images. As Rachel lies in bed, she tries to remember the words of Milton's *Comus* that Terence had read to her just a day before: "Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave,/In twisted braids of lilies knitting/The loose train of thy amber dropping hair" (336). As she focuses on these words, "the glassy, cool, translucent wave was almost visible to her...[and] it was refreshingly cool" (336). As her illness intensifies, she feels herself falling "into a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head...While all her tormentors thought that she was dead, she

was not dead, but curled up at the bottom of the sea” (348). Rachel’s death, like Maggie’s, is a death by symbolic drowning. Cervetti interprets the prevalence of water imagery, and writes that water is “signifying ‘fluidity, softness, comfort, and absence of hardness or resistance.’ Water is the antidote for the hardness of male abstraction” (119). Cervetti goes on to argue that Rachel’s death, like Maggie’s, is a “refusal to serve the institutions of male privilege, marriage, and the masculine plot. Concluding a work of art with the death of the heroine...need not be a sign of victimization, cynicism or futility” (121-122). While Rachel’s retreat into the sea does signify “fluidity” and the “absence of hardness or resistance,” I do not agree that it constitutes a feminine way of thinking that is an “antidote” for patriarchal modes. Rachel and Maggie’s deaths do signify a refusal and response to masculine plots that have limited possibilities (marriage or death) for female protagonists. However, their deaths *are* “a sign of victimization” or “futility” – Maggie and Rachel’s narratives end in death. Rachel’s illness represents the very worst of Maggie’s experience on the water: “she had ceased to have any will of her own; she lay on the top of the wave conscious of some pain, but chiefly of weakness” (*VO* 353). While Maggie recovers a sense of strength in going to rescue her brother, Rachel only languishes in the weakness of complete romantic surrender. As Jane de Gay argues, “Rachel’s absolute disappearance from the narrative and the lack of consolation for her death make it difficult to claim the ending of her story in Nancy Miller’s terms as a ‘feminine “act of victory”” (39). As Maggie does, Rachel drowns as she cannot escape the force of the “machinery” of her female *Bildungsroman*.

Also similar to Maggie’s death, Rachel’s death constitutes entry into a nightmare world of romance that is closely linked to feminine reading practices. Directly prior to the

flood, Maggie is reading Stephen's letter and quoting Thomas à Kempis – she is a passive receptacle for masculine narratives. Likewise, Rachel's headache begins as she listens to Terence read *Comus* to her. Woolf's choice is deliberate: *Comus* is a parable about feminine chastity. Milton's masque tells of an allegorical Lady who is threatened by Comus, the son of Bacchus and Circe. The Lady is ultimately lauded for her "hidden strength/Which if Heav'n gave it, may be term'd her own:/Tis chastity" (418-420). In choosing *Comus* to read aloud to Rachel, Terence imposes a restrictive paradigm of feminine virtue upon her. Sabrina's chaste "twisted braids" (859) are much like Austen's "tight plait." Schlack explains that the allusion to Milton serves "to alert readers to the growing inappropriateness of realistic standards, to the heavily symbolic and allegorical direction in which Woolf's novel is moving" (21). She is correct in that, while the start of the novel begins in a largely realist mode, the conclusion "produces some of Woolf's most modernist writing" (Wollaeger 68). During Rachel's delirium, though "Helen was there all day long; sometimes she said it was lunchtime, and sometimes it was teatime" – though Helen continues to delineate the days for Rachel as her Victorian aunts did – "by the next day all landmarks were obliterated, and the outer world was so far away" (*VO* 336-337). Rachel's illness distances her from the realist world of the conventional Victorian novel and the narrative enters a modernist-romantic mode, which bears a strong resemblance to the romantic episodes in *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*. As with Jane first in love with Rochester, Maggie on the boat, and Rachel during her proposal scene, Rachel's final illness entails that she "retreats from personality and from the particular facts of individual existence" (J. Frye 406). She struggles to remember "what she had felt, or of what she had been doing and thinking three days before" and enters an

existence in which she is “isolated alone with her body” (*VO* 337). In this romantic state, the surreal and frightening dream she had after Richard Dalloway’s kiss recurs: she “found herself walking through a tunnel under the Thames, where there were little deformed women sitting in archways playing cards, while the bricks of which the wall was made oozed with damp, which collected into drops and slid down the wall” (338). In her illness, there is “a gulf between her world and the ordinary world” (335); Rachel enters a romantic state akin to that associated with falling in love.

However, in her delirium, Rachel is definitively alone: “Rachel withdraws into a state of narcissistic singularity” (Kahane 100) that is not usually associated with love. In contrast to Maggie, her death is an escape from relational feminine existence. She withdraws from Terence and forgets their relationship during her illness. Yet the parallels to the romance of Rachel’s love scenes are strong; Rachel drops to the bottom of the ocean when she is ill, and when she and Terence first get engaged she feels that they “had dropped to the bottom of the world together” (281); both her illness and their engagement are described as a “dream.” Woolf draws such parallels in order to illustrate the romantic illusion of oneness in love and the fundamental solitude hidden beneath idealized Victorian love conventions. Though convention dictates that in love the lover becomes “not single but double” (327) and that a couple ought to be “joined for ever” (100), strong and indivisible – like the one heart beating in both Cathy and Heathcliff, and the string tying Jane’s heart to Rochester – in reality, the lovers remain two individuals, struggling to understand one another. When Rachel and Terence turn “to see themselves in the glass,” they are “chilled” because “instead of being vast and indivisible they were really very small and separate, the size of the glass leaving a large space for the reflection of

other things” (310). In reality, one cannot actually surrender to romance in love for surrender implies ease and, for Rachel and Terence, loving union “will be a fight” (289). The only surrender to romance that can take place will be within the individual, as it is with Rachel. As Kahane argues, “[i]f Maggie is rescued from alienation by a final fraternal embrace...Rachel is rescued from division by her own solitary oneness, rescued by her body from the marriage plot and its demands for the couple, for coupling” (Kahane 100). After Rachel dies, Terence tries to reconcile her death according to the tropes of Victorian romance:

An immense feeling of peace came over Terence...they seemed to be thinking together; he seemed to be Rachel as well as himself...this was death. It was nothing; it was to cease to breathe. It was happiness; it was perfect happiness. They had now what they had always wanted to have, the union which had been impossible while they lived...he said, ‘No two people have ever been so happy as we have been. No one has ever loved as we have loved.’ (360-361)

He writes an alternate ending to their story, an ending in which like Jane and Rochester, he and Rachel live eternally together as one, thinking the same thoughts, experiencing the elusive, perfect and unique union that they could never achieve while Rachel was alive. But Terence soon realizes that this is a mere conventional illusion as “it suddenly came over him that here was a world in which he would never see Rachel again” (361).

Thus, Rachel’s death is, like Maggie’s, a response to the conventional “machinery” of the story of a woman’s life: “[l]ike Maggie Tulliver, whom her author drowns...for want of a plot that can carry her toward a grander destiny, Rachel/Woolf

repeats the Fall in words that are different and yet also somehow the same.” (Froula 81). Many critics understand Rachel’s death to be a retreat from the sexual (Schlack 25, Kahane 110); however, it is worth adding that the retreat is from the conventions of Victorian “realist” fiction as well. For, as several critics argue, “in *The Voyage Out*, Rachel dies rather than become part of a traditional marriage and all that it sustains” (Kennard 155). With Rachel’s illness, “Woolf represents her heroine infected by Milton’s Mask,” by “the inescapable interweaving of life and literature” (Froula 86). As literature exerts its patriarchal force on life, Rachel gets caught in “Jane Austen’s tight plots/plaits...[that] become the agent of Rachel’s own symbolic death” (Froula 84). There is strong evidence that Rachel is killed by the force of reading, and of past stories. Though prior to her engagement Rachel had the potential to be an ideal reader, the force of patriarchal convention halts her readerly development – she cannot be an independent thinker and plot her own life; as a heroine she must fall in love and become a wife. Along this line, several critics have argued that Woolf sacrifices Rachel in order to kill off the remnants of the Victorian Angel in the House and achieve a new modernist aesthetic: “many critics have noted that the death of Rachel ‘kills off’ the conventional marriage plot in *The Voyage Out* and functions to free Woolf to construct different kinds of narratives in later novels” (Friedman 116). Friedman continues that *The Voyage Out* also works at “killing off the kind of female reader of books and people who is most likely to be victimized” (Friedman 116). According to Friedman, then, the end of the novel points not only to a new modernist style and the need for new feminist narratives, but to new reading strategies. In a novel in which growth and development are inextricably tied to reading, such an assertion is very plausible.

However, though Woolf's novel does kill off Rachel and effectively end her conventional love narrative, it does not posit a viable alternative mode for telling the story of a woman's life. As in *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*, as well as countless other Victorian female *Bildungsromane*, the heroine's choices are marriage or death. And, as Gay astutely notes,

Woolf's curtailment of Rachel and Terence's engagement in her untimely death is not such a radical rejection of Austen as it may appear. By not depicting their marriage, Woolf does not provide 'the drama of their problems, their developments, their mutual interaction' after marriage, which E. M. Forster saw as essential to a modern novel. By ending Rachel and Terence's relationship in the limbo of betrothal, Woolf was actually replicating the ending of Austen's novels, for, to all intents and purposes, Austenian heroines only ever get *engaged*. (31)

Thus Rachel's sudden death is not the definitive murder of the Victorian Angel in the House and the narrative structure that accompanies her. Similarly, though critics laud Woolf for the modernist aesthetic that dominates Rachel's delirium sequence, as shown, this modernist mode bears strong resemblance to the romantic writing explored by Brontë and, to a larger extent, Eliot. While Woolf's *The Voyage Out* is undoubtedly a criticism of Victorian literary conventions, the novel expresses Woolf's complex relationship to her predecessors, her "affiliation with and dissent from her Victorian past" (Ellis 2). Woolf's modernist novel perpetuates, rather than ruptures, continuity and continues to explore the tension between realism and romance in the narrative of a woman's life and the force of reading, of past stories, upon such narratives.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

In this thesis, through a close analysis of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, I have attempted to answer a very large and elusive question: "what does reading do?" To approach this query, I have inevitably narrowed my focus, first, to "what does reading do for women?" then, to "what does reading do for the female protagonists in the novels under study?" and finally to "how, in these novels, does gendered reading affect the genres of realism and romance?" In other words, this study has been an endeavour to understand how the patterns of fiction affect a woman's ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy in her conception of herself and her life. My findings are, of course, limited by the fact that as a student of literature rather than sociology I am not analysing surveys taken among actual woman readers,¹⁴ but rather representations of woman readers in specific novels. Furthermore, I have chosen to focus on only three novels: two from the nineteenth century and one from the twentieth. However, I believe I have chosen a representative sample. As discussed in the Introduction with reference to historical scholars such as Kate Flint and Jacqueline Pearson, during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the issue of female reading was a prevalent matter for public debate. Women readers were thought to be "peculiarly susceptible" to their reading material; they could be easily influenced and tempted by inappropriate (and unrealistic) ideals. Romantic reading was perceived as a dangerous indulgence for young girls. Brontë, Eliot and Woolf, to different degrees, acknowledge this potential danger: Jane's propensity to see Rochester as a

¹⁴ Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) is an excellent and interesting source that approaches the issue in this vein.

Gytrash or a romantic God-figure is nearly as perilous as Maggie's anti-social desire to flee her home and live with Sir Walter Scott or Rachel's attraction to Richard Dalloway. However, ultimately, *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Voyage Out* suggest that it is not romantic reading material that threatens women, but rather a particular romantic mode of reading. According to Gillian Beer, romantic reading is a process by which a reader "surrenders" (8) to the text and is completely "absorbed" into a different world (3). As Antonia Losano notes with regards to nineteenth-century paintings of women readers, this type of reading "make women *disappear*" (35). This decidedly "feminine" process of succumbing to the text, dissolving one's particular self into the archetypal world of the word, is the aspect of reading which is dangerous for women. Jane manages to escape this fate – through a series of pseudo-realist plot twists – by becoming her own autobiographer and taking control of her story. Maggie, on the other hand, is the definitive feminine reader by the end of *The Mill on the Floss*; she is able only to regurgitate other texts and finally is drowned by the "machinery" of the story and reduced to words on a tombstone and the archetypal feminine role of "sister." Rachel, like Maggie, is killed by romantic reading. Though she exhibits the potential to become an independent and empowered reader, her fate as a woman is shaped by the stories that came before her and she must marry. Rachel's death is the symbolic result of a surrender to reading; just as she is forced to listen to Terence read her the words of Milton's *Comus*, she is forced to participate in a life story – the marriage plot – that is not her own.

Thus, I may conclude that reading, in these novels, exerts a strong seductive pull on the minds and fates of women. Jane, Maggie and Rachel are all tempted to see themselves and their lives through the lenses and conventions of past stories. However,

this cannot be the ultimate answer to the question of “what does reading do?” For, in writing *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Voyage Out*, Brontë, Eliot and Woolf challenge the notion that female reading is necessarily an uncritical surrender to the powers of the text. All three heroines struggle with reading and exhibit the potential to read critically and intelligently; all three novels rebel against and expose conventional story machinery. In writing novels about readers, Brontë, Eliot and Woolf acknowledge the profound power of the written word and harness that power to change the way women read and think.

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