The Dangers of Female Reading in the Nineteenth Century

Senior Thesis

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by

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“From that time on, the world was hers for the reading.”
— Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943)
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Introduction: Reading is Risky for a Heroine

“And then her warm imagination
Perceives herself as heroine—
Some favourite author’s fond creation:
Clarissa, Julia, or Delphine.”
— Alexander Pushkin, Eugene Onegin

For women, reading can be a dangerous pastime. Starting as early as 1320 when Dante Alighieri published The Divine Comedy, authors wrote stories of those whose lives were either ruined, put at risk, or put to an end due to their habit of reading novels. By the nineteenth century, Martyn Lyons writes in his book, A History of Reading in the West (1999), that women were considered a “prime target for popular and romantic fiction.” Publishers targeted women because they were seen as “creatures of the imagination, of limited intellectual capacity, both frivolous and emotional.” However, when the novel as a genre grew exponentially and spread in popularity, critics shared their fears that reading would lead to many problems of morality in English society. This “novel fear” was especially directed toward women, to whom novels posed a greater risk, due to being seen as more sensitive, imaginative, and easily manipulated by literature.

As Nicholas Hudson references in his piece, “Social Rank, ‘The Rise of the Novel,’ and Whig Histories of Eighteenth-Century Fiction,” author William Darrell feared that a female reader of heroic romances would “be induced to ‘spread Nets to ensnare a Gallant, that will as fatally entangle her.’” After reading a novel, women’s sensibilities could lead them to pursuing “Gallant[s]” and romance with “fatal” consequences. People like Darrell feared women would aspire to more than a domestic lifestyle, which went against the “traditional ideals of a virtuous” noble woman. In her article, “Female Quixotism Refashioned,” Jodi Wyett quotes The Monthly Visitor and
Pocket Companion (1798), which states that novels “have a tendency to mislead the mind, to enfeeble the heart… to excite, rather than to suppress, in the young and ardent, romantic notions of love…” For women who were viewed as “frivolous and emotional,” reading was risky because it would “excite…romantic notions of love” and allow women to fantasize about their futures and their potential power to change them.

Instead of “suppress[ing]” women through the domestic duties and maternal pursuits of marriage as was expected from society, reading gave women a new type of freedom—one that was in their own minds. Reading fiction provided women the autonomy to dream of love and a future that they could control, granting them agency for perhaps the first time in their lives. Additionally, critics feared reading of romances in particular, as it could spur more lustful thoughts, which was not allowed for noble women.

Dante Alighieri’s The Inferno (1320) directly confronts the problems that reading can have on women and their relationships. In Canto V of The Inferno, the protagonist Dante and his guide, the Roman poet Virgil, meet Francesca da Polenta in the Second Circle of Hell. Francesca was married to Gianciotto Malatesta, who came from a powerful family made up of the rulers of Rimini. Although she was married to Gianciotto, she was not in love with him and soon after the marriage started a love affair with Gianciotto’s brother, Paolo Malatesta. Paolo and Francesca carried on the affair for years before Gianciotto discovered and killed them both. When Dante meets Francesca in Hell, she tells him the story of how she and Paolo were like “turtle-doves, called onward by desire / With open and steady wings to the sweet nest /… So strong was the affectionate appeal.” Desire and turtledoves are not the only thing that draws Paolo and Francesca together, however. As Francesca says to Dante,
But, if to recognize the earliest root / Of love in us thou hast so great desire, / …

One day we reading were for our delight / Of Launcelot, how Love did him enthral. / Alone we were and without any fear. / Full many a time our eyes together drew / That reading, and drove the color from our faces; / But one point only was it that o’ercame us…

The “earliest root” of Paolo and Francesca’s love begins when they are privately reading a novel, Launcelot, together. The story of Lancelot and Guinevere was a popular French romance, and its genre may have “enthral[ed]” Francesca and Paolo and sparked their desire for one another. It is the act of reading that spurs their lust for one another, as they were “without any fear” and are overcome with passion.

Francesca continues, “This man, who ne’er from me shall be divided, / Kissed me upon the mouth all palpitating,” suggesting that reading the story of Lancelot and Guinevere helped them both to discover their love for one another, and it is sealed with a kiss. The adulterous kiss eventually leads them to their doom, as the story hints that Gianciotto discovers them together, book in hand, and kills them both. Dante Alighieri was the first to tell Paolo and Francesca’s harrowing story, but years later Giovanni Boccaccio provided his own account of the lovers’ tale, stating that the pair was buried together in a single tomb. Because of their reading, Paolo and Francesca are killed and must spend the rest of eternity together not only in a tomb but also in Hell, as Francesca says, “Love has conducted us unto one death.”

Even before the nineteenth century, there was a clear warning that reading can lead to passionate, sensual, and even adulterous thoughts that are dangerous to relationships and to the self. The lovers’ tragic relationship has served as inspiration for generations of future artists.
French artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres painted his own rendition of the scandalous kiss scene between Paolo and Francesca in “Paolo et Francesca” (1819). In the painting, the book of Lancelot has fallen off Francesca’s lap with surprise as Paolo slides closer to her for a kiss, not knowing that his brother is hiding behind a curtain in the same room, sword in hand, ready to catch them in the act and break up the affair. The book is painted as being in midair as it falls, suggesting that reading only comes second to passion and sensuality. Francesca’s bright red dress is suggestive of love and desire, and Paolo also wears a red hat, linking the pair together, while Gianciotto’s dark clothing shields him in the shadows. The prevalence of danger is also very apparent, as the subjects of the painting are too lost in the moment to understand what is to come from their reading and their affair. Stories such as Paolo and Francesca’s in *The Inferno* could have raised concerns in the nineteenth century, as members of English society worried that women would be negatively influenced by reading.
The “novel fear” of the nineteenth century was also spurred by the suggestion that “young women readers would regard themselves as potential love objects for dangerous noble Lotharios, or, even worse, those who only “masqueraded” as members of a corrupt elite.” As Hudson suggests, society feared women who pursued men romantically on their own accord, especially men who are “members of a corrupt elite.” They feared that those men pursued women just to heighten their own status, but were also afraid women could be interested in the “corrupt elite” for similar reasons. Women, typically stereotyped as emotional and sensitive, were not trusted to make marital decisions on their own—yet, people thought reading fiction could give them false confidences.

Similarly, women were to avoid “dangerous noble Lotharios,” a name deriving from a shorter tale within Miguel de Cervantes’ novel, *Don Quixote* (1605). “The Tale of Inappropriate Curiosity” within *Don Quixote* tells the story of a Florentine nobleman, Anselmo, who tests his wife’s trust and fidelity by urging his friend Lothario to attempt to engage in an affair with her. Originally a simple scheme for Anselmo that he thought would surely fail, his wife Camilla does indeed eventually fall into an affair with Lothario due to his efforts and Anselmo is left to die alone of grief.

Cervantes’ novel was an important early source of literature that highlighted the dangers of reading on a community, and the effects it could have on the fragile mind. *Don Quixote* explores the life of Spanish nobleman, or hidalgo, Alonso Quixano, who is delighted by chivalric stories. The narrator states that his love for novels takes a turn for the extreme:

Now you must understand that during his idle moments (which accounted for
most of the year) this hidalgo took to reading books of chivalry with such relish and enthusiasm…[Quixano] was soon so absorbed in these books that his nights were spent reading from dusk till dawn, and his days from dawn till dusk, until the lack of sleep and the excess of reading withered his brain, and he went mad. Everything he read in his books took possession of his imagination…

For a Spanish nobleman with many responsibilities, Quixano still has “idle moments…most of the year” that allow him to spend time reading books about chivalric characters. However, over time he becomes “absorbed” in them to the point where he can no longer sleep or take care of his property, essentially going “mad.” The books he reads take over his “imagination” instead of more rational and practical things, like taking care of his land, which he tries to sell in order to buy even more books. The story of Don Quixote inspired authors generations after its publication to write about characters that love to read, and the consequences they face in doing so. Some, like Charlotte Lennox’s The Female Quixote (1752), directly take subject matter from Cervantes’ novel to create a new cautionary tale about the potential dangers of reading.

In Lennox’s work in particular, the heroine Arabella’s imagination is “dominated by her reading of seventeenth-century French romances” and she, like Quixano, tries to behave like the heroines in the novels that she so admires. However, unlike Alonso Quixano who passes away soon after regaining his sanity, Arabella is saved from a similarly grave fate—she almost drowns—by a clergyman who attempts to cure her dependency on romance novels. Her mental state back to normal, she is able to get married—as women of her status were meant to all along. Unfortunately, not all heroine readers share Arabella’s good fortune.
In my thesis, I will attempt to analyze several novels written in the nineteenth century that explore the ways in which female readers, like Francesca or Arabella, are impacted by reading novels. I have found in my research that novels of the nineteenth century in particular had many popular female literary characters that were also voracious readers, and face varying consequences as a result of their love of reading novels. The three main novels that I will study are Northanger Abbey (1817), Madame Bovary (1856), and Anna Karenina (1877).

In Chapter One, I discuss Jane Austen’s satirical novel, Northanger Abbey. I attempt to tackle the ways in which the heroine, Catherine Morland, uses her reading of Gothic novels to shape her perspective on the world she lives in. Catherine’s reading entertains her, but it also distracts her from real life. The books she enjoys reading are full of mystery and danger, and she begins to behave as a heroine within a Gothic novel, leaving her trapped in her fantastical imagination of the world through a Gothic lens. By trying to act like a Gothic heroine, Catherine goes against the norm of popular heroines of the time, which were sentimental and romantic. Her love of horror stories takes a turn for the extreme and the comic when she visits Northanger Abbey with the Tilney family, as she tries to unearth its ‘secrets.’ In the process, Catherine almost loses the regard of the man she loves and risks her good reputation among society members. With this chapter, I aim to unpack how Catherine sees elements of the Gothic in the world around her, and how she is able to escape the fictional world in order to save her reputation when the odds are against her.

The second chapter focuses on the heroine of Gustave Flaubert’s novel, Madame Bovary, Emma Bovary. I aim to uncover the similarities and differences between
Catherine and Emma, and explore the consequences of Emma’s love for reading romantic novels. While reading novels helps Emma gain an initial understanding of love during her childhood and helps give her the confidence to dream of a life of love and happiness, the novels do not wield the power to actually change Emma’s reality once she is stuck in a dull and unsatisfying marriage. Thus, her desire to gain more, both emotionally and materially, causes her to enter into affairs with multiple men to attempt to find the passion and adventure she expected in her life, based on her reading. Emma desperately searches for a way to become a romantic heroine in her own life, taking on a masculine role to try to obtain love, material items, and independence. Unfortunately, while she gains a sense of agency in her search, she loses love and money, and sacrifices her family, leaving her with little to nothing at the end of her life.

In Chapter Three, I analyze Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy and the heroine, Anna Karenina, who indulges in reading both for pleasure and as a means to escape her loveless marriage and monotonous lifestyle. Like Emma, Anna aspires for a life of happiness, adventure, and high esteem and wants to be the heroine of an English novel, like those she reads about. Anna reads to imagine herself in a better situation than her own, aiming to find agency and love in a world she can control. To help her in achieving this goal, she has a long-standing passionate affair with a Count in an attempt to find the true love that is painfully lacking in her lackluster husband. Yet, as in Madame Bovary, Anna is unable to actually make any changes in her life without male authority, so she is left with painfully difficult decisions to make about her life and the future of her family. Anna questions whether or not it is worth staying in an unhappy situation or dangerously
pursuing a new one at the cost of everything she knows, and risks everything to find the answer to this predicament.

In all three novels, the heroines are connected by their interest in reading and their desire to become heroines in their own right. They each get swept up in fantasies and struggle to achieve the unrealistic expectations of love they hoped for, based on fictional situations that they read in novels. However, I argue that reading for each woman, while dangerous for her health and her sanity, is also a vital part of her existence. Edward Said writes in his book, *Beginnings* (1975), “…the novel makes, procreates, a certain secondary and alternative life possible for heroes who are otherwise lost in society.”³⁶ For Catherine, Emma, and Anna, reading novels is a way for them to envision an “alternate life” in which they are the heroines of their own lives, instead of being “lost in society” and confined within the walls of their homes³⁷. The women read novels to help them “fill gaps in an incomplete world,” adding excitement to the dullness of their realities and leaving space for them to dream³⁸.

Reading is a way for the three women to engage with the deepest parts of themselves—their hopes, their dreams, and their desires. As Said states, the novel is “a way of accommodating discovery,” ringing true for Catherine, Emma, and Anna as they find themselves through the process of reading³⁹. While the heroines risk almost everything to pursue their dreams, it is a necessary step for them to develop their true sense of self and their true character.
Chapter One: Reading as Entertainment in *Northanger Abbey*

“And she was not the sort who glories
In girlish pranks; but grisly stories
Quite charmed her heart when they were told
On winter nights all dark and cold.”
—Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*¹

The first sentence of Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817) stands out from its counterparts, as it shows a new type of heroine that combats expectations placed upon nineteenth century women. The narrator says, “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine.”² David Shapard writes in a footnote that in writing *Northanger Abbey*, Austen targets the sentimental novel specifically³—a type of literature that grew in popularity near the end of the eighteenth century and focuses on one main character, the heroine, in “situations of acute distress.”⁴ In many scenes throughout the novel, Austen and her protagonist, Catherine Morland, parody popular sentimental novels and the stereotypical heroine.

At every turn, Catherine is seemingly the antithesis of a sentimental novel’s heroine—she was not born into a neglectful home or orphanage, her mother did not die in childbirth, and her appearance was unremarkable for the first fifteen years of her life, with “a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair…”⁵ All of these qualities that she did not possess were those characteristic and expected of heroines in novels during the time period, so Catherine sets herself apart from those women. She is part of a loving family, and is not an extraordinary beauty, however there is one other vital trait that differentiates Catherine from the typical sentimental heroine—she is an avid reader of Gothic horror novels.
During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the novel as a genre of literature was rapidly rising, and so was the debate regarding whether women should be reading them or not. According to Belinda Jack, “These battles, whether public or private, conjured an atmosphere in which reading a novel, above all, was by no means universally accepted as a suitable way for a girl or woman to pass her leisure time.” Both in public settings and publications, and in private households, reading novels was at first seen as an unacceptable activity. It was deemed inappropriate for both young girls and older women to read recreationally, but was recommended for men. Anne Mellor writes,

While male reading was universally recommended as the path to a rational education and civilized behaviour, female reading was ideologically fraught. It might increase female rationality, but at the same time it distracted women from their domestic duties… what, when, and how women read thus became sites of political conflict and cultural surveillance.

While men could be curious about the world through reading and were encouraged to learn this way, female reading was frowned upon. Women who read could get carried away in the novels and become distracted from their “domestic duties,” which were seen as a woman’s rightful priority, and furthermore could lead to society’s eventual lack of control over women, which was unthinkable at the time. Being distracted from duties in the home due to books was seen as a source of conflict. Catherine, too, is highly influenced by her reading choices, as I will analyze later on in this chapter, and it often distracts her from her main tasks at hand—sometimes innocently, but other times leading her into dangerous situations.
In additional to political and societal discussions, paintings from the time period also portray women in various states of reading. In Charles de Steuben’s painting, “Liseuse” (1829), the subject of the painting is a young woman dressed in a white gown. An open book is on her lap, but her gaze is turned away from the book. Her face rests in the palm of her hand as she stares into the distance, her focus clearly not on the material she is reading. It seems that the subject of de Steuben’s painting is also distracted—perhaps from her reading, but also potentially from her duties as she sits in an outdoor space. The young woman could be physically avoiding her daily activities in order to read, but finds herself in a more fantastical space in her mind, looking wistfully at something away from her immediate reach. The color of her gown suggests innocence, a trait that she shares with Catherine Morland who is also young and has little life experience. What Catherine knows of adult life or love, she finds in her sources of
reading. Yet, while Catherine herself enjoys Gothic novels, it was not all she read, nor was it the suggested reading for women of her age and social group.

Rather than publicly permitting the reading of novels, the societal expectations of the era meant that people were most comfortable with women reading conduct pamphlets and manuals such as James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), which advised them to secure and uphold socially acceptable marriages with good behavior. For example, Fordyce writes, “the men you marry, the children you bring, and the community at large, will be all deeply interested in your conduct.”¹⁰ Women were judged and inspected by “the community at large” in the public eye, and could not escape that type of scrutiny.¹¹ In Jessica Murphy’s book, *Virtuous Necessity* (2015), she analyzes Richard Hyrde’s translation of Juan Luis Vives’ *Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1529). Hyrde’s translation states that the “good education and ordre [order] of women”—meaning also their behavior—is “essential to the proper functioning of society, extending its influence beyond the household to reach out to the community at large,” according to Murphy.¹² Fordyce and Vives’ writing affirms the idea that throughout centuries, a woman’s good or bad behavior does not only reflect on herself, but the public, as well, thus it is of the utmost importance to maintain a positive reputation and perform properly.

When the Morlands’ neighbor, Mr. Allen, is ordered to Bath “for the benefit of a gouty constitution,” his wife, Mrs. Allen, invites Catherine to come along with them and get a taste of higher society and “adventure,” and mingle with other people closer to her age.¹³ During the scenes in which Catherine is in Bath with Mrs. Allen, she tries to maintain a sense of composure in front of the young gentleman Henry Tilney and other members of his family that she meets, since women were always supposed to be on their
best behavior in public, as Fordyce and Vives describe. Even when Catherine makes mistakes such as thinking about Henry too much, which is fully in her own mind, she feels as though the community at large could judge her for this and she aims to correct her own behavior.

Maria Wartanian writes that Catherine’s “invitation to Bath is her chance to grow and encounter society and the real world,” as she lacks the social life that other young women her age might have had. However, Mrs. Allen does not focus on helping Catherine mature emotionally, as she “lacks in morals and manners herself and ends up only studying other people’s looks and clothes.” Left to fend for herself in the pump-room and dreaming about Henry, Catherine tries to improve her behavior by reminding herself of a piece by Samuel Richardson, thinking “it must be very improper that a young lady should dream of a gentleman before the gentleman is first known to have dreamt of her.” For Catherine, the judgmental eyes of society can scrutinize even her thoughts and dreams. Although she knows what society expects from her as a lady and heroine, as she has read authors like Pope, Thompson, and Gray, Catherine has no female role model to look to in terms of her behavior. Thus, she breaks from the mold and picks her preferred literature—Gothic novels.

While Bege Bowers and Barbara Brothers write that “Jane Austen wrote novels of manners, and such novels present something of the ‘social customs, manners, conventions, and habits of a definite social class at a particular time and place,’” Austen also portrays the ways that people in society, such as Catherine, break away from those conventions in Northanger Abbey. She read the authors and genres that society expected her to read in order to become a true sentimental heroine, yet she stands apart
from them by choosing to expand her repertoire outside of that selection. Bowers and Brothers also point out novels of manners “are concerned with selfhood and morality within a cultural personas and between illusion (imagination and desire) and the actualities of daily existence.”\textsuperscript{20} The books Catherine reads impact her morality—however, because she is more interested in Gothic fiction than conduct books, her imagination overpowers her rational thoughts and strengthens the power of her “illusions,” blending them into her daily existence\textsuperscript{21}.

Catherine indulges in romantic stories filled with mystery, danger, and fright, such as \textit{The Monk} (1796) by Matthew Lewis and \textit{The Mysteries of Udolpho} (1803) by Ann Radcliffe. Catherine even makes a friend, Isabella Thorpe, while in Bath because she is able to bond with her over their similar reading choices. However, Isabella’s brother, John Thorpe, reacts negatively to Catherine and Isabella’s discussions about Gothic novels, as he says “Udolpho! Oh, Lord! Not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do.”\textsuperscript{22} John Thorpe’s reaction to Catherine’s reading habits may be representative of society’s common perspective of female readers as well; that it is nonsensical or a waste of time. It is also the narrator’s way to foreshadow that John and Catherine are not a good match for each other, as their reading interests are so vastly different. It is fitting, then, that Catherine’s actual love interest, Henry Tilney, is in support of reading, and especially Gothic tales. Henry states, “The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe’s works, and most of them with great pleasure.”\textsuperscript{23} Tilney’s point of view counters John Thorpe’s, and perhaps that of society, which deems novels as insensible or potentially of bad influence.
to women. Tilney also recognizes that the act of reading a “good novel” is a pleasurable one\textsuperscript{24}, yet the idea of reading causing pleasure was also controversial in the time period\textsuperscript{25}.

Despite Catherine and Henry Tilney’s bond over their reading preferences, Catherine’s habit of reading also causes rifts in their relationship, due to the fact that her enjoyment of Gothic drama carries over into her daily activities and warps her perception of reality. During her time at Northanger Abbey with the Tilneys, Catherine’s Gothic fantasies put her relationship at risk. In chapter five of volume two, Henry teases Catherine about her excitement surrounding Northanger Abbey by parodying the Gothic novels she reads, as he says “And are you prepared to encounter all the horrors that a building such as ‘what one reads about’ may produce?—Have you a stout heart?—Nerves fit for sliding panels and tapestry?”\textsuperscript{26} Henry’s jokes about the Abbey—the perfect background for a Gothic novel—only work to intensify Catherine’s imagination. While her fascination with the Abbey is innocent at first, Henry’s pushing and prodding only encourage Catherine’s imagination to overrun her reason. Her fantastical thoughts distract her from reality and cause problems in her relationships with the Tilneys.

Soon after arriving at the Abbey, the influence of Gothic novels takes over Catherine, as she questions General Tilney’s behavior, the patriarch of the family. For example, she is “pained” by the “severity of [Captain Tilney’s] father’s reproof, which seemed disproportionate to the offence,” when the Captain is late to dinner\textsuperscript{27}. She also “tremble[s] at the emphasis with which [the General] spoke, and sat pale and breathless, in a most humble mood, concerned for his children…”\textsuperscript{28} Being a young, female guest in their home, Catherine is not able to comment on his behavior to others even though it leaves her afraid, nor does she know if it is unlike him to behave in this way. Therefore,
Catherine is left to assume that he is naturally a gruff man and feels distressed in his presence, as perhaps a heroine in a novel by Ann Radcliffe might. Many Gothic novels highlight the grim nature of their villain or antagonist, thus it is possible that with Catherine’s overactive imagination, she decides to craft the General as a potential villain at the Abbey.

Also, during a late night storm like the one Henry predicted would happen in his parody of a Gothic tale, Catherine is convinced that there is a secret message hidden in a cabinet in her room. She is led on by Henry’s hints and joking suggestions, and gets carried away with the horrors of the stormy rain and wind. Catherine wonders what may be inside the cabinet, as she thinks, “The key was in the door, and she had a strange fancy to look into it; not however with the smallest expectation of finding anything, but it was so very odd, after what Henry had said. In short, she could not sleep till she had examined it.”

A long night of tossing and turning with the anxiety and suspense of what could be on the slip of paper plagues Catherine. When she finally awakens in the morning, she runs to the cabinet and discovers what is inside, as the narrator writes, “Could it be possible, or did not her senses play her false? — An inventory of linen, in coarse and modern characters, seemed all that was before her!” After all of her troubles, the paper was nothing more than an inventory of linen that a maid must have written at some point and left in the cabinet. Although she at first had “not…the smallest expectation of finding anything,” Henry’s tale spurred her curiosity and also left her bitterly disappointed with her discovery of the truth.

After spending more time with the Tilney family at their home, becoming closer with Henry and his sister Eleanor, and witnessing the erratic behaviors of General Tilney,
Catherine learns about the death of Henry’s mother. Swept up in the Gothic horror and romance of the Abbey, she assumes it was a murder at the hand of the General’s sternness or even his neglect without consulting anyone about it. The narrator says, “Catherine’s blood ran cold with the horrid suggestions which naturally sprang from these words. Could it be possible?” Being naïve and fanciful, Catherine’s first instinct is not to think rationally, but rather to relate her reality to the fictional stories she reads, in which men are villainous dangers to womankind and deaths are never natural or innocent. This stereotype is prevalent in Catherine’s mind even before she travels to Bath with the Allens, as her mother warns her about potential kidnappers, which only spurs Catherine’s curiosity further. Her mother tells her, “Cautions against the violence of such noblemen and baronets as delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farmhouse, must, at such a moment, relieve the fullness of her heart.” Her mother cautions her against those who may “delight” in whisking “young ladies away” to remote locations, putting her on her guard for any villainous characters in her life. Even Catherine’s closest family members allow themselves moments of fancy, suggesting Catherine herself may have grown up in an environment where she was encouraged to be imaginative.

Catherine’s upbringing is reminiscent of Austen’s herself, as she was well read and encouraged by her family to read. Shepard writes in his preface for the novel, [Austen’s] family provided an atmosphere that fostered learning and literature… She, like other members of her family, was an avid reader of novels, and the various letters to her sister in which she praises or criticizes novels suggest that they formed an active topic of discussion within the family.
Jane Austen enjoyed reading novels, like Catherine, but is set apart from the heroine of her novel because she felt supported by family members to “foster” such an “atmosphere” in their home where they could have discussions about their reading material. The encouragement Austen received could be seen as counter to the culture of the time, which suggested women’s “heightened sensibilities made them prone to hysteria and madness. Both these conditions might be induced by excessive and inappropriate reading, particularly of novels.” Reading novels was not only seen as nonsensical, but also could negatively impact a woman’s mental and physical health to the point of “hysteria and madness,” yet Austen’s family still went against the grain to foster learning in their household. I argue that Austen is able to craft such a careful satire of sentimental novels in *Northanger Abbey* because she had read many sentimental novels, herself, and was allowed to do so in a safe environment at home.

While there were female authors in Austen’s time, most were better known for writing more romantic and sentimental literature, such as Frances Burney’s *Evelina* (1778). Austen’s writing, which features satirical social commentaries in addition to romance and family drama, is able to stand the test of time. Novels published later in the nineteenth century that I examine in other chapters, including Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1877) were written decades after the publication of *Northanger Abbey*, but also feature heroines that are avid readers. However, while the male authors write in tragic demises for their heroines, Jane Austen manages to bring her heroine to a point of potential danger and demise due to her reading habits, but protect her from overall ruin.
For writers and proponents of conduct manuals such as James Fordyce and Samuel Richardson, Catherine’s paranoid behavior does not come as a surprise; she is like other women who turn to novels for entertainment, instead of more educational reading. Her feelings overpower her logic, and because of that, Catherine puts herself into dangerous and stressful situations. The reader sees her irrational behavior when she discovers the letter inside the cabinet in her room at Northanger Abbey and is unable to sleep, terrifying herself with the thought of its potential contents, only to discover in the morning that it was left behind by a servant. Catherine gives herself unnecessary stress worrying about the General and his behavior, which only grows the longer she stays at Northanger Abbey and tries to uncover its ‘secrets.’

Rachel Brownstein writes in her book, *Becoming A Heroine* (1994), “For a heroine is just that, an image; novel heroines, like novel readers, are often women who want to become heroines.” By this point in the novel, Catherine is envisioning herself as the heroine of a Gothic novel, set in the Abbey. As a reader of novels, she can easily put herself in the shoes of the heroine. She wants to solve the mystery of Mrs. Tilney’s death and save Henry and Eleanor from the villainous General, but is missing the logic and reason needed to realize that she is not actually living in the pages of a Gothic novel.

Her intrigue in the ‘hidden mysteries’ of the Abbey abruptly ends during her search for the truth of Mrs. Tilney’s death. Convinced that the General may be the culprit, Catherine sneaks through the Abbey in search of her room to look for clues. Debra Malina writes, “When Catherine braves the terrors of Mrs. Tilney’s bedroom, she not only ventures, like Don Quixote himself, out of the safety of her own room in search of some action…she also begins to “read” more actively than she has previously done.”
The hero of Miguel de Cervantes’ novel Don Quixote (1605), Alonso Quixano, searches for adventure outside of his normal life, similarly to how Catherine embarks on an adventure after leaving her home—first to Bath, then to Northanger Abbey. A true female Quixote figure in this moment, Catherine tries to step into the role of Gothic heroine to solve a mystery, like in the books she reads.

Unfortunately, Henry interrupts her and soon realizes what she is searching for. He is the one to finally break the spell of distraction upon Catherine caused by her reading. Henry says, “Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? ... Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?” No longer teasing her, Henry quickly disproves all of Catherine’s fantasies and misguided delusions. His earlier joking statements and ridicules of the Gothic genre were successful in governing Catherine’s thoughts at the Abbey, with terrible consequences. In this moment, Catherine reveals her childlike views of morality and her lack of experience in life to the older Henry Tilney, but she soon undergoes a mental transformation.

Catherine has to face her reality, and her behavior, for what it truly is. As the narrator states,

The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened. Henry’s address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done. Most grievously was she humbled...

The consequences of Catherine’s reading of Gothic novels and overactive imagination were great, disturbing her relationship with Henry and the Tilneys as she must face her
own mistakes. At first encouraged by Henry’s parodies of Gothic fiction, he opens her eyes to her faults and encourages her to change her ways and become more understanding, while also being “humbled” by the real world. Now “awakened” and equipped with more reason and restraint, Catherine is not controlled by her imaginative thoughts but can learn to behave maturely and independently.

Maria Wartanian writes in her article “Moral Education in Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey and Mansfield Park” that Henry’s “love leads her from blindness to insight.” With his positive example and care for her, he helps Catherine see the world “in a different way, he can distinguish between fantasy and reality and he enables her to see people for who they really are.” Catherine thought herself to be the heroine of a Gothic novel, in which she would solve the mysteries of the Abbey, but what she really needed was to see herself as she truly is, and find her place in the world.

As Therese Landh writes, it is Catherine’s reading of sentimental fiction that “according to the narrator, allows Catherine’s mind to conjure images of mystery and murder that are in no way founded in reason…”. It is only when she is able to separate her reading from her reality that Catherine can mature and truly come of age. As she wakes up from her delusions about the General with Henry’s help, she is able to grow up overall and make decisions “founded in reason” as opposed to fantasy.

Perhaps more like a heroine now than ever, faced with great distress and love troubles, Catherine snaps out of her dreamlike world abruptly, as “the Abbey in itself was no more to her now than any other house…What a revolution in her ideas! She, who had so longed to be in an abbey!” Catherine must now come to terms with her reality, instead of the fictional reality she had depicted in her mind, and it is even more
treacherous than the one she had invented herself. The Abbey is not a place of danger in terms of hidden messages and murders, but it is a precarious place in which Catherine was meant to show her most ladylike behaviors and assimilate into the Tilney household. Instead, she became swept up in her own fantastical whims.

While she originally thought the General to be a murderer, Catherine is relieved to discover this is not the case. Yet, the General still proves to have a villainous side to him. Believing her to be very wealthy due to misunderstandings with John Thorpe, the General discovers the truth about the Morland family and feeling embarrassed, sends Catherine away from Northanger Abbey. The narrator writes, “…I bring back my heroine to her home in solitude and disgrace; and no sweet elation of spirits can lead me into minuteness.” Unlike a heroine of a sentimental novel, who would return with “triumph of recovered reputation, and all the dignity of a countess,” Catherine is sent home in a carriage alone, which was considered very risky and went against societal norms, putting the General in a bad light. In a way, she is the anti-heroine in this scene, sent home disrespectfully from Northanger Abbey with very little notice and no marriage prospects.

Brownstein writes, “The reason her encounter with evil shocks Catherine is that she had expected everything dreadful to remain between the covers of novels, while she stayed cozily aloof from it.” The actual “evil” Catherine encounters is the General’s misunderstanding of her family background; it is not something she could have prevented by locating clues or hidden messages, and she had to face the consequences first-hand, not “between the covers” of her favorite Gothic novel. Catherine is forced to grow from the situation and must try to maintain her reputation even in humiliating circumstances.
However, unlike the novels I will discuss in further chapters, *Northanger Abbey* ends happily. Catherine becomes a real heroine after all, who finds her true love and along the way, finds herself. Despite her assumptions and naivety, Catherine and Henry’s bond is sustained, even in the face of adversity from the General. Austen writes,

…[Henry] felt himself bound as much in honour as in affection to Miss Morland, and believing that heart to be his own which he had been directed to gain, no unworthy retraction of a tacit consent, no reversing decree of unjustifiable anger, could shake his fidelity, or influence the resolutions it prompted…steadily declared his intention of offering her his hand.57

Catherine is able to grow in maturity from her experiences at Northanger Abbey and from Henry Tilney’s advice. Henry thinks himself “bound” in honor to Catherine in addition to their emotional bond, and feels affection for her even when they are apart58. She grows exponentially throughout the course of the book and learns to act rationally, to not make assumptions, and to give others the benefit of the doubt. All of these qualities, and the ones she already possessed such as her blunt honesty, only make Henry Tilney love and admire her more. Henry’s patience with Catherine while she finds herself and is able to display her true character is admirable, as “no reversing decree of unjustifiable anger, could shake his fidelity,” and the General’s actions are unable to have a lasting impact on Henry and Catherine’s relationship59.

Other heroines that I will discuss in later chapters, such as Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, are not so lucky with their partners. When lost in their fictional realities and invented selves, they are not able to re-enter the normal world. Catherine loses her sense of self while reading Gothic novels and imagines she is a heroine in a horror story
when at Northanger Abbey, but it is Henry’s love that allows her to be freed from such fantastical thoughts and mature into an adult. For Emma and Anna, who are not in love with their husbands, they do not share Catherine’s fear of losing that true love, and are subsequently unable to pull themselves out of their dream worlds. There is nothing in the real world that draws them to stay in their marriages, as all of their temptations and desires are found in novels and their affairs.

Catherine, being a young girl who is unmarried, does not lose anything substantial in her life by ending her fantasies of being a Gothic heroine, and rather fits into the role of a sentimental heroine by the end of the novel. I argue that she becomes a sentimental heroine as the novel ends in “perfect felicity,” a snub by Austen about the quick and ideal ending of sentimental novels, in which “Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang and every body smiled.” All loose ends are tied with a bow, as both families are able to reconcile and Henry and Catherine can live happily. As Brownstein writes, “That Catherine herself is the heroine of a love story, perfectly happy in the end with the man who perfectly suits her, proves she was not so very silly when she planned to be a heroine,” proving that Catherine merely tried to be the heroine of the wrong genre of story when she first set out to Northanger Abbey with the Tilneys, and her initial desire to become a heroine was not so “silly” after all.

It is the fear of losing Henry and his love after questioning his family that forces Catherine to remove herself from the fantasy world she envisioned and enter the real world as a new heroine.

The ending of Austen’s novel may have been surprising to her contemporary readers, who were used to thinking of novels occasionally as dangerous tools. David
Shapard writes, “Some critics dismissed them as a waste of time… moral dangers of novels. The form was accused of inspiring excessive emotions and fancifulness.” As we see in Catherine’s behavior, her reading of novels does influence her imagination and passions. While she is interested in Henry, she is also engrossed by the romance of the Abbey itself, from its architecture to its inhabitants and the secrets she assumed it must have been harboring. The reader also notices that Catherine undergoes a moral journey and matures throughout the course of the novel to control her emotions.

In Jodi Wyett’s “Female Quixotism Refashioned,” she writes “For Austen, female quixotism…[signals] the way in which such engaged reading could manifest personal transformation in surprising and often unconventional ways…” Catherine’s reading, while resulting in her misreading of real life situations, helps her to realize that she needs to change her ways in order to stay with Henry and live happily, resulting in a “personal transformation” that came as a surprise to her and her family. As Nicholas Hudson states,

Few heroines or heroes in Jane Austen novels can draw on the influence of blue blood…they finally establish traits of virtue, enlightened taste, and social leadership belonging to an ideal of aristocratic life that one will find, most plainly, in conduct books of the English Renaissance.

Catherine is not born into a very wealthy family, nor does she possess many characteristics of the typical sentimental heroine. However, she is able to call upon the books she has read that taught her how to behave like a heroine in order to help establish her “traits of virtue,” “taste,” and potentially even “social leadership” after abandoning her whimsical Gothic fantasies. While reading Gothic novels she tries to envision...
herself as a Gothic heroine, but what Catherine discovers is that her true self is waiting for her once she is able to set aside her illogical thoughts and stay grounded in reality. Although Catherine’s interest in novels initially draws Henry to her, it is her ability to remove herself from the fictional worlds of the Gothic horror novels that proves her maturity and good character and makes her the perfect match for Henry.
Chapter Two: Reading as an Escape in *Madame Bovary*

“And now with what great concentration
To tender novels she retreats,
With what a vivid fascination
Takes in their ravishing deceits!”
—Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*

*Madame Bovary* (1856) by Gustave Flaubert focuses on the perils and consequences of female reading as one of its main themes. In this way, it is similar to Jane Austen’s satirical novel, *Northanger Abbey* (1817), which emphasizes what can go wrong when a female reader has an over-active imagination. Austen’s work highlights the dangers of a woman trying to become the heroine of her own story by mistaking fantasy from reality. Flaubert’s work also describes the perilous situation placed upon his heroine as a result of her craving to live like the characters in the books she reads, and as Richard Teleky writes, “Emma Bovary… has sometimes been called a “female Quixote” because of her larger-than-life yet delusional fantasies.” However, *Madame Bovary* differentiates itself from *Northanger Abbey* not only in its plot and dark tone, but also through its genre and heroine.

I argue that *Madame Bovary* contributed to the nineteenth century “novel fear” that influenced society’s thinking about women reading novels, and especially their reading habits, as Flaubert features a bold, reading heroine. Novels, and non-educational reading in general, were seen as impractical and inappropriate for women. Anne Mellor writes, “…all books, even the Bible, struck *someone* as inappropriate for women readers; for all books, again including the Bible, could be read subversively”³. In Chapter One, I referred to conduct books written in earlier centuries and examined why they were considered good influences on women, even in the nineteenth century. Conduct manuals
suggest to women to regulate their behavior, and teach how to perform properly in both public and private spheres. However, as Mellor points out, even theological, ancient texts like the Bible, that are full of guidelines on how to live a Godly lifestyle—and offer advice for how women and men should be behave among one another—could be “read subversively” by women, thus making them inappropriate to read⁴.

Society’s concerns about women reading novels were partly due to the fear that it could be dangerous for the sexuality of young women, filling them with excess amounts of desire. A book such as Madame Bovary, which is filled with love affairs and steamy romance, could certainly be considered a raunchy text that could be subversive for its audience. In fact, the book’s heroine, Emma Bovary, is herself swept away by the reading of her preferred choice of literature—romantic novels—and lusts after multiple men. As Patricia Novillo-Corvalán writes, “Flaubert’s novel reignited the moral debate concerning the dangers entailed in reading corrupting books, especially those that might pervert the minds of young lady readers.”⁵ In society’s view, reading was not just a hobby or a way for women to pass time, but rather a moral issue and a dangerous, “corrupting” tool that could “pervert” minds and had the power to ruin a woman’s good character and reputation⁶.

In Belinda Jack’s book, The Woman Reader (2012), she writes that revolutions such as the French and Industrial Revolutions were “fueled by more widespread reading.”⁷ The idea that subversive reading material could bring political change carried over to the domestic sphere, as Jack mentions that this new idea would bring “radical changes in terms of how men and women would live alongside one another.”⁸ Not only could the reading of novels change daily life, but also could distract women from their
responsibilities in the home. Jack writes, “Women, it was thought, would be tempted to neglect their duties, seduced by engrossing books.” Women were seen as easily swayed and could be “seduced” by books, leading to “neglect” in essential household duties.

Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, in fact, is distracted by her reading of Gothic fiction and begins to blur the line between fantasy and reality, leading to complications. Catherine is so impacted by her reading that she loses her logical sense and assumes mystery and danger into mundane situations, yet she does not fall into lustful behaviors, as Emma Bovary eventually does after reading idealistic romance novels that make her yearn for true love. Novels are seen to have immense power on a person’s character and behavior, thus making them dangerous for women, who were not meant to wield power at all in this era.

Both novels feature heroines who love to read, but their authors are varied in perspective, particularly in terms of gender. *Madame Bovary* is written from the third person female perspective by a male author, while *Northanger Abbey* is written from the third person female perspective by a female author. Before the reader even begins to read the first page of *Madame Bovary*, he or she can make a prediction as to how the main female character will be represented or viewed based on this type of information. The reader may also doubt that a man can intrinsically understand the thoughts of the female mind. Yet, Patricia Novillo-Corvalán describes how Flaubert feels a deep personal connection to his heroine, going as far as to suggest that they are the same. She writes,

For Flaubert, the answer involved subjecting… himself as a male writer—to a gender transformation: ‘Madame Bovary c’est moi’, which in turn implied replacing the chivalric genre with the type of fiction that was popular and clichéd
at the time: romantic literature. This composite, ambiguous sexual identity which lies at the very heart of Flaubert’s identification with his female heroine…

Flaubert’s announcement of “Madame Bovary c’est moi,” or “Madame Bovary is me,” does not mean to suggest that he had the same life experience as his heroine Emma does, but rather that they may have shared similar obstacles and hopes. Flaubert identifies with his heroine in Madame Bovary, and by doing so replaces the “chivalric genre” of writing, such as Don Quixote (1605), with “romantic literature,” while maintaining the same type of character—one that is stuck in a fantasy world and cannot escape. Flaubert turns the world of romantic literature on its head by giving his novel a tragic twist and an unhappy ending for almost every character, including his beloved heroine. Later on in this chapter, I will attempt to tackle the ways that Flaubert’s “identification with his female heroine” may explain some of Emma’s masculine behaviors in the novel.

From the beginning of the novel, Flaubert introduces characters that try to escape their reality by dreaming or reading. For example, Emma’s eventual husband, Charles Bovary, grew up with a mother who was plagued with “broken vanities” and struggled in her marriage. The elder Madame Bovary, tortured by these feelings after having a child, soon began to dream of her young son stepping into “high office” and becoming “tall, handsome, talented, established, an engineer, or a magistrate” as a way to improve their lives. Because she found her marriage disappointing, as it left her mostly ignored or disregarded by her husband, she wanted to create a future for Charles and herself that was exactly the way she wanted it. She forces her son to conform to her own ideas and pursue the career and even the wife that she chooses, as she urges him to marry an older woman who soon passes away, leaving Charles a widower. Further into the novel, as I will
reference later on in this chapter, Charles’ mother also attempts to influence Charles and Emma’s marriage and Emma’s choices of reading materials, in an attempt to regain control in her own life, which never went the way she planned.

Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, indulges in romantic and horror Gothic texts as a form of entertainment. Similarly, Emma Bovary delights in reading popular literature of the time—romances—ever since she was a child. When Emma was a young girl, she lived in a convent and recalls when a maid would sneak them romantic novels filled with “love, lovers, loving, martyred maidens swooning in secluded lodges… arching hearts, promising, sobbing, kisses and tears… gentlemen brave as lions, tender as lambs, virtuous as a dream, always well dressed, and weeping pints.”

The novels that the maid brought to the girls in the convent impacted their ideas of love, imagining that gentlemen who are “brave,” “tender,” and “virtuous” would come to dramatically sweep them off their feet, making emotional promises and showering them in deep affection. Being young, the girls took those ideas to heart, believing them to be true and possible in their own lives. Rachel Brownstein writes,

> Generations of girls… 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… young women like to read about heroines in fiction so as to rehearse possible lives and to imagine a woman’s life as important—because they want to be attractive and powerful and significant, someone whose life is worth writing about.

Young girls like Emma who are “limited by education” and “opportunity” read fictional works to escape from their own “chaotic” lives. To cope with life’s uncertainties, the
girls turned to reading about heroines to “rehearse” what their lives will be like and indulge in feeling important, “someone whose life is worth writing about.” Since her young girlhood, Emma turned to books to teach her about life, to help her find herself and what her desires for life were, and to generally distract her from her hardships in exchange for a dream-like reality in which women are seen as “attractive and powerful and significant.” René Girard writes in his book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1965) that “Emma Bovary desires through the romantic heroines who fill her imagination.” Not only does Emma desire for love, she “IMITATES” the “desires of models [she has] freely chosen.” In other words, Emma wishes to live the life of the heroines in the romance novels she reads. To be able to live like them, she needs to be like them, and can do so by attempting to act like a heroine in her adult life. She imitates their desires—for romantic husbands and passionate love—and also reflects their behaviors in an attempt to shape her own reality for the better.

As the narrator explains, “Emma sought to find out exactly what was meant in real life by the words *felicity, passion* and *rapture*, which had seemed so fine on the pages of the books.” The books make out romance and marriage to be “fine,” passionate, and joyful, without showing the truth of reality, which is not always romantic, thus giving Emma the hope that she can “find out exactly what was meant in real life,” without knowing of reality in the first place. Other marital relationships, such as between the elder Bovarys, are steeped in problems, and Emma herself does not have a parental relationship to look up to, so novels are her form of entertainment and also serve as learning tools to help her discover how the world around her operates. However, society did not always agree with this strategy of learning for women.
The fear of novels, and particularly their ability to spur female sexuality, was covered not only in social criticism, but also in the fine arts. Belinda Jack writes, “Among the vast and varied range are paintings designed, among other things, to discourage women from reading, particularly novels.” In particular, Jack highlights Antoine Wiertz’s painting, “The Reader of Novels” (1853), which pictures a nude woman lying down and reading a book, while a small, mischievous creature hidden in the shadows pushes a book toward her. The creature, which appears to have horns on its forehead, is placing the stacks of books directly onto the bed next to the woman. The subject of the painting seems enthralled by her reading, not noticing the creature at all nor her own reflection in the large mirror next to the bed.

Jack continues in her analysis of the painting, “So here we have the Devil himself, or one of his minions, tempting the woman reader with a supply of popular fiction… Women’s reading, the novel and sexuality are intimately related. There may even be a
suggestion that a woman who has a good supply of fiction may be sexually self-sufficient.”

Jack mentions that the woman is reading in a private space, which society may deem to be inappropriate for women because it suggests she could be sexually “self-sufficient,” and can experience pleasure simply from reading, rather than from a spouse. The reader can see parallel themes in *Madame Bovary* as in “The Reader of Novels,” since Emma gets great pleasure and dreams of epic romances in her own life when she reads. Instead of the Devil pushing more books onto Emma, it is her own interest in love and passion that advances her reading habits, and her sexuality is tied to her choice of novels.

Unfortunately, however, Emma does not immediately find the deeply passionate love that she was looking for as a child. Married to the dull country doctor Charles Bovary (and being his second wife), she describes her life as being “cold as an attic that looks north; and boredom, quiet as the spider, was spinning its web in the shadowy places of her heart.” Instead of adventure and zest, Emma lives a bland married life, her daily activities mostly concerned with running the home. While she tries to “strik[e] the flint upon her heart” to spark the love between them and see if there could be something worth fighting for, their personalities do not mix and despite her efforts she is unable to ignite a romance. To keep herself from being completely miserable in the relationship, she turns to reading books and magazines as a way to escape from her dismal reality, accepting that she cannot love Charles. The narrator states,

…She read Balzac and George Sand, seeking to gratify in fantasy her secret cravings. Even at the table, she had her book with her, and she would be turning the pages, while Charles was eating and talking to her. The memory of the
Viscount haunted her reading. Between him and the fictional characters, she would forge connections…

While on the outside Emma appeared to be the picture of a perfect wife, who was dedicated to keeping the home tidy and embroidering, her true enjoyment came from reading the works of romantic authors like George Sand to “gratify in fantasy her secret cravings” of romance, whether from a fictional character or the Viscount she had met at a ball. She is willing and able to completely ignore her husband even as he is “eating and talking to her” directly, because she cares so little for him. Emma describes meal-times with Charles as most difficult, “It seemed as though all the bitterness of life was being served up on to her plate, and, with the steam off the stew, there came swirling up from the depths of her soul a kind of rancid staleness.” Erich Auerbach describes this scene in his book, *Mimesis* (1953), as a moment of utter misery for Emma, but claims “her despair is not occasioned by any definite catastrophe… Certainly she has many wishes, but they are entirely vague…such formless tragedy.” However, I argue that the monotonous life Emma lives with the mediocre Charles Bovary is the “catastrophe” that leads her to despair, as she feels she is unable to attain any of her wishes for love, elegance or adventure with him in her provincial town.

The narrator reveals Emma’s inner desires soon afterwards: “She yearned to travel or to go back to living in the convent. She wanted equally to die and to live in Paris.” Emma’s life is vastly unlike what she had expected it to be, based on the books she had read as a young girl that ‘taught’ her about adult life. This dissonance torments her to the point of her not knowing whether it would be better to run away, go back to a convent, or die, however, none of these options are really possible for Emma. As the
narrator describes Emma’s head space, “The future was a dark corridor, and at the far end the door was bolted,” meaning that she views her future as futile and locked away of all opportunity or happiness.\(^{42}\)

Mellor writes in her review, “…Female reading offers a multiplicity of pleasures, ‘from escapism to the discovery of one’s true identity, from domesticity to revolutionary alternatives.’”\(^{43}\) Emma uses reading as a pleasurable escape from her real life, which disappoints her so greatly, and helps her discover what she truly wants in her life—unconditional love. However, as in \textit{Northanger Abbey}, other characters are weary of the heroine’s reading habit. Like John Thorpe who tries to negate the value of reading Gothic novels in \textit{Northanger Abbey}, Charles’ mother also views novels as poor influences on women. She states to her son, “…Reading novels, wicked books… It all leads to no good, my poor boy, and anyone with no religion always comes to a bad end.”\(^{44}\) For the elder Madame Bovary, books are “wicked,” and lead to a “bad end”—in a way, she is foreshadowing Emma’s suicide before the reader even realizes it.\(^{45}\) The reader also will notice later in the novel that Emma makes an attempt to connect with Christianity, but it is only a passing phase in her life, while her passion for books never ceases. Charles’ mother wishes to establish obedience and control over Emma, in the same way she controlled her son in the past, but Emma is stubborn and refuses to submit.

The lack of love in Emma’s life, even when she tries to supplement it with multiple affairs, overpowers the good in her life, like her daughter Berthe and their comfortable living situation. From the start of her first affair with Rodolphe Boulanger, Emma felt an immediate connection due to their mutual dislike of the country life. As the narrator writes, during one of their first interactions together “they talked about the
mediocrity of all things provincial, of the lives it stifled, the illusions that perished there.” Emma finds her life with Charles to be “provincial” and “stifled,” but a relationship with Rodolphe provides a way to break from her daily norms and find adventure and romance again. Emma attempts to behave like “the heroines from the books she had read… She merged into her own imaginings, playing a real part, realizing the long dream of her youth, seeing herself as one of those great lovers she had so long envied.” As Catherine Morland stands apart from sentimental heroines in Northanger Abbey, so too, does Emma differ from other romantic heroines. Emma did not marry a gentleman whom she was madly in love with, but with her affair she can “play a real part,” or be active in her own romantic life, and choose whom she wants to love. After a lifetime of “envy[ing]” the heroines of romantic novels, she is able to step into the role of heroine herself to find who she really is, and feel its “triumph.”

However, Rodolphe soon becomes tired of the affair, given his nature of seducing many women, and he writes her a loveless letter coldly ending the relationship. Emma grows extremely ill almost to the point of death, and copes by trying to find grace in Christianity, although it ultimately fails. Her priest looks to Monsieur Boulard, the bookseller to the archbishop, to find “something decent for one of the fair sex with a good head on her shoulders. The bookseller… threw together a parcel of everything recent in the way of pious literature.” Although the priest does not know that her pain is caused by the dreams that she herself formed, he believes that the cure for someone “of the fair sex” can only be “pious literature,” as that was considered morally appropriate reading for women in comparison to novels. As the priest later declares, “he regarded music as less of a moral danger than literature,” proving that a majority of society members,
particularly men in positions of power, thought that novels were extremely dangerous not only for a woman’s mental state, but also for women physically\textsuperscript{55}.

Emma’s affair afterwards with Léon Dupuis is of a similar nature to that of Emma’s affair with Rodolphe—both are fatigued by country life and use each other as a means for escape from their tedious daily obligations. As the narrator writes, “They lay down on the grass; out of sight they embraced beneath the poplars; and they yearned to live perpetually, like Robinson Crusoes, in that little place…”\textsuperscript{56} The narrator directly references one of the first socially accepted novels, \textit{Robinson Crusoe} (1719) by Daniel Defoe, to reference Emma and Léon’s desire to flee from reality and live in a pleasurable, fantastical world where they can travel, “embrace,” and “live perpetually” without the fear of society trying to separate them\textsuperscript{57}. In Léon’s point of view, Emma is “the lover in every novel, the heroine in every play, the vague \textit{she} in every volume of poetry.”\textsuperscript{58}

Finally, Emma is the romantic heroine in her own life story. Through the eyes of her lover the reader is able to see how being in love transforms her character and revives her as a person, making her “the lover in every novel” and the “vague \textit{she}” in poetry that readers would pine after\textsuperscript{59}.

Emma prioritizes love and romance, given the enormous impact that reading about those topics had on her childhood. She is even willing to dress as a man and walk through town, quite conspicuously, in order to meet with both of her lovers, Rodolphe and Léon, taking on the more traditionally masculine role of the pursuer. As the narrator describes the extremes of Emma’s disguise at a masked ball, “she wore velvet breeches and red stockings, a gentleman’s wig, and a paper lantern over one ear.”\textsuperscript{60} If Emma’s identity were to be discovered, her reputation—which was already tarnished with rumors
of her multiple affairs and her lack of money from over-borrowing—would be ruined. However, her desire for romance and passion gives her the courage to disguise herself in order to desperately be closer to Léon and further away from Charles.

As Geoffrey Wall states in his introduction to *Madame Bovary*, the major problems in Emma’s life appear because she believes “life should run sweetly as a romantic novel.” Because women in the time period needed to be married but had little freedom or opportunity to divorce, reading was a way to escape from the problems of their often dull realities. Martyn Lyons writes in his book, *A History of Reading in the West* (1999), “household obligations came first, and to admit to reading was tantamount to confessing neglect of the woman’s family responsibilities.” Emma’s choice to read is shocking to people like the elder Madame Bovary, because it is “confessing neglect” of her womanly duties, such as keeping the home and obediently raising children.

However, Emma does not enjoy her quiet, dull lifestyle and has no one to confide in or share these feelings with that truly cares about her wellbeing. Because of this, she turns even more to her novels to escape reality.

Wall writes, “Emma depends on her reading, a consoling drug, because she is completely isolated, with no one to talk things over with. She is motherless. She has no women friends…to want more is wicked.” Similar to the elder Madame Bovary’s view, Wall writes it is “wicked” for women to read novels and gain ideas from reading that would result in them wanting more than domestic lives. For Emma, reading is the only thing that can “consol[e]” her, because she has no positive female influences in her life, nor any loving partners: she cannot stand her husband, and the men she has affairs with, Rodolphe and Léon, grow tired of their relationships with her. Richard Teleky writes
“Flaubert’s motherless Emma is not an empty vessel but rather someone who has absorbed the sentimental pieties and junk culture of her era,” suggesting that Emma is resorting to romance novels and other “junk culture” like fashion magazines in order to survive in her precarious environment\textsuperscript{68}. 

To avoid even having to sleep next to Charles at night, Emma “read[s] until dawn, bizarre books, full of orgiastic set-pieces and bloodthirsty adventures,” to distract herself from the dullness of her real life\textsuperscript{69}. Different from her typically romantic literature, she even chooses to read books with horrific characters and plots, as they were more comforting to her than the presence of her own husband or child\textsuperscript{70}. The lack of human support in Emma’s life is great, and even her Greyhound runs away from home\textsuperscript{71}, leaving Emma with no true companions, not even a pet\textsuperscript{72}.

Although both Emma and Catherine Morland struggle to find true friends, a major difference that sets the heroines apart is what is at stake for them. Catherine must fiercely guard her reputation because she is still unmarried and therefore in the public eye to men and society at large. Although her whimsies get the better of her at times in the novel, Catherine is able to pull her mind away from the dangerous thoughts she had about the Abbey and the General, in order to better present herself to her love interest, Henry Tilney, and create a better chance for marriage. Emma would have much more to lose if her affairs were to be publicly revealed. For instance, she could lose her rights to her daughter and her property, and be shunned from her community. However, she is no longer fighting for love or a successful marriage, like Catherine is, because her marriage is not based on true love and was pre-meditated by adults outside of the relationship. Therefore, what Emma has at stake is the life she knows and despises, in exchange for the
chance of true love like she fantasizes about in novels, while Catherine has her entire future and potential marriage at risk if she were to prioritize her imaginative world instead of her reality. Emma is chasing her dreams to escape reality, while Catherine had to escape her fantasy world to better her real one.

Left with no companions, an unhappy marriage, a daughter that she wished would be a son, a huge amount of debt to pay, and no passionate love affairs, Emma is faced with problems like she has never dealt with before. Emma is described earlier in the novel as envious of men because they are “free; he can explore each passion and every kingdom, conquer obstacles, feast upon the most exotic pleasures,” in comparison to women who are “continually thwarted.” When she dresses in a masculine disguise, she is free to walk around town and meet her lovers without suspicion. As her actual feminine self, she does not have the chance to “explore each passion” or “feast upon…pleasures” because she is confined to her domestic duties. Flaubert’s personal connection with Emma as his heroine may have been a reason for the character’s inclinations to dress as a male, perhaps suggesting he understood her emotional turmoil, as well. However, left with little options at the end of the novel, Emma cannot sustain her masculine disguise or maintain her affairs forever, and chooses to face death by eating arsenic instead of confronting the mortal consequences of her choices.

Wall writes, “Stealing masculine power and masculine privilege, Emma mixes up the categories of male and female. She becomes, in the terms of her world, less of a woman and more of a monster. She cannot be allowed to live.” While Catherine Morland is allowed to make up for her mistakes and redeem herself to Henry, Emma has made perilous decisions for herself and her family, by placing them in great amounts of
debts. She also humiliates her husband and his family on multiple occasions, as her outings to meet with her lovers are not very discreet and the town members soon begin to question her. As Wall describes, these traits make her “less of a woman and more of a monster,” so Flaubert must have her die at the end of the novel, as she “cannot be allowed to live” under her circumstances.

Patricia Novillo-Corvalán writes that Emma Bovary’s death is related to the literature that she loves to read. Novillo-Corvalán writes, “According to Ladenson, ‘the fate Emma meets is differently literary: dying in sordid agony, she is plagued by a persistent taste of ink, a nauseous reminder of the books that had intoxicated her.’” It is both ironic and tragic that Emma dies thinking about the novels that she loved, which had comforted her but had also forsaken and “intoxicated” her imagination. As the narrator writes, “Indeed, she looked around the room, slowly, like someone waking from a dream…” After a lifetime of chasing love and living in a dream-like world where passion and adventure trumped rationality and obedience to societal standards, it is only when she is about to pass away that Emma realizes that she is no longer in a dream, and must face her tragic demise.

In her final hours, Emma Bovary most resembles a female Quixote, as Alonso Quixano of Miguel de Cervantes’ Don Quixote (1605) also dies after realizing that he had been living in a fantasy. In Part II of Don Quixote, the hero is faced with the Knight of the Spangles (or Mirrors), who attempts to make Alonso come to terms with his hallucinations and illogical behavior. While it plants the seed for what will become Alonso’s reality check, the true realization comes too late. As Roberto González Echevarría writes in his introduction to Don Quixote, “When the hero regains his sanity
at the end of Part II, he dies. As the last chances of living an imaginary life disappear, so must life itself.” Alonso Quixano had been chasing dreams and fantasies of chivalry and adventure for so many years that when he comes to his senses, he does all he can to repent before his life comes to an end.

Similarly to Alonso, Emma Bovary has been chasing a fantasy life ever since she was a young girl. She wanted to be a heroine, someone who was loved passionately and endlessly by a gentleman, to have romance, happiness, and contentment in her life and finally feel like the woman she was meant to be. Unfortunately, after chasing her dream for so many years and being disappointed by reality over and over again, Emma retreated into her world of escape—fictional novels—as a coping mechanism until she no longer could. René Girard writes, “There would be no illusion if Don Quixote were not imitating Amadis. Emma Bovary would not have taken Rudolph for a Prince Charming had she not been imitating romantic heroines… Desire projects a dream universe around the hero. In both cases the hero escapes from his fantasies only on his deathbed.” Emma was living in a “dream universe” spurred by her desire to imitate romantic heroines, and facing death was the only situation that broke her from the spell she was casting on herself.

Further strengthening the connection between Emma and her Don Quixote counterpart, before she succumbs to the poison Emma requests a mirror to look at her reflection. The narrator writes, “…Her eyes lingered there a good while, until great tears began to flow down her cheeks. She turned her head away with a sigh and fell back upon the pillow.” As Lawrence Thornton writes, the mirror has a “destructive power” over Emma, causing “great tears” to fall and her head to “[fall] back upon the pillow.” Looking at her reflection, the mirror finally shows Emma who she really is, and proves
she is not living in a dream or in a romantic novel—this knowledge pains her deeply. As Thornton writes, “Regardless of her efforts, that world of words and mirrors cannot survive in the world of unpaid bills assumed to buy time and the furnishings of dreams.” Aware that she had sacrificed everything for love to no avail, including her money, her daughter’s future, and her reputation, Emma Bovary’s lifelong dream finally shatters, and everyone around her must bear the consequences.

When the arsenic she swallows begins its gruesome effect on her, Emma realizes that she will never become the heroine she dreamed of being. However, I argue that the moments in which Emma pursued her own love and happiness and exhibited agency, such as in her affairs and disguises as a man, she truly behaved as a courageous heroine. No matter her circumstances, Emma did not want to give up her dream of finding a loving relationship, and sacrificed everything to try and achieve her goal. Perhaps when Flaubert stated “Madame Bovary c’est moi,’ he meant that he is a dreamer, just like his heroine. Any reader can relate to Emma’s desire for freedom, passion, and romance. Despite her ultimate demise, Emma was able to get a taste of the freedom she had always dreamed of, since the will to pursue love, in addition to her bravery and confidence in her desires, are all characteristics that she must have learned from reading novels.
Chapter Three: Reading for Pleasure in *Anna Karenina*

“She wanders with her borrowed lovers
Through silent woods and so discovers
Within a book her heart’s extremes,
Her secret passions, and her dreams.”
— Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*

*Anna Karenina* (1877) by Leo Tolstoy is reminiscent of other novels in the nineteenth century that feature heroine readers, such as Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856). Tolstoy’s novel includes a deeply interwoven plot full of tragic twists that ends in the heroine’s demise as a result of her reading habits. The heroine, Anna Arkadyevna Karenina, indulges in reading for her own pleasure and to fill the void of love and adventure that is missing in her real life. In the process, she loses all and any hints of love, happiness, or companionship that she had. Like the heroines in *Northanger Abbey* and *Madame Bovary*, Anna escapes from the dullness of her reality through reading novels. However, Anna depends on books for both emotional and physical desire, eventually discovering that reality is vastly different from life within the confines of a book, leading to her lonely, catastrophic demise.

Catherine Morland’s imagination soars when reading Gothic romances, making her believe that her life is full of mystery and excitement when residing at the Abbey. In reality, her fantasies are based on poor assumptions and whims, leading to problems in her relationships with men. Likewise, Emma Bovary’s experience with love only comes from romance novels read as a young girl, causing her great disappointment in her adult life. Similarly, Anna fantasizes about lives she cannot live by reading books, and by doing so she ruins her relationship with her husband, Alexey Alexandrovich Karenin, and her son, Serezha, by entering an affair with Count Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky.
It is worthwhile to note the similarities between the heroines of *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, as Tolstoy saw Flaubert as one of his favorite writers and had a copy of Flaubert’s novel in his personal library. Anna first crosses paths with Vronsky at a train station, where she stuns him with an “excess of vitality so filled her whole being… now in her smile, now in the light of her eyes,” but the two characters do not get a chance to truly interact with one another, as a watchman is suddenly run over by a train and killed. Anna encounters Vronsky again more intimately at a ball, as Emma Bovary also encounters one of her future lovers. When Anna is returning home after the ball on another train ride, she turns to reading as a way to ease her mind. The narrator writes,

> With the same preoccupied mind she had had all that day, Anna prepared with pleasure and great deliberation for the journey. With her deft little hands she unlocked her red bag, took out a small pillow which she placed on her knees, and locked the bag again; then she carefully wrapped up her feet and sat down comfortably…Anna said a few words in answer, but not foreseeing anything interesting from the conversation asked her maid to get out her reading-lamp, fixed it to the arm of her seat, and took a paper-knife and an English novel from her handbag. At first she could not read…

Anna is left feeling “preoccupied” from her experience at the ball, not only from dancing and interacting with Count Vronsky, but also because she is worried about her relationship with Ekaterina Alexandrovna Shcherbatskaya or Kitty, her sister-in-law who was also interested in romantically pursuing Vronsky. Despite her worries, Anna prepares with “pleasure” for her journey on the train. For her, this pleasure comes through reading English novels. She ceremoniously takes out all of the necessities she
needs from her red purse, including a pillow for her lap and a way to wrap and warm her feet so she is as comfortable as possible before she begins reading.

For Anna, her love of reading is such that she can do it from any location, but it is notable that this passage occurs on a moving train, as it sets the reader up for the future consequences of her actions as she literally moves forward in both time and space. It is an additionally important motif for Anna and Vronsky’s relationship, as it is the location where they first meet. For Anna, reading is not only a form of escapism from her average life and daily activities, but it is also a form of sensual pleasure. She isolates herself from society, in this case her maid Annushka, and creates a private, comfortable space for her to begin reading the novel with a “paper-knife” in tow—a key motif Tolstoy includes relating to sexuality that will be explored in depth later on in this chapter.

Vronsky stirs such feelings in Anna for the first time since marrying Alexey Alexandrovich Karenin, an “an older, lifeless man” whom was ill-matched in marriage to Anna through a familial connection, writes Jeanna Marie Whiting in her article, “Tolstoy and the Woman Question.” Anna cannot connect to Karenin, who is more consumed by his work than his life at home, and has “almost no direction” from him, limited relationships with others, and almost no responsibilities outside of the expected domestic duties of women of the nineteenth century. Thus, when she is “presented with a tempting offer of intimacy with a man whose whole world seemingly revolves around his adoration for her,” she cannot help but become more interested in Vronsky. Vronsky’s clear desire for Anna is unlike anything she experiences with Karenin, so she allows herself to entertain the idea of pursuing him during her train ride while reading a novel in the privacy of her compartment.
A French artist whose works were created during the same time period as the publication of *Anna Karenina*, Delphin Enjolras, made a series of paintings with female subjects reading in solitude. Enjolras’ two paintings titled “La Lecture,” or “Reading,” capture the same mood as Anna’s state of relaxation as she reads. The subjects in the paintings are nude, wrapped in drapery or gauze-like fabrics and lounging on chaises, suggesting a similar level of comfort as Anna when she “wrapped up her feet and sat down comfortably.” While the two subjects in the paintings are all alone, Anna is in a shared space with Annushka, yet the power of reading allows her to create a sense of privacy in a shared compartment. The three women have the privacy to read their novels without anyone breaking their concentration and solitude. The women’s nudity in the paintings suggests a sensual or erotic experience in reading that Anna can mimic without being in the nude. The paintings also display reading as a pleasurable experience in which no other party is necessary—a notion that Thomas W. Laqueur describes was linked to the “private” or “solitary vice,” otherwise known as masturbation.

In Laqueur’s book, *Solitary Sex* (2003), he writes that “reading as a physically powerful act, one that engaged the imagination, one that invited the sort of pleasurable, secret, potentially addictive self-absorption that contemporaries identified as the core of
the private vice, was certainly something women did.”16 The women in the paintings are both alone, reading their books and “engag[ing] the imagination” without the fear of someone walking in, and can enjoy the experience of reading without any peeking eyes17. Similarly, Anna, while not nude in this scene, has time to herself on the train to read and feels she is in a safe and private space. She does not need to entertain anyone or watch her child because she is alone other than her maid. With these conventions in place, Anna is in the perfect position not only to read and fantasize about another life, but she has the opportunity to gain both emotional enjoyment and a more sensual type of pleasure, too.

As Laqueur describes, the act of reading is both an emotionally and “physically powerful” act, and is the “core of the private vice” that leads to a “pleasurable, secret…self-absorption,” suggesting that Anna, not having anyone to take care of in the moment, is able to selfishly take care of her own needs by reading the English novel18. The idea of women reading for pleasure attributed to the novel fear in the nineteenth century, because it was thought women would no longer need or desire relationships with men, as novels could potentially fulfill their sexual needs19. As Stephen Greenblatt writes in a review of Solitary Sex, “Reading novels—even high-minded, morally uplifting novels—generated a certain kind of absorption, a deep engagement of the imagination, a bodily intensity that could, it was feared, veer with terrifying ease toward the dangerous excesses of self-pleasure.”20 Through reading Anna becomes engaged with her imagination, which society feared could easily “veer…toward the dangerous excesses” of sensual self-pleasure and lustful emotions, no matter the book’s content21.

Enjolras’ paintings also portray a sense of lust with the red and warm tones of the lavish rooms the subjects lounge in, mirroring Anna’s characteristic red handbag that she
holds in this passage. Liza Knapp writes in her book, *Anna Karenina and Others: Tolstoy's Labyrinth of Plots* (2016), that Anna’s red bag is seen as a symbol of both her sexual or reproductive organs and also her womanhood, as her desires are held within it.\(^{22}\)

At first, Anna is unable to read but once she begins she realizes how “unpleasant” it is to “follow the reflection of other people’s lives,” and wishes that she were in the position of the heroine, herself.\(^{23}\) Anna reads about heroines who nurse sick men, give speeches before Parliament, and astonish crowds with their boldness, and wants “to do it herself,” but her current position in life leaves her trapped in a loveless marriage to Alexey Alexandrovich, so she cannot pursue any of these desires.\(^{24}\) Leaving her full of hopes yet knowing she cannot attain them, “there was nothing to be done, so she forced herself to read, while her little hand toyed with the smooth paper-knife.”\(^{25}\) Instead of reading about another person’s life, Anna wants to live another person’s life, but she cannot escape hers. Anna differs from Catherine and Emma in this way, as the other women want to be the heroines in their own life story, while Anna wishes that she could become the heroine in someone else’s story.

Rachel Brownstein writes in her book, *Becoming A Heroine* (1994), “To want to become a heroine… is to develop the beginnings of what feminists call a “raised” consciousness: it liberates a woman from feeling (and therefore perhaps from being) a victim or a dependent or a drudge, someone of no account.”\(^{26}\) Anna’s desire to become a heroine while reading is “liberat[ing],” making her an active participant in the world around her, instead of succumbing to the typical role of a dependent, aristocratic wife.\(^{27}\) In Amy Mandelker’s book, *Framing Anna Karenina* (1993), she writes about Tolstoy’s opinions on the “oppressive work of… domestic cares” and other female-specific
experiences such as pregnancy, which Tolstoy deemed more “difficult, strenuous, and important than men’s work.” Tolstoy argues that women, including wives and mothers, should receive “extra consideration” in terms of seeking occupation for self-improvement, in order to “liberate women from drudgery.” I argue that Anna’s reading of novels is her way of occupying her ample amount of free time in the pursuit of self-improvement through dreaming of a better reality than the dull one she lives with Karenin. Reading grants her a private space to dream of happiness and true love.

As Anna reads in her novel, the hero “had nearly attained to his English happiness of a baronetcy and an estate, and Anna wanted to go to the estate with him…” but suddenly feels that the hero must have been ashamed, and so was she for having those thoughts. Then, Anna becomes “indignant…put[s] down her book, lean[s] back, and clasp[s] the paper-knife tightly in both hands,” deeming that there is nothing to be ashamed of. Her emotions run high while reading, as she begins to question her own feelings. Anna wants to be a part of the narrative and have the “English happiness” that is missing from her life by marrying someone of an even higher status than her own husband, yet she knows that this is unattainable. Anna is facing an internal war with herself, as she fights between the reality she despises, and the fantasy life that she desperately desires. Knowing she hasn’t done anything explicitly wrong yet, but feeling the urge to make a change in her life, Anna only has control over the book she’s reading, her thoughts, and the knife she holds in her hands.

Consumed with thoughts of Vronsky, the ball, and her novel, Anna subconsciously “toy[s]” with and “clasps” the paper-knife; a subtle innuendo that suggests Anna could be figuratively engaging in sexual activities through reading a
fictional novel alone. Anna uses the paper-knife to separate the pages of her novel, inhabiting a masculine energy as she reads by cutting the pages of the book, placing herself in the position of the characters, and wishing to control the outcome of the story. Amy Mandelker writes that the knife cutting through the book pages is also a “breach between fiction and reality” for Anna. Using the knife allows Anna to exhibit the traditionally masculine qualities like independence and lust that she desires in a new setting; her fantasy life. The knife can be seen as a phallic symbol as it has the power to penetrate objects and portray dominance and power. The fidgeting of the object in her hands indicates a masculine, nervous, or even sexually excited energy; Anna’s reading is almost a symbolic masturbation and an exploration of the world around her.

Knives as phallic symbols are also a motif in Madame Bovary, as the narrator describes Rodolphe using a “little knife” after making love to Emma in a hidden spot outdoors: “Rodolphe, a cigar between his teeth, was mending one of the two broken reins with his little knife.” Both the cigar and the knife are reiterating the deed that he and Emma have done together, making their affair clear to the reader. As Geoffrey Wall writes in the introduction to the Madame Bovary, “In this code of erotic innuendo, the symbolism of the phallic was, inevitably, the centrepiece. Pistols and swords, umbrellas and cigars all carry their charge of half-hidden meaning, their whispered intimations of desire.” In both novels, specific objects hold phallic-like symbolism, allowing those who wield it to be in a dominant, independent, and traditionally masculine position.

As Anna continues to read, she becomes completely distracted by her thoughts and emotions, her desires for Vronsky and a different life, and “could not understand
what she was reading.” As she begins to enter a more dream-like fantastical state of mind, the passion of the moment overtakes her. Tolstoy writes,

She passed her paper-knife over the window-pane, then pressed its cold smooth surface against her cheek and almost laughed aloud, suddenly overcome with unreasoning joy. She felt that her nerves were being stretched like strings drawn tighter and tighter round pegs. She felt her eyes opening wider, her fingers and toes nervously moving, and something inside her stopping her breath, and all the forms and sounds in the swaying semi-darkness around struck her with unusual vividness.

Anna’s thoughts of Vronsky, combined with the illusions and debate she has within herself from reading the English novel culminate in an almost orgasmic experience. She is “overcome with unreasoning joy” after pressing the paper-knife against her cheek and almost stops breathing. Her nerves, eyes, fingers, and toes are all affected by this experience, suggesting that a mental activity such as reading can have a large physical impact on the body, especially when read in private spaces.

The world suddenly becomes more intense, as “forms and sounds…struck her with unusual vividness,” and Anna almost forgets where she is, and who is sitting in the train with her. Anna has to ask herself, “‘And am I here, myself? Am I myself or another?’ She was afraid of giving way to these delirious thoughts.” After imagining herself as the heroine of many different stories, Anna cannot determine who she is after her reading experience. By wielding the knife and turning its masculine energy in toward herself, Anna loses herself in the sensual experience and is left feeling dazed and “afraid” to give in to the power of her own thoughts.
The ending scene of Anna’s reading on the train connects to another painting by Enjolras titled “La fin d’un roman,” or “The End of the Novel.” In the work, the female reader, similarly draped in a luxurious, red room and nude as in the other Enjolras paintings, has seemingly completed the book she was reading, or is no longer interested in it, based on the title. Her facial expression is very dreamlike, as if in her head she is in a completely different world of fantasy. It appears that the subject, like Anna, has experienced an orgasmic event by reading, and is now tired and weakened. The book is tossed to the side, having presumably been used by the reader for the purpose of achieving a level of self-pleasure. This relates to the way Anna cannot focus on her novel after being overcome with intense sensual feeling. The woman in the painting has finished reading her novel and now seems ready to fall asleep in a curled up, almost limp position on her bed. However, for Anna, falling asleep is only another escape from her daily activities, and will not help her truly change her life.
Another female character in *Anna Karenina* who is enthralled by the idea of reading to imagine a new life for herself is Kitty. When she becomes acquainted with Madame Stahl and Varenka at a German spa, she decides that she wants to become spiritual like they are. The thought of living a more spiritual and religious life opens a “new world” for her. As the narrator writes,

…Kitty determined, wherever she lived, to seek out the unfortunate, help them as much as she could, distribute Gospels, and read the Gospel to the sick, to criminals, and to the dying. The idea of reading the Gospels to criminals, as Aline did, charmed Kitty particularly. But all these were secret dreams, which she did not speak of either to her mother or to Varenka.

Kitty, instead of turning to English novels, imagines turning to the Gospels as a way to transform and change her daily practices. Unlike Anna, she does not want to put herself in the position of a person in the Gospels, but rather, she wants to read the Gospels to others and read to those of lower classes than herself, such as “the sick,” “criminals,” and “the dying.” She does not picture herself as a heroine in a novel, but a heroine in real life, one that spreads literature to those in need, as she finds it to be charming. Her dreams of reading are still like Anna’s, though, because they are her “secret dreams” that she does not tell anyone about, for women were not meant to dream about an independent life outside of the home and family. Liza Knapp writes that Kitty’s mother “might well regard this other English practice—of letting girls read the Bible and make up their own mind about its meaning—to be equally ill-advised and dangerous,” as they may misinterpret the message and think irrationally or selfishly, as Kitty does. Kitty gets pleasure from the thought of spreading the Gospels, not because she finds the message to
be important or that it honors God, but rather because it would make her feel good about herself, and would make her more comparable to Madame Stahl’s niece, Aline.

In Chapter Two, I pointed out that in the nineteenth century some believed that women should not even be able to read the Bible, as it could be read subversively and be inappropriate for women. For Kitty, the idea of reading the Bible reflects her selfish desire to become a heroine and to be someone that helps those in need, for her own pleasure. Kitty is similar to Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* as they are both unconsciously feeding their egos, wanting to be the heroine of their life story. Catherine imagines herself as a Gothic heroine, saving the Tilney family from the “evil” General, and Kitty wants to save others from ruin with the power of the Gospels, but both do so for their own personal benefits, as well. The reader notices that this is simply a phase for Kitty, as she soon forgets about her dream and returns to the domestic lifestyle that women were expected to live.

Unlike Kitty, Anna cannot stop fantasizing about a different life, and wants to be well read in many topics. Because of her affair with Vronsky, she is left isolated from society and her family, and has no one else on whom to rely than Vronsky and her novels. In Anne Eakin Moss’ article “Tolstoy’s Politics of Love,” she writes, “Friendship with other women helps Tolstoy’s heroines find successful strategies for negotiating their interaction with the world.” However, Anna has few female friendships with women who respect and support her when her affair with Vronsky becomes more serious and public—rather, she is judged and mocked in public places, such as the opera. Her other sister-in-law Darya Alexandrovna Oblonskaya, Dolly, is the only woman she can turn to for advice, and even she cannot always fully empathize with Anna. Therefore, she
struggles with “interact[ing] with the world,” relying heavily on the fantasy life she enters when reading novels in which she is endlessly loved and wanted\textsuperscript{53}. As the narrator of \textit{Anna Karenina} states, “She had only his love left, and she wanted to love him,” meaning that Anna is essentially alone and must cling to Vronsky to gain his affections and any type of stability\textsuperscript{54}. Tolstoy describes Anna’s internal torments, as she reveals to Kitty’s older sister, Dolly, that she loves Vronsky and her son Serezha, but suffers knowing all three can never be together\textsuperscript{55}. Soon after this scene, Tolstoy describes Anna and Vronsky living in the country, where Anna again turns to reading novels in order to keep her hope alive. The narrator states,

\begin{quote}
In the absence of visitors Anna still continued to devote attention to her person, and read a great deal—both novels and such serious books as were in fashion…She ordered all the books that were praised in the foreign newspapers and magazines they received, and read them with the attention one gives only to what one reads in solitude.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

Like Emma Bovary who often read popular magazines as well as romance novels, Anna widens her repertoire and reads a variety of novels and “serious books” praised in foreign newspapers to “devote attention to her person.”\textsuperscript{57} Anna read more and more when home alone to try and improve her character and soul which she saw as being “choked by the life she was leading,” as she reveals to Dolly\textsuperscript{58}. Based on previous scenes in the novel, readers notice that Anna chooses to read “in solitude” to give the books her utmost attention, but perhaps also because it brings her pleasure and company in a life that is wrought with anxiety and societal exclusion\textsuperscript{59}. Shortly after, the narrator describes how Anna “fill[s] her time” by reading “one book after another,” fully immersing herself in
fictional worlds in an attempt to escape her troubling reality, and she also uses morphine as a tool to aid her in this quest, falling deeper into trouble.\(^{60}\)

Anna is left emotionally alone, as Vronsky does not understand the complexities of her character, and Karenin will not allow Anna to divorce him. Anne Eakin Moss writes “In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy posits no palatable alternatives to family life,” highlighting how Anna feels trapped in her situation, longing for change.\(^{61}\) She is unable to divorce Karenin without legally losing rights to her son, creating “the barrier for her to freedom” as Jeanna Marie Whiting writes in “Tolstoy and the Woman Question,” yet Anna cannot see herself spending her life happily with Karenin, so she is stuck in a difficult space between freedom and entrapment.\(^{62}\) Amid her confusion with Karenin, Vronsky continues to grow more distant, as Anna complains,

…I don’t need proofs; I need love! He ought to understand the hardship of my life here in Moscow. Is it life? I do not live, but only wait for a solution which is deferred and still deferred. Again no answer!...I can’t do anything, begin anything, change anything! I restrain myself, wait, invent occupations for myself,—the English family, writing, reading, but all that is only deception, it is all a kind of morphia.\(^{63}\)

This scene is crucial for Anna, as she finally sees her situation clearly for what it really is, and views herself critically—not as an imagined heroine. For Anna, books act both as an escape, a “deception,” and as a painkiller or “morphia,” as it is the only thing that can distract her from her despair.\(^{64}\) Anna feels like she is not living, but only waiting “for a solution” to her problems which are ever deferred, because as a woman she does not have any political say and depends on her husband to make those types of decisions—a tricky
thing to do when she has left said husband and child for another man\textsuperscript{65}. The reader can see Anna’s emotional progression: on the train she asks, “Am I myself or another?” and now asks herself “Is it life?”\textsuperscript{66} The effects of reading on Anna’s psyche is intense; as she states, she needs love to survive, and throughout the novel has been building on her knowledge of what true love is based on the English novels she has read\textsuperscript{67}. Yet, all of her reading, writing of children’s novels, and caring for wards are “occupations” she has invented for herself to distract from the fact that what she thought was an everlasting love with Count Vronsky was unfortunately only temporary, even if true\textsuperscript{68}. Whiting writes that Anna is alone both willingly by leaving Karenin for Vronsky, but also unwilling when she realizes that “she cannot depend on the strength and wisdom of Vronsky—he has failed to live up to her expectations.”\textsuperscript{69} Without female companionship, her son\textsuperscript{70}, or a strong, supportive lover, Anna is “utterly alone.”\textsuperscript{71} The “English happiness” Anna was so desperate to create in her life quickly crumbled away and left her with next to nothing\textsuperscript{72}.

As reading books brought her wishes of a new reality, one in which she would have a true love, adventure, and fulfillment in life, it also brought her disappointment when her fantasies could not align with her reality. Her shunning by society, feelings of guilt, and inner torments leads her to decide to end her life by suicide, as she jumps in front of a moving train, paralleling the accident that occurred when she and Vronsky first met at the station. The narrator writes,

The candle, by the light of which she had been reading that book filled with anxieties, deceptions, grief, and evil, flared up with a brighter light than before, lit up for her all that had before been dark, flickered, began to grow dim, and went out for ever.\textsuperscript{73}
The narrator suggests that the book she had been reading, perhaps the English novel she read on the train or a more generalized novel, was filled with “anxieties, deceptions, grief, and evil” when Anna had thought it to be full of an idealized life and dreams. What once was a light in her eyes that entranced Vronsky and everyone around her soon became a light that “flickered” and “went out for ever.” Tolstoy uses the candle and its light as an extended metaphor for Anna’s livelihood, and the book in this scene as a greater metaphor for her life: as her despair builds from the inability to live her life as in an English novel and her dreams feel ever more out of reach, Anna has nowhere left to run or hide, and must face her reality and the consequences of her actions.

Anna’s downfall was not due to her reading of novels, but rather her misreading of them. As with Catherine Morland’s and Emma Bovary’s reading habits, all three women were so focused on the texts they were reading and how they could apply to their lives that they failed to see past their fantasies to notice the dangers that lay ahead. Anna wanted pleasure and a type of independence in her life that was beyond what she could obtain by reading novels. Thus, she begins to act in a more masculine way by wielding the paper-knife and doing things such as riding horseback. At first, Dolly believes riding horseback is “unsuitable for Anna to be riding on horseback” as she connects it to “youthful coquetry, which in her opinion was unsuitable to a woman in Anna’s position.” Liza Knapp writes that it was commonly believed riding horseback was “dangerous to unborn fetuses,” suggesting that Anna denies herself maternity or rejects maternal instincts by riding horseback. Anna’s rejection of child-rearing is later confirmed when Anna tells Dolly she is practicing a form of birth control after her daughter’s birth, again hinting at a rejection of femininity in the place of masculinity and
sexual independence. Although Dolly originally tolerates Anna’s ways, the news that Anna is taking birth control is “repulsive” to Dolly and ultimately severs the close nature of their relationship. Still, Dolly is the closest friend Anna has. Anna tries to visit Dolly and get her advice as a “final attempt to escape, to live,” but is disappointed at Kitty’s presence, which prevents her from telling Dolly about all her troubles and she further bottles up her anguish.

Anna’s inclinations to behave in a more manly way relate to Emma Bovary’s behavior, as well. In Madame Bovary when Emma begins to make independent purchases and wear male disguises, her situation steadily declines, including her mental health, until her ultimate demise. There are similar parallels in Anna’s behavior—including the usage of the paper-knife and taking charge of her sexuality by using a birth control method.

Right before Anna throws herself into the train, she also throws away her red handbag, as if she is throwing away all essence of her womanhood before departing from the world in which she so badly wanted to be loved.

Vladimir Nabokov writes in his Lectures on Russian Literature (1981) that Anna is unlike Emma, because she gives Vronsky “her whole life,” choosing an open affair which “brands her an immoral woman in the eyes of her immoral circle.” Emma Bovary never completely goes public with her affairs and does not run away with Rodolphe despite wanting to, but Anna risks everything for Vronsky’s love, branding herself as “immoral” even among her circle of aristocratic women who also had affairs but kept them secret. Thus, Anna is crushed when even her best efforts to hold Vronsky close are futile. While in Northanger Abbey the power of love is enough to pull Catherine from the illusions of mystery she created in her mind from reading Gothic novels, in
Madame Bovary and in Anna Karenina the tragic disappointment of sacrificing everything for love to no avail destroys the heroines’ mentality and diminishes their will to live. While Catherine’s love for Henry protects her from the consequences of her reading, Emma and Anna have lost all love for their spouses so reading only leads them deeper into their desire for a new life, thus also leading them into danger.

While it may seem that Tolstoy is condemning Anna for transgressing societal expectations of women, Amy Mandelker questions if the author instead intends “to provoke a sense of outrage and compassion for the victims of barbarous moral and social conventions.” Readers empathize with Anna and her struggles to find love and happiness while fighting a morphine addiction and the psychological effects of being ostracized from her family and community among the strict “social conventions” and expectations put upon women in the time period. Gayle Green writes in “Women, Character, and Society in Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina” that Tolstoy held women and men to the same principles: “…a woman is what she does… and what is expected of her, feels even more heavily than man the weight of social pressures which work on and warp character.” Anna is trapped in a bland and loveless marriage due to “social pressures” of the time that did not allow women agency or say over their own lives, marriages, husbands, or even dreams, making the weight of her burdens—and the societal expectations of women—much heavier and more stressful.

Amy Mandelker writes that the act of reading in Russia in the nineteenth century generally was “fraught with the anxiety of reading a nonnative, “other” literature, and the act of reading a novel made the issue even more worrisome, since there was no novelistic tradition in Russia until the mid-nineteenth century.” Anna’s choice of reading English
novels already isolates her from what was socially acceptable reading, if any, and causes her to be seen as “other” by her peers and family. The more she reads, the more she ostracizes herself from those around her. Anna is consistently pursuing a future for herself in which she is the heroine, living a life of adventure and love, where she can wield power and chase her own desires and pleasures. Unfortunately, she is unable to achieve her goals, as she originally hoped to become a heroine in someone else’s story, not her own, and cannot drastically change her circumstances.

In response to the buildup of pressure from her family and compiling dangerous consequences as a result of her fantasies, Anna tragically takes her own life, unable to face the ramifications of her dreams and her actions. Throughout the novel, Anna tries to find herself through reading, and discovers the elements that she wants out of life. The influence that novels have on Anna is great, as they can cause her immense grief but also intense pleasure. Although reading brings her to her demise, it also develops Anna’s sense of who she is, making it a vital part of her self-improvement and development as a woman.
**Conclusion: Reading is Necessary for a Heroine’s Development**

“The choice of books seemed strange indeed;
But soon her thirsting spirit savoured
The mystery that those pages told—
And watched a different world unfold.”
— Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*

Starting in the eighteenth century as the popularity of novels grew, so, too, did the fear of the influence of novels on female readers. Women, and particularly noble women, were targeted as readers of novels by the market, as they had “literacy, fairly developed book market[s], leisure, and ‘some level of privacy,’” Ana Vogrinčič writes. However, because women were the predominant novel-reading group and were “perceived as in all respects weaker, fanciful, more sensitive and thus more liable to bad influence,” women were judged for their reading habits well into the nineteenth century, as well.

In her article “The Novel Reading Panic in 18th Century in England” Vogrinčič quotes the journal *Sylph* (1796), which states “I have actually seen mothers, in miserable garrets, crying for the imaginary distress of a heroine, while their children were crying for bread.” The author of the journal fears that women, particularly “mothers,” will become too invested in the “imaginary distress of a heroine,” and neglect their domestic and maternal duties as a result. This dramatization of the way that women sympathize with heroines highlights the personal nature of reading novels, and the psychological effects books can have. As Vogrinčič writes, women were “fanciful,” connecting deeply to the plights of the heroines as if they were their own. Catherine Morland, Emma Bovary, and Anna Karenina also find themselves distracted from reality by fantasy worlds because they wish they could act as the heroines of a novel in their lives, too. The desire to read, become heroines, and develop their true selves drives their lives forward.
Catherine, Emma, and Anna each have female Quixote-like qualities. Like Alonso Quixano reads chivalric romances, the heroines indulge in reading Gothic, romantic, and English novels and wish their lives could be similarly full of intrigue, passion, and adventure. However, Jodi Wyett writes, “…the figure of the female quixote seems almost exclusively associated with uncritical, overly absorptive novel reading,” suggesting that being a female reader, or dreamer, was not respected, but rather judged as being “uncritical” of the literature and “absorptive.” In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, paintings and criticism portrayed female readers as overly emotional women, or in states of extreme leisure and relaxation. This viewpoint then made it easy for critics to judge women for becoming “absorb[ed]” in their reading or neglectful toward female responsibilities in the home. Gustave Courbet’s painting, “A Young Woman Reading,” (1866), is one of many paintings of the nineteenth century that depict a woman in a state of leisure as she reads, similar to the Delphin Enjolras paintings in Chapter Three that show women in various states of reading and rest. The subject of Courbet’s painting lounges outside in a forest or meadow in a private setting, similar to Charles de Steuben’s
“Liseuse” (1829) from Chapter One. The subject leans underneath a tree, and is able to completely engross herself in her reading, leaning her head on her hand. She does not even notice that her dress has fallen off her shoulder to reveal a portion of her breast. The white dress, reminiscent of the subject in “Liseuse,” suggests an air of innocence about the woman, but the state of disarray her dress is in hints that her reading has carried her away to a different world, leaving her unaware of her actual surroundings to the point where she may accidentally expose herself. Thus, it may also imply to the viewer that she is unconsciously ready to cast off her innocence. When reading, the subject has the feeling of utmost privacy and is able to get lost in the fictional world of the novel. While reading may pose a risk to young female Quixotes like the subject of Courbet’s painting, I argue it is also a vital part of a woman’s self-discovery and maturation.

I included excerpts from Alexander Pushkin’s novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin* (1832), as epigraphs for each chapter because I believe the novel encapsulates the ideals of a reading heroine and proves that reading, with all its perceived risks and pleasures, is necessary for a woman’s self-growth. Amy Mandelker writes in *Framing Anna Karenina* (1993) that Pushkin’s novel in verse is “arguably the first Russian novel,” thus making Tatyana “the primordial Russian reading heroine.” Interestingly, Tolstoy used the name “Tatiana” for his heroine in early drafts of what would eventually become *Anna Karenina* (1877), suggesting that the two characters have had inherent similarities from the beginning, thereby connecting Tatyana and her desires to all three heroines.

*Eugene Onegin*, the titular protagonist, is a wealthy Russian aristocrat, a voracious reader, and a cynic who decides to move from St. Petersburg to live in the countryside after his uncle’s death. There, he meets a host of characters including the
romantic poet Vladimir Lensky, his fiancée Olga Larina, and Olga’s sister Tatyana. Pushkin’s heroine, Tatyana Larina, is a powerful female Quixote figure who dreams of love and explores the world around her through reading\textsuperscript{10}. Like the other heroines I have mentioned in previous chapters, she is a “dreaming consumer of epistolary novels”\textsuperscript{11} and a reader of both “grisly stories,”\textsuperscript{12} folklore, and romance novels. Pushkin writes, “From early youth she read romances, / And novels set her heart aglow,” similar to Emma Bovary’s upbringing\textsuperscript{13}. Over a short period of time, Tatyana develops a deep admiration and love for Onegin, secretly sending him a letter professing her love. Amy Mandelker writes that Tatyana is “so immersed in foreign literary conventions that she writes her love letter to Eugene in French,”\textsuperscript{14} which is important to note as I mentioned in Chapter Three that Anna reading an English novel on the train was worrisome and seen as “other,” given that Russia did not have a robust novelistic tradition until the mid-nineteenth century\textsuperscript{15}. Tatyana best express her feelings to Onegin in a foreign language because most of the books she reads are not originally in Russian, so her reading of French romances gives her the confidence to write to him first, going against societal expectations. Similarly to Anna, Tatyana enjoys reading “French or English romance,” but they fill her heart with such passionate ideals that, like Emma, her reality cannot compare to her fantasies, which greatly disappoints her\textsuperscript{16}.

Onegin coldly rejects Tatyana after reading her letter, breaking her heart and giving her disturbing nightmares. After a series of tragic events leading to Lensky’s death by Onegin’s hand and Onegin fleeing the estate to travel abroad, Tatyana visits Onegin’s home in the countryside and reads through the books in his library to try and understand his character. In Onegin’s library, she reads “not just his books but, taking his library as a
larger text, also his choice of books and marginalia.”\textsuperscript{17} By diving deep into his personal reading materials, she is “disillusioned simultaneously with her beloved, with literature, and with the reading of literature as a reading of life.”\textsuperscript{18} Tatyana questions, “What was he then? An imitation? / An empty phantom or a joke, / …A lexicon of words in vogue… / Mere parody and just a rogue?”\textsuperscript{19} Tatyana is “disillusioned” with Onegin and reading as a whole after her visit to his library\textsuperscript{20}. The time she spends reading makes her question whether Onegin was the valiant man she thought he was, or just an “imitation” or “phantom” of heroes from a compilation of novels he has read\textsuperscript{21}. The realization that Onegin may not be the hero she imagined him to be, and that she may not be the heroine of the romantic novels she reads, forces Tatyana to move on with her life. She begins to understand that she cannot only rely on novels and their images of love to shape her reality. Opposing the narrative of \textit{Northanger Abbey} (1817) in which Catherine snaps out of her whimsical ideals of love and mystery with the help of Henry Tilney’s actual admiration and care for her, Tatyana is able to mature by losing Onegin’s love and learning about his true self.

Pushkin spares Tatyana the tragic fate that Emma and Anna face, however it is not a completely happy ending. Years later when Onegin returns from his travels, he is crushed to see Tatyana married and settled with an older Prince N., a General. Realizing that he truly does love her, Onegin writes her a passionate love letter but Tatyana refuses his advances, telling him she will remain faithful to her husband despite her feelings for Onegin\textsuperscript{22}. Unlike Emma and Anna—who search for true love to replace their dull husbands and are willing to have affairs with other men—Tatyana tries to move on from her “reading of literature as a reading of life” strategy and lets Onegin go\textsuperscript{23}. While
Tatyana matures and discovers her own morality throughout the process of losing Onegin, she also loses her one true love.

Tatyana had high expectations of love ever since she read romances as a young girl, but Onegin failed to fulfill them in her adult life. Ana Vogrinčič writes, “Novels were accused of creating expectations which life could not fulfill…” Critics were afraid women would have unrealistic expectations of life due to reading novels. Indeed, in all three novels I have analyzed, the heroines expect and desire much more from their realities than what they actually experience. As in Don Quixote (1605), Catherine, Emma, and Anna search for adventure and love in their lives in the hopes of living like a heroine in a fictional novel. As women, however, they do not have the same level of agency as the male Alonso Quixano; they cannot travel the country on a quest to find their purpose. Instead, their reading of novels takes them on mental journeys. Although they often misread their situations and face challenges, reading helps the women find their true selves and the heroine-like qualities within them.

As Wayne Booth writes in his book, The Rhetoric of Fiction (1983), authors search for “how to achieve an intense illusion of reality, including the complexities of mental and moral reality” when writing novels. If an author can create an “illusion of reality,” then readers can mentally insert themselves into that world and connect with the characters. For Booth, this is because when a person begins to read, they become a different “self” that “must subordinate… mind and heart to the book… to enjoy it to the full.” When reading, one becomes a different self that puts their full trust, mind, and heart into the book to fully enjoy it, as opposed to their normal every day self. I claim that Catherine, Emma, and Anna also become different versions of themselves due to the
influence that reading novels has on their characters. Because they fully immerse themselves into their reading and can see themselves as heroines, they gain the desire for agency, love, and higher aspirations than a quiet domestic life or motherhood.

According to Booth, an author’s objectivity can create “what Flaubert called *impassibilité*, an unmoved or unimpassioned feeling toward the characters and events of one’s story,” however I believe the opposite is true for readers. Catherine, Emma, and Anna are so moved by the characters within the stories they read that they want to insert themselves in the narrative, for example, when Anna wishes she could become the heroine in the English novel she is reading. For Catherine and Emma, reading “impassion[s]” them to make changes to their realities, such as trying to solve family mysteries or dressing up in a male disguise, in the hopes of making their lives more adventurous and fascinating, like a novel. The three women are moved to action because of their reading, instead of behaving as passive figures in their own lives.

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth writes that “Don Quixote’s madness is partly caused by an excess of idealism… we laugh in the same way at Don Quixote: we are convinced that his heart, like ours, is in the right place.” Catherine Morland’s “excess of idealism” is Quixote-like as she aspires to behave like the mystery-solving Gothic heroines she reads about. While her actions are illogical and she completely misreads the General, her heart “is in the right place” and she is willing to learn from her mistakes, showing her self-improvement, which eventually leads Henry Tilney back to her. In *Madame Bovary* (1856), Emma reads romantic novels from childhood, thinking her life is bound to follow in the same way as a romantic heroine’s. Emma misreads the novels by trying to reflect them in her real life, and chooses to face her death when she can no
longer endure the disappointment. Similarly, Anna reads English novels and dreams of a life where she can have high esteem, pleasure, and love on her own accord. However, she also misreads the novels and loses everyone she holds dear in the process of trying to gain independence and change her life, because as a woman she had little authority to do so. Reading was treated as an incredibly dangerous pastime, yet I believe it was one of the most important things a woman of that time could do to try and better herself, better connect with the world around her, and become an active agent.

Booth suggests that reading is a very personal experience for the reader because “Our interest in the fate of...[characters] springs in part from our conviction that they are people who matter, people whose fate concerns us not simply because of its meaning or quality, but because we care about them as human beings.” Reading was seen as dangerous for women in the nineteenth century not because women were ‘sensitive’ or easily fooled by an author, but rather because connecting with the “fate” of a fictional character as if it was a “human being” could pull women away from the socially acceptable roles they were granted. Literature is powerful because it allows people to dream, to fantasize about alternative realities, and to envision potential new realities and pursue them. Likewise, reading teaches empathy—as readers, we are hurt when Catherine, Emma, and Anna are struggling, no matter if we or the authors judge them for their actions, because we see them as “human beings” or “people who matter,” and feel a personal connection to care for them and their wellbeing.

When characters like the General, the elder Madame Bovary, or Alexey Karenin try to put down the heroines in their respective stories for pursuing their dreams or chasing after love, the danger of reading is not upon the heroines but upon the people
trying to contain them. Catherine reads to try and understand the world, and although the
General humiliates her, with Henry’s help she comes to realize that she has already
learned so much about morality and treating others with respect. No matter how many
times Emma is disappointed by her lovers, she still tries to find the good in their
relationship because she believes in love and its power. Anna fights for Vronsky’s
attention even when it is waning, and sacrifices almost everything to pursue love and a
happy life. Tatyana stands her ground when she is rejected and protects the sanctity of her
marriage, even though it pains her. In each of these cases, reading novels has taught the
heroines about the truth and strength within each of them, and gives them the confidence
to chase their hopes and dreams.

Although reading may be risky because it can create unrealistic expectations for a
woman’s life, it is absolutely essential to the formation of the self. Reading allows the
heroines to discover what they wish their lives could be, instead of prescribing to the
societal norms of the time period and living a dull life void of adventure, change, or hope.
As Catherine, Emma, and Anna demonstrate, the true danger lies in not reading novels. If
the heroines of Northanger Abbey, Madame Bovary, or Anna Karenina did not read, they
would never become true heroines themselves. While it is not an easy path for any of
them, reading allows them to discover who they truly are and what they want out of life.
Without reading novels Catherine, Emma, and Anna would never develop the traits of a
bold, independent, compassionate heroine or learn the ways in which they can apply
these characteristics to their own lives, putting everything on the line for the things that
matter the most: love, happiness, and a sense of self-worth.
Notes for Introduction

1 Chapter 3, stanza 10, lines 1-4, page 61 of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*.
2 Lyons 319.
3 Lyons 319.
4 Hudson 567.
5 Lyons 319.
6 Hudson 577.
7 Hudson 577.
8 Hudson 577.
9 Wyett 261.
10 Lyons 319.
11 Wyett 261.
12 Wyett 261.
13 Hudson 577. Note how Hudson mainly discusses noble women reading novels — most women of the working class did not have the leisure time to read for enjoyment.
14 Raffa, “Danteworlds: A Readers Guide to The Inferno.”
15 Raffa, “Danteworlds: A Readers Guide to The Inferno.”
16 Alighieri V:82-87.
17 Alighieri V:82.
18 Alighieri V:124-125, 127-134.
19 Alighieri V:124.
20 Raffa, “Danteworlds: A Readers Guide to The Inferno.”
21 Alighieri V:128.
22 Alighieri V:129.
24 Raffa, “Danteworlds: A Readers Guide to The Inferno.”
25 Alighieri 106.
26 Hudson 577.
27 Hudson 577.
28 Hudson 577.
29 Hudson 577.
30 Cervantes 295-329.
31 Cervantes 26-27
32 Cervantes 26.
33 Cervantes 26.
34 Cervantes 26.
35 Gilroy xviii.
36 Said 93.
37 Said 93.
38 Said 82.
39 Said 82.
Notes for Chapter One

1. Chapter 2, stanza 27, lines 5-8, page 48 of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (1832).
4. Shapard 5.
10. Fordyce 25.
11. Fordyce 25.
12. Murphy 4.
15. Wartanian 2.
17. Austen 58.
22. Austen 100.
25. I discuss the idea of reading novels for pleasure further in Chapter Two.
27. Austen 308.
30. Austen 352.
32. Austen 384.
34. Austen 28.
35. Shapard xxi, xxiv.
36. Shapard xxi, xxiv.
40. Brownstein xv.
41. Malina 286-287.
In Geoffrey Wall’s introduction to *The Female Quixote*, he writes, “Significantly, Jane Austen read Lennox’s most famous novel more than once, and in 1807 she wrote to her sister Cassandra that reading it ‘now makes our evening amusement; to me a very high one, as I find the work quite equal to what I remembered it’” (xlii-xliii). I find Catherine to have many characteristics of the female Quixote character, but especially in this scene.  

Catherine’s bildungsroman develops further than just her relationship with the Tilneys, as she later discovers the truth that Isabella Thorpe hurt her brother James by flirting with Frederick Tilney and eventually causing a break in their engagement. Thus knowing the full truth, Catherine ends their friendship.  

In Debra Malina’s article, “Rereading the Patriarchal Text: The Female Quixote, Northanger Abbey, and the Trace of the Absent Mother,” she writes that “the damage wrought by the likes of General Tilney is in fact not resolvable into the ‘perfect felicity’ of fiction, and that the convention of the happy ending conceals our all-too-legitimate cause for alarm” (288). I find this to be a compelling argument, but due to the inherent satirical nature of the text as a mocking of sentimental novels, I wonder if it is possible for the General to truly have an honest change of heart by the end of the book.
Notes for Chapter Two

1 Chapter 3, stanza 9, lines 1-4, page 61 of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (1832).
2 Teleky 348.
3 Mellor 132.
4 Mellor 132.
5 Novillo-Corvalán 6.
6 Novillo-Corvalán 6.
7 Jack 228.
8 Jack 228.
9 Jack 229.
10 Jack 229.
11 The novel, however, first begins in first-person. This fact brings about the interesting question regarding the readership of the novels I discuss, and the expected audience. While I do not delve into this topic in my thesis, it is a topic I can expand upon in future writings.
12 In Richard Teleky’s article “Introducing Emma Bovary,” he writes, “In 1849 a young Norman woman named Delphine Delamare died by her own hand, of poison. Her suicide was the subject of much gossip, and a friend of the writer Gustave Flaubert drew his attention to it.” (348). As much as Flaubert connects to his fictional character, he also feels a pull to Emma Bovary having personal connections to her story by knowing its real-life origins, as well.
13 Novillo-Corvalán 12.
14 Novillo-Corvalán 12.
15 Novillo-Corvalán 12.
16 Flaubert 7.
17 Flaubert 7.
18 Flaubert 11.
19 Flaubert 35.
20 Flaubert 35.
21 Brownstein xviii, xxiv.
22 Brownstein xviii, xxiv.
23 Brownstein xviii, xxiv.
24 Brownstein xviii, xxiv.
25 Girard 5.
26 Girard 5.
27 Flaubert 33.
28 Flaubert 33.
29 Jack 229.
30 Jack 229-230.
31 Jack 230.
32 In Chapter Three, I will examine instances of heroines reading for pleasure in greater detail, especially in *Anna Karenina*.
33 Flaubert 42.
Flaubert writes about Emma’s hands, suggesting they are not beautiful in a way that made me recall Catherine’s rather average or plain appearance: “Yet her hands were not beautiful, not white enough perhaps, and rather bony at the knuckles; they were also too long, with no softening curves.” (Flaubert 15). I find the heroines to have many similarities.

Unlike Arabella, the protagonist of The Female Quixote (1752), who is saved from her imaginative fantasies and dependence on novels by a clergyman, Emma’s attempts to connect with religion fail.

Emma wishes to escape from common reality, as she states “…I adore stories that push on inexorably, frightening stories. I detest common heroes and temperate feelings,
the way they are in life,” (Flaubert 78). Her taste for horror novels suggests that for Emma, her domestic lifestyle is more terrifying than anything in the novels she reads, which is why she turns to them for comfort.

71 Flaubert 73.
72 In Chapter Three, I talk about Anna Karenina’s tragic end, in part due to her lack of female peers or friendly support outside of her unsatisfactory romantic relationships.
73 Flaubert 82.
74 Flaubert 82.
75 Wall x.
76 Wall x.
77 Novillo-Corvalán 16.
78 Novillo-Corvalán 16.
79 Flaubert 304.
80 Echevarría vii.
81 Girard 18.
82 Girard 18.
83 Flaubert 304.
84 Thornton 990.
85 Flaubert 304.
86 Thornton elaborates on this idea in his article, “The Fairest of Them All: Modes of Vision in Madame Bovary.” He writes: “…Emma's mirror now tells the truth, and what she sees at last is herself—not Rodolphe's mistress, not Leon's, not Lagardy's imaginary lover…Awakening to reality during the last moments of her life, she discovers the nature of the dream she has lived, “le fruit d'une imagination en delire,” and the horror of that realization cannot be avoided…” (Thornton 990). While Emma once enjoyed reading horror stories to distract her from reality, she is no longer able to avoid the horrors in her own life and must face herself, as she truly is, and come to terms with her reality and her soon-to-be end.
87 Thornton 990.
Notes for Chapter Three

1 Chapter 3, stanza 10, lines 5-8, page 61 of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (1832).
2 In Priscilla Meyer’s article “Tolstoy’s Polemic with Madame Bovary,” she writes that in an interview with G. A. Rusanov in 1883, Tolstoy had “forgotten” about *Madame Bovary*, but had “liked it.” (Meyer 244). However, in an interview in 1904, Tolstoy said, “One of my most favorite writers is your incomparable Flaubert. There is a truly magnificent artist, strong, exact, harmonious, full-blooded, perfect. His style is filled with the purest beauty. Can one say this of many writers?” (Meyer 244). Also, Tolstoy’s library had a Russian translation of *Madame Bovary* from the *Biblioteka dlja chteniia* in 1858, and was torn from the journal and bound with Shakespeare’s *Othello* (Meyer 244).
3 Tolstoy 56.
4 Tolstoy 59. Anna views the death as a “bad omen” (Tolstoy 60).
5 Tolstoy 91.
6 Tolstoy 91.
7 Tolstoy 91.
8 Tolstoy 91.
9 Whiting 6.
10 Whiting 8.
11 Whiting 8.
12 Much of Enjolras’ work focuses on women in domestic settings such as reading or sewing.
13 I was unable to find an exact date for any Enjolras painting referenced in this chapter, but a majority of his works was painted in the late 1800’s (ArtNet).
14 Tolstoy 91.
15 Laqueur 304.
16 Laqueur 304.
17 Laqueur 304.
18 Laqueur 304.
19 Laqueur 240.
21 Feuer Miller 89.
22 Knapp 48.
23 Tolstoy 92.
24 Tolstoy 92.
25 Tolstoy 92.
26 Brownstein xix.
27 Brownstein xix.
28 Mandelker 22.
29 Mandelker 23.
30 Tolstoy 92.
31 Tolstoy 92.
32 Tolstoy 92.
Liza Knapp writes in her book, *Anna Karenina and Others: Tolstoy’s Labyrinth of Plots* (2016), that Virginia Woolf had “nearly every scene of *Anna Karenina* branded in [her],” (207). In Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Peter Walsh also fidgets with a knife to help him cope with sexual energy and assert his dominance in social situations.
I find Anna’s general lack of love for her and Vronsky’s daughter, Annie, fascinating in comparison to her deep love for Serezha. It is reminiscent of Emma Bovary’s general disinterest in her own daughter, Berthe. Amy Mandelker writes, “In the continental tradition of the novel of adultery, motherhood is rarely a significant event in the heroine’s life. Recall Mme. Bovary’s indifference to her children once she realizes she cannot afford the pleasure of purchasing a lavish layette,” highlighting this comparison (51). Liza Knapp also points out their similarities: “Anna Karenina’s abnegation of her maternal responsibilities recalls the behavior of that other fictional adulteress and horse rider, Emma Bovary, who neglects and even abuses her daughter,” (35).

Mandelker writes, “…a feminist critic might argue, female rebellion involves disengaging from what are perceived to be a woman’s natural occupations of housekeeping and motherhood; therefore, she is considered to be monstrous and perverse in deviating from the natural parameters of her femininity,” (42). Again in conversation with Madame Bovary, I stated in Chapter Two that Emma was seen as a monster when she started acting independently and thus could not be allowed to live—I see a parallel to Anna and her rejection of femininity.

Knapp 34.

Knapp 116. Liza Knapp references Amy Mandelker’s Framing Anna Karenina, writing, “Ultimately, when Anna most needs her, Dolly lets her down,” (Knapp 116).
Notes for Conclusion

1 Chapter 7, stanza 21, lines 11-14, page 166 of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*.
2 Vogrinčič 106.
3 Vogrinčič 110.
4 Vogrinčič 104.
5 In addition, Vogrinčič writes “Broadly, one could divide the reproaches into those ascribing to novels the dangerous psychological affects, triggering imitation and inoculating wrong ideas of love and life; and into those referring to the mere habit of novel-reading as a physically harmful waste of time, damaging not only the mind and the morale of readers, but also their eyesight and posture,” (109). Reading was seen as not only dangerous for the mind, but damaging to the body, as well.
6 Vogrinčič 110.
7 Wyett 261.
8 Mandelker 130.
9 Mandelker 130.
10 Interestingly, Tatyana uses reading as a way of understanding Onegin better, too, by reading the books in his library. I will explain this scene further on in the chapter.
11 Mandelker 130.
12 Chapter 2, stanza 27, line 6, page 48 of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*.
13 Chapter 2, stanza 29, lines 1-2, page 49 of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*.
14 Mandelker 130.
15 Mandelker 130.
16 Mandelker 130.
17 Mandelker 131.
18 Mandelker 131.
19 Chapter 7, stanza 24, lines 9-10, 13-14, page 167 of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*.
20 Mandelker 131.
21 Chapter 7, stanza 24, lines 9-10, page 167 of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*.
22 Tatyana tells Onegin, “But I am now another’s wife, / And I’ll be faithful all my life.”
23 Chapter 8, stanza 47, lines 13-14, page 210 of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*.
24 Mandelker 131.
25 Vogrinčič 110.
26 Which, of course, they are!
27 Booth 50. He particularly references Henry James.
28 Booth 138.
29 Booth 138.
30 Booth 81.
31 Booth 81.
32 Booth 246.
33 Booth 246.
34 Booth 130.
35 Booth 130.
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