Diffusing Expectations in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*:
Women Ahead of their Time and Challenging Society’s Ideals

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Introduction

In the twentieth century, the phrase ‘independent women’ was catapulted to attention by the group Destiny’s Child whose lyrics to the song “Independent Women Part 1” included the words “Do what I want, live how I wanna live” (2001). Destiny’s Child may have introduced to a new generation that all women have a right to be independent, but this is a movement long in creation. Feminism has been making its moves for centuries, in fact, the very first woman’s rights conference was held in New York in 1848 (Sprinkle 1) and as stated by Selden et al., although the word feminism “may only have come into English usage in the 1890s, women’s conscious struggle to resist patriarchy goes much further back” (115). The nineteenth century, therefore, was starting to see a change and there were two authors who made waves by infusing their protagonists with an unquestionable independence. These two authors were Charlotte Brontë and Kate Chopin and they did this through their lead characters of Jane Eyre and Edna Pontellier respectively.

Jane and Edna both exhibit an all-encompassing desire for independence and their refusal to compromise the life they have been given with the life they wish to live, reveals an unprecedented progressiveness from their creators. Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847 and Chopin’s *The Awakening* in 1899. Published just over half a century apart, it would still be many years before the women’s movement started to make waves in the 1960s. In *Beginning Theory*, Barry writes that “[t]he ‘women’s movement’ of the 1960s was not, of course, the start of feminism. Rather, it was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women’s inequality in society” (123). Moreover, feminist and literary critic Elaine Showalter states the following: “In 1965, when I began to do research for my Ph.D. dissertation on Victorian women writers, feminist criticism did not exist” (xi). Although these two novelists were certainly not alone, they were pushing boundaries and revealing a feminist prowess when the concept and theory of feminism was still trying to break its way through. The challenging of ideals, boundless determination and independent edge that Brontë and Chopin instilled in their protagonists could, therefore, be considered to be a forecast of the change that was yet to come.

The periods during which the novels were written and published has been classed by Showalter as the feminine phase (1840 to 1880) and the feminist phase (1880 to 1920) (11). During the feminine phase, novels written by women stood a greater chance of being published, if they were written under a male pseudonym (11), such as *Jane Eyre*, which was written under the name of Currer Bell. Whereas the feminist phase is marked by the period of time in which women won the right to vote (11). Both phases fall under the time now established as the first
wave of feminism, a time which “focused on re-discovery” (xv). These novels stand out because they feature women who were not afraid to challenge the preconceptions, oppression and expectations of society so that they could live their life according to their own desires and beliefs.

Essentially, *The Awakening* is a novel filled with promise and despair centred around a woman who is slowly awakening to the invisible ties that society binds her by and whose progression the reader follows as she makes changes to cast those ties aside. Edna Pontellier starts to reject the notion that a woman’s place is in the home, looking after her husband and her family and, instead, begins to awaken to her true self and her need for independence (Chopin 21, 43, 54, 80-82, 89, 126, 149, 171). Similarly, Jane Eyre desires the same of her existence, but outside the realms of marriage. Jane desires to find her own way in life realising that the “real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had the courage to go forth into its expanse” (Brontë 98). The autobiographical narrative framework allows the reader to follow Jane on her quest through life, admitting the reader into her innermost thoughts and feelings and revealing her passion and desire for independence (Brontë 7, 11, 97, 98, 99).

Both women fight against the grain of society’s expectations seeking their independence, and as Sprinkle states with regard to Edna, “[s]he embodied the social ideals for which women of that era were striving […] she was the definitive persona which thousands of women during the late nineteenth century exalted as a role model” (1). The novels, thus, share a common vision and message to society as a whole. The authors could be said to be expressing, not only their own progressive thoughts, but those of their fellow women, through their protagonists. With relevant concepts and research from feminist criticism, I will argue that Jane and Edna’s pursuance of independence outside of the realms of marriage, not only redefines that union’s parameters, but challenges society’s ideals, therefore, establishing them as women ahead of their time.

**Background**

Whilst both novels were published during the Victorian era (1837 to 1901), their authors lived on different continents. Despite their differing countries of origin, there are similarities between Brontë and Chopin and the lives they lived. Charlotte Brontë was born in Yorkshire, England in 1816 and was one of six siblings. Growing up, “[r]eaders and discussion fuelled the Brontë children’s play” (Alexander 4), but in her formative years, Charlotte lost not only her mother, but her two elder sisters (2-3). Books and writing were with Charlotte from a young age, setting
the scene for the career that was to follow. However, before her commitment to publishing, Charlotte worked as a teacher, a governess and even lived in Brussels where she suffered unrequited love (6-9). Charlotte shared a love of writing with her sisters Emily and Ann (9) and all three published novels under male pseudonyms, with Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre* being published in 1847 (10). Success was followed by sadness, however, and between 1848 and 1849 Jane lost her remaining siblings (12). Following the deaths of her sisters, Charlotte continued to write, despite losing her “sole support for literary endeavours” (12). She was married in 1854 to a man that she liked, but perhaps did not love (15) and although happy in her new domestic life, it was not fated to last, and she died during pregnancy in 1855 (15). Charlotte had certainly lived an independent life until her marriage, so it could be said to be curious that despite writing a novel featuring such an independent and bold Jane, that Charlotte herself may have settled for admiration instead of love.

Similarly, Kate Chopin experienced a great amount of loss. Kate was born in Saint Louis, America in 1850 to an Irish father and American mother. Her father died when she was four years old (Reesman 529) leaving her in the care of three “loving, intelligent, independent women” (529) namely her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. Well-read and educated, Chopin began her literary career in her late thirties following not only the death of her husband, but also her mother, in order to provide for the six children that she was left to care for (529). Kate Chopin was a “libertarian thinker, tormented by the conventions of her society and her own lack of contentment” (Cheshire v), who was “more advanced than her contemporaries with her outlook on life and her perception of social evolution” (v). Short stories about the local colourful society in St. Louis led to novels and the publication of *The Awakening* in 1899. Unfortunately, Edna’s awakening to her true self was “essentially a feminist outpouring at a time when the concept of feminism was not yet in society’s vocabulary” (vi) and although Chopin was daring to express “what a lot of other women were feeling, but didn’t want to admit, let alone agree with” (vii) the novel was consequently ill received and Chopin died in 1904 never to see the acclaim the novel later received.

Elaine Showalter states that “as in every other field, being first has its disadvantages, because you become the launching-pad for subsequent work and the starting-point for everyone else’s improvements and corrections” (“Twenty Years” 402). Undoubtedly, this statement may be said to be relevant to both novels and their novelists. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* has received much acclaim since its publication, certainly when one considers the countless reviews and further publications as the likes of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* published in 1966 which focusses on the origin of the character Bertha. Additionally, Showalter’s statement certainly
mirrors Chopin’s experience in publishing *The Awakening*. Condemned by critics who did not yet understand it, being the first to publish such a novel certainly had a negative impact and not only were critics “shocked and dismayed by Edna Pontellier’s behaviour” (Sprinkle 2) but they also “condemned Edna’s infidelity and self-centered narcissism as reprehensible. But what especially invoked their wrath was that Chopin seemed to approve of Edna’s behaviour” (4). It may be said that Chopin and Edna are a reflection of each other in that experience. Edna unable to be who she really wants to be in the time she is living in, chooses death and Chopin, who publishes a book promoting women’s choice, has to watch her career (at least in her lifetime) meet its death. There is no way to truly determine what Charlotte Brontë or Kate Chopin were thinking when they wrote their novels, but through reading their words and studying their backgrounds, one is perhaps offered a glimpse of the shared experiences and attributes that led them to unknowingly pursue the term we now know as feminism and be posthumously recognised as women far ahead of their time.

**Aim and Approach**

The aim of this essay is to explore how the characters of Jane Eyre and Edna Pontellier are women ahead of their time who redefine the parameters of marriage and challenge society’s ideals. My argument will be achieved through a close reading of the texts with a connection to feminist criticism and theory and relevant extracts from secondary sources focusing on the umbrella terms of ‘patriarchy’ and ‘oppression’. Tyson defines feminist criticism as a form of criticism that “examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (83). This essay will feature the work of French theorist Hélène Cixous. Barry explains that French theorists “often deal with concerns other than literature: they write about language, representation and psychology as such and often travel through detailed treatments of major philosophical issues of this kind before coming to the literary text itself” (127). Hélène Cixous, in her essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ published in 1976, created the term *écriture féminine* which essentially concentrates on women’s feelings and expression and as Cixous herself states that “[w]oman must write her self” (875). Selden et al. illustrates that Cixous is arguing “for a positive representation of femininity in a discourse she calls ‘écriture féminine’, and her essay […] is a celebrated manifesto of ‘women’s writing’ which calls for women to put their ‘bodies’ into their writing” (135). Moreover, Cixous’s idea behind the term is to “subvert ‘masculine’ symbolic language and create new identities for women, which, in their turn, will lead to new social institutions” (Selden et al. 135). Based on Cixous’s theory *écriture féminine* and the idea
that “[w]oman must write her self” (875), there are three objectives that will remain the focus throughout the essay and create structure in the overall argument. The first objective is based on how and when the desire to pursue their independence develops within the protagonists. The second objective focusses on Victorian society’s expectations regarding the ‘Angel in the House’ persona and how Jane and Edna challenge this. The third objective explores how both women are infused with a determination to be more than just a wife and more than just a possession. The analysis will be written from the basis that whilst Edna seeks her independence from within the confines of marriage, Jane seeks her independence before being willing to enter into it.

Previous Research and Material
The primary sources used for this project are the novels Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë and The Awakening by Kate Chopin. Jane Eyre was published in 1847 and the edition used is a Penguin English Library edition published by Penguin Books in 2012. The Awakening was first published in 1899 and the edition used is a Collins Classics edition published by Harper Press in 2011. When researching both novels and authors, it became clear that many articles have been written featuring both authors and novels respectively, but it is rare to find an article that focusses predominantly on both. A special project was carried out on both novels by Hanni Mohell Malinen in 2015. Mohell Malinen’s essay was written from the feminist perspective including social construction, patriarchy and social and economic conditions (8-9) with the thesis focussing on the argument that although the protagonists challenge society’s norms, they fundamentally “fail to fully break free from the deep-rooted patriarchal structures” (4). This project and Mohell Malinen’s, therefore, are approaching the protagonist’s independence from differing aspects, as this project will focus on their journey of independence which sees them not only challenging society’s ideals but establishing themselves as independent women ahead of their time. This argument is supported with theory from Hélène Cixous. French theorist Cixous, therefore, is the main secondary source used in this project with theory taken from her essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1976). Additional quotations with regard to theory have been taken from Barry (2017), Selden et al. (2005) and Tyson (2006). Various articles have also been consulted from the Norton Critical Editions of the novels (2016 and 2018). Lastly, with regard to feminist literary studies, Showalter (2009) has proved valuable in providing background and sources relevant to the topic at hand.
Analysis

Jane and Edna’s Independence: An Independence Born and an Independence Developed

Both Jane and Edna pursue an independence that challenges ideals and defines them as women ahead of their time, but they reach this at very different points in their lives. The lives that they intend to live and the paths they are destined to take in challenging the patriarchal and oppressive ideals of society and men in their lifetime, are part of a continual discovery of their inner-selves that develops within them. In her essay, Cixous writes: “Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity […] not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright” (885). This passage from Cixous could be equated to the unwritten journey both women will take. Two women who are brave enough to traverse the unknown and who have the courage to explore the feelings inside of them that tell them that they can be more, and are worth more, than society expects of them. How something that was once deemed frightening (challenging society’s ideals) should perhaps be the focal point that they direct their energy and their thoughts towards.

Both women show traces of the aspects identified by Cixous and, undoubtedly, Jane’s independence is evident from the moment her narrative begins. Marsh writes the following: “Part of the appeal of Jane Eyre is that its heroine […] makes her own way and relies on herself alone […] epitomizing independence. She tells her own story, selecting for her starting point the first moment when she begins to resist those who oppress her and assert her own will” (82). From the outset, Jane fights against the patriarchal world that exists around her. Bullied by her cousin and punished for her retaliation (Brontë 5-7), Jane does not hesitate to question that she should have defended herself when she asks, “[h]ow is he my master? Am I a servant?” (7). Jane is not only already showing that she will stand up for herself and fight against wrongful behaviour, but also that she will not be dominated just because he is a boy. She stands against the idea of patriarchy and a boy (or man) being able to have any control over her. Her own thoughts here reaffirm this: “Unjust! – Unjust!” said my reason, forced by the agonising stimulus into precocious though transitory power; and Resolve, equally wrought up, instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression” (11). This passage suggests that the painful experience at the hands of her cousin and the fact that she is aware of how his behaviour affects her, is the exact reason that she decides to find a solution. The use of the word ‘wrought’ implies that she is so worked up that she has to make something happen and the use of the word ‘strange’ perhaps implies that Jane is aware that her line of thinking is
surprising and unusual for a girl her age or indeed of her time. In fighting back against her cousin and standing up for herself, Jane is exhibiting the “drive” (885) referenced by Cixous. The French theorist also writes: “as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than her self” (Cixous 878). Jane’s actions could be considered to reflect Cixous’s analogy, as her anger at the way she has been treated is the ‘arrow’ that gathers energy and drives her to challenge the patriarchy she is faced with. Jane sees the inequality that exists, and she is starting to expose: “the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural ‘mind-set’ in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality” (Barry 124). It is almost as if Jane is able to see her cousin’s behaviour as a necessary means to an end and that because of it, she sees that she must break free from any form of unjustifiable and unfair control that could potentially be imposed upon her. Jane is realising that in order to escape a tormented life and pursue her independence, she must reject patriarchy and oppression and fight against any authority that would attempt to subjugate her.

Whilst Jane’s independence is with her from childhood, Edna’s is something that creeps up on her at the age of twenty-eight (Chopin 21). There is not one particular event, rather an accumulation of feeling that develops, a sudden awareness that the life she lives is perhaps not the life she desires. The everyday occurrences in Grand Isle and the general nature of her husband, leaves Edna suddenly facing an “indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul’s summer day” (10). As in Jane Eyre, the word ‘oppression’ is introduced at an early stage and reinforces the harsh sense of unfairness that Edna is overcome by. But whilst Jane seems to understand to a degree where these feelings stem from, Edna, an adult, cannot quite put her finger on it. The word ‘indescribable’ suggests that the feeling is so unusual to her that she does not know what to do with it, only that it is there, in a part of her that she has not previously acknowledged. Edna’s thoughts are not clear at this point, but she is aware that the feeling causes her a degree of anxiety because it is out of place with the world she usually inhabits. The words ‘shadow’ and ‘mist’ imply further how Edna is not yet at peace with these new and unusual thoughts. They sit somewhere in the dark, devoid of light and difficult for her to see, but they put her spirit in a sense of unrest. Furthermore, the description of a “shadowy anguish which had overcome her the midnight when she had abandoned herself to tears” (Chopin 21) attests to the burden that Edna is carrying. The phrase suggests the weight of the sadness and suffering that Edna is experiencing from her newfound wisdom that everything is perhaps not as it should be. Edna is very much on the verge of her awakening and quest for independence which parallels the “abrupt and
gradual awakenings” (885) that Cixous writes of. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explains, “Edna’s awakening consists, at least partially, in her growing reflection of the prescribed social role of woman” (247). This is reflected further on in the narrative when Edna describes how

A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her – the light which, showing the way, forbids it. At that early period it served but to bewilder her [...] In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. (Chopin 21)

Edna is just as surprised as Jane as to the thoughts she is having concerning her life, but it is here that it starts to make sense to her. The use of the word ‘dawn’ reveals that Edna is starting to accept the begins of something new in her life and is beginning to see a way forward through the haze of thoughts she has begun to experience. The word ‘forbid’ reveals that Edna realises that some will refuse to grasp or accept her way of thinking and although she herself has been puzzled by it, she is starting to comprehend her situation and position in life. In the period that she lives in, it is unusual to feel this way, rare to want more from life than that which society expects. Mary Papke, when commenting on the novel, describes that “one does hear in her story the constant murmur, whisper, clamour of another vision of life. Through her work, Chopin invites the reader to imagine a world in which woman’s experience and desire are no longer marginalized or effaced” (318-319). This statement on women’s experience corresponds to the empowerment that the reader starts to witness in Edna and can be further connected with Cixous’s analogy of the arrow that “gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than her self” (878). Edna is starting to realise the power that she has within her and that she does not need to fit into the box that Victorian society envisages for women. Edna has reached a turning point and she must follow the light that is slowly building inside her that wants to fight back against the oppression she has begun to sense around her. Edna is realising that she is entitled to more than being defined simply by her sex and that she is a human being who deserves to seek independence and her own version of happiness.

**Jane and Edna’s Challenge to Society’s Expectations: Angel in the House and the Victorian Ideal**

The notion that women should conform to society’s Victorian ideal and ‘Angel in the House’ persona is challenged by both Jane and Edna in their pursuit of independence. The restrictive
ideologies of Victorian society have a strong correlation to the poem ‘Angel in the House’ by Coventry Patmore. In the section of the poem titled ‘The Wife’s Tragedy’, Patmore writes “Man must be pleased; but him to please, Is Woman’s pleasure” (74). The poem envisages a model of how women should behave and expresses the societal ideals and expectations that were prevalent in Victorian times. Women were, in this era, expected to attend to the needs of their husband, their children and their home first and foremost and in doing so, be content. Showalter explains how the “middle-class ideology of the proper sphere of womanhood […] prescribed a woman who would be a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home” (12) while Tyson describes how “[t]raditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (85) which corresponds with theory written by Cixous in which she argues of the importance of women writing “her self” (875). She reasons that women must “let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery” (877) and that women should “invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes” (886). These statements by Cixous could be said to fundamentally make reference to the patriarchal elements of Victorian society, which strove to keep women attentive to their husbands and in their homes.

The ‘Angel in the House’ standard of perfection is, therefore, prominent within both novels because it exudes the ideals that were prevalent during the era, and, in the context of this analysis, the term ‘Angel’ fully encapsulates the virtues that Victorian society reflected onto women. Lutz describes how Charlotte Brontë, when writing love letters, “stepped far outside of the Victorian code of behaviour, cultivating an outspoken, unconventional desire she would develop in her heroine Jane Eyre” (436). Jane displays the ability to speak her mind and challenges expected behaviour because she not only sees how wrong these traditional gender roles are, but she strives for equality between herself and her male counterparts:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 129)
There are various words within this passage that stand out as a challenge to society’s patriarchal views. Jane is aware of the sensations felt by both sexes to be able to use their mental and physical powers. The words ‘rigid’, ‘restraint’ and ‘stagnation’ all point to the unbending inability of society to adapt and of the desire to prevent women from having the same freedom of movement as men. Jane is addressing the fact that society is unwilling to listen to what women have to say, preferring to give advantages to the male of the species and restrict women’s boundaries as revealed by the word ‘confine’. Jane sees the lack of consideration given to women in society and the words ‘condemn’ and ‘custom’ imply that instead of disapproving or condemning women for wanting more than has been the tradition, society should be looking to celebrate women’s desire to find more in life. This reflection could be considered to come directly from Brontë herself, who found herself publishing her book under a male pseudonym in order to become a published author, but fundamentally reveals Jane’s aspirations to be more than the woman that society expects. Jane’s ponderings share characteristics with and could be considered to find root in Cixous’s theory of the importance of women’s writing furthering not only women’s experience, but their feelings, which can be looked down upon by the patriarchal led society. Jane’s drive to seek her independence and challenge society’s ideals, stems from the view that she is equal to and as worthy as any man to pursue her dreams. Jane will not be ‘stopped’ and will not be controlled by society’s patriarchal expectations that women belong in the home. Neither will she allow them to impede upon the choices she makes in following her chosen destiny because she will make her own ‘regulations’. In defying the Victorian ideal of an ‘Angel’, Jane Eyre is a lady very much ahead of her time, challenging the so called ‘codes’ that would keep women at home and championing women’s choice, not only for herself, but for her peers.

In contrast, Edna’s challenge to Victorian ideals and the virtues attributed to the ‘Angel in the House’ persona, comes from the position assigned to her as wife and mother. Whereas Jane’s challenge to society is made outside of marriage and a family of her own, Edna’s comes from within. Edna is also opposed to society’s expectations and just like Jane, as written by Taylor, Edna was “condemned for her independence, defiance of society’s rules and values” (279) and “knows well enough the meaning of her departures from the “codes” of acceptable female behavior, but increasingly takes upon herself the role of lawbreaker” (283-284). Not only does this link to Cixous’s belief that women should “invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetoric’s, regulations and codes” (886) but at the time of writing, as explained by Reesman, “women were beginning to challenge the patriarchal rules that sought not only to confine them to well-defined social, economic, and vocational domains
but to control their inner life as well” (529). Edna resists not only society’s ideals of a woman but opposes the era’s view of how a wife and mother should behave under the virtues assigned to the ‘Angel’ archetype. Edna is not a typical Victorian wife or mother and her rejection of conventional ideals of the time is initially revealed by the omniscient narrator: “Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-woman seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle [...] They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals” (Chopin 12-13). Whilst Edna loves her children, it becomes clear throughout the novel that she is able to set herself apart from them (29-30) and when it comes to her husband, she is far from the position of worshipping him, rather accepting that he is a good husband (11). The use of the word ‘efface’ fundamentally links to the assumed role of the ‘Angel in the House’ because women were expected by society to put their family first, making themselves essentially disappear. To make herself unimportant, even for her children, is not an attribute that Edna is willing to adopt and is addressed in a discussion with her friend:

Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one [...]. I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me. (Chopin 74-75)

Edna’s courage in discussing her views of motherhood and freedom of self with Madame Ratignolle exposes Edna’s rebelliousness when it comes to the virtues that Victorian society expects women to express. Although Edna is still in the process of awakening to the patriarchal ideals that have bound her, she is starting to realise the importance of speaking her mind if she wants more than a life of pure conformity. The use of the word ‘sacrifice’ implies that, although she would give up her existence for her children, she would not offer her spirit for them. Whilst all the other elements are unnecessary to her and she would part with them, her spirit, her essential being, is something that she could not give up, even for her children. Edna being true to herself and liberating her thoughts references Cixous’s theory on transformation (880). In speaking out, Edna is aiding her transformation and carrying out “(a)n act that will also be marked by woman’s seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression” (880). Edna’s discussion with Madame Ratignolle is a clear indication of Edna defying the Victorian ideal and ‘Angel’ persona because
she is not willing to suppress her thoughts, even if they go against what society deems appropriate for women. In daring to oppose the imagined ‘codes’ that society imposes on women and daring to envisage a world in which she is free to speak her mind, Edna is challenging the virtuous ‘Angel’ archetype that would object to her quest for independence, reaffirming that she is a woman ahead of her time.

**Edna and Jane’s Challenge to Patriarchy: Challenging Control and the Union of Marriage**

In pursuing their independence, Edna and Jane not only challenge patriarchal control, but redefine the parameters of marriage. Whilst they are both on a similar path, their journeys stem from very different vantage points. Edna pursues her independence from within marriage’s confines whereas Jane seeks hers before she will consider being claimed by a ring and the institution that accompanies it. Tyson describes how patriarchy “treats women, whatever their role, like objects: like objects, women exist, according to patriarchy, to be used without consideration of their own perspectives, feelings, or opinions” (91) while Barry identifies that the way in which women were portrayed in literature was “felt to be one of the most important forms of ‘socialisation’, since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the ‘feminine’ and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations” (124). However, the goals and aspirations that perhaps the men in their lives (and society) hold, are not held by Edna or by Jane. In fact, Edna and Jane are striving to ensure that their perspectives and feelings are heard, considered and accepted. When speaking of the role of women in literature, Cixous also addresses women’s goals and argues that

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement. (875)

Cixous’s theory appears to share characteristics with Edna and Jane’s journey to independence because they have to some extent been ‘driven’ away from their real self by society’s patriarchal stance which aims to put men first. Not only this, but both protagonists are now aiming to put themselves first and foremost in the world, creating their own ‘history’ by following their own path.

Within the first chapter of *The Awakening*, Edna’s husband’s ideas of control are implied when he is described as looking at his wife as “one looks at a valuable piece of personal
property which has suffered some damage” (Chopin 3). Mr Pontellier sees Edna as his possession, she belongs to him and he expects her to act in accordance with his and society’s standards for a woman. His patriarchal stance looks at her as if she is an object and the use of the words ‘suffered’ and ‘damage’ at the sight of her sunburn (3) suggest that she has somehow diminished her quality in his eyes because she does not look the way he desires. In not protecting herself from the sun, Edna has stepped outside of society’s behavioral etiquette rather than complying with the idea of a flawless wife that not only her husband, but society deems acceptable. However, as Edna starts to awaken to the possibilities that exist outside of his control, rather than her husband’s expectations inducing her to conform, they do the contrary. Edna starts to rebel and instead of being home to receive visitors on the assigned day of the week (Chopin 79-80), she goes out, and despite her husband’s consternation, offers no more of an explanation than she “simply felt like going out” (8). As Cixous’s theory explains, Edna starts to “put herself into the text […] by her own movement” (875). Edna will no longer be controlled, will no longer curtail to her husband or to society and starts to do as she wishes, redefining the parameters that marriage has held over her. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese identifies how Edna is effectually embracing “her rebellion against the social structures she sees as incarnated by her husband” (248). Edna’s rebellion against the control of her husband and the argument that ensues (Chopin 80-81) sees Edna direct her anger on to the symbol of what controls her: “taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet” (Chopin 82). Edna’s wedding ring is a representation of the tie that binds her to her husband and his patriarchal expectations and in stamping on that symbol, Edna is forcefully and decisively attempting to eradicate what controls her. The use of the words ‘striving’ and ‘crush’ indicate that feeling imprisoned by marriage and its expectations Edna wants to do all she can to destroy the object that represents it, and in doing so, that she might be able to extinguish the control and obligations that are attached to it. The use of the word ‘circlet’ suggests how the wedding ring embodies the eternalness of marriage and how the ring is the binding circle that controls her. However, in describing it as ‘glittering’, it could be said that what was once a shimmering light that attracted her, Edna now sees for the superficial symbol it is, representing a man’s control over her life. That Edna is unable to make any mark on its surface, may imply that the patriarchal hold is so strong and so deeply imbedded in the institution of marriage, that Edna is not yet powerful enough in her own right to effect change with regard to women’s positions in marriage or society. Nevertheless, she is on her way to pursuing her own independence and freedom from
her husband’s control where she is not bound by anything other than her own free will. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese states further that “The Awakening does not present marriage as the external symbol of female identity formation” (246). This certainly can be said to be true for Edna, whose identity begins to form when she starts to break away from her husband and his control, corresponding with Cixous’s theory on women’s movement creating their own history (875). In fact, Edna does in fact start to “write her self” and “put herself into the text” (Cixous 875) and this can be seen towards the end of the novel when she declares that she is “no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose” (Chopin 171). This declaration reveals how far Edna has come in her awakening to her own power and independence and ability to control her own life, rather than allowing it to be controlled for her. Edna has reached the point that she has been able to step out from underneath her husband’s control and the use of the word “possession” reaffirms that she no longer sees herself as being owned by her husband, because she has chosen to own herself. She will make the choices that best suit her expectations and desires and in redefining the parameters that control her, Edna is able to establish herself as a woman ahead of her time.

Jane, on the other hand, has known from a young age that she will not submit to anyone’s control or follow anyone else’s goals and aspirations other than her own. Although her years spent at the Lowood school dampen those desires and she learns to embrace her time there (Brontë 97), the departure of Miss Temple, her “continual solace” (97) evokes Jane to “feel the stirring of old emotions” (98), reminding Jane that she wants more from life than to merely be seen as a man’s possession and that what she has always wanted is her independence. When Miss Temple marries, Jane describes her as being “lost to me” (97) as if Miss Temple’s decision to marry means that Miss Temple is no longer able to be found. That marriage has staked its claim on Miss Temple and she exists no more to the free world. Cixous writes of a woman’s “inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (875-876). Miss Temple’s acceptance of convention brings a sense of clarity to Jane and induces her to remember that “the real world was wide” (Brontë 98). Jane is reminded of her quest for independence and the fact that she wants to find her place in history by being more than a man’s possession and she declares: “I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped” (99). The use of the word ‘liberty’ implies Jane’s desire to be free and how this is more than simply a strong feeling or a wish that she has for herself, but that it is something that she sees as being her right or indeed privilege as a woman. The use of the word ‘gasped’ suggests that she is suddenly taken again by that breath of desire that lingers inside of her and the realisation that she must claim her freedom rather
than be controlled, coinciding with Cixous’s theory that “woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement” (875).

Jane’s pursuance of freedom and the belief that she deserves more than to be someone’s possession, enables her to challenge not only the parameters of marriage but also the patriarchal control that accompanies it. Jane left Mr Rochester when faced with the prospect of being the other woman (Brontë 384-386) and when faced with her cousin St John’s proposal, it dawns on her that in accepting she would be “entering into a union even more unequal than that proposed by Rochester, a marriage reflecting, once again, her absolute exclusion from the life of wholeness toward which her pilgrimage has been directed” (Gilbert and Gubar 484). Whilst St John, a clergyman (Brontë 412), is an understanding man and gives Jane shelter in her time of need (420), he inevitably starts to exhibit his patriarchal and controlling side: “I want a wife: the sole helpmeet I can influence efficiently in life, and retain absolutely till death” (490). St John is treating Jane as an object he can acquire and as identified by Tyson, he sees women as objects “to be used without consideration of their own perspectives, feelings, or opinions” (91). The use of the word ‘influence’ reveals St John’s patriarchal nature and need for control because he is convinced that he has the power, as a man, to affect a woman’s beliefs and actions. He believes that he should be able to mould his wife to suit his needs and expectations of how a woman should behave. However, Jane has her own idea of what her goals and aspirations are, and she wants to be heard instead of being controlled. Jane wants to ensure that her own needs are met and in refusing St John, Jane is making it clear that she will not be controlled by a man or society’s expectations. Jane describes their walk home after refusing his proposal and says how she “read well in his iron silence all he felt towards me: the disappointment of an austere and despotic nature, which has met resistance where it expected submission […] in short, as a man, he would have wished to coerce me into obedience” (Brontë 494). It is clear to Jane that St John did not anticipate her fighting against his proposal and that because she is a woman, he assumed that she would give in and allow him to take control. The use of the word ‘despotic’ in describing his nature reveals that Jane sees that St John holds the same patriarchal views as the rest of society and believes in the power and authority of man to force his will. The words ‘submission’ and ‘coerce’ imply that St John expects women to react meekly and willingly do as they are told without discussion. Jane’s strength in resisting a man’s control and not any man, but a man she has become close to, could be said to have a strong correlation to theory produced by Cixous in which she writes:
I say woman overturns the “personal”, for if, by means of laws, lies, blackmail, and marriage, her right to herself has been extorted at the same time as her name, she has been able, through the very movement of mortal alienation, to see more closely the inanity of “propriety”, the reductive stinginess of the masculine-conjugal subjective economy, which she double resists. (888)

Jane will not allow herself to be ‘extorted’ by a man and pushed into a marriage that she believes is wrong for her (Brontë 490-493) or which goes against her goal of becoming a free and independent woman. St John effectively alienates himself when he reveals his patriarchal nature and although he is proposing marriage, the very essence of ‘propriety’ it could perhaps be said, Jane is able to resist both him and the proposal because it goes against the concept that she is striving for, her independence. Earlier in the novel, Jane states that she is “no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will” (Brontë 303). This epitomises Jane’s pursuit of independence and reaffirms the beliefs she holds that she will not be controlled or confined by marriage or anyone’s expectations. Jane is clearly expressing her rejection of patriarchy and the rejection of control in her life by anyone other than herself. Jane challenges and redefines what is expected of her, in order to achieve what is best for her, solidifying her place as a woman ahead of her time.

**Conclusion**

Feminism has been in existence for centuries and it can certainly be said that Charlotte Brontë and Kate Chopin infused their protagonists with an independence and sense of determination that stands out even today. Jane and Edna’s desire for independence emerges at different times and in different ways, but this analysis has examined, at its heart, how Edna seeks her independence from within the confines of marriage and Jane seeks her independence from outside marriages boundaries. Two women, who were not afraid to challenge men’s and society’s preconceptions and expectations so they could live their life according to their own desires and pursue their voyage for independence in a sea of patriarchy. The aim of this analysis was to argue that Jane and Edna’s pursuance of independence outside of the realms of marriage, not only redefines that union’s parameters, but challenges society’s ideals, therefore, establishing them as women ahead of their time. I believe that this has been achieved and that further insight can be glimpsed in the novels with the connection to Cixous’s theory of *écriture féminine* and her focus on “woman must write her self” (875). Cixous’s theory reaffirms that when women put themselves into the world, by moving and thinking and expressing their
aspirations and goals, they have a greater chance of being heard and achieving their desires. This appears to be in line with the journeys that both Jane and Edna pursue in their quest to escape from a patriarchal society that puts men first and women second.

This analysis affirms the argument that Jane and Edna are women ahead of their time by following their journey, as opposed to their destination and the question as to their differing fates may well be something to consider in future studies focussing on these protagonists. However, in brief, whilst Jane’s fate ends in marriage (Brontë 539, 544) and Edna’s in death (Chopin 183), both women are exerting their power to choose. It was Jane’s choice to marry Edward, she was not forced or obliged to do so and does so on her own terms. In comparison, Edna chooses death, but instead of seeing sorrow in this action, it can perhaps be posited that Edna is taking the ultimate control of her fate in choosing eternity as an independent soul. Both make their choice, without influence or consideration for another, proving their independence because they are unafraid to make their own decisions and question the roles that society requires of them. Jane and Edna are women ahead of their time because they are willing to push the boundaries and make their voices heard, even though the men in their lives and the society they live in, expects them to conform to certain ‘Angel’ virtues. Virtues that insist that women accept their place under men, putting marriage and family ahead of themselves, effectively making their desires and hopes invisible. Jane and Edna’s rebellion against these terms, proves that they are two women ahead of their time redefining parameters and challenging ideals, because their progressive thinking and their refusal to compromise, reveals a light of hope in the mists of oppression.
Works Cited


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