Role Models for the Future

Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and George Eliot’s Maggie Tulliver as Feminist Heroines

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

The heroines of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot, Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver, can be considered to be ground breaking feminist heroines of Victorian literature. They are complete opposites to what Victorian society expected women to be and rebel against the patriarchal ideas of their society.

This essay begins by exploring how Victorian society viewed women, demonstrating how the Victorian era was male dominated and how women were not equal to men by explaining what the woman’s main goals in life were and how limited her rights were.

Further, by introducing the female writers Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot the essay explores how female writers during the Victorian era faced oppositions because women were not supposed to enter the male dominated field of publishing novels. It discusses the rebel in these two authors by showing how unique they were and how they went about their lives in a very different fashion from what Victorian society expected of women. It also demonstrates how Brontë and Eliot were trying to influence society in hope for more equality by writing *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*.

The essay goes on to analyse the heroines Jane and Maggie, how they struggle in the patriarchal society, their desire for the education they are not allowed to have, their need for more freedom than society is able to give women and the ways in which they are able to rebel against the constraints imposed on them. The essay explains how they fight for their rights and do not give up in their battle no matter how lost the cause sometimes appears to be. Finally, the essay goes on to compare the heroines Jane and Maggie, examining what they have in common and how they are different, concluding by examining how Brontë and Eliot both influenced future literature by presenting these feminist heroines.
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Introduction

In Victorian England women did not have the same opportunities as men, as society was male dominated. Women were supposed to be decorative housewives and mothers, to take care of the children and the home. The main aim of women’s education was to make them good wives for their husbands and women were not supposed to work or have any income, they were completely dependent on their husbands. However, this did not hinder women from trying to break free of the restraints imposed by 19th century patriarchy. Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot experienced this gender inequality and they tried to influence society in the hope for a change. The novels Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë, published in 1847, and The Mill on the Floss by George Eliot, published in 1860, brought Victorian readers two feminist heroines, Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver. Both struggle in a male dominated world and feel the need for freedom and education. They are both really intelligent but have to face much injustice and fight for their rights to live the kind of life they want to live. The authors of these two novels, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, were women that lived in the Victorian period and therefore experienced the lack of opportunities women faced. In addition, they faced oppositions as women writers, because they could not publish their work using their real names and experienced prejudices because of their gender. It was not appropriate that women wrote novels because novels were seen as a major tool to influence people, and by writing novels presenting Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver as heroines Brontë and Eliot were sending a message to society. In order to demonstrate this, this essay will go over the social background of the Victorian era, focusing on women’s social position in the society and the position of female writers, as well as discuss the novels Jane Eyre and The Mill on the Floss, finishing by comparing the two texts. Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver are heroines that are unique for their time because of their intelligence and need for independence; by being true to themselves and having a strong sense of justice they break the mould.
Women during the Victorian era

In order to understand why Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver, the heroines of *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*, are so unique it is important to have some insight into social conditions and ideas on gender roles during the Victorian era. During the Victorian era society was separated along gender lines which had great effect on women’s opportunities. Purchase describes this separation in some detail:

The result of this division was a public sphere of work for men, and a private or domestic sphere for women. Based as it is largely around the figure of the woman, the emphasis on domesticity had the effect of at once performing and reinforcing patriarchal ideas about the role and status of women throughout society. It effectively restricted women’s political, social and economic rights in the public sphere. (Purchase 44)

Women’s roles during the early 19th century were to make a good marriage, have children and take care of the home, that is to cook, clean, sew and then perhaps to paint a little or to sing. Women’s place was the home and women were always connected to domesticity. It was no accident that the “verb related to the concept of domesticity, ‘domesticate’ means to ‘train’, ‘breed’ or ‘tame’ [...]“ (Purchase 45). Women did not have the same choices in life and not the same independence as men had. Gao describes the position of women in the Victorian era thus:

In [the] Victorian period, the society is man-controlled and man-dominated, and women are subject to the voice of men. It is impossible for a low-status woman to have a decent life or a good marriage. The social structure determines the position of a person. Women are discriminated in the patriarch [sic] society. Also, in this period, the female writers take the pens to speak for the oppressed women and *Jane Eyre* comes to be the most influential novel. (Gao 927)

Men controlled the society and in marriage men held the power and women had to obey them. Marriage was a kind of slavery, women could not file for divorce until the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act was implemented in 1857, ten years after the publication of *Jane Eyre*. Unfortunately this legislation stipulated that “[...] the husband’s adultery was deemed to be insufficient grounds for divorce [...]” while the husband could file for divorce on the grounds of the wife’s adultery alone (Purchase 65). Men held the power over all properties and finance, even those that the wife had before she got married, until 1882 (Purchase 65).
Women did not work outside the home nor did they get the same education as men and therefore they had limited opportunities.

The only chance for a woman to be independent and earn her own money was to be a governess but this was a poorly paid job. Being a governess during the Victorian era meant being treated as inferior and it was the only choice an unmarried middle class woman had, the only way for her to work independently and not be the property of her husband. Therefore if a middle class woman wanted to be independent during the Victorian era and free from male control she would have little money and be treated with condescension. Being a governess during the Victorian era was problematic and the position of the governess was complex because “While the governess had little respect or authority in her employer’s family or among the servants, she yet had the responsibility of educating the young in the moral and social behaviour of their class” (Macpherson 2). The governess had great influence over the children, the future of the family, which is a very important situation but even so she still got little respect. She had to teach the children to behave according to their class, a class that did not respect their governesses. When the Brontë sisters “felt the need to aim at being self-supporting, they became governesses on very low salaries” (Ingham 49).

When it came to education women were not equal to men; they were treated as inferior which had its effects, as Purchase claims:

Most Victorian men believed that women did not possess the intellectual capabilities which educated and industrious men were endowed with. Such an opinion served to distinguish women further from men, while preventing women from entering earlier on in the century at least, the male-dominated fields of education, such as universities, scholarships and research. (74)

If a woman got the chance for an education, the education was limited to the household, that is, focused on making the woman a perfect wife. As Purchase states “[...] women were only taught those domestic and oddly aristocratic subjects - sewing, music, conversation, etiquette - which would prepare them as ‘better’, albeit idle and mostly decorative, wives for their husbands” (55). Men, on the other hand, got better education, i.e. education that would enable them to become patriotic gentlemen and leaders. Even though Victorian men believed that women did not possess the intellectual capabilities needed for an education, they were far from being correct. This attitude towards women triggered female writers to publish novels presenting female heroines that were different from what the society thought about women.
The female writer

Charlotte Brontë was born in 1816 and was the third of six children. When she was only 5 years old her mother died of cancer and four years later her two older sisters died of tuberculosis (Ingham 1). Her father acted as a tutor for his only son and as for his three daughters he provided outside help in order to give them the conventional feminine education (Ingham 4). The Brontë siblings created imaginative worlds together and they played acting games with toy soldiers. They made up stories about these soldiers and acted them out which turned then into dramas. Then they began to write these plays and stories and combine into small books. This later turned into miniature journals. This was the beginning of the apprentice work for their mature novels (Ingham 5-6). The siblings had the freedom to read whatever they could lay their hands on and the fact that their father did not forbid his daughters from reading work that was considered scandalous during the Victorian era, might possibly have triggered Charlotte’s imagination and liberal thinking. While growing up the Brontë siblings read various newspapers and periodicals which connected them to the everyday real world. This journalism introduced them to the publication of magazines and books. Both parents wrote some works and their father published a lot over a period of eight years. This upbringing lead Charlotte to aspire to literary career from an early age (Ingham 8-9).

George Eliot was born in 1819. She was the youngest of three children and while growing up she passionately adored her brother. When Eliot was 13 years old and at a boarding school she read various literary works, even Byron and other works that were considered dangerous, just like Charlotte Brontë. The effects of these literary works, that were considered scandalous during that era, might have triggered the rebel in Eliot just like in Brontë. During her stay there, which was short, Eliot began writing a romance of her own. The writer within Eliot obviously surfaced at an early age. When she was 15 years old she had to leave the boarding school because her mother was dying and during the next thirteen years her education was continued at home through her own efforts (Dolin 5-9). When Eliot was 22 years old she was introduced to Charles Bray, an Owenite and an extremely liberal thinker. He influenced her greatly, mostly in religious faith which lead her to a struggle; she could not reconcile faith and reason. This lead her to stop accompanying her father to church which left a strain in their relationship. Charles Bray’s influence obviously affected the rebel in Eliot (Dolin 11-13).
Neither Brontë nor Eliot had a normal Victorian-like relationship with men, and this might be because marriage was a kind of slavery, since if they got married their property would go to their husbands. Both women were reluctant to succumb to male domination and both wanted the freedom to write novels. Charlotte Brontë received four proposals of marriage in her lifetime but she was reluctant to marry. When she finally decided to marry 18 months after Arthur Bell Nicholls proposed a marriage, she made a legal prenuptial agreement, which meant that her father would inherit her, not her husband, in the event of her death. 9 months after the wedding took place Charlotte died. Before her death she changed the prenuptial agreement and left everything to her husband because she knew he would be a great friend to her father and take care of him (Ingham 34-36). Conversely, George Eliot was in a relationship with a married man, George Henry Lewes, and for 23 years she lived with him until he died at the end of 1878. Lewes supported his wife Agnes until his death. When Eliot’s brother heard about the relationship he became outraged. He cut off all communication with Eliot until after Lewes died (Dolin 21-36). Eliot and Lewes’s openness about this extramarital affair shocked Victorian society, and Eliot was accused of being a marriage-wrecker. Lewes could go about unrestricted but Eliot “was unable to visit anyone in society or receive visits from respectable women, a situation only finally broken down by her fame in the 1870s, when she was sought out even by royalty” (Dolin 26).

During the Victorian era female writers, such as Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, “were up against the prejudices of a patriarchal society and a largely male-dominated arena, the critics of which often took a dim view of the intellectual ‘deficiencies’ of women” (Purchase, 198). Because of these prejudices female writers could not publish their work using their real names, so they used masculine pen names in order to make readers think they were men. Charlotte Brontë used the pen name Currer Bell and Jane Eyre was published under that pen name (Ingham 25). The Mill on the Floss was published under the name George Eliot but her real name was Mary Ann Evans (Dolin 5).

Being a female writer during the Victorian era was difficult because women writers were seen as being simultaneously a threat to men, to other women, and to themselves (Purchase 75). As Purchase notes, “such anxieties partly explain why, generally speaking - and with famous exceptions [...] - women tended to be discouraged from entry into the writing profession” (75). Purchase further states that “The early writings of Charlotte Brontë, in particular, were subject to hostile comments from male reviewers” (75-76). One such incident was when twenty-year old Charlotte Brontë sent the poet laureate, Robert Southey, some of her verse using her real name, and he responded by telling her that women should
not dabble with literature but focus on their proper duties. According to Purchase “Brontë always claimed that she had a ‘vague impression’ that women writers would be ‘looked on with prejudice’ by critics, and this was confirmed after she had sent the poet laureate, Robert Southey, some of her poetry” (198). Brontë herself said that she and her sisters had decided not to declare themselves as females not only because they thought female writers would meet prejudice but also because reviewers often attacked the writer’s personality. This was obvious when one reviewer stated that if the author of Jane Eyre was a woman she had long forfeited the society of her own sex (Ingham 88), and the same reviewer stated that the author must be an outcast and possibly a prostitute (Ingham 30). One reviewer had praised Jane Eyre after only guessing that the author was male but when he knew the author was a woman he wrote of the novel disparagingly; he said that the novel was not lady-like but very masculine (Ingham 88-89).

George Eliot received negative reviews also. One reviewer wrote about Eliot that “She saw all sides, and there are always many, clearly and without prejudice”, although unfortunately such praise was not stated as often as “She was not fitted to stand alone” (Barrett 14), which was meant to attack Eliot’s need for love and accuse her of leaning onto the stronger sex. The previous comment is proper because when Eliot wrote The Mill on the Floss she wrote the story of the siblings Maggie and Tom without prejudice, they were siblings of opposite sexes that both struggled in society, and, as Barrett states, Eliot has the “ability to enter into both sides of a conflict not only intellectually but also emotionally” (14). The fact that there is similarity between the siblings Maggie and Tom on the one hand and Eliot and her brother on the other might also explain why Eliot can write about Maggie and Tom from equal grounds. Barrett states that “There is strong evidence that as a child and a young woman her love and esteem for her father and her brother were inadequately returned” (4), and this is also the case when it comes to Maggie’s relationship with her father and brother. Because of her relationship with Lewes, Eliot experienced massive disapprobation and her brother broke off all communication with her. By presenting the heroine Maggie, Eliot is “showing that a woman who is disapproved by the society in which she lives may nevertheless be morally superior to that society” and therefore the novel might be a statement aimed at society. The ending of The Mill on the Floss is also very important when discussing the similarities between Eliot and Maggie. The fact that Maggie dies at the end of the novel may not fit the comparison with Eliot herself. However, Eliot might be making the comparison by suggesting that Maggie is Eliot herself if she had “[...] never left her home, never broke [sic] the ties most sacred to her, never discovered the George Eliot in herself,”
since the “only end that George Eliot can see for such a life is frustration, a deathlike life, or death itself come early” (Barrett 53).

Brontë and Eliot created strong female heroines that were very different from what was expected of women during the Victorian era. By doing so, they were breaking the social norm. During the Victorian era novels were the most popular form of recreation and therefore writers could influence their readers through their novels. As stated by Kate Flint:

Reading provoked a good deal of anxiety during the Victorian period. At the centre of this anxiety about what constituted suitable reading material and ways of reading lay concerns about class, and concerns about gender. In both cases, fiction was regarded as particularly suspect: likely to influence adversely, to stimulate inappropriate ambitions and desire, to corrupt. (17)

Both *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* deal mostly with gender inequality but also with class inequality. Brontë and Eliot both try to influence people through their novels by focusing on gender inequality and by bringing the reader feminist heroines that break the social norm. Female readers were the main target because “Reading fiction was a way of winding down; a mental space from the complicated business of running a home; a means of filling hours that for otherwise under-employed women were figured as ‘empty’” (Flint 20).

Brontë and Eliot were trying to have an impact on society through their writing and the novels *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* are their legacy for future generations, as stated by Showalter:

Women beginning their literary careers in the 1840’s were seeking heroines - both professional role-models and fictional ideals - who could combine strength and intelligence with feminine tenderness, tact, and domestic expertise. At the same time, they perceived themselves and their fictional heroines as innovators who would provide role-models for future generations. (100)

When Brontë and Eliot wrote *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* they were looking for two kinds of heroines: “They wanted inspiring professional role-models; but they also wanted romantic heroines, a sisterhood of shared passion and suffering, women who sobbed and struggled and rebelled” (Showalter 103). Both Jane and Maggie fit this description, and therefore they can be seen as role-models for future generations. They share a passion for education, they suffer in a male-dominated world, and they certainly both sob, struggle and rebel.
Jane Eyre as feminist heroine

Charlotte Brontë’s* Jane Eyre *was a ground-breaking novel and it had enormous influence on novels written after its publication. With *Jane Eyre*, Brontë brought new perspectives to the literary arena, like Showalter states: “The influence of *Jane Eyre* on Victorian heroines was felt to have been revolutionary. The post-Jane heroine, according to periodicals, was plain, rebellious and passionate; she was likely to be a governess, and she usually was the narrator of her own story” (122). *Jane Eyre* is an extraordinary novel and Jane is a character that was revolutionary for her time, like Macpherson affirms: “Jane Eyre as heroine and Charlotte Brontë as writer rewrite Victorian Woman into a whole, to include intellect and feeling, passion and reason, rebellion and propriety, transgressive desire and virtue” (9). What makes Jane so extraordinary is her quality of forgiveness and kindness, along with her feminist views that women are not so extremely different from men as society has made them out to be. Jane needs more in life than just what society says she should want. She acknowledges the dominant male power but she refuses to accept it and that is obvious when she says to Rochester: “we stood at God’s feet, equal, - as we are!” (Brontë 223). Jane sincerely believes and hopes that there can be more gender equality in the world. Indeed *Jane Eyre* is “a novel very much grounded in the ‘realities’ of patriarchal oppression and the desire to escape that oppression” (Purchase 186). Considering her circumstances, Jane is optimistic and she has a really positive attitude towards everything; she does hardly ever have a negative thought. Jane’s positive attitude, strength, hope and kindness give her a voice that makes the reader interested to listen to what she has to say. Like Purchase states, *Jane Eyre* deals “with youthful hardships, coming of age, finding one’s place in life through love and work, and the development of the self towards a resolution in better social and financial circumstances” (24). Jane obviously wants to be independent because when she expresses her deepest wish she says that she wants to be able to save money in order to open up a school in a house she herself rents. People around Jane realize that she is not a normal woman and that she is unique. Rochester says that Jane is different and he is fascinated by that even though he does not show it. He says to her: “Not three in three thousand raw school-girl-governesses would have answered me as you have just done. But I don’t mean to flatter you: if you are cast in a different mould to the majority, it is no merit of yours: Nature did it” (Brontë 118). St. John says to Jane that she has “a man’s vigorous brain” (Brontë 361) and this statement shows that being intelligent is linked to men, suggesting it is not thought normal for a woman to be intelligent.
When it comes to Jane’s relationship with Rochester, it is obvious how unique she really is for a Victorian woman. Also, when looking at Jane and Rochester, the effects of gender inequality are obvious. When Jane meets Rochester for the first time she says that she feels no fear of him and is not shy because he is not a handsome, heroic-looking young man. Jane goes on to explain that she wants to steer clear of handsome and masculine men because they are threatening and dangerous:

I had a theoretical reverence and homage for beauty, elegance, gallantry, fascination; but had I met those qualities incarnate in masculine shape, I should have known instinctively that they neither had nor could have sympathy with anything in me, and should have shunned them as one would fire, lightning, or anything else that is bright but antipathetic. (Brontë 99)

The reason why Jane is so afraid of handsome and masculine men is that the combination of beauty and masculinity in a man represents power and authority and therefore women feel their powerlessness and inferiority in their presence. Also, because of Jane’s intelligence, men subconsciously feel threatened in her presence and therefore they make her feel as though they cannot have any sympathy with her. Because of their intellect, women like Jane must have felt really uncomfortable in the presence of men.

Even though Jane is falling in love with Rochester she tries to convince herself that a relationship between them cannot happen; she does not believe herself to be worthy of him and this is possibly because of the class difference and the fact that if she gets married she is afraid that she will lose her freedom. Throughout the novel Jane says that she will never get married and she calls marriage a catastrophe (Brontë 174), which is extremely unusual for a woman in the Victorian era. After Rochester has proposed to Jane, she says that his love will dissolve in six months; he might like her through the rest of their lives but he will not love her as he does now (Brontë 229). She feels this way because the set gender roles make her feel inferior to Rochester and also because he belongs to a higher class than she does. When they are planning the wedding, Jane refuses to wear expensive jewels and fancy dresses, thereby not only refusing to succumb to male dominance but also to class difference. Moreover, Jane sees the jewellery as slave chains, so therefore the jewellery is a symbol of slavery. Again marriage is linked to some kind of catastrophe, the end of woman’s freedom.

At the end of the novel Jane proposes to Rochester and this reflects how Jane is a feminist, because during the Victorian era women did not normally propose marriage. This is her moment, she does this on her terms, like Macpherson states: “Her power is this welding of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual strength into speech, articulating her claim for
equality and direct communication between the sexes” (70). The fact that Jane and Rochester get married is against the social norm because they are not equals when it comes to position and fortune. In effect, they are breaking the mould. Because of all this, it is obvious that Jane does not follow the social norm of the Victorian era. When Jane marries Rochester they have become equals because in losing his hand and his sight in a fire, Rochester has learned how it feels to be completely helpless and how to accept help (Showalter 122). Rochester has also, in a way, lost a part of his masculinity. As a couple at the end of the novel, Jane and Rochester represent the exact opposite of what the normal Victorian couple represents, because unlike women, Jane is not tamed, while Rochester, unlike men, is, so to speak, tamed after he is injured in the fire.

A passage in which Jane describes the male dominated society is really powerful and for a novel written in 1847 this is a really rebellious statement. Jane is obviously not a normal woman because she does not agree that women have limited choices and are inferior to men; she really has something to say about the discrimination between the sexes:

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 95)

Here Jane lists all the things a normal woman during the Victorian era was supposed to do and states that those things are just not what women want, that women do desire more and need more, just like men. This statement gives the reader an understanding of Jane’s character and what her deepest wish is. She desires freedom, the freedom to be able to do what she wants and to be free from the restrictions women suffer. Jane wants freedom for every woman and this statement is the strongest argument supporting the fact that Jane Eyre is a feminist heroine.
Maggie Tulliver as feminist heroine

George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* introduces the rebel and feminist heroine Maggie Tulliver. Maggie is highly intelligent and extremely rebellious. In order to understand Maggie and her actions it is important to look at the injustice she suffers at the hands of her loved ones. George Eliot cleverly makes the siblings, Maggie and Tom, represent the typical man and woman during this time. How they are raised and treated demonstrates how things were different between men and women during the Victorian era. Tom is made to feel masculine, powerful, strong and intelligent and he gets more allowance because he is a boy. Maggie is oppressed and does not get a chance to be educated, she is always made to feel inferior and she never meets her parents’, or relatives’, expectations. However, the fact is that Maggie is more intelligent than Tom while he is the one that gets the better education because he is a boy. And the difference between the different kinds of education they receive explains in part Maggie’s character: “Even though Maggie is brighter than Tom, emotion plays a far more active part in her decision-making than it does in Tom’s. This is in part due to the difference between Maggie’s education as a girl and Tom’s as a boy: boys are encouraged to develop their intellects, girls their emotions” (Barrett 71).

Tom is extremely oppressive towards Maggie and bullies her all their life and throughout the novel he is the one with the power. This is not the only injustice Maggie suffers. According to her mother, Maggie does not fit the description of a perfect girl like her cousin Lucy, as Maggie has too dark a complexion and her hair does not curl. Maggie hears her mother talk badly about her. She is being constantly put down and reminded she is not good enough. This leads to Maggie’s rebellious acts against this inequality. She cuts her hair when she hears her mother criticizing it, so here Maggie is trying to be the way people want her to be. Like Paris states: “Throughout the novel two elements are at war within Maggie: her desire for the love, acceptance, and admiration of her family and associates and her desire for a life rich in sensuous and intellectual pleasures” (21). This makes her confused about how to respond to criticism. When Maggie is just a child she has two methods to dull the pain that she suffers due to this injustice. One is to beat and drive nails into a doll, the other is her imagination and in her imagined world she is appreciated and loved.

Maggie feels her inferiority when her father goes bankrupt and she wishes she was someone else, that is, a man: “She wished she could have been like Bob, with his easily satisfied ignorance, or like Tom, who had something to do on which he could fix his mind with a steady purpose, and disregard everything else” (Eliot, 258). Maggie thinks this because
she desperately wants to help but she is not capable of doing anything because she is not a man and she cares too much for her father to disregard his troubles like her brother. However, Maggie eventually expresses her feelings about the gender difference but she expresses it to Tom in the form of an outburst. Maggie is emotional because her brother has been scolding her for meeting Philip and she replies: “Because you are a man, Tom, and have power, and can do something in the world” (Eliot 312). Maggie does obviously feel powerless because if you are a woman you do not have power and therefore cannot make a difference in this world.

What makes Maggie a very interesting character is her thirst for knowledge. She is intelligent and wants to learn but because she is a girl she is not allowed this. During the Victorian period it was not normal that a girl should get much education. Because of this gender difference Maggie has tantrums. Maggie uses these tantrums because she needs to be heard, but unfortunately tantrums are not an effective way to achieve equality. People around Maggie realize that she is not a normal girl. Maggie is really intelligent and her father admits this, but he does not approve of it, as he says: “a woman’s no business wi’ being so clever; it’ll turn to trouble [...] she’ll read the books and understand ‘em better nor half the folks as are grewed up” (Eliot, 14). Even though he recognizes his daughter’s intelligence, Maggie, being female, will not get a chance to be educated like her brother. People around Maggie think that she should let Tom take care of her and do not understand why she wants to be a governess because this means that she would be treated as inferior and be poor. But Maggie refuses to succumb to male control and she wants to be independent. When deciding to become a governess, she says: “I can’t live in dependence - I can’t live with my brother - though he is very good to me; but that would be intolerable to me” (Eliot 369). By becoming a governess Maggie is seeking independence and she is also trying to give others the chance of an education that she never got. Sadly for Maggie she does not get many opportunities to share her intelligence through teaching; for two years she teaches at a boarding school and does not like it.

Maggie’s struggle with the male-dominated society, leads her to self-renunciation; that is, she tries to deny herself what she wants, but this is “in one respect a destruction of self and in another respect an attempt to escape from pain by martyr-like transmutation of pain into pleasure” (Paris 27). For Maggie, “full emotional acceptance could only come after much inner struggle and error” (Paris 27). Therefore Maggie realizes that she wants much more than what society is willing to give her and she cannot live the way society wants her to. Maggie refuses to accept the fact that she is inferior to men and not being able to get the
same education as her brother, and therefore she struggles to find her place, a place where she can be happy. It is obvious that Maggie is a feminist heroine because “When we see the novel as a tale of resistance against male coercion, it becomes apparent that Maggie does not fail as a feminist: she achieves a hard-won, though admittedly fruitless, victory” (Barrett 56). The fact that Maggie’s victory is fruitless is because even though Maggie never stops rebelling against the male-dominated society, she never achieves the freedom she wants, but at the same time she never gives up her battle, always hoping that a change is possible. The ending of The Mill on the Floss is very important because brother and sister, the two opposite representatives of gender difference, the female with limited choices and the dominant male, are united in death. When Maggie saves Tom from the flood she reconciles with him. This might be a foreshadowing for better times to come. Paris argues that in death “Tom and Maggie become part of the long river of tradition, of human love and pain, hope and struggle, that flows into the future with an ever-increasing beneficent power” (31). Therefore the author might be suggesting that in the future men and women can unite and be equals.

**Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver compared**

Both *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* are powerful descriptions of what it was like to grow up as a female in Victorian England. Showalter states that “Brontë’s Jane Eyre is the heroine of fulfillment; Eliot’s Maggie Tulliver is the heroine of renunciation” (112). By becoming an independent, self-sufficient female Jane achieves her freedom from a patriarchal society. However, Maggie always renounces the patriarchal society, which leads to her destruction, through which Maggie becomes the heroine of renunciation. An important difference between Jane and Maggie is the fact that Jane gets the chance to start an independent life while Maggie does not. The fact that Maggie does not get the chance of freedom leads to her destruction, and by comparing these two novels it is safe to say that both novels suggest that women like Jane and Maggie must have a chance of independence if they are to survive.

Both *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* are classic feminine novels, that is “they realistically describe an extraordinary range of women’s physical and social experiences” and also contain a few explicit feminist passages (Showalter 112). Both Maggie and Jane have to face the fact that a gender biased society does not want women to be too intelligent. And through their intelligence they become more aware of how inferior to men they are and of
how men control their destiny. Macpherson states that “Men guard the door to women’s education and work” (63), and this is because even though Jane is more free and more independent than many other women, she gains her freedom because of men, who have all the power, even over women. Men grant Jane her freedom on several occasions; first Jane needs the apothecary’s recommendation to leave Gateshead, then Brocklehurst must give his permission for her to leave Lowood and St John gives her the position of a teacher at a small school with her very own cottage. This is important because even though Jane has her freedom it is because men allow her to have it and to “experience such dependency on male authority […] is to get to the very bottom of women’s oppression” (Macpherson 63).

This applies to The Mill on the Floss also, as men have the key to Maggie’s education. Her father and Mr. Stelling have to allow her to get an education, but they both agree that women have nothing to do with too much education. Mr. Stelling says that women “can pick up a little of everything, I dare say. They’ve a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn’t go far into anything. They’re quick and shallow” (Eliot, 134). Unlike Jane, Maggie does not get many opportunities when it comes to education, even though Jane’s education is not as good as the education boys get. Maggie is really intelligent; she is always reading and gathering knowledge, which was not the norm for women during the 19th century. Maggie’s passion for reading is a rebellious act because she knows it is not conventional that women learn; when she is thinking about Tom’s school books she sees them as “a considerable step in masculine wisdom - in that knowledge which made men contented, and even glad to live” (Eliot, 257). Maggie is seeking this masculine wisdom because of her need for knowledge and due to the hope that perhaps one day she could become equal to men. However, not being able to leads her to her doom:

Maggie Tulliver’s education prepares her only for a respectable young woman’s “dull wearisome life”, so that she must suppress “the intense and varied life she yearned for” (book 6, chapter 2). Without an education beyond the requirements of female accomplishments, and without opportunities for work, Maggie’s passionate nature is channelled into a violent internal struggle between competing forms of desire - intellectual, spiritual, and sexual. In a small provincial town a woman’s passion however noble its nature or object, is morally dangerous. Maggie’s life is accordingly reduced to a cramped cycle of temptation and renunciation, played out in the two stages of the fateful event which takes the novel towards its climax: the languid eroticism of her tidal journey downriver with Stephen Guest; and her cold
The fact that Maggie does not get the chance of a good education even though she has the need for knowledge leads Maggie to her rebellious acts against inequality. Her passion for reading is obvious when she has secret meetings with Philip because he lends her books. Another rebellious act is when she and Stephen run off together; the reason why she considers leaving with him is the hope for a better life. However, if she marries Stephen she might not gain more freedom than she has and “in her refusal at Mudport to marry Stephen, is a victory of self-assertion over male domination” (Barrett 69).

Both Jane and Maggie are treated badly though it is safe to say that Jane is treated a bit worse. But even though she suffers bad treatment Jane is extremely kind and understanding and she forgives Mrs. Reed for all the ill treatment: “Yes, Mrs. Reed, to you I owe some fearful pangs of mental suffering, but I ought to forgive you, for you knew not what you did: while rending my heartstrings, you thought you were only uprooting my bad propensities” (Brontë 14). Jane’s extreme kindness and her ability to forgive gives her much greater credibility and clarifies how deeply she wishes people to get along as equals. As the story progresses it becomes obvious that the greatest problem is the difference between the sexes and there is a great need for change; women have the right to be equal to men. Because both Jane and Maggie experience women’s inferiority they want to influence society in order to change the gender difference and they try that by becoming governesses. This way they can teach young girls and try to inspire and empower them. Jane gets the chance to be a school-mistress, a position that was viewed with less condescension than a governess. Jane teaches poor children in a small classroom with her own cottage and she loves it. When Jane gains her freedom by being a school-mistress, she says: “Whether is it better, I ask, to be a slave in a fool’s paradise at Marseilles - fevered with delusive bliss one hour - suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next - or to be a village-schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England?” (Brontë 318). While Jane achieves success in becoming a school-mistress, sadly Maggie does not even become a governess.

In The Mill on the Floss, Maggie has a sense of justice and this is very obvious when Maggie’s family becomes bankrupt. When Maggie’s father is lying sick and her aunts and uncles keep on blaming him for becoming bankrupt and are not trying to find a solution to help the Tullivers, Maggie is the only one that stands up for her family. She yells at her aunts and uncles and says that they should try and help her sick father rather than blame him. This
is obviously Maggie’s most influential scene in the novel because she is defending her family and it demonstrates how rebellious Maggie really is. This scene makes Maggie really sympathetic because she obviously has a great sense of justice and it supports the fact that Maggie is a heroine.

The main similarities between Maggie and Jane are their intelligence and the fact that they both acknowledge the dominant male power which they both refuse to succumb to. But the difference between them is that Maggie is more dramatic than Jane. Since Maggie is a girl, she has limited choices in life and that leads her to her dramatic outbursts; she yells at her brother and her aunts and uncles and she cuts her hair. Jane is more subtle, she keeps calm, except when she is traumatized as a child when locked inside the red room, and she tries to influence people in a positive way. She speaks her mind but is really careful not to go too far. Jane is more fascinating than Maggie because she influences people and therefore her battle for equality is more likely to be acknowledged. Another major difference between them is that Maggie is constantly trying to please people and she deeply wishes to be accepted, while Jane decides that money makes people mean and therefore tries to keep her distance when she is around people that belong to a higher class than she. Basically, Jane does not let other people influence her as much as Maggie does.

Both Jane and Maggie experience entrapment which they try to escape. First, Jane escapes from Mrs Reed and all the ill treatment she suffers at Gateshead. Jane is so pleased to be leaving Mrs Reed that when arriving at Lowood she is very happy. Her stay there has its positive and negative elements. She is ill-treated there also but things get better when Miss Temple takes matters into her own hands and clears Jane of all the accusations she faced, thereby giving Jane a new start. After Jane begins working as a teacher at Lowood and her stay there is comfortable enough she still has the need for more freedom. Jane is entrapped again but she belongs to a lower class which means that she does not have many choices. Therefore her only means to explore and experience more in life is to become a governess. Jane escapes the limited life at Lowood and goes to Thornfield. But after being a governess there for a while Jane begins to experience the need for adventure again and she realizes that she is being held captive in this male dominated world. Jane realizes that her thirst for freedom and adventure cannot be quenched while society is the way it is; women need more freedom and they need to have more choices in life. However, even though Lowood makes Jane feel entrapped, it is a really important part of forming Jane because at Lowood the women have more power than men and also because there Jane realizes the power of education. Like Macpherson states:
Jane learns from the women at Lowood that self-control is the true victory, and must be self-taught. Such discipline cannot be learned by command, force, or public humiliation - all Mr Brocklehurst's powers. Though he starves and freezes and beats and sickens and preaches and bores and threatens the girls with sudden deaths and punishments, he remains quite impotent over the eighty young women because he cannot actually teach [...] Power, authority: where do they come from at Lowood?

Who controls the female interior? (96)

Miss Temple has more power at Lowood than Mr Brocklehurst because she is the one that orders “more food, offers what he has forbidden, and let curls grow [...]” (Macpherson 97). This female power that Jane experiences at Lowood is an important element to bear in mind when considering why Jane does not let other people influence her as much as Maggie. Even though Jane suffers a lot there, Lowood is the place that saves her. This makes Jane stronger while Maggie is stuck with her family and in a society that is constantly breaking her spirit.

In comparison, Maggie’s home and the community are a confinement for her and she tries to escape from her parents. She runs away from home and she goes to the gypsies hoping to escape this confinement. Maggie does not find what she is looking for at the gypsies’ and returns home, but she is still entrapped. Maggie’s second escape is her journey down the river with Stephen Guest. However, just like with her first attempt at escape Maggie realizes that she is not even close to finding the freedom she seeks. It is obvious that Jane and Maggie really do not get the freedom they want because they are confined by gender inequality. Furthermore, the confinement they experience is also a manifestation of what society expects of them in terms of manner and passion. Sadly, it is impossible for them to break away from these restraints and become completely free.

By presenting the heroines Jane and Maggie, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot affected a change in literature. Another female writer, Mrs. Margaret Oliphant, noted that Brontë had changed the direction of female tradition: “Perhaps no other writer of her time has impressed her mark so clearly on contemporary literature, or drawn so many followers onto her own peculiar path” (qtd. in Showalter 105-106). Female novelists frequently compared themselves with both Brontë and Eliot which created frustration towards them (Showalter 107). Female writers during the Victorian era felt betrayed when they considered Eliot, but that was because they misunderstood her; it was not until the 1890s that female writers saw Eliot as a heroine and not as a rival (Showalter 111-112). Jane and Maggie were ground-breaking feminist heroines for future literature, because they “were more intellectual and more self-defining” than the heroines before them (Showalter 122). They affected a change in
literature; the governess became a popular literary heroine and a writer for *The Westminster Review* wished to see the end of this heroine in novels and more of them in England (Showalter 123), thereby suggesting that the governess had reached the height of popularity in literature and that there was time to see more women like these heroines in real life. Jane demonstrated a need for self-fulfillment and the legacy of the novel *Jane Eyre* was massive. According to *Saturday Review*, since literature had “grown to be a woman’s occupation,” a “resignation to the dominance of glorified governesses in fiction was needed” (Showalter 123).

**Conclusion**

As has been shown in this essay, the novels *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot are obviously ahead of their time because they present female heroines that are unique for the Victorian era. During the Victorian era women were oppressed; they only got woman-centred education which was supposed to make them better wives, and they were not free to work or become self-sufficient. Their main purpose in life was to be a wife and mother and when a woman achieved the ultimate goal, married life, the husband held all the power, controlled all their property and the wife’s income if she worked. Being a woman during the Victorian era was difficult and even more so if one wanted to be a writer. The female writer was discriminated against and attacked verbally; therefore female writers concealed their identity. Both Brontë and Eliot published their work under pseudonyms, including *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*. Brontë and Eliot experienced the gender biased society and since they were both female writers they met with negative criticism. By publishing these novels during the Victorian era they were trying to influence their readers and trying to make them open their eyes in order to see that this was time for a change. By presenting Jane and Maggie, the ground breaking heroines, Brontë and Eliot were pioneers for literature to come. The feminist heroines Jane and Maggie break the social norm of the Victorian era because they refuse to succumb to ideas of gender inequality and challenge their limited choices in life. Jane and Maggie both need so much more than society can offer them and they try to break free and follow their own path towards independence. They are strong even though people treat them badly and they hold their heads high.
Works Cited


