

## Abstract:

Since the beginning of recorded history, women have often been relegated to the roles of wife and mother. As such, the workforce has been largely a male-dominated arena; exceptions given for occupations that men viewed as too feminine, such as nurses and educators. Despite many women having had equal abilities to their male counterparts, professional writing was generally reserved for men. Looking back through the ages of British literature, one thing is glaringly obvious; women who were set on having writing as a career were prepared to assert themselves against the patriarchal views of society. Despite their assertion of their abilities and worthiness, there were—and continue to be—outside factors that would determine the success of female writers in England from the nineteenth century all the way through to the modern era. This thesis aims to show how these outside factors, specifically gender and socioeconomic status, have affected women writers throughout multiple centuries. It is not enough to study only the literary works of these prominent female writers, but this thesis also considers the circumstances of their personal lives as well. While there have been many studies of the lives and works of British female authors, there have been few that consider the effects of gender *and* socioeconomic status, while also spanning centuries to include women writers from vastly different societies. By applying both the feminist and Marxist lenses of literary criticism to the lives and works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, and J.K. Rowling, this thesis asserts that while women's socioeconomic status may have an effect on their becoming a successful, published author, it is not the only determining factor. All of these women were born at different times in British history, under different reigning royal families, within different

social classes, and with different hardships to be faced— yet they still have all become wildly successful in their own rights.

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The Effects of Socioeconomic Status on Women Writers: Past and Present

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### The Effects of Socioeconomic Status on Women Writers: Past and Present

For many years, occupations outside of the home were reserved for men. Women were meant to be the “seen and not heard” members of society; they were the homemakers and child-bearers, with little worth of their own. Many women depended on their relationships with their brothers, fathers, and husbands for a sense of purpose and social status before feminist movements swept in, demanding change and pushing for equality among genders. Progression for women did not come quickly or easily, and many careers were — and still are — reserved for men. Women writers, for example, were not taken seriously in society for most of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Because of this lack of female representation in the workforce early on, women had to fight for their places in society and in their careers. Even today, women continue to fall behind men in many aspects of their careers, especially in their earnings. As recently as 2019, “the gender pay gap was 17.3% in the UK, which means that on average, women were paid approximately 83p for every £1 men were paid” (Francis-Devine). Presumably, this fight for equality in society, career opportunities, and wages has affected the lives and careers of women writers throughout the ages. There is, then, a multi-dimensional aspect to the trials and tribulations experienced by female authors in the fact that their gender and economic status are interwoven to influence not only the subject matter of their writing, but their

success as writers as well. It can be asserted that these issues have existed, at least, since the eighteenth century and that they continue to affect women who choose careers in writing even today. Examining the lives and works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, and J.K. Rowling through both the feminist and Marxist lenses of literary criticism shows how socioeconomic status has affected female authors for centuries.

The feminist theory of literary criticism is integral to this examination as its purpose is not only to consider the role of female characters within literature, but women as readers and writers as well. When many of the aforementioned female authors were writing, there was no feminist theory to refer to when discussing their literature. This changed in 1977, when Elaine Showalter published *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Showalter's investigation of women writers was the catalyst for a new body of literary study—the feminist lens of literary criticism. In examining British female writers, Showalter began the research of feminist critics for years to come. Even twenty years after she wrote *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter pledged her continued dedication to the field of feminist study, saying “I still remain committed to the idea, even the metaphor, of progress in English women's writing, if only in terms of range and freedom of expression. Moreover, I think it is necessary to evaluate the relative success and failure of women's writing” (Showalter 407). The success of all writers in their genre remains a constant topic of conversation, but to be a successful woman in this field is of particular interest. Successful women in any aspect of life, other than homemaking and childbearing, seemingly represent a threat to the patriarchal society in which women have finally begun to thrive. This perceived threat to society is discussed in *The Gender of Modernity*, when Felski asserts that:

...the alignment of the modern woman with a narrative of progress was a deliberate attempt to refute contemporary views of suffragettes as dangerous and unnatural figures whose activities posed a threat to the social fabric. Feminists frequently resorted to eugenic theories to insist that women's presence in education, the workplace, and the public realm would lead not to the depletion of the race, as conservatives feared, but rather to a population of healthier and more vigorous bodies. (155)

Where strong, capable women contribute greatly to their societies, their existence is often met with resistance and fear from men. For many years, any woman with an opinion of her own was stereotyped as dangerous, greedy, lustful, and dishonest as a means of inhibiting her autonomy, and thus, her power. This is why feminist literary criticism is integral to the study of the body of British literature as a whole. Women in literature have spent centuries defying the patriarchy and putting their life experiences on paper, allowing women throughout time and space to cultivate a shared meaning of womanhood.

Although being a woman in and of itself has had an effect on whether or not a writer would meet success in their career, it is not the sole factor. Feminist criticism has strength enough to stand on its own, but ignoring other aspects of the lives of female writers leaves many stones unturned. In studying the success of women as writers, one must also consider the social class and financial stability of the writer. These factors are determinant in many facets of the lives of female writers — such as the necessity for means of income other than writing and access to education — and are best examined through the Marxist lens of literary criticism. Marxist literary criticism is based on the socioeconomic principles of German philosopher Karl Marx. Marx's studies focused on the social classes and how members of these classes related to

each other for economic and social stability. In his essay, “The German Ideology,” Marx explains that “the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of material production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (733). So, it can be asserted from this theoretical perspective that the members of the higher social classes control the material and intellectual forces of society, which then creates a lower class whose actions are based on their circumstance. In general, humans “tend to assume that our thinking is free, unaffected by material circumstances. In our minds we can always be free.” According to Marxism, however, this is a fallacy as “Minds aren’t free at all; they only think they are” (Bertens 70). In examining the socioeconomic statuses of Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë, Woolf, and Rowling, there is significant consideration given to the outside forces that either inhibited or propelled their careers and success as female writers. Additionally, applying the Marxist lens of literary criticism to the texts of these women lends further insight into the subject matter that fills the pages of their literature. In order to adequately understand the effects of gender and socioeconomic status on the relative success of writers, it is necessary to combine both the feminist and Marxist lenses of literary criticism, utilizing the sub-theory of Marxist feminism as a filter for both their literature *and* biographical information.

In many ways, Mary Wollstonecraft can be considered one of the first feminists on record. One of her most prominent works, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, pioneered the fight for women’s rights in the 1700s. Although the feminist movement would not come to fruition for many years after her death, Wollstonecraft’s recognition of the inequalities faced by



women in the eighteenth-century patriarchal society began the feminist conversation. While Wollstonecraft was born into an upper-class family, her life was far from ideal. From a young age, Wollstonecraft acted as a protector to her mother, who was regularly abused by her father, Edward. Furthermore, any wealth that Mary Wollstonecraft and her family would have enjoyed was squandered away by Edward. Instead of the upper-class life intended for them, the Wollstonecraft family ended up as members of the lower middle class. In *Mary Wollstonecraft*, Todd and Ferguson portray how Wollstonecraft's father shaped her future attitudes, saying:

With the dwindling away of his inheritance, her father began to expropriate the money settled on his daughters, which in turn made Mary feel obliged to surrender her legacy, and along with it, any chance of the early independence she coveted. Her future fretting over money matters and her constant attacks on the practice of primogeniture stemmed from unpleasant memories of these times as much as from her own impoverished existence. (1-2)

Due to the lack of economic stability experienced by her family due to her father's selfish behavior, Mary Wollstonecraft has the necessity of working in order to earn an income. Far from being a burden, Wollstonecraft accepted "employment in the fashionable city of Bath as a live-in companion to a rich, demanding widow, Mrs. Dawson" which excited her as it gave her a sense of autonomy from her father (Todd and Ferguson 3). After the death of her mother, Wollstonecraft lived with a poor family and worked odds and ends jobs in order to offset some of her living expenses. With a passion for reading and writing, Wollstonecraft opened a school and later became a governess as her means of income. This would have been a respectable career

for a lower-class woman in the eighteenth century, but it was not satisfactory for Wollstonecraft, who was determined to become an author.

Likely as a result of her own upbringing as a child of an abusive marriage, Wollstonecraft did not succumb to the social pressures she faced surrounding marriage. While it was true that “...the eighteenth century was not, in general, an easy time for women,” and there were “particular difficulties facing single women, whether spinsters, unmarried mothers, or widows, whose livelihood depended on their own exertions,” Wollstonecraft would not be content with marrying as a means of survival (Sweet and Lane 67). This was a stark contrast from many lower middle-class women, as “not only did eighteenth-century society fail to acknowledge the problems facing single women, but there was a refusal to recognise that women had any real existence outside marriage” (Sweet and Lane 67). In a society where women were taking the names of their husbands, Wollstonecraft fought to make a name for herself as a woman, a writer, and a free woman. In *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft discusses the consequences of promoting the autonomy and liberation of women in a staunchly patriarchal society, stating:

Make them free, and they will quickly become wise and virtuous, as men become more so; for the improvement must be mutual, or the injustice which one half of the human race are obliged to submit to, retorting on their oppressors, the virtue of man will be worm-eaten by the insect whom he keeps under his feet. (206)

Where men fought against the liberation of women for many reasons, the biggest motivator is one that has been true across time and space: those in power fight to remain in power.

Wollstonecraft recognized that men were fighting for hegemony in society while she was

fighting for equality. Furthermore, men believed that giving up some of their power to women would be detrimental to life and society as they knew it. Wollstonecraft argued that this was not the case and, in fact, would likely have the opposite effect. In *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, O'Brien asserts this idea when she states:

Wollstonecraft points out that, in the case of women, the connection is ruptured because their lack of civil and political rights reduces their moral stake in the good of the commonwealth: for women's 'private virtue' to become 'a public benefit, they must have a civil existence in the state, married or single'. Denied a public dimension to their moral choices, women have little incentive to act virtuously. (185)

Far from being a detriment to current society, Wollstonecraft argued that a society in which men and women work together toward the greater good would be far more successful than one in which women were continuously oppressed.

At the heart of Wollstonecraft's fight for equality were her views on equal access to education for both men and women. During her lifetime, formal education was reserved for men. Wollstonecraft recognized that, as in many areas of life, there was a double standard for the consideration of the education of men and women in society. Where men had the time and luxury to pursue different disciplines in order to find their path to success, women were not as privileged. This disparity in privilege is outlined in "Julie Carlson. England's First Family of Writers: Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Shelley," when the author argues that:

For Wollstonecraft, wisdom does not consist in the regulation of passion—least of all for women—but arises instead from actively—and "fancifully"—going astray in attempts to

enlarge the mind. Since men have traditionally been accorded the privilege of "going astray" (making mistakes, moral or otherwise) and recovering lasting harm, "females must be accorded a similar field for error" (141) if they are to achieve a comparable degree of wisdom. (Rzepka 154)

Women in the low classes had no means of becoming educated, as society dictated that their life's purpose was to be (at least somewhat) gainfully married at an early age. While upper-class women did have access to education, their instruction was limited to areas that would promote success for them as wives and homemakers. The common social standard of the eighteenth century said that women were the weaker sex, and their only real purpose in life was to bear children and be homemakers, wives, and help their husbands in any way necessary. Due to their purpose being generally contained within the realm of domesticity, it was believed that women "were not equipped to deal with the rigors of university education which would threaten their capacity to bear children; and because women's vocation in life supposedly different from that of men, it was believed to be pointless and cruel to educate her beyond her sphere as a wife and mother" (Schwartz 674). Not surprisingly, this rationale makes the oppressor appear to be considering the best interest of the oppressed when in reality, withholding access to education was just another means by which women remained dependent on their fathers and husbands. Wollstonecraft rebelled against the notion that education should be reserved for men, and instead asserted that knowledge and wisdom was intended for all who might be interested in making meaningful contributions to society—women included.

Mary Wollstonecraft was the product of a lower-class family who did not marry herself off in order to cement her place in society. Instead, Wollstonecraft was a pioneer for gender

equality and, as she was so determined, a successful writer. Despite her sex and social class being inhibitors of her potential, Wollstonecraft welcomed them as challenges and became a successful writer. During the time in which Wollstonecraft wrote and published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Britain was seeing a notable uptick in the advocacy of women's rights. As this subject was already on the minds of many Britons, the subject matter contained within the pages of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was not entirely unexpected. What was not expected, however, was that Wollstonecraft's portrayal of advocacy was unlike anything that society had ever seen. Instead of championing women as a standalone ideal, Wollstonecraft wrote in a way that would appease both women *and* men by promoting harmonious balances of power between the sexes. Instead of fighting for hegemony, Wollstonecraft's belief was simply that it should be shared. Due to this mentality, her work ethic, and her refusal to follow patriarchal norms, Wollstonecraft's work was well received by society as a whole. This reception stirred societal views surrounding women during the time of its publication, as:

In approving the work, the reviewers endorsed the view that the character of women at the present time needed to become more independent, more rational, more equal to men in mind and spirit; and they indicated how widespread the assumptions of earlier educational reformers had become. As is so often the case with British reformers, the benevolent, improving impulse sought to ameliorate the condition of the sex, not to alter relative positions between the sexes. (Janes 295)

Whereas many women in the eighteenth century were not able to find success, Mary Wollstonecraft found the opposite to be true. Success for women was to be found in patriarchal society— regardless of sex and social class — if one was prepared to fight for it. Wollstonecraft

did, indeed, fight for her rights as a woman, but that was only the beginning. Wollstonecraft's successful work as a writer was largely focused on the liberation of all women and the creation of a harmonious balance of power between the sexes.

Mary Wollstonecraft may have been one of the first women to speak out against patriarchal views of womanhood in society, but she certainly was not the last or only woman to do so. Much like in Wollstonecraft's experience, women in Austen's society "faced limited options" to support themselves other than to get married, which was not always an ideal situation; "Marriage gave them social and financial security, with or without romantic love, but it carried the burden of constant childbearing and rearing" (Reef 10). To many women, however, this was preferable to the alternative as "A single woman with no income had little freedom, because she depended on her family for shelter and support. Those who were qualified could teach or care for the children of others, but teaching was hard work that paid little, and governesses held a low social rank" (Reef 10). While Austen was born into a respectable family, they were not wealthy, and what wealth they did have would have been passed down to her eldest brother. Because of this, much like many other single women of her social status, Austen relied on her family for support until well into adulthood. This was not the life that Austen desired, as she aspired to be a self-sufficient writer, but social confines made this aspiration unattainable for women.

As part of their becoming equally contributing members of society, Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen both promoted education for women. While Wollstonecraft fought for women to have equal education opportunities as men in society, this was still not the reality for Austen

as a young woman in a patriarchal society. There were vastly disparate goals for educating young men versus young women, as:

Parents who enrolled their daughters in school wanted them to come home “accomplished.” Boys studied classical languages, history, mathematics, and science. Girls learned a little grammar and geography, but mostly they practiced penmanship and other ladylike skills. Women who could paint or do needlework filled empty hours and beautified their homes. Those who spoke French and knew how to dance or play an instrument mingled well in society. (Reef 21)

Like her older brothers and sisters, Austen was afforded the opportunity of a formal education. This education, however, was the typical education for girls in Austen’s society, and she learned very little. By the age of eleven, Austen “had seen enough of girls’ schools to form a strong dislike of them, and she never changed her mind. She later described them as places ‘where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity.’ At home, she read freely, and her parents hired a piano master to give her lessons” (Reef 23-4). Despite having attended two different girls’ schools as a child, any real intellectual education that Austen received throughout her lifetime was due to her own thirst for learning. Having an educated father with an extensive library, Austen learned as much as she could both from her father and his books. Formal schooling was nothing Austen thought it would be, as society dictated what would be appropriate subject matter for young women to be exposed to— regardless of their personal goals.

Jane Austen was well aware of society’s expectations and stereotypes surrounding women in the early nineteenth century. This is not to say, however, that she was content with

conforming to these norms. By the time that Austen was an adult, she would likely have been exposed to the ideas of her feminist predecessor, Mary Wollstonecraft, as she was a curious and voracious reader. Furthermore, Austen had social connections to Wollstonecraft through her family's extended acquaintances, making the possibility of this exposure even more likely. By all accounts, Wollstonecraft's lifestyle was a direct contradiction of the expectations placed on her by society. In fact, "The nonconforming Wollstonecraft had famous men as lovers, bore a child out of wedlock, and married an outspoken atheist. She stirred debate about whether women should write for publication and what they should write if they did" (Reef 27). While Austen's only real contradiction to the social confines of women during her time was to not get married for economic gain, she expressed her views surrounding this subject more completely in her writing. Having women like Wollstonecraft illuminating the path of feminist thought gave Austen the foundation for her social commentary that she expressed in her literature.

While Austen was seen as the stereotypical spinster of the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, she used her writing as a way to speak out against social norms surrounding women. In her novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen's female characters satirically portray "proper" women of the upper-class. One such portrayal is that of Lady Middleton, the definitive high-class, lady-like character of Austen's lifetime. The other female characters in the novel view her as such, and Austen presents Lady Middleton with high enthusiasm, writing:

They were of course very anxious to see a person on whom so much of their comfort at Barton must depend; and the elegance of her appearance was favourable to their wishes. Lady Middleton was not more than six or seven and twenty; her face was handsome, her figure tall and striking, and her address graceful. Her manners had all the elegance which



her husband's wanted. But they would have been improved by some share of his frankness and warmth; and her visit was long enough to detract something from their first admiration, by shewing that though perfectly well-bred, she was reserved, cold, and had nothing to say for herself beyond the most common-place inquiry or remark. (30)

Lady Middleton is presented as what every lady *should* be, yet Austen makes it clear that this does not reflect her personal views on womanhood. Lady Middleton is married to a wealthy man, which society was pushing for, yet she is boring and dry. Austen portrays her distaste for social norms surrounding women and marriage by associating negative qualities in Lady Middleton, who has followed all of society's rules.

Conversely to Lady Middleton, one of the novel's main characters, Marianne, takes on the role of wife, but Austen presents this in a positive light for the audience. There is definitely "a gender inflection in the outline of Marianne's new position. She does indeed enter on new duties as a wife, but the terms 'mistress of a family' and 'patroness of a village' seem to emphasise empowerment rather than conventional feminine submission" (Morris 52). Instead of writing a character who marries out of necessity and ends up unhappy, Austen writes a female protagonist who holds power in her role as a wife. Morris asserts this idea in *Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism* when she states:

*Sense and Sensibility* opens by expelling its two young female protagonists from the security of the patriarchal home. By its conclusion, both Elinor and Marianne have moved into a larger material world. They have, however, retained a sense of self as social being, rejecting both privatised interiority and acquisitive competitiveness. As so often in Austen's fiction, the close of the narrative hints at the formation of a new, potentially

dissensual, social order, worldly rather than idealist, horizontal rather than vertical, and one in which women have an active and intelligent public role to play. (52)

Austen did not advocate for marriage as a means of financial gain but recognized that this was the norm for many women. Like Wollstonecraft, what Austen's work does do is promote equality and a shared power between both husband and wife within the relationship. This promotion of female empowerment built upon Wollstonecraft's views that women had a vital role to play in society — and not only as wives and mothers.

Jane Austen lived and died as an unmarried woman who relied on the men in her family for much of her life as a means of economic survival. Despite the fact that she is one of the most famous authors of all time, having written six novels by the time of her death, Austen was never well-known as a writer in her lifetime. Austen's literature was, and still remains, relatable to the general public, as “[n]ot only is she dealing with characters and feelings taken from ordinary life as opposed to the nobility, it is the innovative quality and detail of this ordinariness in her writing that is interesting and illuminating” (Morris 29). Austen's characters and situational irony are captivating, thought-provoking, and witty, yet she never gained any sort of fame for her writing talent until long after her death. Why, when Austen was an “educated” member of a respected family was she unable to make a name for herself in her chosen career? Austen's gender and socioeconomic status— however respectable — held her back from this level of success. Being a woman, society had a certain idea of what Austen's role would have been in her lifetime. She was not meant to be a writer, but a wife and a mother— two other roles she left unfulfilled. Furthermore, while Austen's family was well respected in their community, her father was a clergyman. Being a clergyman would not have provided the Austen family with any substantial

wealth, leaving Austen with limited means as an unmarried woman. Being an unknown author in the 1800's, Austen's time spent writing would not have provided her with any income. In fact, this career would likely have *cost* her money, as she would have had to pay to have her works published. All of these limitations set by socioeconomic standards in her lifetime nearly guaranteed that Austen would see no success as a female writer in her lifetime.

Over time, early feminist pioneers, such as Wollstonecraft and Austen, would be joined by multitudinous female writers. One such writer is Charlotte Brontë, who— unlike Austen — found success in her writing career during her brief lifetime. As Brontë was not of the upper-class, she would have had the same options as Austen had to support herself— either get married or become a governess. While Brontë would have preferred to make writing her paid career, she “was painfully conscious of the poor intellectual status assigned to women in her day and regarded it as outrageously unfair. Women were to learn and labour truly to get their own livings, but how hard this was made for them” (Andrews 142). While working as a governess was less than ideal, Brontë did hold this job for some time, as she was adamantly against marrying for economic station over love. During the Victorian era in which Brontë lived, many would have considered this resolution to be injudicious, but Brontë paid no mind to what society had to say. Examining Brontë's society and the career options for women in her era, Rostek asserts that:

Against the background of limited and risky economic options faced by women, their repeated insistence on and preoccupation with love must not be downplayed as mere romantic extravaganza or the emotional counterpart to the worldly issues of money and trade, but regarded as a strategy of gaining some degree of security despite their precarious economic and legal position. In a time when certain elementary human needs

could only be legitimately satisfied within a marriage, but when the laws of coverture basically made a married woman the property of a man, love and affection — in addition to faith in God and a marriage settlement not everyone could afford — became for women important, if imperfect, means of insuring themselves against subsequent (economic) abuse by their husbands. (84)

Marrying for love over securing a comfortable economic situation was of the utmost importance to Brontë, who remained unmarried until she fell in love at the age of thirty-eight. She also openly lamented women's social obligation to marry for money in her writing, and "[i]n her novels — like Jane Austen before her — she emphasizes that marriage and love are circumscribed by property: one has to be able to afford the luxury of being united to a beloved person" (Rostek 82). Being able to marry for love, which Brontë considered a necessity of life, was a situation that she realized was not possible for all.

Brontë became a writer in a time when female writers were still regularly dismissed and disregarded by their male counterparts. Despite the hardships that women writers faced in the Victorian era, Brontë persevered and became a well-respected author. Had society's shunning of female writers been effective, and Brontë "had never written her novels she would not have become the inspiring influence — a stronger one than she may have realized — in the movement for women's rights" (Andrews 142). Brontë's female protagonists are women who take risks and fight to achieve what they want in life, regardless of social pressure. This ideal is displayed in her novel, *Villette*, when Lucy Snowe embarks on a journey abroad in search of a means of supporting herself. Surrounding Lucy's journey, Brontë writes:

My state of mind, and all accompanying circumstances, were just now such as most to favour the adoption of a new, resolute, and daring—perhaps desperate— line of action. I had nothing to lose: Unutterable loathing of a desolate existence past forbade return. If I failed in what I now designed to undertake, who, save myself, would suffer? If I died far away from— home, I was going to say, but I had no home—from England, then, who would weep? I might suffer; I was inured to suffering: death itself had not, I thought, those terrors for me which it has for the softly reared. I had, ere this, looked on the thought of death with a quiet eye. Prepared, then, for any consequences, I formed a project. (Brontë 57)

Here, Lucy Snowe is uncertain of what the future might bring, but she faces this uncertainty and bravely presses on to earn her autonomy. While many, including Brontë herself, would not include her on a roster of early feminists, her contributions to the movement through her literature are vastly important. Brontë recognized the socioeconomic inequities faced by women in her lifetime, and the lack of autonomy they faced. Linton Andrews describes these inequities between men and women, writing:

She lived during a time when the Industrial Revolution was having a marked effect on the economic side of women's rights. In an earlier stage the father or husband was the breadwinner; the women were fed and clothed and housed at his expense. No matter how hard they worked in the house he believed that he kept them. But when great numbers of women began to work in the mills this ancient idea began to crumble. It was clearly recognized that a factory woman earned her keep, and she had the good sense to realize

the complete unfairness of handing over all her pay to father or husband to be spent as he thought best. Side by side with this new idea of independence or self-dependence on the part of the factory worker rose a new appreciation of the inestimable service performed by the working-class wife and mother with no hired help to lighten her almost incessant duties. (Andrews 143)

Acknowledging the fact that women had very limited resources in becoming independent members of society, Brontë used her talent as a means of commentary on the oppression women faced by living in a patriarchal society that allowed them little freedom.

In her young life, Brontë did have some formal education, although her education was mostly gained through her love of reading and interacting with her sisters. Throughout her childhood, Brontë “was an insatiable reader, ranging freely, like her siblings, through the magazines and books that their father and aunt kept at the Haworth parsonage. She also had access to libraries in the town of Keighley and at Ponden Hall” (Lonoff 458-9). There were two instances of formal education in her life when Brontë briefly “went away to school: first at eight, for less than a year, to the institution that *Jane Eyre* made infamous as Lowood, and then at fourteen to Miss Wooller’s school at Roe Head, where she remained for three half terms”(Lonoff 458-9). While education was valued a great deal by Brontë and her family, she was dissatisfied with much of the curriculum in British schools during her lifetime. Correspondingly to when Austen was educated, “the typical school for young ladies drained the excitement out of learning. Accomplishments — drawing, piano playing, dancing — out- ranked intellectual achievement in the view of most parents and headmistresses” (Lonoff 461). Because of this, Brontë looked

within her own family as a means of learning and personal growth. Her education extended “outside the formal classroom, in the spaces that she shared with her siblings. As they pored over sources, exchanged ideas, and transmuted the results into fictions of their own, the children taught and learned from each other” (Lonoff 459). While this level of education was perhaps more than many women would have experienced during Brontë’s lifetime, she was left without the level of education that she deemed necessary for success in her life and career. As a result, Brontë traveled to Brussels for a formal education in French, which ended up fulfilling her needs in more ways than anticipated. Lonoff contends that Brontë experienced a higher level of education when she writes:

*Education* refers broadly to the means by which people develop their capacities. It may encompass formal schooling, but it also refers to other kinds of development: emotional, moral, and social. *Formation* has more narrowly to do with intellectual and career development. Modern French students who want to become teachers or lawyers must consider their *formation* — the institutional training that their work will require... though Charlotte went to Brussels seeking *formation*, the knowledge of French that would enable her to run a school, she left it with an *éducation* that enabled her to become a successful writer. (458)

Due to her determination to become a successful teacher, Brontë gained enough education and experience to make her a successful writer. Where Austen had little recognition in this field during her lifetime, Brontë became an acclaimed writer before her death. This acclaim came with

Brontë's refusal to accept that successful authorship was reserved for men, and the drive to achieve more than wifedom and motherhood.

Careers for women in writing were not commonplace during Brontë's time as an author. If and when women did write something that reached publication, literary critics were at the ready; prepared to dissect the pages of female-written texts for errors and misuse of language. In order to circumvent this disadvantage, Brontë published her early works under the male pseudonym Currer Bell. Because "[h]er use of a male voice meant that she was never subject to a conventional female style or restricted to topics considered appropriate for women to read and write about... [Brontë's] language was honest, revealing and powerful, and certainly not typical of women's writing at the time" (Alexander 16). Being able to write in her own authentic style without concern of whether or not it was "lady-like," Brontë created works of literary art that would be well-known and well-regarded for centuries to come.

In the time following Austen and Brontë's eras, Virginia Woolf was born in the latter years of the Victorian reign in Britain. As such, Woolf's early notion of women's place in society would have been much like that of Brontë. For women during this era, society was still predominantly run by patriarchal ideals. Women were often married as a means of making a living for themselves, and then, became the "angel of the house." It was generally accepted that "a woman's place is at home. As an angel, she should be kept untainted by the public life, the world of affairs which belong to man. The woman's duty is to create a world of peace where the man can take refuge from the harsh outside world and the children can be well taken care of" (Ren 2061). Woolf's witnessing of these ideals in the society in which she was raised did not



produce in her an “angel,” however. Instead, society’s oppression of women instilled in her the need for financial independence so that she may come into her own as a person and a writer—without having to rely on a husband. In her extended essay, *A Room of One’s Own*,” Woolf’s character asserts the importance of financial independence when considering the dynamics of relationships between women and men, saying, “No force in the world can take from me my five hundred pounds. Food, house, and clothing are mine for ever. Therefore not merely do effort and labor cease, but also hatred and bitterness. I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me” (38). A condition of being self-sufficient, Woolf indicates that she can have more meaningful relationships with the male figures in her life. Furthermore, women who earn money for themselves have nobody to answer to concerning their careers. In the same essay, Woolf further speaks about how financial independence affects the careers of women as writers. On this subject, she writes:

Intellectual freedom depends on material things. Poetry depends on intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one’s own. (Woolf 108)

Here, Woolf aligns her views with the Marxist ideology that asserts that in order for anyone to truly have the luxury of freedom of the mind, one must also have financial freedom. Since Woolf observed that women generally were reliant on men in this era, she made a concerted effort to

break free from the restraints placed on women by society and become a self-reliant woman and writer.

While Woolf's family was of the upper-class in England, she was never afforded the opportunity to attend school in a formal setting. Instead, "Woolf and her sister were educated at home by their mother Julia, who tutored both girls....When Vanessa went to art school, Woolf remained at home alone, studying Greek, writing in her diary or reading classics from her father's extensive library" (Nadel 26). Woolf would later study at Kings College, although she never graduated. This was of no great detriment to neither Woolf's personal nor professional development, as there was much debate over what courses would be available to women. Men had much to say about the education of women in the late nineteenth century, and:

The heated controversy over women's higher education in the nineteenth century and the high visibility and achievements of the first women graduates raised fears that college women would not be content with traditionally domestic lives. And in fact, the marriage and fertility rates of college women differed from those of the general female population. (Gordon 211-3)

Reminiscent of the social implications surrounding Wollstonecraft's pleas for equality, this debate was based on the fears of men who were concerned that society would suffer if women became educated. They contended that if women attended college, it was less probable that women would marry and have children. This controversy even spread so far as to have a doctor promote the idea that "women who studied the same subjects in the same manner as men risked permanent injury to their reproductive health" (Gordon 213). Having a medical professional tell

women that their bodies might fail them if they study subjects available to men not only served as discouragement for women to become educated, but perpetuated the control that men held over women for all of time.

Feminism during Woolf's lifetime looked different than it had for her predecessors in the literary field. Where women in earlier years had not been well-known as writers during their lifetimes or had to write under male pseudonyms, there was a genuine movement of inclusivity for female writers in the early twentieth century when Woolf was writing and making a name for herself in the field. During the Modernist era in which Woolf's work became popular, "there [were] institutional grounds ... attempting to bring more women into existing literary canons by drawing attention to the innovative and formally sophisticated nature of their art" (Felski 24). This movement, certainly, did not erase the centuries of suppression that women had experienced, as there were still a plethora of obstacles to be overcome if a woman were to become an established writer. In order for this to happen, Woolf asserted the need for three specific conditions to be met. These conditions are outlined in "Virginia Woolf and the Condition of the Woman Writer in the Essay 'A Room of One's Own'" which states:

Virginia Woolf's thesis states that a woman, in order to be a writer, needs her own place – a room of her own –, time and financial independence. Only when these three conditions are met is she able to define her own spiritual identity. At the same time, in terms of her inner structure, she also needs the strength and determination to give up her own feminine identity in order to become the creator of works really meaningful.  
(Musina 189)

While there was some speculation as to Woolf's intentions surrounding this idea, she was not running away from her female gender identity. Instead, Woolf was asserting that gender identity should be subjective, rather than assigned by the patriarchal society in which she lived. Toril Moi breaks down Woolf's intention in her book *Sexual/Textual Politics*, saying that "[f]ar from fleeing such gender identities because she fears them, Woolf rejects them because she has seen them for what they are. She has understood that the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity" (Moi 13-4). Woolf's feminism is largely based in the idea that gender is a social construct, and that men and women could perform many of the same social roles. In adopting a certain gravitation toward androgyny, Woolf "brought to light certain ideas about the nature of gender and how society defines people and their roles by biological appearances" (Melita 132). In doing so, she proved that women have a place in the literary canon— both because of *and* in spite of their differences from men.

Woolf's career as a prominent female writer broke barriers created for women by society by forcing her audience to reconsider everything they thought they knew about gender and possibilities. Woolf ultimately did make a career out of being a writer. She began earning money for her journalism and essays in the 1920s, and continued to do so for the rest of her life. While Woolf was a member of the upper echelon of society— her social connections undoubtedly aiding her career— there was no lack of advocacy for herself and her sex in her writing. Her extended essay, "A Room of One's Own," highlights the need for women to have their own place in a male-dominated field, and, more broadly, in the world. Woolf considered it a great detriment to society that the literary canon of her era and those before her held so little

representation from women, as female writers are exceedingly capable of meaningful and complex composition— if only given the chance. Lamenting on this lack of representation and the stifling of women’s creativity in writing, Woolf writes:

For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men. And one must conclude that it would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only? (87-8)

Being a progressive thinker, Woolf considered the possibility of there being more than two genders. In light of this idea, she wonders how such a diverse world can be adequately represented only by the words of men. This notion was one that propelled Woolf’s writing career, fueled by a desire for inclusive representation of women in literature. Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” is seen by many as the first major work of feminist literary criticism. Woolf’s work towards equality in the literary field was a significant precursor for positive changes for female authors in subsequent years. Nearly a quarter of a century after Woolf’s death came the birth of a woman who would become one of the most famous authors of the twenty-first century.

Joanne Rowling, later known by her pen name J.K. Rowling, was born in England in 1965. By this time, the social, economic, and political climates had changed drastically from how Virginia Woolf had known them. Rowling was born in a time that would be remembered as one

of the greatest feminist movements in history. Due to this social evolution, gender roles were no longer such that women were resigned to being homemakers, wives, and mothers. Instead, women were coming into the workforce and making careers for themselves. Rowling's mother, for example, was a woman working as a scientist—a field that would have been reserved for men in previous times. This was not to say, however, that women had it easy in the working world. Women were still not earning anywhere near their male counterparts, and most still took on the domestic role in their homes. While many women still struggled with finding the balance between their professional lives and personal responsibilities, there were still significant strides being made for women in the workforce during this time. Rowling fit into this new dynamic of women in the workforce by becoming an English language teacher as well as getting married and having a child. Ultimately, this did not work out for her, as Rowling soon found herself as an unemployed, single mother. At the time that Rowling began her writing career, she was collecting welfare and writing when she could while caring for an infant. While some women were able to have both a career and be a mother, Rowling struggled with her role in society at this time.

By the time Rowling was ready for school, it had already become commonplace for girls and boys to attend together. As such, she received the same primary and secondary education as most children in the United Kingdom had experienced in the 1970s. Since both of Rowling's parents were educated and worked in professional fields, it is not surprising that she went on to attend Exeter University to study French and the classics. This was not uncommon for women during the 1980s, as "[i]n the second half of the twentieth century a far larger number of girls went on to university... 'new universities', such as Keele and Sussex, ... accepted a far higher

proportion of women students and the gender ratio began to change significantly” (Bunkle 803). Women were becoming educated at higher rates as a means of marketing themselves as employable in an economy that necessitated that women generated income. This was true for Rowling, who went on to become a secretary, and then, a well-known author. While she did have an education, most of what Rowling knew about fiction writing came through her own creativity and practice. It is likely that Rowling recognized this as fact, as she portrays education in a similar fashion at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the *Harry Potter* series. While students at Hogwarts are afforded a classroom education, they are “given the basic tools and then are encouraged to discover on their own and apply and practice their learning” (Dickinson 244). This is similar to how Rowling became a best-selling author; she studied literature in school and utilized her creativity to create her own classics.

As Rowling began writing during the late twentieth century, much of the groundwork had already been laid for her in terms of the acceptance of women in the literary field. By the time Rowling released the first installment in the *Harry Potter* series in 1997, there had been many successful book sales from women authors in the United Kingdom. As with any field, this is not an indication that women made their way into published authorship easily, simply that there was now a place for them at the table. Although Rowling had previously been employed as a teacher, this was not what she wanted to do for her life-long career. Rowling had been reading and writing stories for the better part of her life, and she knew that the literary field was calling her. With little more than some determination and the story of a boy’s coming-of-age in the wizarding realm, Rowling began writing her first novel in what would become a series of seven of the most famous books ever to be written. While Rowling had little money or familial support,

she took to the feminist belief that “women could become mistresses of their own destiny. This unwittingly foreshadowed the idea of the self-made woman who ‘took responsibility’ for her own wellbeing through an act of Will” (Bunkle 804). With this, Rowling wrote her novel, but she had a difficult time finding a publisher due to the fact that she had little money and even less reputation. Despite the fact that *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* was a well-written young adult novel, as would be revealed once it met publication, few publishers were willing to take a chance on Rowling, and:

It is one of the ironies of book publishing that Rowling’s first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, was rejected by several publishers before Bloomsbury accepted it. It came out in June 1997 in London and reached the top of the prestigious *New York Times* Best Seller List in August 1999. The second and third books in the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* were published in the next two years and by 2000 the three books had occupied the top three places of *The New York Times* Best Seller List in adult fiction for over a year. (Visser and Kaai 196)

While there are any number of reasons that Rowling was rejected by publishers, it was not— and still is not— uncommon for women to be dismissed as being inferior to their male counterparts. Furthermore, being a single, unemployed mother on welfare, Rowling had no money to aid in marketing herself or publishing her work, nor did she have any social connections to further her career. Pairing gender inequality with Rowling’s low social status, it is unsurprising that she was repeatedly turned down. Rowling knew of this probability, as she consciously “decided to use initials rather than her first name to disguise her gender and ward off any possible bias” due to



being a woman (Gale Biographies). However, once she was finally published in 1997, Rowling's career took off—and it has not slowed down since.

It is evident in Rowling's *Harry Potter* series that she values traditional gender roles and family dynamics. The Weasley family, for example, is comprised of the father, who works and earns money for the family, the mother, who is the homemaker and caretaker, and several children who all go to school or work. That being said, there are plenty of female characters that play strong roles within the series, modeling the female empowerment that Rowling used to advance herself into a writing career. One such character, and one of the protagonists of the series, is Hermione Granger. While Hermione can be interpreted as being overshadowed by Harry in the novels, her bravery and power cannot be overlooked. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Hermione has the following exchange with one of her classmates, Malfoy:

Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?" said Malfoy. "And he's supposed to be our teacher!"

Harry and Ron both made furious moves toward Malfoy, but Hermione got there first - SMACK!

She had slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster. Malfoy staggered. Harry, Ron, Crabbe, and Goyle stood flabbergasted as Hermione raised her hand again.

"Don't you *dare* call Hagrid pathetic you foul—you evil—"

"Hermione!" said Ron weakly and he tried to grab her hand as she swung it back.

"Get *off* Ron!"

Hermione pulled out her wand. Malfoy stepped backward. Crabbe and Goyle looked at him for instructions, thoroughly bewildered.

"C'mon," Malfoy muttered, and in a moment, all three of them had disappeared into the passageway to the dungeons.

"*Hermione!*" Ron said again, sounding both stunned and impressed." (Rowling 213)

This exchange is integral to the characterization of Hermione for a multitude of reasons — taking many socioeconomic issues into consideration. First and foremost, Hermione is a female and Malfoy is a male, which is a direct opposition to patriarchal views that would stereotype women as prim, proper, and polite. This would especially be true between Malfoy and Hermione, as the latter has two other factors stacked against her in relation to her male peer. In addition to being a girl, Hermione is also of a lower social class than Malfoy. Malfoy's parents are wealthy, and Rowling repeatedly characterizes him as being rich and entitled. Hermione's parents, on the other hand, are dentists. While dentistry is a respectable field, it would not come with the wealth or prestige that is seen by the Malfoy family. To further complicate this dynamic, Hermione's status is considerably lower since she is a first-generation witch born to non-magic parents. All of these socioeconomic issues considered, Hermione's words and actions in this exchange are extremely poignant toward asserting her a strong female representation in literature.

Where Austen, and Woolf saw success in their writing careers as a result of their high social class, Rowling did not have this advantage. Instead, much like Wollstonecraft and Brontë, Rowling's success as a writer came as a result of her hard work and determination. Rowling never accepted the limitations placed on her gender or socioeconomic status by society.

Undeterred by skepticism, she pushed forward and fought for her spot in the modern literary canon. To say that J.K. Rowling has made a substantial impact on modern literature would barely scratch the surface of the sustained effect that *Harry Potter* has had on the world. The books have sold over 500 million copies worldwide, making them some of the highest sellers of all time. The final installment of *Harry Potter* was released in 2007, yet Rowling still earns income from the series. In 2020, Rowling's earnings totaled about \$60 million, making her "the second highest-paid author in the world, behind the prolific James Patterson" (forbes.com). Rowling has proven that successful writing careers are not only for men, but that women could dominate the field, if given the opportunity.

Throughout the past three hundred years, women have emerged as successful individuals, breaking free from the oppressive hold of a perpetually patriarchal society. While some of these writers had their socioeconomic status as crutches, many made a name for themselves simply for working hard and being outstanding in the field of composition. Emphatically, there is still considerable room for growth in becoming a truly equitable society; yet tremendous strides have been made since Mary Wollstonecraft penned *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Wollstonecraft likely had no perception of the profound impact that this work would have on society, or that it would be studied as the precursor to feminism for centuries after her death. She wrote it with one goal in mind: to create a society in which women and men could live and interact harmoniously and freely. Wollstonecraft understood that women were under male hegemony, and that this was of the utmost detriment to society. While she would not live to witness the social outcome of her ideology, Wollstonecraft set in motion the wheels of feminism so that her successors might bring equality to fruition. Wollstonecraft's legacy was carried on

with prominent women writers through the ages, who built upon her beliefs and fought for their spot in a male-dominated field. Austen did not outwardly display her feminism in her personal life, but still, she wrote stories that connected with women in her era. Austen employed her creativity as a means of speaking out against a society that favored men and forced women to marry in order to support themselves. Brontë continued Austen's trend of using her literature to speak out against societal norms, although she chose to do so under a male pseudonym as women were still not taken seriously as writers — or even contributing members of society — during her lifetime. Woolf was one of the first female writers to openly criticize social ideals surround women in her writing, and her works would become preeminent in the feminist movement toward equality. Rowling continues to see success as a modern female writer, as her literature depicts the strong female characters made possible by her predecessors. Applying both the feminist and Marxist lenses to the lives and works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, and J.K. Rowling, it can be asserted that gender and socioeconomic status has affected female writers in various ways throughout the ages.

Today, the works of Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë, Woolf, and Rowling continue to be read, enjoyed, studied, and analyzed by readers and students worldwide. These women and their works have touched innumerable lives, continuing their legacy of female empowerment in a male-dominated society. Fighting against oppression, and, in some cases, low social status, Wollstonecraft, Austen, Brontë, Woolf, and Rowling have proven that women are capable, competent, and competitive in their fields. Regardless of hurdles, women have the power to overcome and achieve, the same way men are perceived to do. Having prominent female writers

to look back on, women today can follow the example of the women before them, never allowing the limitations set by society to dictate their success.

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