

Evolving Fictional Visions of Josephine Bonaparte, 1950-2000s

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When considering novels, one easily thinks about the large section of the modern bookstore that contains thrillers, fantasy, suspense, romance, historical fiction, and so on. Though these genres can stand alone, they are often combined for an infinite number of new stories or new angles on old stories. This section includes the classic literature taught in high schools and beyond right down to the trashy romance novels that many women are embarrassed to admit reading. Because historical stories are engaging for writers due to their aspect of reality and inherent complexities, certain time periods seem to have created a multitude of situations that lend themselves to fictional retellings, either because of the society of the time, the specific events, or the charismatic leaders that seem to have engaged readers throughout the centuries. For example, a simple search for Napoleon Bonaparte on a book retail website will turn up not only numerous biographies and academic texts, but also more than sixty works of fiction dating only from the last sixty years.¹

This wealth of topics has been able to grow even more expansive due to the boom in the book publishing industry. According to John Tebbel, a former journalist and book editor,² in the years following the Second World War, “there was a brief pause” in the publishing industry prior to “the mightiest outpouring of mass market books of every kind that had ever been seen in publishing history.”³ Although fiction has long been a large portion of title output in the world of book publishing, the boom in publishing has resulted in an astounding growth in the number of new fiction titles released each year. In 1954, only 11,901 new titles were produced; of those

¹ I looked at both, www.barnesandnoble.com and www.amazon.com.

² “John William Tebbel” *Contemporary Authors Online*, (Thomson Gale, 2005)
<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/GLD/hits?r=d&origSearch=true&o=DataType&n=10&l=d&c=1&locID=was_h11212&secondary=false&u=CA&u=CLC&u=DLB&t=KW&s=1&NA=john+tebbel#Career>.

³ John Tebbel, *Between Covers: The Rise and Transformation of Book Publishing in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 421.

titles, fewer than 3,000 were fiction and literature.⁴ Although this is a large portion of the total, the number of books is not exceptional. In 2007, on the other hand, over 171,000 new titles were published, well over 22,000 of these in were fiction and literature.⁵ In Tebbel's view, this large increase in output may be directly linked to the changing focus of the book publishing industry. During the 1950s and before the relationship between publishing houses, editors, and writers was very close. However, after WWII, book publishing became more about the bottom line.⁶ One could say that it became a business rather than a network of people concentrating on the quality of each individual work produced. Because the industry began to focus on the business aspect, the sales of certain genres would become more important, leading to the recurrence of some themes and topics.

Various historical settings and figures are frequently put into fictional stories: these include the Renaissance, the Tudor Era, and Napoleonic Era. These complex eras have many characters and happenings that seem to have captivated the modern audience. Napoleon Bonaparte and his wife, Josephine, have been a mainstay in fictional portrayals of the past. Their history has been brought to life through fiction since their deaths. By studying the portrayals of these two people in modern fiction, this study seeks to further the understanding of fiction as a social barometer. This paper will combine interpretations from both history and literature. By putting these two together, this paper will analyze the role of literature in modern times and the understanding of history that is passed on to the fiction reader. Although there is a wealth of novels that feature these two intriguing people, I have taken only a small sample to make this

⁴ Wyllis E. Wright, ed, *American Library Annual for 1955-1956* (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1956), 80.

⁵ Dave Bogart, ed, *The Bowker Annual: Library and Book Trade Almanac*, 52nd ed., (Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc., 2007), 487.

⁶ Tebbel, 462-463.

project manageable. I will analyze two books from the 1950s (*Désirée* by Annemarie Selinko⁷ and *The Emperor's Ladies* by Noel Gerson⁸) and the works by two authors after 1990 (The Josephine B. trilogy by Sandra Gulland⁹ and *The Secret Life of Josephine: Napoleon's Bird of Paradise* by Carolly Erickson¹⁰). These novels have been specifically chosen because they are targeted towards women and each feature both Napoleon and Josephine as leading characters to the plot. By shifting between these time periods, the drastic changes in the portrayal of these two characters will be thrown into sharp relief.

Several aspects play into these changes. The desires of the audience are a key element that may affect the themes within novels. Women play a major role in the realm of fiction. According to Elaine Showalter, a leading feminist scholar, women account for nearly 75% of novel sales.¹¹ A survey completed in 1983 showed that women read more often than men, as men tend to focus on outdoor activities.¹² Thus, women completely monopolize the book industry. Novelists must be cognizant of the desires of their readers. Thus, they need to know what women want to read. If the readers cannot relate to the characters in the story, they will not buy the book or suggest that those they know read it. Then the book would fail to sell.

The changing needs of the reader may also be dependent on societal changes. According to Nadya Aisenberg, a literary and feminist scholar, "literature simultaneously reflects and

⁷ Annemarie Selinko, *Désirée* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1953).

⁸ Noel B. Gerson, *The Emperor's Ladies* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1959).

⁹ The trilogy includes: Sandra Gulland, *The Many Lives & Secret Sorrows of Josephine B.* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1995); Sandra Gulland, *Tales of Passion, Tales of Woe* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1998); Sandra Gulland, *The Last Great Dance on Earth* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2000).

¹⁰ Carolly Erickson, *The Secret Life of Josephine: Napoleon's Bird of Paradise* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007).

¹¹ Cited in Cecilia Konchar Farr, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads*, (Albany: State University of New York Press: 2005), 23.

¹² Eileen Green, Sandra Hebron and Diana Woodward, *Women's Leisure, What Leisure?*, (Houndmills: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1990), 57.

forecasts the social world to which it is inextricably linked.”¹³ Thus, it is necessary to understand the historical happenings that have occurred in the recent past of the author and that have shaped the society in which the novelist writes. These changes are often translated into fiction. Writers from the 1950s were able to write from the Post-World War II perspective, whereas writers from the 1980s were able to incorporate the societal changes that had transformed accepted gender roles. Because a writer cannot be removed from his social context, to understand trends in fiction, one must also understand the broad history shaping the writers.

In this comparison of writers from the 1950s and writers after 1990, the Women’s Liberation Movement is a crucial aspect of social change that must be considered. The movement led to a dramatic shift in woman’s place in society among other societal changes. The American women’s liberation movement dominated the public media throughout much of the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, women protested for equality in the home and workplace. They engaged in “bra burning” and fought for their rights to jobs with equal pay and recognition inside and outside of the household. Though there is no definite start to the women’s movement, there is a marked change in gender roles during World War II. Because women were called from the household to the workplace, they no longer occupied the roles that they had filled for so long. When the war was over, they were back to the home to open jobs for the returning men, which arguably led to the dissatisfaction with home life that would spark the movement in the 1960s and thereafter. The late 1960s and early 1970s represent the peak of the “second wave” of feminism during women’s movement, with demonstrations and activism all across the country. However, in the late 1970s, the second wave declined. The original groups that had been formed disbanded and many new groups were formed, thereby splitting the movement and slipping into

¹³ Nadya Aisenberg, *Ordinary Heroines: Transforming the Male Myth*, (New York: Continuum, 1994), 11.

the background of popular politics.¹⁴ Although the movement seems to have been removed from the spotlight, the effects on society cannot be denied. By the end of the movement, women were expected to have jobs rather than being relegated to the home. They were active in politics and were allowed many of the rights that had previously been only available to men, such as a no-fault divorce.¹⁵

Because this period has had such an effect on the lives of women and men throughout the United States, it has led to an analysis of the role of women in fiction. Notably, there have been several studies of the heroine. During the 1980s, many feminist writers contributed to a growing literature that called for a new heroine. Among them, Nadya Aisenberg argued, “In the large-scale effort now underway to recover women’s contribution to culture, their voices, their images, we discover a counter-narrative for the new heroine to set in motion.”¹⁶ Likewise, Rachel Brownstein argued, “to want to become a heroine...liberates a woman from feeling...a victim or dependent...someone of no account.”¹⁷ However, their studies have not been furthered. Whether or not their call has been answered has yet to be addressed. Although fiction is often studied within the academic realm for plot devices and character development, these studies have not been combined with historical context or the aforementioned feminist texts on the heroine. This study seeks to do just that.

This project focuses specifically on Josephine Bonaparte. To better understand her fictional portrayals, a brief biography is necessary. She was born, Rose Tascher de la Pagerie in Martinique. In 1779, she was sent to France to marry the viscount Alexandre de Beauharnais.

¹⁴ Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: the Women’s movement in America since 1960* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 49, 121, 137-138.

¹⁵ J. Herbie DiFonzo, *Beneath the Fault Line: The Popular and Legal Culture of Divorce in Twentieth-Century America*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 173.

¹⁶ Aisenberg, *Ordinary Heroines*, 16.

¹⁷ Rachel M. Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women in Novels*, (New York, The Viking Press, 1982), xix.

However, their marriage was not a happy one. Although they produced two children, they both took up with lovers. At the outset of the French Revolution in 1789, her husband became a noted politician. Nevertheless, with the rise of Robespierre, anyone of noble blood was called into question. Both Josephine and Alexandre were arrested. He was guillotined just four days before the fall of Robespierre, but Josephine was saved. After her release, Steven Englund writes that “she developed another ‘sentimental attachment’ with Paul Barras,” a member of the new government. Through him, she met Napoleon, who quickly became infatuated with her, calling her Josephine even though she had previously only been known as Rose. Although she did not reciprocate his passionate adoration, they soon married. As he continued his campaigns and advanced his career to the point of becoming emperor of all of France, she started an affair with Hippolyte Charles that would create difficulties in her marriage. Napoleon forgave her, but they eventually discovered that her stint in prison had rendered her barren and she could not produce an heir for the empire.¹⁸ Hence, he decided to divorce her for a younger, royal wife, Marie Louise of Austria. Afterwards, she was able to keep her home and a stipend from Napoleon; they even remained in contact. With several military defeats, Napoleon was exiled and Josephine lived out the rest of her life at Malmaison, her home on the outskirts of Paris.

According to writers of the 1950s, Josephine Bonaparte was a scandalous character. In each book in which she is a major character, she is portrayed as a cunning woman out to have fun and ignorant of world affairs. She is manipulative, seductive, and promiscuous. All of the controversial things that the real Josephine did in her life, such as her affair with Hippolyte Charles and her humiliating divorce from Napoleon, are thrown into sharp relief in these novels. Every misstep that she made is magnified, making her appear as a villain.

¹⁸ Steven Englund, *Napoleon: A Political Life*. (New York: Scribner, 2004), 90-95.

In the novel, *Désirée*, published in 1953, Annemarie Selinko gives a truly negative portrayal of Josephine. The story is written as the diary of Désirée Clary, Napoleon's first fiancée. When Josephine enters the story she is automatically cast as the "other woman." According to the young Désirée, the sly Josephine with "childlike curls" used her wiles to seduce Napoleon into the marriage bed. Désirée's diary excerpts about Josephine highlight her sensuous movements and attractive clothing: "Her tiny head, with brushed-up curls, was thrown back. Her eyes were half-open; her eyelids were painted silver, and a narrow red velvet ribbon around her neck made it look provocatively white...Her closed lips smiled derisively and we all followed the direction of her half-closed eyes. She was smiling at Barras."¹⁹ Although she continually calls Josephine's curls childish, she also shows her jealousy of Josephine's abilities to win Napoleon. After finding out that her engagement with Napoleon was over at the public announcement of his new engagement to Josephine, Désirée runs from the scene and from Paris.²⁰ This new villain catches her unaware. Désirée had not been prepared for another person pursuing her fiancé. Strangely enough, even though Napoleon callously left Désirée with no warning, he is never portrayed negatively in this novel. Instead, Josephine is the villain. She took Napoleon away from our heroine.

However, Désirée eventually must return to the French capital and confront her ex-fiancé and his new woman. In doing so, she is faced with the embarrassment of her last meeting with Josephine, and our semi-villain takes the opportunity to show Désirée that she still remembers how they first met.²¹ Josephine mockingly calls her a "former rival."²² Given her status as a semi-villain, as it were, Josephine is a powerful character whom Désirée knows she must watch

¹⁹ Selinko, *Désirée*, 85.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 115-116.

²² Ibid, 119.

out for. The one woman who has any power to sway Napoleon is portrayed disapprovingly. Rather than recognizing her power as a good thing, Selinko makes it appear as though she abuses the little power that she has obtained. She acts self-absorbed and as if she is only concerned with meeting her own goals, regardless of the effects that her actions have on others.

Désirée also catches Josephine in an intimate embrace with her lover, Hippolyte Charles. After happening upon the scandalous couple, Napoleon follows her into the scene. However, the cunning Josephine uses Désirée to explain the presence of Hippolyte, thereby removing any blame from herself. “‘I was just showing Mlle Désirée and M. Charles the Venetian mirror you presented to me in Montebello, Bonaparte.’ Josephine was unperturbed. She took Napoleon’s arm and guided him toward M. Charles.”²³ Désirée’s unwanted appearance allows Josephine to weasel her way out of a sticky situation. Although she had been in a dark corner with a man, she was able to explain it to Napoleon simply because of Désirée’s presence, which further cements her as a vixen in the readers’ eyes. Rather than facing the punishment for her crimes of infidelity, she hides it. Furthermore, she exploits our heroine to do so. Her actions cause us, the readers, to feel sympathy for Désirée and give us even more reason to find Josephine despicable.

Later, Josephine even has the audacity to ask Désirée for her help in dealing with Napoleon. After being caught with her lover once again, this time by Joseph Bonaparte, Josephine seeks out Désirée, whose sister is married to Joseph. She pleads with her to use her influence to stop Joseph from spreading her secret. “‘Since we grass widows must stick together against our mutual brother-in-law, I thought you could tell your sister. Julie might persuade Joseph not to write to Bonaparte.’”²⁴ Thus, even though she once mocked Désirée, she now wants her to go out of her way to help. This request is particularly galling because Josephine has

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 152.

already used Désirée to keep from being caught once. As Désirée goes to see Joseph, her resentment of the situation and of Josephine is readily apparent. By this time in the novel, Désirée has already been married and tried to move on with her life, but Josephine draws her back into the tumult with the Bonapartes.

A final dig at Josephine is slight, but apparent nonetheless. It is well known that Josephine and Napoleon's mother, Madame Letizia, did not get along. They seem to have been bitter rivals for their place in Napoleon's affections and life. Even though Napoleon married Josephine and crowned her empress, Letizia refused to acknowledge it and did not even attend the coronation. However, Désirée and Letizia are great friends in Selinko's novel. Letizia runs to Désirée when she wants to get help in persuading Napoleon to not complete a political death penalty. Désirée manages to get affection from Letizia whereas Josephine only met with hostility.²⁵

Josephine merits a similar portrayal in *The Emperor's Ladies*, published in 1959. Noel Gerson tells the story of the women in Napoleon's life after becoming emperor. The novel starts on the night that he informs Josephine that he wants a divorce. As she is on the way out of the picture, Gerson gives a notably negative portrayal of her. He describes her as a promiscuous, conniving, frivolous woman that cares more about her pride and money than her marriage. Throughout the brief chapter in which we are introduced to Napoleon and his first wife, Josephine is the narrator. We are given a glimpse into her thoughts, which paint a convincing picture of a woman, "to whom all matters of state were boring."²⁶ Regardless of her husband's ambitious political aspirations, she seems an unlikely partner for Napoleon to have ever even

²⁵ Ibid, 189-191.

²⁶ Gerson, *The Emperor's Ladies*, 17.

married considering that their marriage began when he was but a soldier hoping to climb the ranks. In this sense, Josephine would have been a hindrance.

However, he did become emperor and in the novel, we, the readers, are faced with his frivolous wife. Although she should be helping her husband, she refuses to wear silk, which would help the struggling French economy. Rather than using a product produced in her own country (Lyon), she is importing brocade from across the channel, thereby helping her husband's chief enemy. She was more interested in the material of her gown than the state of her country. Although he has explicitly demanded that the women of the empire wear silk, she disobeys him over a simple matter of apparel. After his reprimand, she retorts, "You may forbid what you please and order what you please, you may march two hundred and fifty thousand men across Europe and back, but you'll never succeed in telling a woman what to wear."²⁷ Even though her meeting with Napoleon is of great importance to discuss their impending divorce, the conversation is reduced to such a trifling matter. Again, her clothes are more important than her husband's career. She seems oblivious of the fact that her marriage is falling apart. All she can think about is what she will be wearing at the next social engagement.

When Napoleon is finally able to break the news to her, he tries to do so gently. "There's only one way to tell you this,'...his voice so low she had to strain to hear him. 'I've decided to divorce you.'" Rather than take this news gracefully and noticing the effort it took him to even deliver it, she strikes back at him spitefully. She insults his family, a tactic she knows always upsets him. Instead of being helpful, or at the very least understanding, she is malicious. Furthermore, Josephine reduces Napoleon's reasons for divorce to a simple matter of infidelity by both parties, instead of giving any importance to Napoleon's political needs of a wife. As she is no longer able to have children, Napoleon must have a wife who can give him an heir.

²⁷ Ibid, 17.

However, as this version of Josephine has no interest in politics, she thinks that Napoleon is just upset about her sexual liaisons with other men. Although he promises to give her a generous settlement, she is displeased without the specific figures. She immediately asks, “how ample?”²⁸ Again, she is more concerned about her style of living than the state of her marriage or its collapse.

Napoleon is given an overall positive portrayal as a character. Although the novel is about his many relationships, he is not portrayed as a womanizer. He even gets his second wife to fall in love with him. Instead of being depicted as a rogue, he seems to be wearied by all the responsibilities he has acquired throughout the course of his career. Even though he is supremely busy, he takes the time to try and be nice to his first wife as he tells her that he must divorce her and move on. Rather than supporting her struggling husband, Josephine snipes at him and makes him feel guilty for doing what he feels he must.

These two portrayals of Napoleon and Josephine paint a similar picture. In each story, Josephine is frivolous and uncaring, whereas Napoleon is carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders and is forced to do so without the support of his wife. Josephine’s role as his wife is shown as a duty that she is not fulfilling. Thus, the criticisms of her are harsh. Although these authors are unsympathetic to Josephine, several factors put into the societal context of their time can be used to explain why they viewed her this way: the historical knowledge of Napoleon and Josephine, the role of women in society, and the idea of the heroine.

Unfortunately, not much is known about Annemarie Selinko’s life except that she was a German novelist. Noel Gerson, on the other hand, was a noted writer in the United States of both

²⁸ Ibid, 19.

fiction and history.²⁹ However, both authors made efforts at historical accuracy. In her author's note, Selinko writes, "This book is based on history, but like every novel it has its own reality. In a few incidents I have departed from history because I am persuaded that history is not always recorded to the last detail."³⁰ She admits that not all of her story is backed by historical fact, but she states that she strove to give a relatively accurate portrayal of those characters from history. Although Gerson leaves no note as to his goals regarding historical accuracy, one could presume that his academic life bled into his fiction as well. Like most historical novelists, these writers must pay attention to detail, but outside of personal correspondence and memoirs from the characters that they write about, they must imagine the sentiments and thoughts of these historical figures to create a believable character within the plot. Neither Selinko nor Gerson left any evidence as to which sources they used in their research. Selinko did not explain what she meant when she wrote that her work was "based on history." Although they did not leave a specific bibliography, we are able to speculate which sources were available to them that they would have made use of.

J.M. Thompson's *Napoleon: His Rise and Fall*, originally published in 1951, was the most prominent biography of Napoleon from the 1950s.³¹ Any contemporary author seeking accurate information would have been likely to consult it. His historical interpretation of Josephine was likely to have influence on the fictional portrayals seen within the novels. In his text, Josephine is given only a fleeting role in the emperor's life. Although she was married to him during his most prominent years, she is only mentioned sporadically. Even though the book

²⁹ "Noel Bertrand Gerson," *Contemporary Authors Online*, (Gale, 2002)
http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/GLD/hits?r=d&origSearch=true&o=DataType&n=10&l=d&c=1&locID=was_h11212&secondary=false&u=CA&u=CLC&u=DLB&t=KW&s=1&NA=noel+gerson (Accessed 15 March 2009).

³⁰ Selinko, 594.

³¹ J.M. Thompson, *Napoleon Bonaparte: His Rise and Fall* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott Ltd., 1963). According to Felix Markham in the preface his own biography, *Napoleon*, Thompson's work is the only "full-length biography of Napoleon by a professional historian." (Felix Markham, *Napoleon* (New York: Penguin Group, 1963), xii.

devotes great attention to Napoleon's life during his marriage to her, her impact on Napoleon is greatly downsized. In his book of more than four hundred pages, she is only mentioned on ten separate occasions.³² According to Thompson, she was "ill-educated and unbusinesslike...it was not to be wondered at that she made full use of acquaintances whom the latest turn of the revolutionary wheel had placed in power: Barras..., and now Bonaparte."³³ Although he makes her little more than a footnote, the tone of his descriptions might well lead a reader or novelist to believe that she should be cast in the role of the villainess. The above description makes her seem manipulative, without the need of the creative license taken in fiction. With the research behind his text, those studying the lives of Napoleon and Josephine would be easily led to believe that she only used Napoleon, but did nothing to help him in return.

Furthermore, these novelists were led to believe that she was not important to Napoleon's reign on the political level. She was only a feature of his home life. Thompson's discussion Napoleon and Josephine's views of each other is telling in this regard: "To her he stood for an establishment, worldly success, and hero-worship: for him she provided the social graces of a hostess and the charms of a mistress."³⁴ Josephine was nothing more than a wife, and given her illicit affairs and social missteps, not a good one. With these ideas of her character, the authors of historical fiction would be forced to portray her negatively.

In both *Desiree* and *The Emperor's Ladies*, much as in Thompson's biography, Josephine fades into the background. Selinko makes the story about Napoleon's *first* fiancée rather than his second. While the brief views of Josephine are quite negative, as discussed above, the fact that she is so briefly mentioned is in and of itself noteworthy. Although Josephine was an influential and important person in her time, Selinko portrays her as a minor actor, significant

³² Ibid., 56, 93, 115, 135, 210, 213, 300, 315-316, 383.

³³ Ibid., 57.

³⁴ Ibid., 135.

only in the realm of relationships rather than politics.³⁵ In the other direction, Gerson makes his story about Napoleon's second wife and not his first. In fact, Josephine's part of the story is just her exit. The story is really about the relationship between Napoleon and Marie Louise, which would make Josephine nothing but a hindrance. Josephine's relationship with the emperor is in the past with little influence on his life and the plot in the novel. She is only seen in the opening chapters, after which she ceases to exist, at least as far as the main characters are concerned.³⁶ Neither of these authors tries to bring her into a sympathetic light. Instead Josephine either causes trouble or is so unimportant so as to only merit a brief introduction as she disgracefully leaves the story.

However, the historiography of Josephine and Napoleon is not the only contributor to these negative interpretations of the first French empress. The social context in which the novels were written also helps to explain why she would be seen in such a negative light. In the years following World War II, women were pushed to return to the home. After helping the war effort by working, the jobs were now being returned to the men. Thus, the push for the "happy housewife" began. Young girls were taught to want a future as a housewife and mother without a job. As Betty Friedan, one of many feminist scholars states, "The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American woman...She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfilment."³⁷ This life was supposed to be what women wanted. Although Friedan argues that this life was in fact unfulfilling for many women, her book was not published until 1963, which means that for the decade of the 1950s, many women thought that although they were

³⁵ Selinko.

³⁶ Gerson, 11-25.

³⁷ Friedan, 60-61. Also quoted in Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 3rd ed., (Boston: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc, 2000), 507.

dissatisfied with their position in life, as far as they knew they were the only ones that felt that way. Thus, the push for the happy housewife continued. In *Women and the American Experience*, Nancy Woloch discusses women during this era. She states, “the decade had an overt agenda, the return to domesticity, and a hidden one, a massive movement into the labor market.”³⁸ The idea of the family became a central focus of advertisements and publications. As children of the Great Depression, Woloch argues that the women of the 1950s were striving for personal security and a certain lifestyle rather than personal rights.³⁹

With this description, we have the ideal woman in the minds of 1950s society. Women were supposed to be content wives without motives outside of the house. They were not supposed to worry about politics or finances. Their main concern was bringing up the children and keeping their home in order. Although Friedan points out that many women became bored of this life situation, this image sustained the lives of women. According to Friedan, many women happily listed their employment as housewife. The idea of focusing on bringing up the children and making sure your family was fed, clean, and happy pleased many women as well as the men that needed the jobs that they had so recently acquired.⁴⁰

Although there was such a large promotion of the idea of women in the home, this era actually witnessed the movement of many more women into the workforce. As the post-war economy grew, new jobs were constantly being created. Women were just being moved away from certain types of work. Managerial positions, of course, were handed back to men returning from war, but secretarial jobs were created for women.⁴¹ But because the promotion was for housewives, popular fiction and magazines pushed this image forward. According to Friedan,

³⁸ Woloch, 507.

³⁹ Ibid., 508-509.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁴¹ Ibid., 507.

“The image of woman that emerges...is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home.”⁴² Although many women began to work, this ideal still existed. “For over fifteen years there was no word of this yearning in the millions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers...to glory in their own femininity.”⁴³ While Freidan primarily studied women’s magazines, her findings can also be seen in novels. For example, in *Désirée* the heroine is the woman who became engaged, was dumped, but then married and became a suitable wife and mother. In *The Emperor’s Ladies* as well, we see that the leading heroine is Napoleon’s second wife, a woman without a scandalous past who fulfilled her wifely duty to bear children. Josephine, real or fictional, could not fit into this image.

When speaking of the short stories in magazines, Freidan states, “these stories may not have been great literature. But the identity of their heroines seemed to say something about the housewives who, then as now, read the women’s magazines.”⁴⁴ Rather than being able to identify with women in the working world, these suburban housewives needed their lives juxtaposed into the fiction that they read. For example, *Désirée* was a number one bestseller in the United States. The reception of the book was very good. The novel was so popular that it was turned into a film starring Marlon Brando.⁴⁵ Women were able to understand the heroine. Désirée’s life as the wife and mother related to the lives that these women were leading. Josephine, however, was the antithesis of their goals. She was the other woman that threatened their happy home. She was the woman that could ruin their dreams. Josephine represented the

⁴² Freidan, 87.

⁴³ Ibid, 57-58.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 87.

⁴⁵ Dwight Garner, “TBR: Inside the List,” *The New York Times* (May 18, 2008)
<http://www.lexisnexis.com:80/us/lnacademic/search/homesubmitForm.do> (Accessed 22 March 2009).

departure from the norm. She was different and did not fulfill their goals in life. Women would not want to read her story. She was too scandalous for 1950 society. Presumably, these women would relate to a heroine that went to great lengths to help her husband rather than herself. Although Josephine did fill most of the duties expected of her during her lifetime, such as hosting parties and serving as a leader in fashion, society seems to have placed their standards on her life. She did not fit with the mid-twentieth century idea of the appropriate wife for a common man, much less the emperor of France.

Another contributing societal factor to Josephine's image may have been the concept of divorce during the 1950s. Although divorce rates had been on the rise since World War I, the image of the happy family had usurped the popular media. According to J. Herbie DiFonzo, a law professor, divorce was what every wife was supposed to avoid. The blame for divorce was often considered the woman's fault.⁴⁶ Thus, Josephine was at fault for her failed marriage with Napoleon, not her inability to bear children that was caused by the Revolution. She was supposed to do more to ensure that her marriage succeeded. Because she did not keep her marriage together, readers in the 1950's would want to ostracize her, especially considering the flippant way she handled her divorce as portrayed by our novelists.

Novels about Napoleon and Josephine from the last two decades, however, present a completely different portrait of the couple. Rather than Josephine being a negative character, she is instead the leading heroine. The stories are not just based in her time; they are about her. Mostly written in the diary format, they give us her life from her perspective. Every choice she made that in previous fiction made her seem villainous is explained away or deleted. She inspires sympathy and understanding.

⁴⁶ DiFonzo, *Beneath the Fault Line*, 88-111.

Writing about forty years later, Sandra Gulland gives a markedly different perspective on Josephine in a trilogy about her life.⁴⁷ Written as the empress' personal diary, the story starts during her childhood, where the reader is introduced to a daring, adventurous girl. Throughout the first half of the first novel, Josephine is portrayed as a sympathetic character for the reader. She has many difficulties with her first husband, but always suffers through. After her husband slanders her by claiming that her second child is illegitimate, she retaliates by obtaining a legal separation.⁴⁸ Although her plight makes readers sympathetic, she is by no means a weak character. Rather than submitting to her husband's accusations, she responds and makes him pay for his insults. While she does not stand up for herself when alone with her husband, she takes appropriate action to get the results that she wants.

Furthermore, after being released from prison at the end of the Reign of Terror, she learns to move in the right circles that keep her in touch with the government and allow her to have some influence on the politics of the day. Although most fiction shows Josephine having an affair with Deputy Barras to get to this position, she is not shown in this light in Gulland's trilogy. Thus, Josephine is able to seem more innocent. Instead, she is simply friends with Barras (who is homosexual according to Gulland's implications).⁴⁹ Instead of focusing on Josephine's connections, Gulland plays up her home life. Throughout the story, Josephine is a dedicated mother. Although she continues to have a social life, her children are the most important part of her life following her release from prison, especially as they did not recognize her on her return. "It is through these simple acts—tying a sash, fastening a button, reading out a sentence in a reader—that Hortense and Eugene begin to know me again. How I long to take them in my arms,

⁴⁷ The trilogy includes: Sandra Gulland, *The Many Lives & Secret Sorrows of Josephine B.* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1995); Sandra Gulland, *Tales of Passion, Tales of Woe* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1998); Sandra Gulland, *The Last Great Dance on Earth* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2000).

⁴⁸ Gulland, *The Many Lives & Secret Sorrows of Josephine B.*, 106-111.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 304-310.

touch them, but even now I must refrain. I must not alarm them.”⁵⁰ Rather than being the frivolous creature depicted in 1950s fiction, this Josephine cares deeply about very important matters. She is not focused on what she will wear, but on how she and her children will survive such a hard time.

When Napoleon enters her life, he is repeatedly belittled by Josephine’s descriptions and the conversations with her friends:

The man was remarkable, it was true, but for all the wrong reasons. His long, limp hair hung down around his ears in a sorry attempt at fashion. His skin was sallow and his figure so thin his threadbare breeches seemed to hang... “That Barras!” Therese exclaimed in the privacy of Minerva’s boudoir. “he has taken his projects too far.” “Deputy Barras pressed me to introduce Citoyen Buonaparte into our circle,” Minerva told us. “He is new to Paris and in need of social contacts—” “He is in need of social *manners*.”⁵¹

Josephine and her friends are surprised that he is being brought into their world. She is not drawn to him; he is pushed to her by Barras, who is intent on making a match. Although their conversations are stilted, Barras insists that she befriend him.⁵² Thus, her eventual relationship is not through her will, but that of one of the government’s leaders. Though no one seems to have a personal affinity for the future emperor, all recognize that he is on his way to great things and therefore should be closely monitored.

In *The Secret Life of Josephine*, 2007, the empress is again the main character. Carolly Erickson focuses on many of the same characteristics as Gulland. In her novel, she also tells the story of the Josephine’s life, starting with her childhood in Martinique and ending with her death at Malmaison. As we move through the story, we follow the ups and downs of her life. As a child, she is adventurous and rebellious, which carries into her adult life. However, Erickson

⁵⁰ Ibid, 294.

⁵¹ Ibid, 375-376.

⁵² Ibid, 379.

admits that her book is only “historical entertainment” and thus does not keep strictly to historical fact.⁵³ Although the novel is not historically accurate, the portrayal of Josephine still shows the changes in the acceptable forms of the feminine, in the details of her life that Erickson highlights and excuses away, such as promiscuity and rebelliousness against the men in her life.

With her marriage to Alexandre de Beauharnais, she is left to lead a miserable life, while he has his many affairs. When she finds out about his other lover, she shows her rebellious side and talks back to him: “What I see now...is that the arrogant, hateful boy I knew in Martinique has grown into a selfish, callous man. A man I can never love or honor. I have pledged myself to you, but I regret it. Oh, how I regret it! And if I should, one day, bear you a son, I will pray every hour that he grows up to be nothing like you!”⁵⁴ As their marriage deteriorates further, they reach the critical point of consummation, which had been delayed because of his blatant dislike for his new wife and his ongoing affair. However, she does not submit willingly, and he rapes her. At this point, she obviously becomes the victim, calling for the reader’s sympathy. However, she refuses to be entirely powerless. After the ugly event, she immediately begins plotting her revenge, thereby showing her inner strength.⁵⁵

Ultimately, her revenge is to separate from her husband. Now that she is living alone, she has to find a way of providing for herself. By teaming up with a money-lending baron, she is able to use her talents at reading tarot cards to build her lifestyle. While negotiating the terms of their symbiotic relationship, she drives a hard bargain for the amount of profit she demands from their endeavours. The baron tells her, “Ah viscountess, you are a better man of business than I am. You bargain like a fishwife haggling over a basket of eels. And I fear you are as slippery as

⁵³ Erickson, *The Secret Life of Josephine*, 329.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 48.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 64.

an eel, no matter how elegant you look and how sweetly you smile. I will have to watch you.”⁵⁶

Her industriousness pays off. She is able to afford the life she wants to live. She is also able to send money to her suffering family back in Martinique, where she eventually goes to be reunited with her childhood home.

However, when she lands on the island, she is faced with the dramatic changes. Martinique is no longer the prospering colony she remembers, but rather a powder keg ready to blow. The slaves are openly hostile to their masters and she must become accustomed to the tension throughout the island. When she gets to her home, she learns that her mother has been exiled out of shame due to her father’s African lover. Once she becomes aware of this situation, she voices her complaints to her father regardless of the fact that it is not her place in society to do so. Clearly she takes an automatic dislike to the new mistress, Selene. However, as the situation in Martinique explodes and Selene goes into labour, Josephine shows her good heart and helps the woman deliver her baby.⁵⁷ Although she shows attitude and spite, she does not let her anger consumer her as she decides to be a good person and help rather than to stand on pride, contrary to the early depictions of her from the 1950s.

Furthermore, Erickson counters another prominent negative aspect of her character in novels like *Désirée* and *The Emperor’s Ladies* from the 1950s: Josephine’s noted promiscuity. After experiencing her miserable life in prison during the Revolution, we are more easily able to understand her following promiscuity. Erickson does not ignore or deny Josephine’s affairs; instead, she embraces them. Her sexual freedom is simply a celebration of freedom and life after coming so close to death. Although she describes how she gave up much of her responsibility even for her children during this time after her release, it is described as a passing phase. “Oh,

⁵⁶ Ibid, 74.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 96.

how we rejoiced that summer, after the Great Terror ended and those of us lucky enough to have survived were set free!”⁵⁸ Thus, her lapse in responsibility is only temporary and she will eventually settle back down to her normal life, but in order to do so, she must enjoy all that she can now do.

Napoleon, on the other hand, is portrayed more negatively. Contrary to his earlier position as hero or leading man, Erickson’s Napoleon is only a side character; her tale actually focuses on another man in Josephine’s life. When Napoleon finally enters the story, Josephine’s entries make fun of him. “He was small, almost puny, with a melancholy expression on his round, young face and fierce, angry-looking eyes. Although his clothes were well made he looked ill at ease in them, and he carried himself badly; that he felt awkward and self-conscious in the company of older more worldly people was very evident.”⁵⁹ Even though she disparages him, she also explains that he has a certain “it” factor that draws her to him. She likes his pride and ambition and sees that these qualities could help her, particularly as she has to settle down with a husband in the near future because she cannot remain a mistress forever.⁶⁰ However, when the idea of marriage to Napoleon is first mentioned, she dismisses this idea as “outlandish.”⁶¹ Napoleon’s character is argumentative, and he monopolizes conversations. Once they begin sleeping together, she further emasculates him by insulting his abilities in the bedroom, saying, “he was as inept, as unsure as a besotted schoolboy.”⁶² When he finally proposes, she only chooses him because he is her best practical option and not for any romantic impulses.⁶³

⁵⁸ Ibid, 122.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 127.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 129.

⁶¹ Ibid, 132.

⁶² Ibid, 138.

⁶³ Ibid., 143.

These more recent novels show some of the same details of Josephine's life, but with a different spin. Now, her power is good. Being able to speak for herself and make her own decisions is acceptable and even applaudable. Rather than painting her as a cunning woman out only for herself, we, the readers, see her many trials. She is shown as simply trying to survive and flourish. What caused such a drastic change from that sly woman seen in the 1950s fiction? Again, the historical knowledge of the time, standards for women, and conventions of the fictional heroine all play a role to create an entirely different image of the same person from history.

As discussed above the authors each make an effort to show history relatively accurately. These two modern authors spent a great deal of time researching Josephine's life and surroundings to create their stories. Although Carolly Erickson labels her novel a historical entertainment, she distinguishes events in the novel that did not happen. She primarily refers to Josephine's affair throughout the book with a man named Donovan. However, her overall image of Josephine and her life seem to be drawn mostly from fact, but is "fictionally embellished."⁶⁴ Erickson also makes the point to declare her falsehoods so as to stop readers from believing them to be truth. She explains specific portions of her novel that are false, such as the baby delivered during the slave rebellion, thereby leading us to believe that the basic facts and descriptions of Josephine are researched.

Although Sandra Gulland has only published her Josephine B. trilogy and another historical novel about a mistress of Louis XIV,⁶⁵ she has listed extensive bibliographies in each of her novels. In her author's note, she stated, "After over a decade of immersion in this moment in history, I still feel I have only scratched the surface. My bibliography now lists almost four

⁶⁴ Ibid., 329.

⁶⁵ Sandra Gulland, *Mistress of the Sun* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

hundred titles; I will note only a few.”⁶⁶ Though she claims to only display a few, in just her first novel, she lists sixteen secondary sources, including biographies of Napoleon, French biographies of Josephine, and cultural histories of life during the French Revolution.⁶⁷ In her second and third novels, she mentions the many primary sources that she uses, including the letters from Napoleon to Josephine and Josephine’s personal correspondence.⁶⁸ With this amount of research that involved primary and secondary sources, Gulland was clearly trying to create an accurate portrayal of Josephine. She also visited France, Martinique, and Italy in her efforts to better understand the French empress.⁶⁹

As a final note to her second novel, Sandra Gulland addresses the existing historiography on Josephine. She says:

This novel spans the most controversial years of Josephine’s life. If she has what one would call a bad reputation, it arises largely out of her actions during these four and a half years—or rather, her actions as described by a number of historians...I am well aware of the accepted version of Josephine’s life, well aware that this novel presents a view of her that is unique in the literature. It is my hope that a study of Josephine will someday be undertaken re-examining primary sources, and that the rumours surrounding her will then be reassessed.⁷⁰

Her evolving interpretation of Josephine’s life fits with the changing academic understanding of her life and specific actions throughout her period. Although earlier historians had written of her life as scandalous, new research into her personal life apart from Napoleon led to a better understanding of the way that she acted. Because Gulland was not researching academically, her note calls for a new study. Although she had a new interpretation of Josephine, she was writing fiction. Therefore, her findings would not be regarded with academic merit.

⁶⁶ Gulland, *Last Great Dance*, 367.

⁶⁷ Gulland, *Many lives*, 434-435.

⁶⁸ Gulland, *Tales of Passion*, 367. And Gulland, *Last Great Dance*, 367-369.

⁶⁹ “Sandra Gulland” <<http://sandragulland.com/author/index.html>> (Accessed April 28, 2009).

⁷⁰ Gulland, *Tales of Passion*, 367.

A prominent biography from after 1990 is Steven Englund's *Napoleon: A Political Life*.⁷¹ Although this text was published after the release of Gulland's novels, it represents the trends in the historical representation of Josephine's life. Contrary to Thompson's earlier version of Josephine, Englund has this to say about her:

In style, la Beauharnais conveyed both a maternal and a sexual aura; she appealed as a friend as well as a lover, which made her that rare combination: a man's woman and a woman's woman. Her animated expressions were so sweet, her makeup so clever, her gaiety so contagious, and her affection so sincere that she could compete for attention at Mme Tallien's with younger and more conventionally beautiful women.⁷²

Rather than showing her as a woman unsuitable to her rank, Englund describes her as charismatic and personable. She is described as giving life with her "contagious gaiety" to the sometimes-bland, upper-class society. Her liveliness is not necessarily a bad trait. Instead it makes her seem approachable and able to help her future husband in social settings. In his brief description of her personality, Englund describes how she seemed to know people and was kind and graceful.⁷³ These traits would make her a desirable wife because she would be able to work a crowd and win people to her husband's side. To build this vision of Josephine, Englund uses many of the same sources as Sandra Gulland, including the works of André Castelot, Evangeline Bruce, Bernard Chevallier and Christophe Pincemaille.⁷⁴

Thus, Englund seems to have started to fulfill her call for more research into the life of the empress. Although his focus is Napoleon, his work represents an academic study that reconsiders her life. He brings forth new visions of Josephine as well. Not only is Josephine shown in another light by his writing, but also in the sheer number of times she is mentioned. In Thompson's biography, one could easily be led to believe that Josephine was only a passing

⁷¹ Englund, *Napoleon: A Political Life*.

⁷² Ibid, 91.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Each cited in: Englund *Napoleon*. And Gulland, *Last Great Dance*.

fancy for Napoleon, if not a meek wife, only a wife. Englund, however, shows her differently. She is mentioned for her influence in many different aspects of Napoleon's life. She is even mentioned after their divorce. Hypothetically, she should have faded out of our history texts as she was no longer in the spotlight, but instead, Englund highlights her continuing friendship with Napoleon and her support after his abdication.⁷⁵ Her overarching reach into Napoleon's life even after their divorce shows the true power that she held during her life, which had previously been ignored by historians.

Carolly Erickson has also published an academic study of Josephine's life, among several other biographies and fictional works. Although she describes her novel as an entertainment, she had previously done a lot of research into the truth of Josephine's history. Even though she does not provide a bibliography for her novel, one could presume that her earlier research bled into her fictional story. Her narrative biography tells of the empress' life from birth to death. Erickson tries to make Josephine sympathetic. In her epilogue, she draws attention to number of mourners present at the former empress' funeral. "Josephine's children and grandchildren remembered her with great fondness, as did all those who had known her and served her and in the little church of Rueil, where so many had gathered to remember her on that June day, Hortense and Eugene put up a monument to their mother."⁷⁶ Erickson does not shy from describing actions of Josephine's that had previously been criticized, such as her affairs, but she does not entirely succeed in justifying them. However, she represents one of the first efforts to understand Josephine differently.

These new studies into the lives of both Napoleon and Josephine each show Josephine more closely to the portrayal in the newer fiction. This new trend may be attributed to both the

⁷⁵ Englund, 418.

⁷⁶ Carolly Erickson. *Josephine: A Life of the Empress* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 348-349.

new academic research and the social context of those looking into her life. Women writing today live a different world than those before. With the women's movement, gender roles in American society changed drastically. According to Nancy Woloch, a historian at Barnard College,⁷⁷ "By the start of the 1980s, the women's movement had made a significant impact on American life. Laws, aspirations, and institutions had been transformed. Federal policy had been revised, new coalitions of women's organizations had been formed, and women's issues became national issues."⁷⁸ Women had moved into the workplace to now play a major role. They entered professional fields and into professions that had been dominated by men.⁷⁹ Women were no longer expected to be the happy housewife. They were able to pursue careers and still have their families. Woloch writes that there was:

Delayed marriage, unwed cohabitation, single parenthood, and mounting illegitimacy. Ironically, the impact of feminism coincided with significant shifts in domestic life, whose beneficiaries did not appear to be women or children. The new woman of the "postfeminist" generation might well be the working wife in an upwardly mobile two-career family. But she might also be a single mother, deserted spouse, impoverished family head, or by choice or circumstance, a woman living alone.⁸⁰

After 1980, women were increasingly accepted in the workplace and in positions of power. According to some Gallup polls, this trend seems to have grown greatly in the last three decades. When asked if people would accept a female president if she had the credentials for the position, the majority of people answered yes.⁸¹ This change in society would of course translate into the popular fiction. According to Carol Thurston, a writer and market research consultant, the development of the Women's Liberation Movement and the sexual revolution resulted in the

⁷⁷ Woloch, iii.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 567.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 573.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 578-579.

⁸¹ Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout, *Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 220-221.

explosion of mass-market romance novels, or “bodice rippers” as they came to be known.⁸² The new independence and sexuality meant that women in history could be shown differently in fiction. Thus, we can see the change in the representation of Josephine. As people become more accepting of feminine power, a woman in Josephine’s position becomes more tolerable.

With the emergence of no-fault divorce in the 1970s, to obtain a divorce neither the wife nor the husband had to show any wrongdoing. Divorces were granted simply because the spouses desired it, thereby eliminating blame on either party. With this change, divorce was able to become even more common than it had been before.⁸³ Josephine’s divorce was no longer contemptible. Instead, it was only a fact of life. Divorces happened without anyone necessarily being blame. Josephine’s situation was then able to gain sympathy because she was in a position to be criticized for the divorce within her society without it actually being her fault. Thus, modern novelists did not need to skirt around the issue of Napoleon and Josephine’s divorce. They could show it and continue to move the plot along. Although the divorce obviously affects the plot, Sandra Gulland and Carolly Erickson did not need to place blame on either Josephine or Napoleon.

The many reviews of these modern novels show how they were received by the public. Both Gulland and Erickson received good reviews. The two authors bring women to “wonder what France would have become without Napoleon; and what Napoleon would have been (or not been) without Josephine.”⁸⁴ Rather than allowing Napoleon to take all the credit for the history of his era, these new studies and stories allow for an understanding of those women who were around famous men, potentially guiding them to the choices they made. “Standing beside the

⁸² Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 16-19.

⁸³ DiFonzo, 171-177.

⁸⁴ “Josephine B. trilogy, Sandra Gulland,” (2008),
<<http://www.historicalfictiononline.com/forums/showthread.php?t=1349>> (Accessed 10 March 2009).

charismatic Napoleon, Josephine's own importance and fascinating history have often been overshadowed.”⁸⁵ Not only is she more important in the eyes of modern readers, but her story also has merit of its own away from Napoleon.

These reviews credit the research that the fictional writers have done. “The books appear to be meticulously researched; I believe Ms. Gulland's character development, personalities, conclusions, etc. are all based on fact and rest on solid foundations.”⁸⁶ Particularly in Gulland’s novels, her research is apparent, both through her writing and her list of sources and notes at the end of each book. The research helps to create a more believable character because she does not emerge solely from imagination. By learning about Josephine’s real life, the authors can create a character that relates to women on many different levels. Women can imagine being in Josephine’s position and making similar decisions. Although Josephine led a life like no other as a woman from an island that moved across the ocean, married unhappily, was imprisoned, and finally became the empress of France, the stretch of imagination in fiction allows her story to reach many women.

The reviews of Carolly Erickson’s novel are similarly positive. On MyRomanceStory.com, novels are reviewed by the website’s staff after publication. In their review of Erickson’s novel, the reviewer writes, “In *The Secret Life of Josephine: Napoleon’s Bird of Paradise*, Carolly Erickson weaves a rich and colorful personal tale of a powerful women’s life before, during and after the French Revolution.”⁸⁷ The idea of power is even present in the review. Her power is no longer a negative. In the earlier novels, her small show of

⁸⁵ “The Many Lives and Secret Sorrows of Josephine B.” (FantasticFiction, 2009) <<http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/g/sandra-gulland/many-lives-and-secret-sorrows-of-josephine-b.htm>> (Accessed 9 March 2009).

⁸⁶ “Josephine B. trilogy, Sandra Gulland.”

⁸⁷ “MyRomanceStories.com’s Book Reviews,” (Arrow Publications, 2009), <<http://www.myromancestory.com/bookReviews/review.php?theid=61>> (Accessed 10 March 2009).

power was always shown only to highlight how she was abusing such power, but the more recent novels show the power as acceptable. Gulland and Erickson give her more power and give her the credit of being able to use it. Rather than criticizing her previously scandalous actions, the reviewer focuses on the violence of the time, thereby justifying some of her actions because her life was so chaotic.

Another review of Erickson's novel even mentions the idea of the affair without censure. Kathe Robin, a Romantic Times book reviewer, states, "She begins an affair of her own that lasts through the revolution and Reign of Terror, and uses her wit and charm to escape the guillotine and gain powerful friends, including Bonaparte."⁸⁸ By saying "of her own," Robin implies that affairs were perfectly normal during the time. Therefore, Josephine's affair was not disgraceful, but instead just a part of life. Although writers disparaged Josephine's liaisons during the 1950s, her affairs seem to be largely accepted in modern society. Even though Erickson's version of Josephine not only lost her virginity to this fictional love but also continued her affair with him throughout her entire life, readers find her intimacy with a man not her husband unobjectionable. This shows the change in common expectations of sexuality. In a study of manners books, Cas Wouters explains that in the 1950s, women were only supposed to sleep with their husbands, whereas after the sexual revolution in the late 1960s, women were able to sleep with whomever they wanted without marriage vows.⁸⁹ In the post-WWII fiction, women that had extra-marital affairs faced consequences, such as divorce. However, in the last two decades, women have been able to have pre-marital sex as well as extra-marital affairs in many popular novels, thereby showing how the idea of acceptable sexuality has changed in American society.

⁸⁸ Kathe Robin, "Book Review" (Romantic Times BOOKreviews Magazine, 2009) <http://romantictimes.com/books_review.php?book=33161> (Accessed 9 March 2009).

⁸⁹ Cas Wouters, *Sex and Manners: Female Emancipation in the West, 1890-2000*, (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 124.

According to Cecilia Konchar Farr, an English Professor, Oprah's book club exemplifies the changes in women's reading habits. After studying the book club for many years, her study sought to explain the cultural phenomenon that Oprah's book club had become and how it did so. Her show has touched millions of women across the country. She has used her popularity to get people to read by starting her book club. Farr terms this as a "reading revolution," quoting Toni Morrison.⁹⁰ Because Oprah's audience is mostly women, the novels that she chooses are, "in general, by, about, and for women."⁹¹ Farr dedicates a chapter to what modern women are looking for in their novels as can be seen in Oprah's book choices. "Some topics recur—love, motherhood, friendship, self-discovery, overcoming adversity, negotiating difference, surviving."⁹² Both Gulland and Erickson allow these topics to permeate their stories of Josephine. In each novel, Josephine is in love, either with Napoleon or her fictional lover, Donovan. Her affection for her children is always shown. As she builds her friendships in France and goes through a journey of self-discovery to become the strong woman that marries Napoleon, she is faced with the horrors of the French Revolution and imprisonment during the Reign of Terror. Overcoming this situation and simply surviving the violence, allows her to reach her life with Napoleon. They also show the problems with her marriage that she has to try to handle with grace. Each of these parts of her life fit into the stories chosen for Oprah's Book Club.

At the end of her study, Farr explains what she presumes other women are looking for in a novel:

The best novel would meet my expectations; it would engross me on many levels with complex characters, a layered plot and lovely language. Without talking down or over-explaining, it would trust me as a reader to get it. And it would challenge me on social

⁹⁰ Farr, *Reading Oprah*, 1.

⁹¹ Ibid, 23.

⁹² Ibid.

issues, on my understanding of people and life, opening new views or values or reinforcing the ones that are central to me.⁹³

Rather than wanting a simple romance, women are looking for complex stories that engage them. The quest for a husband is not enough for women today. Although they do not cut out the idea of love and marriage, the search for a suitable man is not the main objective. Josephine's story is not driven by her desire to be married. The story is about her life and the trials therein. Though marriage is a part of her life, it is only a small portion of her story.

These changes in themes in novels can partially be attributed to the shifting vision of the heroine. In the past, the heroine has simply been a secondary actor behind the leading hero.

According to Nadya Aisenberg:

In the past, the hero dominated the heroine; in both life and literature, men were the active figures and women followed them, even within the fictional or operatic love plots where the heroine was a major protagonist... Women's traditional place as passive, supportive, and awaiting romantic destiny, is reinforced by the fact that women's contribution is omitted from the long record of historical achievement handed down by men..⁹⁴

For example, in *Désirée*, Napoleon remains the hero pushing the plot. All of his decisions affect her life even after she is married to another man. Even though the story is told from her perspective, all of her actions are responses to the actions of either Napoleon or her husband. She does not have a personal story beyond these two men. Even her rivalry with Josephine is based on Napoleon. She is the fictional complement to Napoleon. The novel is for women, but does not feature a woman that stands on her own, except for Josephine, who is painted as a vixen.

Rachel Brownstein also writes about the role of the heroine. She published her book, *Becoming a Heroine* in 1982. She looks at the topics that women, or young girls, read that shaped their views of their own lives. She writes that modern women "look for significance in a

⁹³ Ibid, 94.

⁹⁴ Aisenberg, *Ordinary Heroine*, 13.

concentrated essence of character...The marriage plot most novels depend on is about finding validation of one's uniqueness and importance by being singled out among all other women by a man."⁹⁵ She explains that the idea of the heroine is more focused on being special or unique, instead of completing a monumental task as a hero would have to. Although this heroine is the leading character, she has no control over the plot. Her choices do not influence the direction of the story. She is pushed by the other characters and happenings around her, but her personality and centrality to the story are what make her the heroine. This idea could never fit Josephine. In her life, she made her own story. By choosing to marry Bonaparte she put herself into a position of power. Where she could have married him or another man and faded into the background, she chose to stand beside him throughout their marriage. Her agency did not fit with the pre-1990 idea of the heroine. She was too strong a person in life to be portrayed as a meek woman in a solely romantic plotline.

This quest for personal validation seems to have pervaded modern fiction, starting in the nineteenth century through the mid- to late twentieth century. In her introduction to *Antigone's Daughters: Gender, Family, and Expression in the Modern Novel*, Marta Wilkinson, a literary scholar, compares the forces motivating both heroes and heroines. In masculine novels, gender identity is "founded on will, power, and reason." Women, however, "have to learn the terms of their female condition and social roles in the private sphere of domesticity. Rather than being an active pursuit, their education is founded on emotional suffering and passive indoctrination."⁹⁶ Again, the fiction is not about their actions, but their placement within society. Although their personality is important to the story because they are the leading characters, these heroines cannot stand alone. Although the novel is about them, it is not about them as an individual. They

⁹⁵ Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine*, xv.

⁹⁶ Marta L. Wilkinson, *Antigone's Daughters: Gender, Family, and Expression in the Modern Novel*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2008), 1.

are only important because of their societal constructs. Without society and men to validate them, these heroines would not be heroines at all, but just women like everyone else. By being chosen for marriage, the heroine is confirmed as a viable person, which raises the question of what would she be without society? Quite possibly, nothing.

When discussing heroines, a question of semantics arises. Many regard the term heroine as degrading because it is simply a modification of the male counterpart. The term heroine could imply that she is only the complement to the leading male rather than the leading protagonist herself. Thus the term the female heroine arises. In *Psyche As Hero*, Lee Edwards discusses the different roles for the female hero versus the heroine. When comparing the hero and heroine, Edwards writes, “A primary character, the hero inspires and requires followers; the heroine obeys, falls into line, takes second place. Although a hero can theoretically exist in a narrative without a heroine, the reverse is not the case.”⁹⁷ She goes on to argue that the development of the female hero should bring the idea of the patriarchal society into question. She should make the leading male subject to her actions and her goals. Her idea of the female hero can easily be seen in the recent novels about Josephine. As discussed above, Josephine rules her world. Although she does not have complete jurisdiction over every aspect of her life, she does not allow the men to manage her either. She makes her own choices and makes the men bend to her will.

In *Ordinary Heroines: Transforming the Male Myth*, Nadya Aisenberg calls for a new heroine. She asserts that heroines in earlier literature were not heroic characters in their own right, but rather merely the leading protagonist to counter the male. Instead of the women being strong and leading the plot, the female protagonists were only following the traditional male hero. She claims that in 1994, “the creation of a new heroine is a crucial task facing us today. We

⁹⁷ Lee R. Edwards, *Psyche As Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form*, (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 5.

need a new heroine with new strengths, new virtues, and new energies to play new roles because classical heroes and the heroic code they embrace have failed us badly.”⁹⁸ To create a female role equal to that of the hero, the ideals of the hero would have to be changed. Women cannot match men for physical strength, so the idea of the female warrior cannot fit with most women. Although there have been warrior women, such as the Amazons, society today and in the 1950s would not be able to relate to these women. Thus, a strong woman would need to have more emotional and mental strength over physical strength. “Very different values sustain hero and heroine. Were the heroine to be as dominant a protagonist as the hero, she would still act differently. Hero and heroine belong not only to separate sexes, but to separate worlds.”⁹⁹ Aisenberg called for a heroine that is not just an offset of the leading male. A new type of woman needed to be created in fiction to be relatable to women in the 1990s.

The novels by Sandra Gulland and Carolly Erickson seem to answer this call. Their Josephine is a strong woman. The stories are about her; the men are ancillary. The men come and go, but Josephine is the constant. Rather than having special super-human characteristics, her humanity and relatability is highlighted. Her frailties are not hidden. Although she is a strong character, she shows weakness at times as well so that she seems more realistic. Josephine is able to act independently. When she was unhappily married to her first husband, she took strides to get away from him, instead of waiting for him to act against her. She is strong on her own without the support of a man or another woman. Her accepted independence is even expanded in Erickson’s novel because of the sexual freedom she has. Even when married, she makes her own decisions about whom she will sleep with. Josephine embodies this new heroine. She is second

⁹⁸ Aisenberg, 11.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 16.

to no one. The story is about her, told from her perspective. All of her motives and desires are relayed to the reader.

She makes her own decisions about how her life will continue. Unlike the 1950s heroines, she is not just a victim of her situation. When Noel Gerson described the divorce scene, Josephine had no response to Napoleon's request for a divorce other than to make sure that she would not have to worry about money. Outside of spiteful anger, she does nothing try and dissuade Napoleon away from his set course.¹⁰⁰ In Gulland's final volume, at the announcement of the divorce, Josephine argues against it. Although she does not succeed in making Napoleon change his mind, she fights for what she wants. His decision proves to be one that she cannot get overturned.¹⁰¹ Erickson's version of Josephine also fights back. In fact she even goes so far as to fight Napoleon after their divorce, following him to Russia in order to sabotage his campaign. Malicious though this action may be, she is acting on her own against the powerful man in her life.¹⁰²

From a cunning villain with only a minor role in historical recountings of the Napoleonic Era, Josephine Bonaparte's image in the public eye became a leading figure of her time with positive influences on Napoleon and the construction of history around her. This dramatic change came about for several different reasons, inside and outside of academia. Because the views of Josephine in academic texts from the 1950s portrayed her negatively, novelists would have a negative view before starting their fiction. Their opinions on her character and actions were already skewed because of the bias within the academic research around her. However, now, she is not bad. Modern historians, such as Steven Englund, have given her a larger role in

¹⁰⁰ Gerson, *Emperor's Ladies*.

¹⁰¹ Gulland, *Last Dance*, 267-269.

¹⁰² Erickson, 252-319

Napoleon's life and shown that her connections helped Napoleon build his empire. Thus, when a historical novelist sits down to research the Napoleonic era, he does not automatically see her in a negative light. Instead, he would see a complex woman that played a major role in history. The academic interpretation of her life has led novelists to see her positively for her strength. As a survivor of the Reign of Terror, she built her life inside the chaos of the French Revolution and managed to end up as the empress of France. Her ability to create such a life for herself, shows her individual power.

However, this sense of power was not always a good thing. The changing perceptions of her can be partially attributed to the changing acceptance in gender roles. Women are now able to hold power in the workplace and outside of it. Because Josephine's power during her life could not be denied, authors had to change how this power was shown to readers. In the 1950s, her power was bad because she abused it and was not made to hold power as a woman. The American woman in the 1950s was also not meant to be powerful. Following the stereotype, she was supposed to be happy raising the children and keeping the house, regardless of whether or not she was actually content with that station in life. Even her control in the house was limited; finances were managed by the man. As Josephine could not fit this standard, she would not be a heroine to these women. The matter of divorce was also important. In 1950, divorce was shameful and usually blamed on the woman. Because Josephine was divorced, her scandal was even greater than just her affairs and position of power. Women that were trying to avoid divorce at all costs could not relate to a woman who had flouted this standard.

As the Woman's Liberation Movement progressed and gender roles in America changed greatly, so too did the leading female protagonist within fiction. Because fiction is a sort of social barometer, Josephine's acceptance as leading heroine or female hero, shows a change in the

views of power, divorce, and gender roles. The woman is no longer supposed to be the meek and mild wife; she should have spunk, attitude, and self-assurance. Without these characteristics, she would not be able to drive her stories. Although romance remains a central feature of novels, it is not the only purpose. Even in commercial romance novels, the heroine and hero usually have to face an adversary in addition to falling in love. Novels specifically targeted for women often feature more men, much like Josephine's men shown by Carolly Erickson. The leading woman remains strong throughout the story as the main character, whether suffering, surviving, or thriving, but the men come and go at the heroine's will.

These changing perceptions resulted in the choices of leading heroines. When choosing a historical person to portray in fiction, writers from the 1950s would never choose Josephine. She did not fit any of their standards. She was a woman of scandal and power. Désirée, however, was engaged, engaged again, and married. She led the life that a woman was supposed to during the 1950s. She supported her husband. Likewise, Marie Louise was a peaceful wife. She did her duty by Napoleon. She provided him with an heir while Josephine had been unable to do so. Even though her barrenness was not her fault, she represented what women in the 1950s did not want to be: a woman unable to give her husband a child or family. Therefore these other women in Napoleon's life were chosen as the heroine during the mid-twentieth century.

As the idea of the ideal woman changed, Josephine began to be an interesting prospect for a novel. Her life was chaotic; what was known of her personality and character was complex. Women no longer needed their heroine to be that cookie-cutter wife. She needed to be an interesting person by herself in addition to her marital status. Although she may have done things that women still do not always condone, her flaws make her more interesting.

The choice of Josephine as heroine corresponds with other selections for historical novels. In the last decade, several women from history that had previously been ostracized have been chosen as leading ladies, such as Marie Antoinette. Furthermore, Marie Antoinette provides an interesting parallel. While she had been condemned throughout her own time and afterwards, the last several decades have heralded more academic research into her life and influence.¹⁰³ She has become so popular that Antonia Fraser's biography¹⁰⁴ was turned into a popular film. In each of these texts she is studied further and turned into a sympathetic character, much like Josephine in later fiction. There has also been an outpouring of books that look into women during the French Revolution.¹⁰⁵ These studies examine the roles of women and families in the Revolution. However, Josephine has yet to get the same amount of legitimate academic research. While Steven Englund did portray her differently, there has not been a biography about her from a scholar of the time. She merits a closer look to find her true influence during her time. As I have discussed above, the changing portrayal of Josephine has led to more consideration by novelists and academics alike. Several components contributed to this changing portrayal; new gender roles, changing conventions of the heroine, a changing literary market, and shifts in historical knowledge. All of these developments result in a new understanding of Josephine Bonaparte that should be taken further into a full academic study of the life of the empress before and after her marriage to Napoleon.

¹⁰³ See: Evelyn Lever, *Marie-Antoinette*, (Paris: Fayard, 1991). Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the French Revolution*. (New York: H. Holt, 2006). Stefan Zweig, *Marie Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman* (New York: Harmony Books, 1984).

¹⁰⁴ Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

¹⁰⁵ See: Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and Their French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). Jennifer Ngai Heuer, *The Family and the Nation: Gender and Citizenship in Revolutionary France, 1789-1830* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

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