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The Yellow Wall-Paper and the self-image on Victorian women writings

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ABSTRACT

The Victorian Era has been acknowledged to be a period of economical, social, and individual revolt and crisis. Under those circumstances, Literature will be the tool to express what humans encased on their minds, their fears and inner desires. For that reason and due to the fact that women were unknown to themselves, we have deepened into their own writings and have been witnesses of how the social movement of feminism helped women in order to find their own voice and self-image. As an illustration of this, we will centre our attention into a close reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, *The Yellow Wall-paper*. On this narration we will state how women writers fostered several narrative techniques and genres, and used elements influenced by the Gothic imaginary s as to represent a portrait of their own internal terror.

Key words: Victorian Literature, woman, feminism, literature, self-image

RESUMEN

La época Victoriana se ha caracterizado por ser un periodo de crisis económica, social e individual. Bajo estas circunstancias, la literatura será la herramienta que exprese lo que se encuentra en el interior de la mente humana, sus miedos y deseos más profundos. Por este motivo y debido al hecho de que las mujeres eran desconocidas para sí mismas, hemos profundizado en sus escritos y hemos sido testigos de cómo el movimiento social del feminismo las ha ayudado a encontrar su propia voz y autoimagen. Como ejemplo de ello, centraremos nuestra atención en la lectura de la relato corto escrita por Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*. En esta narración se muestra cómo las mujeres escritoras adoptaron numerosas técnicas narrativas y géneros, y emplearon elementos influidos por la imaginación gótica para exponer un retrato de sus miedos internos.

Palabras clave: Literatura Victoriana, mujer, feminismo, literatura, autoimagen

1. Introduction

Victorian Literature has been widely studied and considered for its historical context and for the prolific novels created at the time, which represented relevant matters, such as depravity, decay, corruption, self-image, and conflict, among others. It would be impossible to refer to this literary period without mentioning authors like Oscar Wilde, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens and Lord Byron for instance. However, our interest will focalize on women writers and their study of the self, determined in contrast to an opposing, male-centred society, and how they create their own image in literature. Strongly influenced by the previous period —the Gothic—, Victorian texts will expand into ideas of the individual and the mental processes they suffered, and will also focus on the behaviour of a changing society as a whole. (Punter, Wiley, J. & Sons, 2012)[1]

On this account, the purpose of the present Final Degree Dissertation will be to deepen in the analysis of the Victorian female author through the reading of *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. There women will be shown as marginalised members of society, and the understanding of a female author writing as a reflection of her thoughts and concerns. Also how she described other females and their roles in the public sphere in opposition to the private one, and the techniques she explored to do so. We will revise the different narrative techniques the writer used to show the protagonist's thoughts, the themes related to psychology and mental illnesses, the gothic influence in Victorian texts and how a male-ruled society played a major role in the creation of a woman's self-image.

For this reason, in the first place we will discuss the Victorian historical context, women's situation in society and their roles and relevance in the different aspects of life, to reach a better understanding of their worries, anxieties, impulses and real thoughts. This is made not through a male-gaze but by themselves as writers of their own testimony and based on the analysis of Perkin's narration. For that purpose we will revise history, politics affecting women, and social aspects in general in the Victorian Era. Secondly, an inquiry of female-writings and authors will be offered in their search for one's identity when they were surrounded by a fashion that forced them to be in a precise way. Also, we will mention those

[1] See more in Punter, D., Wiley, J. & Sons. (Eds). (2012). *A New Companion to the Gothic*. USA: Wiley-Blackwell. 162-264

genres and topics in which they were more prolific, and the techniques that the author of the story examined employed in her narrative. And last but not least, the proper analysis of the story in question reflecting on the topics previously mentioned and a final conclusion with the result of the investigation on Victorianism and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's text.

2. Women and Literature during the 19th Century

2.1. The 19th Century

The Late Victorian period was a time of industrial rivalry and expansion, imperialism, waning confidence and the growth of political, economic, social and spiritual uncertainties (Chew, S. 1980: 1448). We could assert then that this period was that of a generalised dissatisfaction with the circumstances of life and society. As Samuel Chew and Richard Altick state in their *Literary History of England* (1980), the Victorian period was "a contentious Unionist minority, a series of industrial strikes, and the militant activities of the advocates of woman suffrage embittered public life." (p. 1453). The years comprehended between the 18th and the 19th century supposed a moment of history when many events developed and generated a personal (and social) crisis later exhibited through literary works. Podnieks asserted that the self-awareness fostered during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries was that of the self as unified and knowable. (2000: 16) However, this sense of losing one's identity emerged as a plague that started to grow in every individual, with the rise of individualism and looking for one self's definition. Following Smith's words as stated by Podnieks, the "ideology of individualism" not only privileged but also universalized the male." (2000: 16) That is, women remained in the background even when they fought to be equal.

This inequality can be also appreciated in the fact that there existed a literature in the previous century which alluded to senses and sensibility, the "sympathetic identification" and was written mainly by male authors. In those texts, authors experienced empathy with their environment; they felt identified with their surroundings and showed deep emotions when alluding to personal or family matters or by identifying with a suffering character. However, cultural spheres split in the 19th century where the public was male-dominated and the private female-driven, and everything that had to do with feelings, sensibility and sentimentality was strongly feminized. It supposed the figurative death of masculine sensibility and the increase

of male characters more interested in analyzing their surroundings and in the logical thinking than in the affective or active expression of emotions. (Lubovich, M. 2013)

As a consequence of this, morality became one of the main issues that citizens had to deal with, and the standardized moral was firmly criticised in literature and art in general. Oscar Wilde himself was against contemporary standards of taste and morality, and especially at contemporary society (Chew, S. 1980: 1482) which can be seen in works such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). In that novel he represents the decadence of the time he lived in, full of conventionalisms and rules against free will and personal freedom.

With this, we return to the idea of Literature as a scapegoat to that inner struggle of the individual. And as Amigoni describes it, writers and especially poets had to survive to the modernization of the Victorian period, they faced a "dialogue of the mind with itself" (2011: 110) and divided from the post-Romantic feeling. There was a movement in this era advocating for the individual's power to control their own emotions and ideas and promote a mental advancement. There was an enormous interest in psychology in the literature of the time, on the self-help, theories of character development and philosophies of the mind. However, Athena Vrettos mentions that these writers also focused on the perspective of human behaviour, on what impelled people to act one way or another, and it gave birth to their interest in cases of insanity and abnormal mental conditions (Bratlinger, P. 2005: 69)

> In these and other late Victorian fictions of madness, the figure of the lunatic, like the vampire, came to represent the potential eruption of irrational forces in the human psyche – the "other" underlying the self. The lunatic thus became, for both nineteenth-century fiction and psychology, an emblem of the evolutionary past and its lurking presence in the human mind. (Ibid, 78)

This quote can be used as an explanation of the introduction of some topics in the Victorian Gothic and horror novels: the double, as in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, which exposes the internalization of anything that is evil and the hidden negative part within every human being; the portrait or reflections on mirrors, that might not show reality and be twisted, or showing a reality that we do not desire to see as in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, or representing the double moral of the population; and the figure of the ghost, as an spectre, a threat which appears in the presumably safest place, our homes. All of them have in common being part of the study of the mind and represent how

the events of the time disturbed the psyche, the morals of the time and the interpretation of an unstable state of mind.

An interesting question dealt in psychology was also that of degeneration, the suffering of the human species from an intellectual, physical and moral decline, which worsens with the revolutionary ideas of feminism, the problems of immigration, crime and drug addiction as well as illnesses, resulting in those features that characterize the Victorian period. The previously mentioned literary figures have a role on this and may represent the idea of those strange and alien ideals and initiatives. And from those dialogues derived from an inherent conflict, we will deepen into the question on the female, and how they expressed themselves through writing.

2.2. Women during the Victorian period

Kara L. Barret establishes an interesting distinction between upper-class and working-class women during the time in her article "Victorian Women and Their Working Roles" from 2013. On this study she states that women were treated as second class citizens and their functions in society and the workplace were also restricted. However, every role a woman could play, no matter her status, (prostitute, wife, worker…) was defined and controlled by men entirely, and the perfect place for a female was found in the household. It was true that upper-class women had more privileges and were far more protected than those belonging to the lower classes; still, they were all subjected to a male prescription of demeanour and by social expectations. The female portrayed on the different novels had to face those problems in a daily basis, finding their own path to denounce and cry out loud how they were treated, the harassment and forcefulness put upon them by the male society they lived in. One of the difficulties found was the issue or earning money by themselves, because if a woman demonstrated economical power and independence, men would lack this monetary imposition on them, and consequently would not want to marry a female like that.

In addition to this, the interest on the human mind and the different cases of madness, the border between sanity and insanity, drove the nineteenth century towards the deep study of the mind. However, whereas men were likely to be diagnosed mad through genetics or a malfunction of their brain as far as morals are concerned, Elaine Showalter claimed "madness came to be understood as a 'female malady' in Victorian culture, allied with hysteria, and viewed as a product of women's greater tendency towards emotional excess and irrational

behavior and thought."[2] This resulted in the disparagement of women's protests and opinions about important matters and the suppression of their voice as well as the birth of the term 'madwoman'. Their conduct, ideals and thoughts needed to be shaped by modesty and propriety, not to offer an opinion on important matters, those that were carried out by men such as politics, financials or work. Women were forbidden to any kind of activity which would stimulate their mind and their imagination because the male tradition asserts that it was bad for their health, especially for the mental one. Providing an example of this topic we can consider the mental state of the protagonist in Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* who suffers from postpartum depression and nervous breakdown.

As so, mental illnesses such as agoraphobia and anorexia were linked to the female of the time, both related to what was public, with the outside, contrary to their domestic environment (a safe place) and the latter as a result of physical punishment and fight with their images (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 53). From the second mental disorder, another important remark to make was their enslavement to male's physical and sexual cannon, which made the woman in the 19th century lose a sense of her own body and image, and as a consequence, to lose her nature. During the time, the image of women led them to sickness and fragility, to be slimmer, to look paler, and to appear ill. Indeed, getting sick was a goal to achieve rather than a consequence of their acts, with the intention to fulfil the physical canon that men described in their works. "Female sickness" was a social constructed condition appearing in texts where the "angel" of the household would tremble in fear and uneasiness, as well as of a real illness. This ghost-like figure will inspire them to promote ghosts in their writings that exteriorize their hate and repulsion towards this image of themselves. (Smith, A. 2010)

2.2.1. Feminism and Gender politics

As far as gender politics are concerned, women were restricted legally as they were not allowed to own a property or make any payment without a male-figure's approval (husband, father, brother…). They would never be "full citizens" and assume their independence when being forced to occupy a specific role in society. H. M. Schor asserts in the following quote:

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[2] Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brönte to Lessing*. 1977. London: Virago.

> "[T]he education of women and the refusal to train them to take a serious role in society; the legal and property restrictions that kept women from assuming the independence that would make them full citizens; and a series of legal and imaginative restraints on women's lives, chief among them, paradoxically, the structure of marriage and the laws which supported it, which made women vulnerable to violence, imprisonment, and cruelty. (Bratlinger, 2005: 174)

So, the lives of women were drastically affected by the discussion that surrounded them about any aspect of their lives, by gender roles previously instituted, and by the feminist movements happening during the nineteenth century. This was important for them to try and create a sensible acknowledgement of their own destiny and to be recognized as intelligent and capable of doing things by themselves as the author to be analyzed, Charlotte Perkins, did in her writings and papers.

As a matter of fact, *Jane Eyre* already identifies those aspects central to women's expanding roles in Victorian England, which were education, law, property, religion, service and family. The opening of Queen's College in 1848 and Bedford College in 1849 was essential to the progression of knowledge for the sake of women being able to access higher education. From here, a new generation of feminist theorists and activists was born and matured. Feminism began because there were women who wanted to distance themselves from the ordinary, and refused to keep going on as the world was. This distancing made them wonder in which sphere a woman could be prosperous, at a moment where their passions were disapproved and their requests ignored.

Also, domestic logics would make this mother-like role defined women as more suitable to participate actively in anti-slavery movements. However, their activism went beyond that and broke the traditional idea of the domestic woman and purity by heartily acting in political campaigns and claiming for their own freedom. Movements such as abolitionism and feminism would focus on destroying the ideology of feminine virtue, one that situated women as something below and under the orders of the opposite sex. Angelina Grimke[3] asserted that "If women do not voice their opinions to their representatives in Congress, they are mere slaves known only through their masters". The notion made about

[3] As cited in Brown, G. (1992). *Domestic Individualism: Imagining self in nineteenth-century America.* California: University of California Press.

femininity was used as a tool for politics, literature and mysticism which embodied self-denial and self-assertion but did not reach a consummation.

2.2.2. The representations of women

Lilith (1889) by John Collier. Representation of the first woman ever created by God as stated in the Jewish mythology, considered mother of monsters.

We have dealt with the ideal woman impersonated at the time in the historical context, but we could go further in the actual representation of women in every aspect of life was reduced and stereotyped. "From Eve, Minerva, Sophia and Galatea onward, after all, patriarchal mythology defines women as created by, from, and for men (...)" (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 12) All these female characters were created from a male perspective and women had to act according to them or against them. As an example we have the figure of Lilith, supposed to be the first woman according to apocryphal Jewish lore, not created from Adam but as his equal, two creatures born at the same time, and she is also considered the first monster. She is the representation of the repercussions to rebel against the patriarchal law and trying to elaborate a different image of herself, resulting in a condition of isolation and incapacity to fight for her own freedom and free will. Compared to that rebellion of Lucifer, who remained and fought, she is marked as a coward and traitorous, personified as a sexual monster and deceiver: the sexually free and strong woman. It also gave birth to the theory that links free women with the ideas of madness and abnormality.

There is an idea displayed in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the one of "sexual nausea": women seeing the lustful and immoral sexual behaviour of the devil-female provoked repulsion over their own body, which lead them to a complete unconsciousness of their own sexuality and pleasure. It helped to the fact that these representations of vicious and monster-like women that caused admiration, but specially rejection, resulted being another of the reasons responsible for the wrongdoing on the image that female population had upon themselves. As we have seen, women were subjected to fit on the male's ideal figure and character, even their way of thinking, so they feared being similar to those images of evildoers as they would be hated and brutally reprobated. (Gilbert & Gubart, 2000: 33) Their

unique goal was to settle a great distance among the real woman and concepts such as Lilith's because they suffered from anxiety when dealing with their own body. Also, being subjected by male's ideals made them contrary to their nature, so they found themselves attaching to that canon, but hating their own bodies in the process.

Regarding this, not only specific characters, but a whole literary convention could be born out of them; one of these detached characters is the image of a woman whose marriage had not being successful, appearing as something negative, being persecuted, and sometimes, even made invisible. This figure became hateful for society, because if a marriage comes to pass as a failure it was always the woman's fault: for not being pure enough, not taking care of her husband's needs, having talked ungratefully to other men... The idea that the wife's own wishes were not accomplished was irrelevant and not considered at all. It can be appreciated in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman when she speaks about receiving the visit of some relatives, yet she is not allowed because the husband perceives this activity as harmful for his wife.

Speaking of marginalised characters, we can find in Victorian Literature a depiction of the cruel reality of other people as well, those who also endure the injustice of a world who looks down on them and to destroy the myths surrounding the apparently perfect industrial system. These are poor workers, children, women from any occupation and social state. Novels then were applied as a unifying element and as a mirror displaying the forgotten side of reality, in as much understanding comes when facing these "other realities". Nevertheless, several women of the time found it really hard to compare or identify themselves with those new heroines or with the possibility of being independent from the situation they lived in, which lead to these other novels to be severely criticised.

For example, in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, there is a misogynistic speech on the narration representing the personification of Sybil Vane as the woman, not as the actress. Sybil is seen as a mere object to possess, and only needed to be beautiful and dumb, easy to please and control. As Dorian had been in love with the actress and not with the woman, he had idealized her, and later on, his hate towards the real female will drive her towards suicide, everything because she did not satisfy his artistic needs. It is made by Henry, and it encloses, once again, the way in which Victorian men thought about the opposite sex:

> It is no good for one's morals to see bad acting. Besides, I don't suppose you will want your wife to act, so what does it matter if she plays Juliet like a wooden doll? She is very lovely, and if she knows as little about life as she does about acting, she will be a delightful experience. There are two kinds of people who are really fascinating—people who know absolutely everything, and people who know absolutely nothing. [...] She is beautiful. What more can you want? (Wilde, O. 2016 [4]: p. 92-93)

We can spot two main ideas: the one that a woman does not need to perform if her husband desires so, and the other being women only something lovely and stupid to entertain the man married to her. The emphasis on her stupidity and beauty is enough to understand how underestimated the females were, and the hatred that Dorian threw at her will drive the young actress to commit suicide for not being worthy of that man.

2.2.3. Domesticity

During the nineteenth-century there was a huge relevance regarding the concept of domesticity and its parallel evolution with individualism, acknowledging the ideal of femininity and private life. This concept of the woman belonging to the household will be perceived in fields such as economy, privacy and identity; and the last connects with the idea of the self, which also faces a constant process of renewal and construction. In the following quote from *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist compares herself —and tries to create or describe an aspect of her "self"– with her sister-in-law, and highlights the values of the woman through her capacity to take care of her home and not desiring any other work.

However, in agreement with the development of the individual of the seventeenth-century, "every man has property in himself and thus the right to manage himself, his labor, and his property as he wishes" (Brown, 1992: 2) This statement left the female population apart, those who were not owners of themselves, and happened to be a man's property. Obviously linked to the white men, this possessive individualism mirrors a male-dominated perspective of economy and life in general. In the meanwhile, the domestic sphere grew separated from economy and the system itself expelled women from monetary production. This caused the confinement of women in the domestic ground and the collocation of men into work spaces, which enlarged the differentiation between both sexes. The figure of the

[4] It was first published in 1890.

woman in the house was the impersonation of a "stable value" and economic prosperity whereas the man had to go to work and manage society in all aspects.

This prosperity was achieved due to the state of "self-denial" in which females were put. Charlotte Perkins Gilman sharply criticised the reality of being bound to a domestic confinement in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and in her article "Women and Economics" asserted that women should be free to move in the sphere they wanted to, or felt more comfortable with (Brown, 1992). Females living at that time desired to do so and lived in a constant state of introducing in a sphere to which they belonged and from which they were rejected simultaneously. Once again, we are returning to the idea of identity: who were they, if they did not have the right to choose a specific place, or were rejected if they wanted to walk a different path? That firmly stated thought of women and men being separated into domestic and public was necessary to maintain the previously established social power structure, males on the oppressive side, women in the oppressed. A proper relation between the housekeeper and her chores was a sign of prosperity. Despite that, domesticity could also implicate an outbreak to that male-imposition, a safe environment for women to develop or feel safe, even if it was just to a certain point. 19th century critics and anti-feminists used a discourse based of women's lack of security in the outside world, which only made evident that a powerful, independent woman was terrifying for them, or more specifically, for their privileges.

Another issue discussed in the field of domesticity was the idea that doing household chores could be something harmful, or beneficial, something not clear even during this historical time. Some people considered that cleaning the house, cooking or taking care of the husband was something which helped the female to be healthier or even cure their mental (or even physical) illnesses; yet others thought it actually forced their bodies to be sick. It can be connected to how women were coerced to look as a determined aspect and look fragile while listening to a male. No matter what, a woman dedicated to her duties in a selfless mode was perfect; a kind, domestic angel whose errands were almost something sacred or with a high spiritual connotation. This is a possible origin for the idea of being hard-working as being closer to God. (Gilbert & Gubart, 2000: 27)

2.3. Women writers

Literature, history and even religion, have always been male-shaped and centred: the figure of the Father, the creator, the King... all of them written from and for a specific gender. Their texts, even though they spoke about females, always presented a single point of view of life and reality, and it made the female reader and writer aside of it. Writing became then something completely foreign and unusual for women, as they were not instructed to do so but to be proper wives and mothers instead. The understanding of the male during this century was that of the woman's existence only for the sake of serving men, on the literary and sexual domains. Women could reign, and could command is they had the power, but could never free themselves from being under the care and judgment of those in power, which were all male. For this reason, the representations of female in male author's writings present features that fulfil their expectations and desires, or to criticise those who do not enter in their "perfect woman" role, for women were only properties to manage.

Clementine reading a book, 1860s
One of the first portraits of women reading a book, which meant their access to formal education.

As an illustration of the male authority, in Victorian poetry we could take into consideration one of Robert Browning's creations, titled "My last Duchess". This poem depicts the way of thinking of a historical character in particular, Alonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, about his last wife Lucrezia De' Medici. It was published in *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842, and it just exposes another perspective of how male-power is put up to a woman who apparently was too cheerful and too naive, presumably killed:

> Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
> Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
> Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
> Then all smiles stopped together.

The Duchess he is speaking about is portrayed as a beautiful, charming and seductive woman, who did not appreciate her husband's gifts and love but decided to act coquette with other men. We cannot be sure of this fact as we only have access to the Duke's point of view and speech. Maybe it was all his delusions, but the sense of ownership and jealousy drove him mad. The fragment shows the authority he carries "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together", and the frightening power the husband had on her. Yet, the only thing left is a picture of her, hidden from the world as something only for him, because she was a woman he once possessed. Critics have inferred from this poem that the Duke was actually her murderer and followed the misogynistic tradition of the time; because as soon he buried her last duchess, he planned another wedding with a young, beautiful, rich lady.

However, apart from the already-known male canon, women have been proved to develop a literary tradition since earlier, but after the 18th century they started to shape it into something substantial and more powerful, even when it was disesteemed by readers, male and sometimes also female. Those authors tried to elevate their writings to that male traditional literary culture, already existing and studied for centuries, by offering a peculiar perspective and adding a sense of femininity into literacy. As so, they would inspire (and let themselves be inspired by) other women of letters who would make an effort and create new texts and realities. During this period of time, women authors as Charlotte Perkins Gilman will offer an in depth revision of those patriarchal conventions and will finally deal with the issue of a self representation, and, above all, authority. With this, we have been witness to men's writings only, so there will be a turn to the female side of the question.

The first time that a reader approached a feminine (and indeed, feminist) voice in novels as in the case of *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) they received it as a shocking surprise, because it attracted the attention towards women's role and the expectations they needed to act in accordance with. It is significant because concerning the previously mentioned points, women found themselves shaped both psychologically and physically by men. And those who desired to express through literature did not have the chance, unless it was by letters to other women, by using male pen names or in their diaries. Why is it worthy to mention this matter? Because women during this century started to look after their own identity, wanted to communicate their way of thinking and began to break free from those canons and unfair impositions brought to them. The idea they had from themselves will change from the

previously presented by men “as unified and knowable” (Podnieks, 2000: 14) to something more accurate to reality.

> In 1847, an author by the name of Currer Bell published *Jane Eyre*, an orphan-governess romance that did much to establish the power of feminine domestic realism through the story of middle-class Jane's ‘taming' of wild, unhappily married aristocratic Mr. Rochester. (...) Of course, the identity of these androgynously named authors was gradually revealed to be Charlotte and Emily Brontë, marking the important presence of women writers in the field of fiction writing. (Amigoni, D. 2011: 54)

On this quotation it is reflected that women were not allowed to publish their writings, or at least to do so without the supervision, censorship, and approval of a male. And is important to highlight that keeping the author as anonymous would permit to rise the interest on the composition, not knowing if the author was female or male. Nonetheless, for the reason that authors such as the Brontë sisters appeared and were discovered to be female authors, a change of mind started to grow in Victorian literature and society. Because if a woman were to write and publish texts, she had to do so being an “authentic woman”, holding up the appearance of a docile, domestic female. Against the odds, several of them were otherwise and consequently severely criticised by the critics and society, right from the beginning when they decided to pick up a pen and write.[5]

JANE EYRE.

An Autobiography.

EDITED BY

CURRER BELL.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
SMITH, ELDER, AND CO., CORNHILL.
1847.

Jane Eyre, first publication, 1847.

We can appreciate the male pen-name that the original author had to use to publish her novel in the cover of the book’s first publication.

[5] See more in Susan Shifrin’s *Women as Sites of Culture* (2002).

> Elizabeth Gaskell did precisely this in *Mary Barton*, a ground-breaking novel about the harsh conditions of working-class life in industrial Manchester. (...) The narrative also placed its heroine at the centre of a tale of industrial conflict, class-based love rivalry, and murder. An intense debate ensued about the proper subject matter and provenance of fiction, and the capacity of a woman author to know and write sympathetically about working-class life, and matters of economy and society. (Ibid, p. 55)

The purpose of writings such as *Mary Barton* (1848) was to convey the importance of females in society, and how they felt and suffered from the circumstances that surrounded them, instead of their role preconceived by male authors. Women showed their intelligence and understanding of the world that was around them, in conjunction with the internal one. For this, female characters began to be in the spotlight and made other women reflect about their life and worries, and finally felt identified through different symbols and techniques. Still and all, we should not forget the suffering those first women authors got through into a society contrary to them, where it became a challenge to take the energy needed to write against that injustice. The issue of having a role model to follow helped the development of the society, even when it cost years of anxiety, fear and judgement.

2.3.1. Self-awareness and search for own identity

Apart from the issue of being misrepresented, the reasons why women did not attempt to write earlier or hesitated to do so in history were various and most of them based on fear, submission and unfamiliarity with themselves. First, as previously developed, they needed the authorisation of a male, fact that makes us recognize that females were a propriety; second, they had been looking at themselves through the portraits that other men did, not by the point of view of another woman, so they lacked a self-consciousness; and third, they had to fully understand their position and power, dissociating themselves from the false idea of being useless beings when it comes to logic. One more sample taken from *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) expresses the issue of a woman writing. In this case writing would be considered inappropriate for a female, and her husband is completely against it.

These women writers had to reorganize their ideas and separate them from the biased perspective of the "angel" and the "monster"[6] which is, the perfect, idyllic woman,

[6] Retrieved from *The Madwoman in the Attic,* (2000) edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. P: 27

submissive, prudent and beautiful but pure, against the independent, malignant, intelligent and sharp one, an immoral woman who would be carried by her desires. Even in those stories in which women were protagonists, there was always a male voice behind them, leading their behaviour towards competition or self-loathing.

> Feminist critical theory suggests that the problem of "saying I" is important both thematically and formally in literature by women, for whom finding and using a voice has been fraught with special difficulties ranging from unequal educational opportunities to social strictures against appearing before the public as an author and moral strictures against the egotism implied in literary self-expression. (Delamotte, 1990: 150)

Eugenia Delamotte provides and analysis in *Perils of the night* (1990) which is a clear example of how women were portrayed in the literature on the previous era. Those female characters present in Gothic works had to remain "proudly silent" (ibid, 149) secure, and even when they could choose to speak the truth and exhibit their perspicacity, they prefer to be quiet, and therefore, misunderstood and even persecuted. Not only in literature, but this behaviour was also attributed to a perfect woman in society: quiet and obedient, not willing to make a fuss over any problem. Delamotte also gives us further information on why it is so important for women to find their identity and write from a personal perspective. She lays emphasis on the difficulties that they faced, such as unequal education, getting as far as not granting any woman access to knowledge; social strictness or moral implications on what literature was, which only raise the importance of finding a genuine voice and religious matters that were completely male ruled and oppressive towards the opposite sex. It is surprising that some critics found women as perfectly capable of learning science, history, politics and so, but irremediably leading those areas to a more sentimental field.

2.3.2. The Gothic Nightmare and Ghost stories

Be as it may, these new perspectives had their origin or were strongly influenced by what is called the “Gothic nightmare”. It was identified by the insistence on the self, linked to a hostile and rotted world. The Gothic offered women writers of the Victorian age the opportunity to look for “the possible reconcilement of this world with their own souls”[7]. This

[7] Quote from *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852) by Herman Melville. The author made reference to religion and the look for spiritual answers, and it can be also adapted to the female situation during the Victorian period but searching something that could define themselves.

is, to find a link between their feelings and identities and the world enclosing them by presenting the atmosphere and ambiance to reflect somehow how they felt as in The Yellow Wallpaper.

Perkins' short story speaks about the new surroundings in which the protagonist is found, and from there we assume something close to the Gothic tradition and will precede the supernatural theme present. There existed an emergency because of those repressed feelings, emotions, and female potential that would give birth to the concept of the gothitization of the sentimental mode. When housekeepers developed into activists the integrity of the house and family as it was conveyed was threatened to the core.

> Woman in these nocturnal spaces is really woman in her everyday relations, surrounded by [the] vice and violence of the social and political institutions that dominate her life. It is in the Gothic novel that women writers could first accuse the 'real world' of falsehood and deep disorder. (Lee, 1787: 560)[8]

The Gothic nightmare evidenced that, for the first time, women could symbolize trough words their own sense of vulnerability and fear. They openly showed their contrariety and disgust against institutions that did not represent them, and towards which they felt alienated. By virtue of this new trend, there was a new topic born which we could call the "domestic prison". A place normally connected to the female, their "realm", became then the origin of their uneasiness and despair. This familiar environment could enclose a hell in itself: the suffering from abusive father or male figures, the intrusion of society's expectations into the intimate, the necessity to be "a different person" in front of others... something supposing the annihilation of tranquillity.

> Because the home can become the place which generates sexual anxieties it is therefore no surprise that the Gothic of the late nineteenth century also suggests, in the ghost story, that the home is a dangerous place. (Smith, A. 2013: 89)

Once more, the familiar environment that was once a refuge for the self became that of nightmares, insecurities and turmoil. The introduction of the ghosts' imaginary in fiction is only the personification of that vital anguish these writers felt, no matter if those obstacles

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[8] Lee, Sophia. (1787) *The Recess; or, a Tale of Other Times*. P. 560. As cited in Delamotte, Eugenia C. (1990) *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*.

represented were sexual abuse, the male oppression, money issues or just the lack of a proper identity as it was the case. At the time, I have mentioned that ghosts could also symbolize a reflection of women's own ill and fragile image at the time, the repulsion they felt towards themselves but directed to a supernatural element as something "external". As Vanessa D. Dickerson has stated:

> The ghost stories written after the 1850s, but especially in the last decades of the century, would be written in a climate of change and reform marked by such developments as the agitation for women's rights to education, employment, and suffrage; the passage of the married women's property bills; and the rise of the New Woman. (1996: 133)

These female-written ghost stories will try to supply the void that moralist and politic discourses caused by researching deep into the problems faced by women. The symbols employed in these narratives will allow them to criticise male power and sexuality in a subtle or encrypted mode through a self-consciously exploration. More often than not the topics they tended to deal with were money, love and history. They were sometimes included in a dreamlike climate, something surrealistic to justify their critics and as a tool to aim for their liberation. The use of an obscure, frightening climate and atmosphere would help the reader to feel the same uneasiness they felt in their everyday lives.

2.3.4. The American perspective

Even though they got through similar situations during the time, American women went through the same situation during the nineteenth century. For them, the issue of mixed races and the consequent racism was added to the already existing sexism in Victorian society. They forced themselves to present the view of the generally depicted white, high and middle-class woman, but also that of the lowest background, the black woman, the mixed, the disabled. Those characters appear frequently in their writings, essential to the purpose of sentimentalism.

Sentimentalism is defined as "a mode of literary and cultural discourse that evokes a language of sympathy, elicits an exchange of feelings, attempts to teach others how to care

and, finally, invites them into community." [9] (De Jong, M. 2013: 111) It was crucial to manifest those female values and to find the women's place in a modernizing environment and culture, to rewrite the missing parts of it. For their writings, fiction was a mode of building a story to tell, an element that will "keep their sanity and survival" (Kilcup, 1998: 24), and maintain their dignity. As an example provided in Kilcup's book *Nineteenth-century American Women Writers*, Alice Dunbar-Nelson exposes the meaning of a story of a black, working-class woman in her short writing "The Praline Woman", written in 1896 but not published until 2002. The author had published a collection of short stories before; however, this one was not included. The protagonist of the story will share her life experiences and stories with her customers in order to sell her products, as telling them that his son died. This will demonstrate the intelligence of women, and in this case a New Orleans's black woman, who will do whatever to survive. She persuades the customers with these stories and gain their pity: "'Pralines, pralines, so fresh, so fine! M'sieu would lak' some fo' he's lil' gal' at home? Mais non, what's dat you say? She's daid! Ah, m'sieu, 'tis my lil' gal what died long year ago. Misere, misere!". (Dunbar-Nelson, 1896) On the other hand, rather than creating an identity, male Western texts are demonstrated to prove the concept of manhood (as a part of the male identity) through acts of violence.

Nevertheless, sentimentalism was confined within the context of domesticity, the home being a place separated from masculinity and where women could shape themselves as opposed to men. However, it continued with the unequal distribution of privileges where they would only have a restricted space for them.[10] They will employ sentimentality as a literary method and literature will become once more a tool to create a reform, this time on women's role and mindset, and which will allow their voices to spread freely on the public sphere whereas they remained confined in their homes. This factor will allow women to have knowledge also of the events happening in the public spheres, and somehow have a voice to opine about them, by bringing them closer to their homes, which is the space they dominated.

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[9] Lubovich, Maglina. "Desired and Imagined Loss as Sympathetic Identification: Donald Grant Mitchell's Reveries of a Bachelor". Included in *Sentimentalism in nineteenth-century America literary and cultural practices.*

[10] Garland Thomson, Rosemarie. "Crippled Girls and Lame old Women: Sentimental Spectacles of Symathy in 19th American Women's writing" included in *Nineteenth century American Women Writers*.

2.3.3. Diaries

All this suffering, self-change, inner thoughts and ideas could be kept secret in private notebooks, better known as diaries, where there was no censorship or restriction. To have a more suitable explanation, Podnieks defines them as "private records of a person's life" (2000: 14); she also asserts that from any part of the world, and in every era, women would have maintained their thoughts in books, having them hidden or even under lock and key. Perkins' protagonist develops her thoughts and the events in the form of a diary or personal notebook, and asserts that it helps her relief some of the pain and worries she has to face in her life.

At the time we make reference to, these texts are usually contrasted with autobiographies, which are indeed written with the purpose of being published and read by the public. Diaries, on the contrary, are characterized for being more "authentic", because they do not consider an audience but the writer herself (Podnieks, 2000: 18). These texts centred on private life in conjunction with the idea of keeping a record of family boundaries, and the areas in which they were written by women belonged to those of social and domestic network. And not only so, they were created with the vision of some kind of durability in time. Time, for example, is observed differently as a diarist is not able to know what will happen, and can only make hypothesis, whereas the autobiography is fully aware of past and future in a sense.

In spite of that, the format of the diary has been widely used in literature as a part of fiction, or containing fictional elements, which brought up the genre to a whole new level as in the case of Fanny Burney's[11] diary from 1768. Burney wrote the diary addressing "to a Certain Miss Nobody", which means that she was aware of the possibility of someone reading her writings in the future. She produced a satirical chronicle of her own life and sent it in letters to her sister as a way of communicating with her. However, those texts contained literary features that showed it was a proper work of literature, created with a literary consciousness and intention.

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[11] Frances Burney, Madame d'Arblay (1752-1840). She was an English satirical novelist and letter writer, author of *Evelina* (1778). She was relevant for her contribution to the development of the novel of manners and to modern English fiction.

The previous matter brings up another one, the question of authenticity which is completely linked to this kind of texts, because the reader assumes trough a fictional pact that every description, character intervention, and event is real. The person that writes a diary is trying to convince us that what we read is veridical, as the author is inviting the reader to "enter a private document" (Podnieks, 2000: 35). We could then proclaim that these texts are edited by diarists themselves, as they go through a mental process of selecting what to include and exclude in order to rewrite everything. Be that as it may, the censorship mentioned before occurs in the moment in which the diary is prepared to be published, where the editors are predisposed to proceed according to their own prejudice and may present a contrary vision to that of the author.

2.3.3. Sensation Fiction

Sensation novels were a cultural and literary phenomenon that changed completely the way of writing novels and specially fiction during the time. They were deliberately contentious, provocative, as their main goal was to create an extreme emotion of the reader, an intense "sensation". This subgenre emerged from the permanent mood of fighting against the institutionalized topics and models, and to process those hidden worries and obsessions. The feature which represents it best is "the trend to domestication of crime, secrets, and illicit sexuality. (...) It located its shocking events and characters firmly within the ordinary middle-class home and family."[12] (Bratlinger, P. 2005: chapter 15) The reader is terrified by the idea of those things happening around, the possibility for it to happen even in our homes.

> In the typical sensation novel, the middle-class home, which remained at the core of so much of Victorian culture, could no longer be counted on to function as a refuge from horrors or from the brutalities of an encroaching urban and industrial society.(Bratlinger, 2005)

This meant that the success of these stories was the way in which it dealt with events that would normally thrill the reader, and take it as close as possible to leave an imprint on them. We could not take anything for granted, as the most ordinary item or familiar action was given to be suspicious. This new genre took all the concerns of the time and condensed them, which increased the feeling of restlessness on the readers.

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[12] Hughes, Winifred. *The Sensation Novel*. In Bratlinger, P & Thesing, W (2005) *A companion to the Victorian novel*.

> The sensation novels resonated with a new anxiety, not only about the social institutions of marriage and family, but about the nature of the psyche as well. The individual self, the moral will, were perceived to be under attack not only from without but from uncontrollable forces within. The sensation novel functioned as something of a Pandora's box within this larger context, collecting and then releasing what the culture found most disturbing about itself. (Pykett, 2018: 273).

Sensation novels innovated at keeping on blurring boundaries and barriers, on several aspects: characters, topics, narrative techniques... And the women portrayed had to be at the same level as this new narrative, so they act for themselves not waiting for the help of men to carry on their duties, which resulted completely scandalous for the readers of the time. Those female characters showed a moral ambiguity, a non-perfect profile, without ceasing to be actual heroines but far from the previous femininity ideals. Their finals were not such, they left many loose ends not completely tied on purpose to add a feeling of uneasiness and puzzling. Ever contemplating the narrator, they were no longer trustworthy, for the reason that they may have secrets to keep and be involved into the darkest past of the narration as in *The Yellow Wallpaper.* On the consequential pages I will point out more of these literary devices which are characteristics from horror literature and images written with the intention to create a strong feeling, as this text could be considered inspired or based on the sensation fiction.

For example, on the final part of the story, the protagonist becomes one of those female beings which are able get through the paper to the outside and vice versa. This event provokes a strong reaction in her husband (who actually faints) and in the reader, who did not expect her to become one of those creatures depicted in the narration and which were driving the woman mad. They are described as in a more savage state, creeping during the day and moving in the night, and leave a feeling of uneasiness in those around them.

The former theme about uneasiness along with an analysis of the whole short story will be show in the last section. All of them will be used to understand and exemplify the themes previously described that were enclosed in Victorian Literature; topics such as feminism, women's portrayal, domesticity, self-image, the relevance of the Gothic and more.

3. Charlotte Perkins and *The Yellow Wall-paper*

The final part of my dissertation will consist on a brief biography of the author in question and the literary analysis of the previously mentioned short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). The former will help the reader to have more knowledge on women writings and their anxieties during the Victorian Era, both themes introduced in the narration, as well as provide interesting information that affected the story in particular and literature in general. The latter will combine both literary criticism and literary analysis to present the short story as an adequate sample that encloses all the aspects considered in the previous points. This part will be detached in three parts: an introduction with relevant data about the text, the narrative techniques utilized by the writer and the relevant topics given with examples that support them.

3.1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Charlotte Perkins Gilman[13], born in 1860 and deceased in 1935, was a prolific American novelist of fiction and nonfiction. She has been acclaimed for the feminist perspective of her writings, some in which she defended equality between men and women and denounced the stereotypes in the code of conduct of society, which she was eager to destroy. Apart from her work as a writer, she was a leading activist in the American women's movement during the 19th and 20th centuries. Her life's events influenced her future works, one of them being at the time when she was an infant that her father left home, and her mother unable to take care of the children, put them under her husband's family care. She was greatly motivated by this fact, and by her great-aunts, all of them involved in the cause of women's rights. However, later he came in contact with her father, who encouraged her to attend school. Later on she married Charles Stetson, an artist who believed that women were fragile creatures and insisted on her wife's recuperation in confinement. That fact increased the postpartum depression she suffered after the birth of her

Photographic portrait of the author Charlotte Perkins Gilman (taken around 1900)

[13] Retrieved from https://www.literaryladiesguide.com/author-biography/charlotte-perkins-gilman/

child, and this situation in which she found herself inspired her most acclaimed text, *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

Another important phenomenon was her separation from Charles Stetson and their later formal divorce. She took their daughter with her, but when their divorce was legal, she gave her back to her ex-husband and his new wife, as she believed her to be more suitable as a mother than the author would ever be. All these points will permit her to get deeper into the suffragist movement and feminism, along with developing a prolific career as a novelist. Nevertheless, in spite of fighting for equity, she was deeply influenced by the sense of colonialism, the idea of blood purity, and happened to be a solidly racist and imperialist woman.

3.2. *The Yellow Wall-paper* (1892)

3.2.1. Introduction

The Yellow Wallpaper is a short novel first published in 1892 in *The New England Magazine* and Perkins' most famous work. It is considered part of the feminist readings thanks to the way in which it deals with and represents the mental health, internal issues and society pressure that a woman felt in her life during the 19th century. The title is important because it centres the reader's attention in a specific element which will be crucial for the development of the story. Around it, the author includes other topics such as psychology, female identity, male oppression and supernatural elements in an innovative and creative manner. It has been considered a kind of semi-autobiographical work where we can appreciate retails of her postpartum depression and anxieties towards her marriage, as well as her beliefs retrieved from the feminist movement.

3.2.2. Narrative techniques

It is worth mentioning the different narrative techniques that the writer employed to give relevance to certain aspects of the work. For example, we will deal with the type of narrator and its value, the format chosen for the presentation of events and the stylistic devices and their purpose. As a beginning, the facts happening are presented in a first person narration where protagonist of the story is a female, or as Victorian novelists liked to call them, heroine. This matter was in itself innovative, because few females were the main characters in a story, and lest written from the perspective of another woman. All her thoughts

and actions from the main character are expressed in the form of a diary, and the point of view is completely subjective. She is a mother with a severe case of postpartum depression which only worsens, so there is an emphasis on her being mentally ill.

> I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to. I don't feel able. And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think in some way - it is such a relief! But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief. (Perkins, 1892: 651)

Here she shows her anxieties and terrors through writing, because any other person besides her would believe what she sees or feels in her confinement in that room. We can also perceive a state of nervousness and anguish. Having mentioned an unstable mind, the text presents a discussion regarding the reliability of the narrator: we are facing a case of a supposed unreliable narrator, as the perspective of the woman is subjected to her own feelings and twisted vision of her surroundings provoked by stress or her depression. However, she can be considered to be reliable regarding society and those impositions that her husband and her family charged on her, because she saw clearly the pressure to get better, to be a good wife and to be almost obliged to listen to what the men in her life said.[14]

Concerning this usage of the first person, it is worth mentioning the fact that the events are narrated in a diary format thanks to the features that characterized those writings. The sense of privacy, not being subjected to censorship, the license of jumping in time and maybe not following an ordered chronological timeline... everything gives this short story a sense of truthfulness and proximity of the main character to the reader. Perkins could have chosen it because women were not allowed to express their ideas clearly, as seen in the text where the narrator needs to hide the diary from her husband: “There comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word.” (Perkins, 1892: 649) And she makes it explicit in their diary, which will allow her to speak frankly about what bothers her.

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[14] As a comparison with other authors, even when the narration technique of the first person is the same, Poe portrays a masculine voice dragged to suffer for a woman who had recently died, and Perkins a feminine one looking for her liberty and the “death” of her old self. Those women shown in the Gothic author’s tales are terribly sick or dead, converted into spirits or diabolic entities that come to life, somehow, through the protagonist’s mind and obsession as in the case of “Ligeia”. On the other hand Jane is also ill and apparently fragile, but she would become stronger in the end and does not accept death as the solution to her problems.

Another constituent to underline is that the narration is expressed in the form of a monologue because we have direct access to the protagonist's thoughts and feelings, yet it includes sentences written in direct speech. The purpose of this could be for the reader to be closer to the female and feel empathy towards her. On the following quotation, there will be shown a combination of indirect and direct speech so we can appreciate both perspectives: the inner from the protagonist and the outer one from her husband. We can observe an insistence on the husband's power over the female, and those kind words which enclosed the desire to be the one deciding what was best for Jane.

> He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get. "Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear," said he," and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time." (Perkins, 1892: 648)

Returning to the idea of writing, there is a constant emphasis on the theory of a patriarchal system's imposition with the protagonist's husband and brother assuring that her confinement would help get better from her illness. The confinement of the woman in question in a house and the restrictions imposed on her of not doing any stimulating activity, anything that could make them think or use their imagination —this fact explains why Jane writing a diary was something unacceptable and her husband despised it—.The two male figures insisted on the fact that they had the knowledge needed for her recuperation, and she asserted not having any option or power but to accept their advices and orders without saying a word. And that was the reason why she wrote everything down in a diary.

> If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression - a slight hysterical tendency- what is one to do? My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing. (p. 648)

Thanks to writing in a personal notebook format, we have access to the parts of her life she wants to express, and there are some stylistic devices used to show so. The author used italics in specific terms to point them out for a reason, maybe those words are presented like that as something ironic, to express disagreement, to show admiration or only to accentuate a subjective opinion or thought from the protagonist.

> John is a physician, and *perhaps* —(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind—) *perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster. (Perkins, 1892: 647)

On the former fragment we are aware of the word "perhaps" being used in italic format which emphasizes the subjective factor and the actual disagreement that the woman will express later or maybe even as an ironical remark. Other elements will follow this format along the narration.

3.2.3. Themes

This point will deal with the several topics existing on the short story. The main one is about a woman madness induced by a supernatural element, which is related to another two topics which are the paper itself and the female ghost or supernatural figure behind the paper. Other important themes to bear in mind are; the self-image as the definition of a person's character and identity, the description of the role-model of a woman in Victorian Era defined by male-centred society and the doubling of a person found in the border between reality and a supernatural world.

In the first place we can proclaim, through a close reading, that the main theme of the text is the woman's madness which has been induced by a supernatural element. The whole story is developed around this female persona and her obsession with the decorative paper of a particular room in the house she was brought to. First she shows her discontent and hatred towards the pattern and the colour, and mentions the fact that it has been ripped off. "I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps because of the wallpaper. It dwells in my mind so!" (p. 650) The topic itself is a suitable illustration of the Victorian interest on psychology and the conventions they had on women's maladies. Most of the time women's delusions were presumed to come from these efforts on learning or for having a different idea from the pre-established, and under that pretext they were mistreated and embarrassed. At that time, female mental illnesses were witnessed as something usual because they were pushed towards irrationality by nature, so anything moving them towards the emotional was forbidden.

> While male lunatics were just as likely to be linked to hereditary forms of insanity, the larger number of women diagnosed with mental disorders in the nineteenth century seemed to indicate a specifically female propensity for madness. Elaine Showalter has claimed that madness came to be understood as a "female malady" in Victorian culture, allied with hysteria, and viewed as a product of women's greater tendency towards emotional excess and irrational behavior and thought. Similarly, members of "foreign" races and cultures often were associated with mental fragility and an increased hereditary tendency towards madness. (Brantlinger & Thesing, 2005)

This interest on the psychological is a reflection of the Gothic influence. The twisted perspective of reality is seen since the beginning of the short novel, with this initial anxiety about the house they are going to move for the summer. The subsequent quotes are planned to express this anxiety at the outset of the story and how it is used to make the reader nervous about something that is still unknown to them and inside what should be familiar.

> A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity- but that would be asking too much of fate! Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it. Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted? (...) John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures. (Perkins, 1892: 647)

The second element shaped by the Gothic is the twisted pattern of the paper. This torn, decayed decoration illustrates a sense of danger and instability in the domestic sphere, being something perceived as alien and dangerous, as well as there is a call on the protagonist's perception of horrific things. Not only the disfigured paper but also the pattern that it presents arouses negative feelings and emotions.

> This wallpaper has a kind of subpattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see It In certain lights, and not clearly then. But in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so - I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design. There's sister on the stairs! (Perkins, 1892: 650)

This image of the paper having different patterns makes her feel uneasy, it surrounds her physically and mentally, and is a kind of restriction in her confinement because the paper is present in the room in which she has to remain most of her time. There is another thing calling our attention, and it is the changes that Jane perceives on the paper as the light changes while observing it night and day.

> There is one marked peculiarity about this paper, a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes. When the sun shoots in through the east window - I always watch for that first long, straight ray - it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it. That is why I watch it always. By moonlight -the moon shines in all night when there is a moon - I wouldn't know it was the same paper. (Perkins, 1892: 653)

An interpretation given by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000) is that the paper is a representation of the oppressive structures of the male society in which she lives, something that censures her imagination and power, and it is horrific for her because she tries to get free of those impositions. That may be the reason why she keeps on breaking it, and the fact of destroying it makes her feel relieved "I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper [...] Jennie looked at the wall in amazement, but I told her merrily that I did it out of pure spite at the vicious thing." (Perkins, 1892: 655)

All these gothic-inspired elements assist the depiction of her feelings about the intrusion into something completely strange to her: "That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid, but I don't care -there is something strange about the house -I can feel it." (p. 648). Maybe the term "ghostliness" refers to the recurrent thinking of ghosts and spiritual entities she had when arriving in the building or those emotions emerging in her due to that house and what surrounds it. This could be stated as the first acknowledgement of Jane, the protagonist, with the entity behind the wallpaper as both being alienated and entities separated from the outside world.

During her confinement in what she calls "the big room", the protagonist starts to notice strange figures formed in this decorative paper that prevent her from resting properly: "There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down." (Perkins 1892: 649) A figure with a broken neck results quite disturbing, and so does the idea of some eyes that observe you constantly, entering your privacy and destroying any signs of tranquillity. Those elements break the idea of an idyllic place, the perfect domestic environment. However, if we keep in mind the interpretation of Gilbert and Gubar about the paper being a reflection of society, those figures may be the representation of her desires, confined behind the paper and observing her, pushing her mind to the limit in order to obtain a reaction from her, which is the destruction of the paper. She bestows human-like features to unanimated objects and even "expression" to what is supposed to be just a wall-paper, and as an extension, to the house itself. The issue of something inside their house, in the safest place for a woman, feeling observed and seeing perturbing figures keeps the reader's attention to think on what will happen next. To do so, there are frightening descriptions of the phenomenon coming into existence.

> Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breaths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other. I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have! (Perkins, 1892: 650)

Using a common or domestic environment and introducing an element that misleads the protagonists and leads them to madness can be easily connected to Edgar Allan Poe's compositions. This psychological facet, the analysis of the human mind and an object to be the switch that activates a break in the narration's development is shared by both authors, as well as the Gothic elements that form part of the environment. Still, their purposes happened to be completely different: Poe tried to dissect the perversion and moral limits of the mind pushing them to limit situations and to show the devil in people, not in supernatural beings, whereas Perkins will use a limit situation to denote a change in women's mentality and the freedom of thought and spirit, even if it meant being treated as a freak or demonic entity.

Besides, her presumably mental illness will start to be remarkable in her physical state, which pleases John whereas she feels really debilitated. After speaking out her worries about not being better to her husband, he states: "Bless her little heart!" (...) "she shall be as sick as she pleases!" (Perkins, 1892: 652). And he continues praising how wonderful is that she seems much recovered. We are now aware that sickness was the final goal of beauty and pressure over the female image and it is interesting to mention that she is conscious about her being weaker and weaker psychologically at the same time the feminine figure behind the paper started to move by itself.

Having mentioned the protagonist mental illness and the perception of other female beings behind the paper, we need to remark the idea of identity. Respecting to the issue of self-image, two different kinds of women are portrayed: the protagonist as mentally ill and reluctant to change her life but slightly disobedient; and her sister-in-law described as the Victorian angel[15]:

> There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing. She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I

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[15] See more in M. Gilbert, Sandra & Gubar, Susan. (2000). The *Madwoman in the Attic: The woman writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*

> verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick! But I can write when she is out, and see her a long way off from these windows. (Perkins, 1892: 650)

This person is supposed to represent the perfect Victorian female: caring, desiring to stay and take care of her home and being against the idea of a woman writing. However, there is a third female figure described who does speak in the end, supposedly being the protagonist, and manifests herself as coming from behind the wall-paper. She speaks to John at the end of the story and about Jane, but who is actually Jane, and who is she? Was there a change of personality, or are both the same person? The female speaker throughout the narration is trying to pull herself out of the restrictions of the society she lived in without result, only when she acted as quiet and obedient she was then considered to recover from her illness. Yet, on the other hand we had access to her inner thoughts and there started to be a change caused by the yellow paper.

> "Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was. John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wall-paper. I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was because of the wall-paper - he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away. I don't want to leave now until I have found it out." (p. 653)

There has been a transformation in the narrator from insecure and submissive to wild and free. She goes from an insecure, dominated woman who could only write what she enclosed in her head, someone oppressed by her surroundings and whose only conviction was to destroy or discover the wonders of a quotidian object such as the paper decoration, to a wild, freer and uncontrolled woman who actually goes against the normality and finally finds herself to be liberated. We could come back to the idea of the 'angel' (domestic woman) she was before her arrival in that house; to the idea of a 'monster' (a free woman), something outside the social rules and even from the 'real world'. (Gilbert & Gubar 2000: 17) This ghost-like woman appearing from the paper could be the symbol of the person 'Jane' wanted to metamorphose into; she goes out freely, crawls around and hides to the eyes of those she does not want to be seen by. And Jane starts acting like so, sleeping during the day and, at the moment of the night where witches and demons are supposed to appear, she is completely awake and aware of what she is, and what surrounds her. This situation resembles the cases in

which women felt horrified but also identified with the spectres that appeared in front of them.[16]

From this the reader can interpret these two female figures also as a doubling or double-entity of the self, where there is the possibility of the protagonist sees another "her" behind the wall. The woman behind the wall could embody those repressed desires of the female protagonist, towards she feels both attracted to and detached from. This idea of the doppelganger was widely used in the Victorian period as they face an internal crisis.

> In Victorian fiction self-division could take many forms, ranging from the emphasis on warring mental faculties in Villette to Oscar Wilde's separation of body and soul in The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) or Stevenson's reverie on the coexistence of good and evil in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Victorian novels are filled with doublings of characters – doppelgängers, alter egos, twins, portraits. Although these conventions originated in Gothic and romantic fiction, they took on increasingly psychological significance in the Victorian novel as doublings between characters became doublings within. As psychologists attempted to map the complex structures and layers of the mind, Victorian novelists similarly constructed fragmented, fluid, and permeable mental lives for their characters. (Bratlinger, 2005)

Also the use of the double comes from the Gothic as a representation of what is inside us, but considered evil or negative by society. The following quote leads our attention towards this double as the embodiment of all the features that human censures and repress internally. Jane does internalize her intelligence and imagination, repress it next to her desire to be free and closer to the nature that she praises and enjoys.

> The Gothic's use of doubling is a clear indication of the internalisation of 'evil'. Indeed in the new, predominantly secularised context of the mid- to late nineteenth-century Gothic, 'evil' seems a misnomer because such 'inner' narratives can be explained in psychological and social, rather than strictly theological, terms. In the Introduction we saw that Freud in 'The Uncanny' initially regarded the double as indicating the emergence of our adult conscience. However, this 'conscience', which has a positive role in regulating behaviour, turns into a dangerously powerful form of censorship that, for Freud, stifles the development of the self so that the double becomes 'the uncanny harbinger of death' (p. 357) because it psychologically kills (or represses) the self. (Smith, 2013: 94)

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[16] See more in Smith, Andrew (2010). *The Ghost Story, 1840-1920: A Cultural History*.

This “new” Jane will complain about the women outside the reality of the paper, where they have to creep around, near the ground instead of on their feet, where they are unhappy and disgraced. Also, her last sentence is meaningful: “I've got out at last,” said I, “in spite of you and Jane? And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!” which can be the arrival to know her own identity, realising the power that she as woman possess, and getting out of those restrictions or chains that life had put on her.

The whole issue of identity described is enclosed in the context of the male authority imposing things upon women. As the narration unfolds, the men in Jane’s life are wrong in forbidding her to get out and work, and she is tired of those medicines given to her. Even when she is fully aware of her worsened state after this restriction, the male figures oppress her and assert that they have the key to her recuperation, making her feel irrational or stupid. Also, her husband deceives her, underestimates her opinions and imposes his own. There are also times in which he directly laughs at her, as a humiliation, but the scene is contemplated as normal: “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.” (Perkins, 1892: 647) The social conventions drive her life to the point in which we are aware of how marriage and society restricts women, to that of feeling inferior and not being able to express so, for fear to be even more embarrassed. The protagonist admits her husband does not believe in her sickness as he does not really care about her well-being, only in what society thinks of them.

> But I find I get pretty tired when I try. It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. When I get really well, John says we will ask Cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fireworks in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about now. (Perkins, 1892: 649)

At this time Jane finds useless trying to convince her husband of anything, for her is an ill woman who ignores what is better for her recuperation. This lack of interest in her thinking disheartens her from doing anything imaginative or speaking about herself to anyone, which increases the feeling of imprisonment.

Referring to this idea of confinement and the Gothic environment present in the narration and in connection to it, there is the issue of the borders between reality and a possible supernatural world. In the following example, Jane admits the colonial house they rented to be charming; however, the elements enumerated are more connected to Gothic and enclosed spaces that generated uneasiness. Those make reference to gates, barriers and locks,

things that provoke the feeling of not being able to getaway, unable to escape from that space or situation. It offers a sense of isolation from the world, as she will find herself physically and spiritually.

> The most beautiful place! It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people. (p. 648)

This new place is already presented as something not real, far from reality "English places that you read about" or that could come from something more fantastic. Jane also speaks about the garden "There is a *delicious* garden! I never saw such a garden –large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them." (Perkins, 1892: 648) It is an important element because she will see female figures crawling on it, wild and close to nature, escaping from the paper right to the outside world, implying that she would be free like them even then her "rational-I" feels hatred or disgust. They could be the embodiment of her desire to be close to something not made by men, and

> I see her in that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in hose dark grape ' arbors, creeping all around the garden. I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines. (Perkins, 1892: 654)

Not only this, because even the state of the paper (broken, tore, old) is extrapolated to the colonial house in general: "There were greenhouses, too, but they are all broken now. (...) anyhow, the place has been empty for years." (ibid: 648) We could infer from this issue that the woman behind the paper actually desires to be liberated and attached to what nature offers to her, instead of being enclosed in a little space made and, in the last instance, controlled by men.

The end of the story can be interpreted or read as the liberation of the female character from her confinement, and the realisation of her own identity as a free woman. She is then fully identified with those figures behind the paper that beforehand were presented as repulsive or strange, but later were proved to be wild and free.

> "What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing!" I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder. "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane? And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back! "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time! (Perkins, 1892: 656)

4. Conclusion

As a conclusion for my dissertation, we have analysed those features defining the Victorian Era and the characteristics of its literature, laying emphasis on that one belonging to women. Its conflictive historical context, the rise of political movements such as feminism and abolitionism next to the great impact of the Industrial Revolution, created the perfect breeding ground for an existential, social, individual and economical crisis. Literature will provide then a proper resource to develop such contemplations and relieve the crescent anxiety in the hearts of the people living at that time. Women's living conditions and the social system at the time is proved to have forced them to overcome even more difficulties than those already built by such a difficult period, but that did not did not prevent them from writing and searching to write and search a model to be identified with.

For such purpose, Charlotte Perkins's short novel has provided us with the varied elements that make of it a perfect illustration of those convictions taken from feminism, Victorian crisis and the internal revolution growing in women's hearts when it came to know oneself and search for their own power. She wrote the story as a diary, and has been used as an exercise of self-observation, analysing her social anxiety, exploring the Gothic elements and the figures pertaining to the movement as symbols of her troubles and insecurities, and deepened into the character's mind to create emotions and leave the reader with a sensation produced by these unpleasant, alien elements or by the mere fact of breaking with the social order. The vision and representations previously done by male authors has been revised, denounced and deconstructed in the protagonist to offer a more realistic vision of women at a time where female identity needed to be defined properly.

It caused a big revolt as she wanted to express female author's intellect, issues affecting the human mind and the liberation from those imposed stereotypes and rules that women needed to overcome to gain the importance they deserved. Everything that Perkins obtained through the use of supernatural, ghostly elements and figures as representations of those fears which were hidden behind the yellow paper. Consequently, my paper has shown a deeper understanding on female texts as a reflection of their worries in all aspects of their lives in order to oppose a male-driven world that tried to stop and constrict them.

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6. Figures' references

Figure 1: *Clementina reading a book*. (c. 1860) Lady Clementina Hawarden. Retrieved from: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2274357/Lady-Hawardens-19th-century-prints-sale.html

Figure 2*: Lilith* (1889). John Collier. Atkinson Art Gallery, Southport (England). Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilith_(painting)

Figure 3: *Title page, first edition of Jane Eyre* (1847). University of Leeds Library. Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotte_Bront%C3%AB#/media/File:Jane_Eyre_title_page.jpg

Figure 4: *Photographic portrait of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (c. 1900.) C.F. Lummis. Restoration by Adam Cuerden. Retrieved from: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/00/Charlotte_Perkins_Gilman_c._1900.jpg