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***Northanger Abbey* and "The Yellow Wallpaper": Gothic narratives of  
confinement, madness and imagination**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Both the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and Catherine Moreland, the main character of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), have often been interpreted as mad women by the readership. The two characters present an enormous intellectual curiosity which is not always well regarded by the male figures around them. The fact of being deprived of intellectual activity and being confined within a room will lead both characters to what has been interpreted by the criticism as madness. Furthermore, both Gilman and Austen decided to exceptionally employ elements of the Gothic fiction in their narratives. This essay will discuss to what extent can confined women become mad and to what extent can we define these two characters as madwomen. Also, it will analyze the role of Gothic fiction in these narratives.

Key words: *Northanger Abbey*, "The Yellow Wallpaper", gender roles, the Gothic, feminist literary theory

## **RESUMEN**

La narradora de "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) de Charlotte Perkins Gilman y Catherine Moreland, la protagonista de *Northanger Abbey* (1818) de Jane Austen, a menudo han sido interpretadas por el lector como mujeres desequilibradas. Ambos personajes presentan una curiosidad intelectual que no siempre está bien vista por figuras masculinas cercanas a ellas. El hecho de estar privadas de actividad intelectual y de estar encerradas en una habitación llevará a ambos personajes a lo que se ha interpretado como locura. Mi trabajo final de grado consiste en examinar hasta qué punto la reclusión de la mujer puede llevar a esta a la locura y hasta qué punto se puede considerar que estos dos personajes sean desequilibrados. Además, analizaré cuál es el rol del género gótico en estas narrativas.

Palabras clave: *Northanger Abbey*, "The Yellow Wallpaper", roles de género, el Gótico, teoría literaria feminista

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Northanger Abbey* is the first complete novel by Jane Austen. Written at the very end of the eighteenth century, it was published after the author's death, in 1818. In *Northanger Abbey*, an omniscient third-person narrator tells the story of Catherine Morland, a young girl from an English family. The story begins with Catherine's trip to the fashionable city of Bath, where Mr and Mrs Allen, acquaintances of the Morland family, are planning to spend a couple of weeks so that Mr Allen can recover his health. During the Georgian era, many people used to visit the spa centers in the city because of the curative properties contained in their water. Additionally, the city used to hold a large number of balls, which implied opportunities to get acquainted with new people and possibilities to find a husband or a wife. For that reason, Catherine's father and mother find it convenient that their daughter should accompany Mr and Mrs Allen on their trip. At the beginning of the novel, it is inferred that Catherine should be around the age of seventeen, which at that time was a reasonable age for women to get married. In Bath, the protagonist meets some old friends of Mrs Allen, the Thorpe family. From that moment onwards, she becomes very attached to Isabella Thorpe, a girl around her own age with whom Catherine shares her passion for reading, and the two girls spend the days discussing Gothic novels. Nevertheless, men like Isabella's brother, John, show themselves as reluctant towards this kind of literary genre, claiming it to be shameful and intellectually inferior. In Bath, the protagonist also meets Eleanore and Henry, the Tilney siblings who, unlike John and Isabella, are not vain and selfish but good-hearted. Catherine immediately becomes attached to the siblings and falls in love with Henry.

Some editions of *Northanger Abbey* have been divided into two parts by publishing houses, since the action takes place in two different spaces. The first part of the novel, i.e. the first fifteen chapters, takes place in Bath, mainly in the ballrooms and within the domestic sphere, at the lodgings of Mr and Mrs Allen, where also Catherine is staying. As for the second part, the events take place in Northanger Abbey, the Tilney's family home, where Catherine has been invited to spend some days. Innocent as she is, her obsession with Gothic fiction leads her to madness. As Rachel M. Brownstein notes, Austen's novel derives "from the Cervantean model", since, like Don Quixote, Catherine is not able to discern reality from imagination (Brownstein, 2006, p.

39-40). Because of the second part of the novel, Austen's text has been commonly referred to as a parody of the Gothic genre.

In this connection, some similarities can be drawn with respect to "The Yellow Wallpaper", the renowned short story by the American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Published in 1892, it is the account of a woman who has been diagnosed with postnatal depression and is told to live a quiet life by her husband, who is also her physician. Because of that, husband and wife move to an ancient mansion for the summer, where the protagonist spends most of the day confined within a yellow-wallpapered room. In addition, the nameless protagonist is prohibited to write, activity which she is very fond of. Being deprived of writing, the narrator becomes obsessed with the wallpaper and her own confinement and becomes irrational. Like Austen, Gilman too sets her story within the domestic sphere and resorts to the Gothic genre as a narrative device to fulfill her feminist agenda.

This study attempts to compare and contrast both texts at different levels. The first part of this essay analyses the Gothic elements that both Austen and Gilman employed in their narratives and the purpose behind them, taking into account that neither Austen nor Gilman were Gothic writers, but exceptionally chose to resort to this genre. In addition, the essay will explore the conditions under which both Catherine and Gilman's protagonist descend into madness as well as the relation between madness and confinement. Finally, the essay will explore the role of the woman reader and writer as well as gender roles.

## 2. THE FEMALE GOTHIC

### 2.1. *Intertextuality and the Female Gothic in Northanger Abbey and "The Yellow Wallpaper"*

In spite of the many common traits that Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's share, no evidence that Gilman had read *Northanger Abbey* has been found during this research. The similarities between "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Northanger Abbey* are not merely those regarding the two main characters, but also those of writing style and setting. The fact that both Gilman and Austen decided to employ the Gothic style is not arbitrary but does play a role in their political agendas, which is worthwhile devoting a section to in this paper. It is relevant to note that neither Gilman nor Austen are considered to be traditional Gothic writers according to the literary canon, but the two texts that will be discussed in this essay might be classified into what has been defined as the Female Gothic<sup>1</sup>. The term Female Gothic was first coined by Ellen Moers in 1976 and, as Carol Margaret Davison suggests in her essay, this literary genre is not opposed to the classical Gothic, but it is in dialogue with it. Taking "The Yellow Wallpaper" as an example, Gilman's short story constitutes a "radical response to the classic American Gothic tradition" (Davison, 2004, p. 49). Stated otherwise, the Female Gothic does not aim at shattering the classical Gothic, but uses the element of terror that is typical in the Gothic fiction in order to criticize social institutions, which are usually ruled by men. It is a known fact that Gilman had read the works of Edgar Allan Poe since she wrote about his tales in her autobiography<sup>2</sup>. In fact, Poe's "The Black Cat" and "The Yellow Wallpaper" have often been discussed together due to the similarities that both texts present: mad narrators and a focus on the domestic sphere. The "hereditary estate" in Gilman's short story "may be read metafictionally as the Gothic tradition" and the narrator stripping away the yellow wallpaper in the nursery has often been read by the criticism as a renovation of the Gothic genre (Davison, 2004, p. 49). In other words, the Female Gothic is governed by the same basic principles as those of the traditional Gothic, but elements from sentimental literature are as well incorporated. Thus the Female Gothic is a feminine form of expression in which, unlike

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<sup>1</sup> As Carol Margaret Davison notes, critics such as Fiedler have traditionally conceived Gothic literature as a male literary form of which authors like Brockden Brown, Poe and Hawthorne are the greatest exponents (Margaret, 2004, p. 49). Instead, the texts by Gilman and Austen that will be discussed in this paper have been labeled mostly as domestic fiction and parodies of the Gothic genre.

<sup>2</sup> For further information, see Davison's *Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in "The Yellow Wallpaper"*, p. 63.



with the traditional Gothic, women writers could "find their own literary voice different from the so-called patriarchal voice of Realism" (Băniceru, 2018, p. 11). Because the Female Gothic is a gender-aware literary genre, it allows women writers to vindicate the role of women within society.

The main difference between the classic Gothic and the Female Gothic is that the latter "centers its lens on a young woman's rite of passage into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially the joint institutions of marriage and motherhood" (Davison, 2004, p. 48). Because of that, feminine figures are at the centre of these narratives and perform as main characters. Also, the Female Gothic shares some traits with the *bildungsroman* or the novel of formation, since these narratives are described as "cautionary, ritualistic, travel-adventure novels that involve the testing and emotional growth of the heroine in the verge of womanhood and marriage" (Davison, 2004, p. 50). Unlike in a traditional Gothic novel, the heroines of the Female Gothic are not passive and instead undergo a process of evolution and maturation throughout the text.

Female Gothic stories usually take place within the domestic sphere, but what should be familiar becomes unfamiliar or "uncanny" for the female protagonist. The heroines in this literary genre are usually "transported to, and virtually imprisoned in an ancestral Castle or manor home "which they will explore at night (Davison, 2004, p. 51). Davison draws a parallelism between the exploration of the house and the young heroine's own exploration or "process of self-discovery", which will allow her to achieve personal maturity by the end of the story (p. 51). In addition to the new and mysterious space that the heroines inhabit, the presence of a male villain is crucial to these narratives since this character contributes to the heroine's repression. Concerning the two texts that will be discussed in this essay, this repression is mainly intellectual, as neither of the two protagonists will be able to carry out the acts of reading and writing freely. In the end, however, not only will the heroines of this genre be awarded with personal growth but often also with an inheritance and an "emotionally fulfilling" marriage (Davison, p. 51). In these narratives, elements of the supernatural are used "for political ends" (Davison, p. 48). As an example, the yellow wallpaper in Gilman's story which, under the eyes of the narrator, adopts different patterns throughout the text and at some point it even seems to contain a woman within. This changing condition of the

wallpaper is charged with a symbolism that will serve Gilman as a vehicle for her political agenda.

To best illustrate her definition of the Female Gothic, Davison takes Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1764), the archetypal Female Gothic novel, as an example. In her essay, Davison hints at a possible intertextual relation between "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Radcliffe's novel, which the main character of *Northanger Abbey* also happens to be so fond of. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the reader is presented with the story of Emily St. Aubert, who accompanies her recently-married aunt to the prison-like Castle Udolpho, where her husband lives. The aunt's husband embodies the authoritarian male villain typical in the Gothic fiction since he "abuses his paternal power and repeatedly threatens the young woman with a loveless, arranged marriage and disinheritance" (Davison, p. 51). Both "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Northanger Abbey* comply, thus, with the Female Gothic requirements: tyrannical male figures, women confined within the domestic sphere and elements of the supernatural are found in these texts. In the following subsections I will explore how both Gilman and Austen condemn social institutions and conventions through the Gothic elements and to what extent they succeed at doing that.

## 2.2. *Gilman's Gothic allegory against the medical discourse*

In her short story, Gilman resorts to the Gothic writing mode in order to condemn the patriarchal structures of power that repressed women, more specifically, the medical institutions. As Greg Johnson indicates, Gothic conventions serve Gilman to "present an allegory of literary imagination unbinding the social, domestic, and psychological confinements of a nineteenth-century woman writer" (Johnson, 1989, p. 522). It is well known that Charlotte Perkins Gilman, like the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper", had suffered from a severe depression and was prescribed the so-called rest cure, which consisted of no intellectual work, great amounts of food intake, total rest and thus reclusion. Although the rest cure was known as the treatment that was applied to men who had suffered from a posttraumatic disorder after World War One, it had been first applied to women who had suffered from hysteria or other nervous disorders.<sup>3</sup> In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, critics such as Michael Blackie have viewed

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<sup>3</sup>To know more, see Blackie's "The Rest Cure", p. 59

the rest cure as a result of the male-ruled medical power establishment which was supposed to "restore Victorian notions of femininity in women whose nervous disorders signified its loss or, worse, perversion" (Blackie, 2004, p. 60). During her treatment, Gilman herself had been told to "live as domestic a life as possible" and "never to touch pen, brush or pencil again" (Gilman, 1995, p. 331). Because of that, her account has been widely read as autobiographical. In her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, the author admitted that her short story had actually "a real purpose". It was directed at Silas Weir Mitchell, the physician who treated her, in order to "convince him of the error of his ways (Gilman, 1990, p. 121). It is known that, after S. W. Mitchell read Gilman's story, he decided to modify the treatment of their patients.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, "The Yellow Wallpaper" can be viewed as Gilman's successful attempt to condemn male-ruled medical institutions that repressed women at that time, which she achieves by presenting a Gothic allegory.

As Ana Cristina Băniceru notes in her essay, despite being a feminized space, the household in Female Gothic fiction is at the same time "oppressive, confining and meant to infantilize women" (Băniceru, 2018, p. 11). From the start, the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not satisfied with the house, particularly with her room, which she "[doesn't] like a bit" (Gilman, 1997, p. 2). The narrator is delighted with the garden and the outside spaces, which remind her of "English places you read about" (Gilman, 1997, p. 2). Nevertheless, when it comes to the house, she claims that "there is something queer about it" (Gilman, p. 1). Considering that the role of women in the nineteenth century was strictly tied to the domestic sphere, it is interesting to note that the household becomes an uncanny space for the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper". The wallpaper in the narrator's room is the utmost marker of domesticity, but it stands for "a claustrophobic household" in which the narrator is trapped (Băniceru, 2018, p. 14). From the very beginning, she dislikes the wallpaper and argues that she "never saw a worse paper in [her] life" (Gilman, p. 3). As the narration goes on, the protagonist becomes more and more obsessed with the wallpaper and the wallpaper assumes a supernatural character to the extent that the protagonist perceives it as different every time she looks at it. At some point the wallpaper even seems to be impersonated, since the protagonist thinks she is being observed by its "absurd, unblinking eyes" (p. 5).

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<sup>4</sup> *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography*, p. 121.

Although it is clear that the yellow wallpaper is symbolically-loaded, it has been interpreted in many different ways by the criticism. Critics as Beverly A. Hume have suggested that the wallpaper might be at first a symbol of male power and surveillance since the protagonist "records a vaguely masculine and phallic pattern" (Hume, 2002, p. 14). Given the fact that the protagonist is terrified by her husband and constantly worries about him finding out that she is writing, the wallpaper might embody the authoritarian figure of the husband who surveils the imprisoned narrator. Nevertheless, the wallpaper has been more commonly read as the narrator's "projection of herself", as if the wall was a reflection of her own anxieties (Băniceru, p.14). At some point, the protagonist seems to spot the figure of a woman on the wallpaper: "I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman" (Gilman, p. 10). If the female pattern behind the wallpaper corresponds to the narrator's projection of her own self, it can be argued that the wallpaper is a symbol that "stands for her domestic entrapment" (Băniceru, p.14). As it has been widely assumed by the readership, the narrator's extreme obsession with the wallpaper and her confinement will even drive her to madness, but whether the protagonist becomes actually mad or not will be further discussed in this essay.

It is worthwhile noting that the narrator's identity is negotiated within the room. The narrator is infantilized by being placed in a room that had been "nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium" (Gilman, p. 3). As Davison notes, the relationship between the narrator and her husband is based on a hierarchy between carer and ill person, in which the male figure is the dominant one (Davison, 2004, p. 58). This kind of relationship reminds us also of a father and child relationship. Moreover, when talking to the narrator, the husband's language acquires a paternal tone since he refers to her as "blessed little goose" and "little girl" (p. 4, p. 8). Although the narrator's husband engenders fear in his wife, she uses words such as "careful" and "loving" to describe him (Gilman, p. 2). As female characters in sentimental literature, the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is casted "into the role of innocent children" by her husband (Băniceru, p. 14). With reference to the narrator's identity, the protagonist is not only infantilized, but she does not comply to the role of mother either. She shows her love for the "dear baby" and is glad that a relative is taking care of him, but she admits that "she cannot be with him" since he makes her feel nervous (Gilman, p. 3-4). Some critics such as Rodrigo Andrés and Teresa Requena have gone a step beyond arguing that

Gilman's narrator is dehumanized by being presented as a creeping creature on the floor at the end of the story. However, the possible interpretations of the ending of Gilman's short story will be discussed in another subsection.

As noted before, the presence of the male Gothic villain is in this story epitomized by the narrator's husband, who happens to be her physician, and therefore embodies a double authority. Although Gilman's narrator believes that some work would be beneficial for her, she continues to repeat that John is a physician and accepts his prescription: "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?" (p. 1). Interestingly, Davison compares the narrator's husband in "The Yellow Wallpaper" with Dr. Victor Frankenstein, a mad scientist who conducts experiments in isolation from society and whose misuse of science leads to the creation of monsters (Davison, p. 59). Nonetheless, it is debatable whether the actual monsters in both *Frankenstein* and "The Yellow Wallpaper" are the creatures or the creators.

### 2.3. Austen's political agenda

In the case of *Northanger Abbey*, Austen's novel has been commonly read as a parody of the Gothic genre. According to Robert Miles, the author made use of the Gothic style to actually warn the reader about "the dangers of Gothic reading" (Miles, 1993, p. 143). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Gothic literature was supposed to be read by female audiences in Britain. In *Northanger Abbey*, it is seen how this literary genre is rejected by men like John Thorpe, who claims that these texts "are the stupidest thing in creation" (Austen, 2003, p. 47). Instead, young girls like Catherine and Isabella are fond of these texts and enjoy discussing them. Nevertheless, it has been argued that by reading these texts, "women participate in glamorizing their own oppression and in promoting traditional gender roles" (Miller, 2010, p. 128-129). As it was mentioned before, female characters adopt a passive role in these narratives, and by wishing to live a novel-like life, the female readership might be perpetuating these gender patterns. The protagonist of *Northanger Abbey* has been widely referred to as a "female Don Quixote" since her imagination takes over her by the end of the story and she ends up imagining that she lives in a Gothic novel where crimes are being

committed (Miles, 1993, p. 147). In that sense, *Northanger Abbey* might be read as a warning for female readers who massively consume this literary genre and idealize the role of women as they are portrayed in this kind of fiction.

However, and although the feminist movement did not exist as such until the twentieth century, this study aims to show a possible protofeminist insight that the novel might offer. It is worth noting that, by the end of the novel, the protagonist of *Northanger Abbey* is completely the opposite of female characters in the novels of sensibility that she reads about. Although Miles refuses any feminist interpretation of the text, he acknowledges that Austen's heroines "far from passive, acted" (Miles, 1993, p. 145). In other words, Catherine Morland does not resemble the female characters that appear in Gothic narratives and that according to Miles are portrayed as passive (p. 145). In her novels, Jane Austen creates a "myth of the subject" by which her heroines, who occupy a central position in her narratives, go through a process of evolution in which they need to take ethical decisions (Miles, p. 145). The protagonist of *Northanger Abbey* resembles rather a heroine of a *bildungsroman* since a personal growth can be perceived in her character throughout the novel. The time that Catherine spends in Bath is crucial to the development of her personality. In Bath, the protagonist is constantly involved in ethical decision-makings and becomes to some extent a more independent woman. In chapter 11, the reader is presented with a more mature Catherine, a Catherine who is capable of making her own decisions, even if that means contradicting men. In the morning, the protagonist is supposed to go for a walk with Henry and Eleanor Tilney, but John Thorpe lies to her, assuring her that the Tilney siblings have forgotten about her, and drives her to Blaize Castle. Although Catherine wants to visit Blaize Castle and thinks of it as a castle with "towers and long galleries", like those that appear in the sentimental fiction that she reads, she rejects Mr Thorpe's proposal as soon as she finds out about his lie (Austen, p. 82). In this passage, Catherine is portrayed as rebellious towards the manipulative John Thorpe:

Catherine looked round and saw Miss Tilney leaning on her brother's arm, walking slowly down the street. She saw them both looking back at her. "Stop, stop, Mr. Thorpe," she impatiently cried, "it is Miss Tilney, it is indeed.—How could you tell me they were gone? —Stop, stop, I will get out this moment and go to them. (Austen, p. 83)

Nonetheless, it is worthwhile mentioning how Catherine Morland is paradoxically portrayed as the opposite of a heroine at the beginning of *Northanger Abbey*. As a matter of fact, already in the first sentence the narrative voice states that "[N]o one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine" (Austen, p. 15). Like in Austen's best-known novel *Pride and Prejudice*, the first sentence of the text anticipates the fate of the main character, who by the end of the story will succeed at becoming a heroine<sup>5</sup>. In the beginning, Catherine is not only portrayed as plain and non-heroic, but also as "inattentive, and occasionally stupid" (Austen, p. 16). In the first chapter of the novel, the narrative voice insists on the fact that Catherine "had by nature nothing heroic about her", like the submissive female characters in the Gothic novels that Isabella and she like to read (Austen, p. 17). Furthermore, the protagonist is described with male-like features, the opposite of what a lady is supposed to be. In her childhood, she enjoyed "cricket, base ball, riding on horseback, and running about the country", activities that have been traditionally related to the male sex and that a female heroine would a priori not have (Austen, p. 17).

In her novel, Austen makes use of similar Gothic conventions to those used by Gilman. The figure of the Gothic villain is also present in Austen's novel and is embodied by General Tilney, Henry's father. In *Northanger Abbey*, the protagonist imagines herself inhabiting a Gothic novel where General Tilney has killed his wife. At night, Catherine is terrified by the stormy weather and explores her room, where there is a mysterious sealed chest. Until the episodes in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine had been portrayed as naive, but Henry Tilney releases her from her imagination and that represents a moment of maturation for the character. Her time in *Northanger Abbey* results in a process of self-discovery and personal growth and the protagonist is at the end rewarded with marriage. Nonetheless, Miles argues that Austen's feminism is uncertain since it is a male character who will lead Catherine to womanhood (Miles, p. 148).

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<sup>5</sup>"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (Austen, p. 5). The first sentence in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* hints at the source of conflict and the main topic in the novel: marriage as a means of attaining financial stability. In the same way, the first sentence in *Northanger Abbey* too indicates that the protagonist will eventually become a heroine.

### 3. THE PARADOX OF HAVING "A ROOM OF THEIR OWN"

#### 3.1. *Confined women and mad women*

In 1929, the British writer Virginia Woolf published *A Room of One's Own*, in which she stated that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf, 2000, p. 6). A priori, one could think that the two characters that are being discussed in this essay might to some extent comply with Woolf's premises. When it comes to the main character in "The Yellow Wallpaper", she has a room of her own in the "colonial mansion" that she and her husband have rented for the summer (Gilman, p. 1). Although it is assumed that Gilman's narrator does not have a job, her husband is a physician and has enough money to rent a house for the summer, thus it is inferred that they belong to a rather high social status. As for Catherine Morland, it is known that she does not belong to the upper-class since that is the reason why General Tilney does not approve of a marriage between her and his son, but she is provided with a room of her own while spending some days in Northanger Abbey. Paradoxically, neither of the two characters is completely free in her room, since they are deprived of the acts of writing and reading, the latter in a more metaphorical way, because Catherine actually continues to read, though she is haunted by all the prejudices around sentimental fiction. As a consequence of that, and perhaps on account of their confinement, they seem to lose their rationality. Thus, this subsection aims to explore to what extent both Catherine and Gilman's narrator can be considered mad characters.

In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published their renowned collection of feminist essays *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in which, though not comparatively, both *Northanger Abbey* and "The Yellow Wallpaper" are discussed among other nineteenth-century British and American texts by women writers. In fact, Gilbert and Gubar define the nineteenth century as that "of the richest productions of the female imagination" both in Britain and America (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p. xxxi). The two critics argue that the woman writer's anxieties and preoccupations during the nineteenth century, these being "the discrepancy between the Victorian ideology of femininity and the reality of Victorian women's lives", are the reason why these texts exceeded those of the twentieth century in terms of literary quality (p. xxxi). The female characters that are discussed in Gilbert and Gubar's work are usually portrayed as opposed to the Victorian idea of femininity and are sometimes presented in confinement and as irrational. As a matter of fact, the title *The Madwoman in the Attic* derives from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane*



*Eyre* (1847), in which the character of Bertha Mason is locked-up in the attic by her husband.

With respect to "The Yellow Wallpaper", it is debatable whether the protagonist actually becomes mad. In 1913, years after the publication of her short story, Gilman wrote a brief explanation on how she came to produce her short story, which was entitled "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper" and was published in the monthly magazine *The Forerunner*. In her text, Gilman assured that she had indeed come "near the borderline of utter mental ruin" (Gilman, 1995, p. 331). As it has been mentioned earlier, the protagonist's identity is negotiated within the nursery. In this sense, Rodrigo Andrés and Teresa Requena argue that the protagonist does not only fail to accomplish her role of wife and mother, but that she also "falls back into an embryonic, pre-linguistic, non-human status" (Andrés and Requena, 2000, p. 145). At the very end of Gilman's story, the narrator adopts the position of a creeping creature and claims that "outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow" as if she had acquired animal features and had abandoned her human condition (Gilman, 1997, p. 15).

At the beginning of the story, the narrator mentions that she is suffering from "a slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman, p. 1). As Andrés and Requena point out in their article, the word «hysteria» etymologically derives from the Greek term for uterus, the organ which according to the ancients was supposed to divide woman's nature and as a result of that, cause her an illness (Andrés and Requena, 2000, p. 146). Furthermore, it was believed during the nineteenth century that the uterus had an influence "on women's intellectual capacities" (Andrés and Requena, p. 146). In this respect, critics such as Băniceru have viewed hysteria as "the common diagnose given to all women who experience[d] various nervous breakdowns or did not comply with what was expected of them" (Băniceru, 2018, p. 13). In other words, and regarding Andrés and Requena's standpoint, nervous diseases and madness were "clearly gender specific" conditions during the nineteenth century (Andrés and Requena, p. 145). This might have allowed male-ruled medical institutions to repress women's anxieties and intellectual curiosities and to ensure the perpetuation of women's domestic roles in line with the Victorian ideas of femininity. Hence, and irrespective of the existing interest in preserving male power through medical institutions, Gilman's short story, together with her autobiographical testimony, reveal that these illnesses were actually real.

Contrastingly, the end of "The Yellow Wallpaper" has often been interpreted as the narrator's rebellious act towards patriarchal power. Băniceru has read the ultimate image which the reader is presented with at the end of the story, that of the narrator creeping over John, as "far from passive" and "show[ing] a propensity for rage and revolt" (Băniceru, p. 15). Such rebellious act is epitomized by the narrator's last sentence: "I've got out at last" (Gilman, 1997, p. 15). In this connection, other critics have also offered a somehow optimistic interpretation for Gilman's story. Greg Johnson, for example, claims that "writing is [the narrator's] only salvation" (Johnson, 1989, p. 530). By this statement, it might be argued that Johnson's understanding of writing consists of a means of staying rational. In the same line, Beverly A. Hume suggests that it might be possible that the narrator were Gilman's conception of her own self, who "recreates her 'fictional' journal *after* her doctor-husband, John, faints" (Hume, 2002, p. 8). If it is assumed that "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the narrator's *written* account on a journal, it can be inferred that there is indeed certain rationality in it since the text is structured in a coherent manner. In fact, Gilman's short story accurately reproduces the characteristics of an informal written text such as a journal. Throughout the text, numerous instances of interruptions are found and the paragraphs tend to occupy no more than five lines. Furthermore, and on account of the fear that John has engendered in her, the narrator states that she "must put this [a possible journal] away" on several occasions when her husband is supposed to approach. (Gilman, p. 3).

Nonetheless, Andrés and Requena refuse to see "the main character's madness as a springboard for her liberation in feminine terms" since the narrator is ultimately presented as a creeping creature on the floor and that questions the fact that the narrator is an autonomous being (Andrés and Requena, p. 147). They argue that, by defending that the narrator achieves a possible liberation, feminist critics have presented "female madness in a quasi-romantic light, positivizing it as an empowering experience for women" (p. 147). In any case, partly due to the autobiographical texts written by Gilman herself in which she accounted for her personal experience, the readership has mainly assumed "The Yellow Wallpaper" to be the story of a mad woman. In spite of this, Johnson and Hume's understanding of writing as a salvation from irrationality offers the possibility of rethinking to what extent Gilman's protagonist is a completely mad narrator.

With respect to Jane Austen's protagonist, Gilbert and Gubar argue that she is not as literally entrapped as she is metaphorically in her fiction (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 137). At the beginning of *Northanger Abbey*, the narrative voice suggests that, although she is far from being a heroine, she had been training to become one during her youth, when she read texts from varied authors such as Pope, Gray, Thompson and Shakespeare (Austen, p. 17). However, the process of becoming a heroine seems to be truncated as soon as she meets John and Isabella Thorpe in Bath. As Marvin Mudrick especially notes in his review of the novel, the character of Isabella is the one who "firstly introduces the Gothic theme" to Catherine, indoctrinating the protagonist with "her own reading into the Gothic world" (Mudrick, 1990, p. 79). The Thorpe siblings are the embodiment of the prototypical hero and heroine from sentimental literature. For that reason, Catherine feels great admiration for them and from the beginning desires to be acquainted with them. Nevertheless, as Mudrick notes, the two characters are reversed prototypes of the Gothic fiction (p. 82). As for Isabella, she is "the heroine's confidante reversed: sensibility into vulgarity, sympathy into egocentrism, chastity into man-chasing, thoughtfulness into frivolity" (p. 82). As far as Mr Thorpe is concerned, he is "the unwelcome suitor *contracted*" and is supposed to threaten Catherine's happiness by offering her an unwanted marriage on the protagonist's behalf, but in this case "his methods are ludicrously petty by comparison" (p. 83). Because Austen's protagonist is an "impressionable and ingenuous young girl", her naiveté does not allow her to see the siblings' true personalities nor the dangers of Gothic fiction embodied by John and Isabella and that Austen intends to warn the reader about (Mudrick, p. 79).

As a consequence of her growing obsession with Gothic fiction, Catherine is tricked by her imagination while spending some days with the Tilney family. On their way to Northanger Abbey, Catherine cannot stop herself from asking about her prospective room, to which Henry already anticipates the protagonist's descent into madness:

Can you stand such a ceremony as this? *Will not your mind misgive you* [emphasis added], with this gloomy chamber—too lofty and extensive for you, with only the feeble rays of a single lamp to take in its size—its walls hung with tapestry exhibiting figures as large as life, and the bed, of dark green stuff or purple velvet, presenting even a funereal appearance. Will not your heart sink within you? (Austen, p. 150)

It is interesting to note how, years later, Gilman would similarly resort to walls that exhibit figures in her short story too. Nevertheless, once the protagonist arrives in Northanger Abbey, she realizes that her room is "very unlike the one which Henry had endeavoured to alarm her by the description of", but still it has all the suitable elements to motivate her Gothic fancies, especially the mysterious "immense heavy chest" from which she will start hypothesizing about all kind of conspiracies (p. 155). These Gothic fantasies lead Catherine to believe General Tilney guilty of murder, which unsuccessfully she decides to prove. In spite of her wrongdoing, Austen's main character is far from being mistaken at all. In fact, the protagonist's innocence does not allow her to see that her stay in Northanger Abbey is also concerned with social issues. The actual reason why Catherine has been invited to Northanger Abbey is General Tilney's need to ascertain whether she can be the right wife for his son Henry, but the young girl ends up being turned from their home as soon as General Tilney finds out about her social status. Although Henry's father does not turn out to be an actual murderer, he is still guilty of jeopardizing Catherine and Henry's happiness by attempting to arrange a marriage based on financial power. Catherine's entrapment, thus, is not as literal as the narrator's in "The Yellow Wallpaper", who is actually secluded in a room by medical prescription. Nonetheless, the context in which both characters appear as irrational meet the same requirements in both texts. These episodes occur within the domestic sphere, where everything that the two protagonists should be familiar with becomes uncanny and frightens them.

### *3.2. The independent woman and fiction*

In her masterpiece *The Second Sex* (1949), the French feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir devoted a chapter to the role of the independent woman and the woman writer. As it was previously noted, neither of the two protagonists in Gilman and Austen's texts succeed at being fully independent, since they are not free to carry out intellectual work as they would wish to. On the one hand, Catherine is haunted by all the prejudices that revolve around sentimental literature and turns out to be trapped in her own fiction. On the other hand, the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is fearful of a husband-physician who does not approve of her being a writer.

According to Beauvoir, the main cause for the existing inequality between men and women lies in education. Regardless of the fact that curricula might be the same for both boys and girls at some schools, it has been usually taken for granted by teachers and parents that the intellectual capacities of the female sex are inferior to those of the male sex and therefore, students themselves have assumed that too. (Beauvoir, 2015, p. 51). No special attention has been paid to girls' progress at school and that has led them to believe themselves inferior and to adopt a "defeatist attitude" (p. 52). The same attitude has been adopted by women who aim to be artists of any kind, especially those attempting to be writers. The latter, unlike "actresses, dancers and singers", whose bodies play a meaningful role in their work and contribute to "their sexual worth" for men, have had even more difficulties to see their labour recognized (p. 55, p. 56). Thinking themselves less capable than men, women writers have acquired such modesty that does not let them exploit their talent at its fullest:

women are still astonished and flattered to be accepted into the world of thinking and art, a masculine world: the woman watches her manners; she does not dare to irritate, explore, explode; she thinks she has to excuse her literary pretensions by her modesty and good taste; she relies on the proven values of conformism; she introduces just the personal note that is expected of her into her literature: she points out that she is a woman with some well chosen affectations, simpering and preciosities; so she will excel at producing 'bestsellers' but she cannot be counted on to blaze new trails. Women do not lack originality in their behaviour and feelings: there are some so singular that they have to be *locked up* [emphasis added]; on the whole, many for them are more baroque and eccentric than the men whose strictures they reject. (Beauvoir, p. 62)

As Beauvoir notes in the previous fragment, women writers are as talented and original as male writers are, but because they do not dare to explore or provoke, they can hardly write as extraordinary texts as those by Stendhal, Dostoevsky or Tolstoy (Beauvoir, p. 64). Also, because women's lives have traditionally been linked to housework and family, they have not had the time that writing demands. In one of her essays, Woolf remarks the fact that "the four great women novelists" in England, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, had had no children (Woolf, 1967, p. 143). In fact, only since the end of the eighteenth century a regular literary production by women writers has existed, but women have succeeded mainly at writing novels, which

according to Woolf are "the least concentrated form of art", since unlike poetry or drama, they "can be taken up or put down more easily" (p. 143). Woolf also highlights the fact that women have written as back in history as men and refers to Sappho in Greece and Lady Murasaki in Japan (p. 142). However, the reason why no regular production of literature by women has existed until the end of the eighteenth century in England "lies [...] locked in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers", as women like the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" had no choice but to write secretly.

The novel as a genre has represented a space of possibilities for women readers and writers throughout the years. In *Northanger Abbey*, the protagonist argues that she prefers the realm of imagination to that of history, where "the men [are] all so good for nothing, and [there are] hardly any women at all" (p. 104). In her text, Austen suggests that History, a genre which intends to present facts objectively and which is supposed to present the truth, was always concerned about men. On the contrary, the novel is the literary form where female readers can see themselves reflected in other characters and where female writers can create stories in which women have a voice. In fact, *Northanger Abbey* is a highly self-reflective text on the matter of fiction and itself represents a safe space for female readers.

In order to become a writer, Woolf claims that every woman must kill the Angel in the House that every woman embodies and that represents society's expectations on women during the Victorian period. Woolf describes the Angel in the House as follows:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. (Woolf, 1967, p. 285).

According to Woolf's definition of the Angel in the House, women were expected to completely devote themselves to their family and home and to prioritize the wishes of others to theirs. Nevertheless, killing the Angel and becoming an independent woman requires sacrifices that not all women are able to make. As Beauvoir suggests, the

woman who decides not to get married and to devote her life to literature needs to carry the burden of feeling tempted by "the woman friend who is married or comfortably kept" by a husband because the latter is widely accepted by society (p. 50).

As far as Austen and Gilman's texts are concerned, both protagonists are victims of the patriarchal system that Beauvoir and Woolf describe. On the one hand, young girls like Catherine can only allow themselves to read novels. The main character in *Northanger Abbey* is contented to read Gothic texts where she can find characters that resemble her and who she can identify herself with, but in the real life she has no agency over herself when it comes to choosing a husband, for instance. On the other hand, the protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper" constitutes an example of all the women writers that were silenced in the past and whose work was never recognized.

#### **4. PROBLEMATIZING GENDER IN *NORTHANGER ABBEY* AND "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"**

In both *Northanger Abbey* and "The Yellow Wallpaper", Austen and Gilman challenge the ideas of masculinity and femininity by presenting two couples that do not always conform to the normative gender patterns. With regards to the two female protagonists, and in line with Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of both texts, it has been previously mentioned how Catherine and the nameless narrator are portrayed as opposed to the Victorian notions of femininity, as rebellious and even as irrational. Stated otherwise, they refuse to play the role of the Angel in the House. As for their male counterparts, critics such as Rachel M. Brownstein and Beverly A. Hume have noted how both Austen and Gilman decided to feminize these characters. This last subsection aims to explore how Austen and Gilman subvert gender roles in order to fulfill their feminist agendas.

As far as Austen's text is concerned, the relationship between the two main characters is from the start unconventional in terms of gender performativity. On the first instance, and because Austen is parodying the Gothic genre, Henry "fails to fall in love with her [Catherine] at first sight" and "does not even rescue her at any critical moment from a villain's clutches" (Mudrick, p. 83). As a matter of fact, Henry is not only portrayed as "the Gothic hero reversed", but he also presents a number of features that one would often associate to the female sex. In chapter three, for instance, Mrs Allen and Catherine are struck by Henry's knowledge about gowns and fabrics, since "men commonly take so little notice of those things" (Austen, p. 28). When asked whether he really understands about muslins, Henry replies as follows:

Particularly well; I always buy my own cravats, and am allowed to be an excellent judge; and my sister has often trusted me in the choice of a gown. I bought one for her the other day, and it was pronounced to be a prodigious bargain by every lady who saw it. I gave but five shillings a yard for it, and a true Indian muslin. (p. 28)

The previous fragment shows that Henry really is an expert in fabrics. Additionally, he never judges Catherine for reading novels and actually confesses to be a reader of this kind of books himself. In chapter fourteen, Catherine takes for granted that he does not read any novels, arguing that these texts "are not clever enough" and that "gentlemen read better books" (p. 102). However, unlike wicked John Thorpe, who absolutely



detests this kind of fiction, Henry claims that "[t]he person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid" (p. 102). From that moment onwards, Catherine does not feel ashamed of being caught up reading Ann Radcliff's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* anymore.

With respect to Catherine, she does not exactly behave as a female heroine would. Brownstein states that "she is unfeminine" (Brownstein, 2006, p. 36). It has been mentioned earlier how Catherine preferred boys' games to gathering flowers from the garden during her childhood and how she detested "confinement and cleanliness" (Austen, p. 16). However, the narrative voice claims that, at the age of fifteen, "she began to curl her hair" and that "her love of dirt gave way to an inclination for finery" (Austen, p. 16). Here, Austen makes use of the clichés around the female sex, which are linked to the importance of women's physical appearance and which "reflect society's expectations of genteel girls" (Brownstein, p. 36). Nevertheless, Catherine's father and mother refer to her as "*almost pretty*", which provides the reader with a sense of failure on the part of the protagonist (p. 17). The protagonist is in fact portrayed as plain throughout most of the novel. Even though she is always at the centre of the narrative, Mudrick remarks that she is not "as interesting and complex a person as she would have to be—intellectually or emotionally—to sustain the necessary tensions at the center of a realistic novel (p. 88). When it comes to the main character's education, it is noted that Catherine "read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable [...] in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives" (Austen, p. 17). In this sense, it is suggested that femininity is a combination of "literary conventions" and biology (Brownstein, p. 36). Reading experiences in *Northanger Abbey*, thus, play a significant role in the construction of the protagonist's identity. In the same way, Catherine's character is later shaped by the Gothic world and the values that that world represents and which eventually lead her to irrationality.

As for "The Yellow Wallpaper", Gilman too chose to feminize a male character in her text. The final image in Gilman's story is that of the protagonist creeping on the floor and asking herself "Now why should that man have fainted?" (p. 15). The narrator's question regarding her husband's passing out might be read in a surprising tone if we assume that fainting is related to weakness and therefore, not as something typical of the male sex, and far less, of a doctor. Beverly A. Hume argues that by making John faint, Gilman's story satirizes "gender-biased medical assumptions" and

therefore everything that bad medical practices can lead to (Hume, 2002, p. 14). In this sense, not only gender roles are reversed, but also the relationship carer-ill person that was mentioned before is subverted. Although the narrator does not turn out to be a heroine by the end of the story, John is certainly punished for having mismanaged the protagonist's madness.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study attempts to bring both *Northanger Abbey* and "The Yellow Wallpaper" closer by examining the resemblances that both texts present. It is worthwhile mentioning that the two texts have rarely been compared, but the two of them are discussed in Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*. What is most remarkable is that, in spite of all the similarities that have been mentioned throughout this essay, no confirmation that Charlotte Perkins Gilman had read Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* has been found during the research process. Many references to Ann Radcliff's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* can be found in Austen's novel. In fact, Radcliff's text can be considered the backbone that articulates the whole novel, since it is the protagonist's obsession with this novel which in the end leads her to irrationality. Also, as it has been suggested by Davison, Gilman too might have been aware of the existence of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, since many elements from the prototypical Female Gothic novel are found in Gilman's short story (Davison, p. 51). Hence, it might be argued that both texts derive from the same model.

The Gothic conventions used by both Austen and Gilman seem to be the point where both texts converge, regardless of the fact that Gilman had read *Northanger Abbey* or not. The Female Gothic seems to be a suitable literary genre to present fearful, confined and mad women. Most importantly, the two texts depend on the figure of two male Gothic villains, General Tilney and the husband-physician John, whose function within the narrative is to repress both female protagonists in intellectual terms by engendering fear in them. The element of terror which is typical in Gothic fiction plays a significant role in the narrative and is embodied by these two characters. As for "The Yellow Wallpaper", Gilman's agenda is clearly feminist. Through Gothic conventions, she presents an allegory reflecting the anxieties of the woman writer at that time. With respect to *Northanger Abbey*, Austen's agenda is not so clearly feminist. As it has been mentioned earlier, the British author intends to warn the reader about some reading practices that were not well regarded at that moment and that could lead to mental diseases, as it actually happens to the main character. Nevertheless, her text resembles a *bildungsroman*, since the story clearly depicts Catherine's personal growth towards womanhood and the protagonist is portrayed as someone who is independent enough to make her own decisions. In that sense, *Northanger Abbey* might offer a possible profeminist message. Nevertheless, as it is typical in the Austenian fiction, the story

ends with a happy marriage. This conventional ending and the fact that Catherine is brought back to rationality by Henry makes it hard to define Austen's text as completely feminist. As for the ending of "The Yellow Wallpaper", the narrator's descent into madness has often been positivized and has been regarded as a liberating experience. Although the protagonist shows some signs of rebellion as stripping away the wallpaper, it has often been argued by the criticism that she is not an autonomous being, since she ends up adopting a non-human position or even a fetal position by the end of the story, which brings into question whether she is actually liberated.

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