

**MADNESS, GENDER, AND SPACE IN *JANE EYRE* AND
*THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER***

**LOCURA, GÉNERO Y ESPACIO EN *JANE EYRE* Y *THE
YELLOW WALL-PAPER***



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ROCÍO CRUZ BORRERO

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TUTOR/A: SONIA VILLEGAS LÓPEZ

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Nombre Rocío Cruz Borrero

DNI 49082063-V

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Abstract

The aim of this project is to analyse Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wall-Paper* (1892) from the perspective of the representation of female madness, and paying special attention to the disciplinary proceedings and spaces designed to exert authority over those characters considered mad. We will study specifically the figure of the madwoman and discuss the interpretation of (female) madness as a way out of or an escape from the aforementioned controlling spaces and from patriarchal institutions. In this project, we have therefore focused on the spaces designed in both narratives for them by legal and medical institutions. Both texts deserve our attention since they explore the connection between female madness, imprisonment and male violence. A comparative reading of *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper* will offer an insightful look at the plight of Victorian women from a female perspective.

Keywords: Victorian literature, female madness, space

Resumen

El objetivo de este proyecto es analizar *Jane Eyre* (1847) de Charlotte Brontë y *The Yellow Wall-Paper* (1892) de Charlotte Perkins Gilman desde la perspectiva de la locura femenina, y prestando especial atención a los métodos disciplinarios y espacios diseñados para ejercer autoridad sobre los personajes femeninos considerados locos. Estudiaremos específicamente la figura de la 'loca' y discutiremos la interpretación de la locura femenina como una salida o como mecanismo de escapatória de las instituciones patriarcales y espacios de control. A lo largo de este proyecto, han sido objeto de interés los espacios diseñados para ellas en ambas narrativas por parte de las instituciones legales y médicas. Ambos textos merecen una atención especial ya que exploran la conexión entre locura femenina, confinamiento y violencia machista. Una lectura comparada de *Jane Eyre* y *The Yellow Wall-Paper* nos ayudará a entender el sufrimiento de la mujer victoriana desde un punto de vista femenino.

Palabras clave: Literatura victoriana, locura femenina, espacio

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1. Introduction

In this project I seek to critically examine Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wall-Paper* (1892), focusing on the madwoman as the figure who is subjected to the authority of the medical institutions and the patriarchal family. It will be argued that madness can be interpreted both as the way in which patriarchy regards deviant female behaviour, on the one hand, and as the only means some women had to go beyond traditional definitions of femininity and female propriety, on the other. My discussion will include the interaction of these three concepts: madness, gender and space. 'Gender' and 'madness' will be explored in relation to the category of space. In particular, I will consider the theory about the separate spheres in order to understand the relation between gender and space. According to Nancy Cott in *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*, women's place was in the private sphere, family life and the home whereas the public sphere, related to politics and the economic world, was associated to men (Cott 1977, 237). In both texts proposed space determines the gender construction of both male and female characters, since the female ones, like Bertha Mason, Jane Eyre or the protagonist of Gilman's story, are inhabitants of the private sphere of the home. Those women considered insane are even more related to domesticity and enclosure. On the contrary, male characters in *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper* are considerably powerful and thus, enjoy freedom of movement in the public sphere.

In this project, I will carry out a comparative reading of *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, analysing both texts in the light of theory and criticism. In this sense, I will be using as starting point Jeremy Bentham's concept of the *panopticon*, later used by Michel Foucault to expand his theory about the historical treatment of the insane in works like *Discipline and Punish* or *Madness and Civilization*. Sigmund Freud's study on hysteria will be also a key text, as well as other recent works which have approached the topic of (female) madness from the perspective of feminism, namely, *The Female Malady* by Elaine Showalter, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's classic study *The Madwoman in the Attic*. What I propose in this paper is to analyse how strict definitions of madness are applied to some female characters in both texts, and how women's behaviour is surveyed both by the medical institutions and by the figure of the female carer, who is most times an accomplice of the former.

In this project, the following parts are clearly delimited: first, a survey of the theories that explore the construction and treatment of (female) madness during the

nineteenth century, which will help us understand the stereotypes associated with women from biblical times. Moreover, some relevant concepts namely *femme fatale* or the hysterical woman will be explained according to Victorian standards. The next section will be devoted to the analysis of gender and madness in the two selected works, *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper*. Next, a third section will analyse the use of space and confinement in both texts. The essay will end with a section of conclusions and with references.

2. Madness and space in the nineteenth century

Jane Eyre and *The Yellow Wall-Paper* were both published in the nineteenth century, a period in which traditional gender stereotypes were in force for both men and women. The misogynist tradition associated with religious prescriptions about appropriate male and female behaviour were still in force and were given particular emphasis during the Victorian period (Guy 1998, 468). Imbued by biblical teaching and doctrine, the happiest and most beneficial sphere for women was thought to be that of domesticity, as we can read in Sarah S. Ellis's *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1894):

The most servile drudgery may be ennobled by the self-sacrifice, the patience, the cheerful submission to duty, with which it is performed. Thus a high-minded and intellectual woman is never more truly great, than when willingly and judiciously performing kind offices for the sick. (Ellis, in Guy 1998, 497)

The association between women and caring was promoted from the first. In Victorian society women were completely dependent on husbands and fathers, and their aspiration in life was to behave like dutiful mothers and housewives, and obedient daughters. This deal of femininity became widespread, and consequently, female chastity and the virtues of the approved role model of the 'Angel in the House' were thought to be attributes natural to women, who were the guardians of the home and the family. The concept of 'Angel in the House' was first coined in the title of an immensely popular poem published by the Victorian poet Coventry Patmore in 1854 (Kühl 2016, 171). He believed his wife to be the perfect woman, a model for all women, highlighting her spirituality and naivety. A great amount of conduct manuals were published during the nineteenth century to preach about character-formation and domestic duty, since domesticity and submissiveness were crucial characteristics for women.

The traditional behaviour prescribed for them was thus characterized by feminine virtues such as endurance, refinement, restraint or sexual prudishness. They did not have control over their lives and married women were victims of their oppressive marriages. The image of ‘the Angel in the House’ represented precisely the model to follow, whereas those women who did not behave as angels, played the role of *femme fatale*, partly associated with the insane. This was a very popular figure in Victorian literature, characterized by her assertiveness and refusal to be subordinated to men in different ways, for example, by not complying with domestic values, or by stepping outside the rigid gender categories associated with them. In *Jane Eyre*, the figure of Bertha Mason fulfils the role of the madwoman, and she actually becomes an extension of the *femme fatale*, especially every time that she is associated with the vampire, or the sexually-insatiable woman, since women were thought to be submissive, selfless and idle in their minds. Interestingly, the intellectual woman was also a companionate image of the *femme fatale*. The fear was that the over-stimulation of women’s brains could reduce energy from their reproductive organs, as Jeannette King mentions in *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*: “The perceived infirmity of the female body had an impact on ideas about female education, the conflict between the demands of the reproductive body and those of the intellect being starkly depicted” (King 2005, 18). Generally, during the nineteenth century, employment and intellectual concerns in women were neglected or outrightly disregarded, as it is explained by Kerstin Fests: “The ‘good’ woman is expected to neglect her work and prioritize her private life. Women’s professional success is very often linked with a lack of femininity and presented as a threat” (Fests 2009, 45).

The features of the *femme fatale* were not very different from the ones defining the type of the hysterical woman. Since Hippocrates’ times in ancient Greece, a connection is found between hysteria and gender, and between women’s minds and bodies:

The construction of hysteria described something resulting from a firmly organic cause, the movement of the womb [...] which can be cured by marriage and/or pregnancy, scent therapy, irritant pessaries, and various herbal concoctions administered by mouth, by nose, or direct to the vulva... Since the womb is believed capable of movement around much of the body, these texts attribute a wide range of symptoms to womb movement. (King 1993, 14)

Almost twenty four centuries later, in 1869, the American physician George M. Beard coined the diagnostic term 'neurasthenia', to tackle the connection between mind and body in the case of women, and defined this illness as follows:

A morbid condition of the exhaustion of the nervous system [...] The condition was one which grew out of the American way of life, with its race for money and power [...] These had made striving, successful men prone to nervous prostration. As for women, who constituted a large proportion of the ranks of the neurasthenic, an incursion into the masculine sphere or intellectual labour together with the 'exhausting sentiment of love' were responsible for their nervous depletion. (Appignanesi 2008, 101-102)

A great importance was given to the working of the nervous system and its direct relation to insanity. Similarly, the well-known Austrian founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, together with Josef Breuer, researched into the psychic mechanisms involved in hysteria and concluded that it was not caused by the vagaries of the female reproductive system, but by repressed, emotionally charged memories. Freud's notion of hysteria prescribed that the sources of female madness were 'trauma' and a weakening of the nerves, no doubt motivated by women's 'weak' condition and the frailty of their bodies. One of the reasons for these assumptions was the traditional association of women with sensibility and the emotions, and as a consequence, with the development of certain illnesses:

The unsophisticated observations of our predecessors, the residue of which is preserved in the term 'hysteria [derived from the Greek word for 'uterus']', came nearer the truth than the more recent view which puts sexuality almost last, in order to save the patients from moral reproaches. The sexual needs of hysterical patients are no doubt just as variable in degree from individual to individual as in healthy people and are no stronger than in them; but the former fall ill from them, and, for the most part, precisely owing to struggling against them, owing to their defence against sexuality. (Breuer and Freud 1895, 247)

Freud discarded the ancient Greek's gynaecological 'theory of the wandering womb', and he made abundantly clear that psychological disorders came from the brain, not from the malfunctioning of the womb.

Similarly, the twentieth-century French philosopher Michel Foucault aimed to determine to what degree it is legitimate to treat the concepts of 'hysteria' and

'hypochondria' as mental diseases. He studied these terms in *The History of Sexuality*, and noted that:

This hysterization of women's bodies is a threefold process whereby the feminine body was qualified and disqualified as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; turns hysteria into a favoured object of medical, moral, and aesthetic discourses; such bodies become targets and anchorage points for the ventures of knowledge. (Foucault 1976, 104)

In *Madness and Civilization* (1964), Foucault had explored the aspects of madness, and claimed that madness is not a natural, unchanging condition, but rather that it depends on the context in which it exists. Various cultural, intellectual and economic structures determine how madness is known and experienced within a given society. In this way, the experience of madness is socially construed. Foucault traces the evolution of the concept of madness through three phases: the Renaissance, the 'Classical Age' and the modern experience and the process that he calls "the Great Confinement", based on the isolation of mad people from society. Moreover, he explains that the definition of madness as mental illness appeared at the end of the eighteenth century for the first time (Foucault 1964, 14-25). Regarding notions of space and control, Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, rescues Bentham's disciplinary theory on *panopticism*.¹ The *panopticon* was a mechanism consisting of an architectural structure that enabled the medical-psychiatric institutions to exert control over patients and inmates. It was designed as a central tower pierced with wide windows that controlled the prisoners at the periphery. It induced a hierarchical notion of surveillance and a normalizing gaze as sources of oppression and power in disciplinary institutions such as schools, prisons, hospitals or asylums (Foucault 1975, 196-200).

Related to madness and gender, the concept of the 'madwoman', which we will further discuss later, was inspired by the figure of Bertha Mason and used by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979) to designate the figure of woman of letters. During the nineteenth century, women were trapped in the literary constructs of patriarchal society, and literature produced by female writers was neglected and only occasionally became part of the canon, as we notice in *A Literature of their Own* by Elaine Showalter: "Women had a hard struggle to overcome the influence of male

¹ Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was an English philosopher and social theorist. Bentham was one of the founders of Utilitarianism, and was well known by his invention of the *panopticon*.

literary tradition and to create an original, primary, and independent art” (Showalter 1978, 3).

The rigid gender and social structure in Victorian times prescribed a strict control both notionally and practically over women’s lives, which quite often regarded deviant behaviour as pathological. During the Victorian period, madness was a common illness among Victorian women. Regarding asylums inhabitants, men outnumbered women until 1845. However, the pattern changed after mid-century with the rise of the vast public asylums, and the later nineteenth century enshrined women as the weaker vessel, frailer by constitution, and thus more easily susceptible to madness (Appignanesi 2008, 45-46). Out-of-the-norm behaviour was usually associated with madness, a particularly common disease among women, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain:

Not so much because it takes its name from the Greek word for womb, hyster (the organ which was in the nineteenth century supposed to "cause" this emotional disturbance), but because hysteria did occur mainly among women in turn-of-the-century Vienna, and because throughout the nineteenth century this mental illness, like many other nervous disorders, was thought to be caused by the female reproductive system. (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 53)

These critics questioned traditional connections between madness and femininity, since many psychiatrists and social scientists quite often tried to prove women sick in every sense. Men dominated the medical profession and presented madness as a primarily female disease. The notions of insanity and space were highly related since the only cure for these hysterical women was captivity. This ideology resulted in the widespread of confinement in asylums as the treatment for deranged woman. England had the highest incidence of insanity. In fact, Victorian England was generally known as the centre of lunacy reform since investigators and doctors from all over the world were attracted by the medical practices applied to manage the stigma which spread all over the country (Showalter 1987, 25). This might be considered an interesting detail to understand why insanity is a recurrent topic in the two texts under inspection.

In *The Female Malady* (1987), a broad study about how the definition and treatment of female insanity had been shaped by the cultural misconceptions during the Victorian times about ‘proper’ feminine behaviour, Showalter’s interpretation of female

madness confirms that she considers it as a consequence of, rather than as a deviation from, the traditional enforcement of female roles.

3. The faces of madness in *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper*

In the nineteenth century, an overwhelming male-dominated society, women lacked freedom within the domestic sphere. Nonetheless, some of them looked for some sort of economic and intellectual independence by turning to the writing profession. Charlotte Brontë, after a long trial, managed to publish *Jane Eyre* in 1847 under the pseudonym of Currer Bell, while her sisters Emily and Anne also adopted a male *nom de plum*. The composition of the text, Brontë's masterpiece, came about under harsh conditions of 'internment': Brontë wrote the novel roughly during a couple of months 'in darkness', while her father was recovering from an eye surgery in Manchester. *Jane Eyre* was an immediate success, its critical reception considerably positive and it soon became a literary classic. The *bildungsroman* of a young orphan, scorned by her only relatives, an inmate in an all-girls school, who had procured herself a profession—a governess—and who finally had found love in the person of Mr Rochester, was very appealing to the Victorian reading public. The novel was, moreover, haunted by the elusive figure of a madwoman, Rochester's first wife, who had lost her wits and was kept captive in the third story of Thornfield Mansion. Many years later, *Jane Eyre* still 'lurks' the imagination of contemporary readers, and has been the source of inspiration for later versions, *Wide Sargasso Sea* being probably the most outstanding one, based on the enigmatic figure of Bertha.

More than fifty years later, in 1892, the critic and female writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman published *The Yellow Wall-Paper* in the *New England Magazine*. A relevant writer and a spokeswoman for women's rights, Charlotte Perkins Gilman also contributed to journals like *The Forerunner*, in which she also published, for example, "Why I wrote *The Yellow Wall-Paper*". In her short story, she shows the frustrations and the unfulfilled desires of women at a time marked by conventional gender norms and male domination. Gilman's biography suggests that, similarly to Brontë, she included many autobiographical details in the story, since she had suffered from post-partum depression and, as a result, she consulted Dr S. Weir Mitchell, one of the most famous nerve specialists of the time. Gilman followed a rest cure, and the doctor prescribed complete isolation and bed rest, a treatment cunningly closer to that of her

protagonist. Although *The Yellow Wall-Paper* is usually recognized as a thorough psychological study, it was initially seen as a horror story owe to its gothic and disturbing elements. There is no Bertha Mason in *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, but a female narrator who suffers from what it has been called a ‘post-partum depression’. As Gilman, she is forbidden to work and is prescribed by her male relatives—her husband John is a physician—a rest cure in isolation. For that purpose, they rent a house. Through the plight of her protagonist, Gilman is clearly condemning Mitchell's methods in his sanatorium and rejecting the definition and treatment of insanity that were commonly used in America during the nineteenth century.

Both *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper* contributed to discuss some problems faced by women in Victorian society. Bertha Mason, and the nameless protagonist in *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, experience physical and mental impediments to freedom and they are denied public participation. Furthermore, a comparative reading of both texts reveals a similar interpretation of women’s oppression under disciplinary regimes, like the patriarchal family or the medical institution, run by men. Besides, in both texts the notion of space is extremely important. Jailed in the third story of Thornfield, Bertha Mason became the focus of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar when writing their influential critical essay in 1979. Although in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* madness seems to be connected to maternity, space is also relevant, since the main character is confined in the attic and is kept apart from family and society.

The character of Bertha Mason has been approached to understand the way in which female madness is constructed through discourse strategies in *Jane Eyre*. In fact, she is the epitome of the hysterical woman in Victorian times. For many literary critics, this gothic character is the incarnation of rebellion and rage within the woman’s subconscious. Furthermore, some critics have signalled Bertha’s connection with Shakespeare’s Ophelia, claiming that Bertha is her Victorian counterpart, since she becomes a love-mad monster due to her experiences of unrequited love towards Rochester (Miquel-Baldellou 2008, 2-3).

Different, however, is the feminist interpretation by Gilbert and Gubar, who defined Bertha as the personification of the madwoman resulting from patriarchy. In their view, Bertha is the realisation of Jane’s desires and dark side (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 360). Nonetheless, before Gilbert and Gubar’s interpretation, Peter Grudin had already referred to Bertha as “the representation of something unspeakable and as a projection of Jane’s own dark potentials” (Grudin 1977, 145-147). This critic interprets

Bertha as a surveyor, as the gothic figure who shows why Jane acts as she does in the novel. Similarly, Nancy Armstrong argues that the presence of deranged women in domestic novels came in vogue during the decade of the 1840s, as a result of English rural political grievances dramatized through literary displays of sexual outbursts (Armstrong 1990, 172). Helen Small interprets *Jane Eyre* as a narrative through which female hysteria is constructed and deconstructed through intertextual discourse, and Bertha's laughter as a "a mode of rebellion against the constraints of patriarchy [...] implies an acute psychological danger of the discontent that agitates the heroine, an expression of Jane's frustrated desire" (Small 1998, 160).

As already mentioned, Bertha's racial background has been analysed concerning post colonialism, particularly after the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Rhys, in which we notice the relationship between madness and Antoinette's maternal 'legacy'. Furthermore, according to Laurence Lerner, Bertha Mason has become one of the major characters in English fiction, not only granting her a major role in Brontë's novel, but also exalting her as a representative figure of the suppressed voices (Lerner 1989, 273-300). In any case, it is worth noticing that, either in the case of Bertha's clear identity as the madwoman, or Jane's outbursts of madness, insanity is often associated with female figures.

Similarly, articles and chapters have examined madness in Gilman's story. The content of *The Yellow Wall-Paper* was revised and described by Caminero-Santangelo as a short story whose "female protagonist retreats from a world of insuperable obstacles into madness and suicide, [...] the retreat is highly ambiguous" (Caminero-Santangelo 1998, 181). Otherwise, according to Richard Gray, as the story of "an unnamed woman [who] records her strange experiences when she and her husband, John, go to live in 'ancestral halls' for the summer", another form of isolation and confinement, it could be argued (Gray 2004, 316). In the same way as other literary critics have examined madness in *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, I will try to illustrate the straightforward connection between this notion and space.

From very early in life, Jane's experiences in Brontë's novel define inevitably her character: she learns to refrain her words the hard way, and she usually keeps silent unless she is prompted to speak, as she is several times by Rochester when their acquaintance grows. Jane reveals herself as an intrepid woman, a person who rebels against the abuse of power and against the attitudes that she considers irrational, trying to find her own voice and identity very early in life. A relevant moment is experienced

with aunt Reed during the Red Room episode, where her defencelessness as an orphan, her class, and her gender contrast with her cousin John's privileged situation. If, as a child, she experienced John Reed's violent demonstrations of rage and violence, and she answered them with frustration and anger, in youth she has learnt to 'tame' her character to conform to the prototype of 'proper' femininity at Lowood school, where Jane and the other inmates grow almost as nuns and live secluded and subjected to Brocklehurst's strict rules. In Brontë's novel, Jane is aware of the invisible chains that fetter women, due to social convention, strict gender norms and male prejudice against the 'fair' sex, as she claims:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need to exercise for their faculties as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint... and it is narrow-minded... to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings...It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 1847, 146)

In spite of this, Jane grows into an assertive and independent woman that even makes the most of her situation. Her travels are recurrent all along the novel, each of them signalling a crucial new stage in Jane's life.

No matter how relevant the study of Jane's behaviour in the novel might be from a gender perspective, my concern in this section is with the figure of Bertha Mason, a recurrent icon in feminist and postcolonial analyses of Brontë's text.² Bertha's unruly nature, being aggressive, bestial and violent, gives account of her irrationality. Furthermore, she is not granted the power of speech, but is often depicted uttering guttural sounds, what reinforces her animalisation and monstrosity. A linguistic analysis of *Jane Eyre* reveals the number of times that Rochester and even Jane refer to her as "it", and also the way in which verbs denoting animal behaviour are used to describe Bertha's actions – "It grovelled...it snatched, and growled like some strange animal" (Brontë 1847, 384), as well as nouns and phrases that highlight her wild appearance, like "her grizzled hair" (Brontë 1847, 384). She is even described as a "clothed hyena"

² Jean Rhys explores the origins of Bertha's madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Antoinette Cosway, and her Creole origins take the reader to a past of colonialism and slavery.

(Brontë 1847, 384), what denies once more her humanity.³ We also find in her case some mental processes associated with madness that reaffirm the evolution of her insanity. To name but one example, Bertha bites and stabs her brother, and even tries to set Thornfield on fire on several occasions until her plan succeeds. She is depicted as a demonic and dangerous figure, mentally deviant, violent, self-destructive, and restless. Consequently, she is dehumanized and denied of reason due to her physical and mainly bodily representations. Furthermore, she is “a violent and hideous predator of men, a monster of sexual appetite, and her madness has to do with female sexuality and the periodicity of the menstrual cycle” (Showalter 1987, 67). Bertha’s threatening presence represents a peril for the people surrounding her. In Rochester’s view, Bertha’s insanity has to do with her biological inheritance, “she came of a mad family”, and he continues “with a mother who was a madwoman and a drunkard” (Brontë 1847, 382). She could do nothing else but to conform: “like a dutiful child, she copied her parent in both points” (Brontë 1847, 382).

Hegemonic is also Rochester’s relation towards Jane in Brontë’s novel. In fact, Jane is also victim of Rochester’s strong personality. Nonetheless, the unclean, sexually unchaste and depraved Bertha Mason is set in contrast to Jane’s English Protestant purity. In fact, as mentioned above, Bertha often stands for Jane’s other. Jane’s intimations of Bertha’s presence in the house are finally realized on her wedding day. Till that moment, though, Bertha’s elusive presence haunts Jane’s life since her arrival at Thornfield. It could be even argued that Jane ‘speaks’ for the silenced Bertha, about whom Jane only perceives her demonic laughter, which she compares to a goblin’s.

As we read in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, all female characters in male-authored books can be categorized as either ‘angel’ or ‘monster’ (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 386). There is an implicit contrast between the strong and self-controlled figure of Jane, and the animalistic qualities of Rochester’s first wife. Although they seem to embody two different concepts, those of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ respectively, the lines between these types are constantly blurred. Bertha is not Jane’s opposite, but her double. If we focus again on the author’s choice of vocabulary, very similar images are used to refer to both women, since Jane is sometimes described as a “bad animal”, or

³ This idea of ‘otherness’ in English Literature takes us back to Mary Shelley’s monster in *Frankenstein* (1818, 1831), who is only humanized when he learns to speak. Till that moment, he is described in Victor’s terms as ‘demon’, ‘creature’, ‘devil’, or ‘it’. Bertha being a woman, her representation is also related to moral features and she is described as the succubus; she is sexually active, a feature that seems to be absent from the representation of the monster in *Frankenstein*.

“mad cat” (Brontë 1847, 14-18), and even as a “sorceress” or “witch” (Brontë 1847, 196).

The concept of the *doppelgänger* may easily apply to refer to Jane’s double in the novel. A classic element in the gothic romance, the *doppelgänger* is a “spirit that looks exactly like a living person, or someone who looks exactly like someone else but who is not related to that person” (*Cambridge Dictionary Online*). The personification of Jane’s oppression is expressed through the presence of Bertha, who is her *doppelgänger*. Jane often complains about the tyrannical oppression of the society of that time, and she sometimes realizes that there is no other choice than yielding. Her sufferings are personified by Bertha’s presence. Bertha can be easily read as Jane’s inner part, as her hidden craziness. Jane’s rebellious and passionate nature, which makes her react to oppression, is similar to that of Bertha Mason. Parallels are found between Jane’s experiences in the Red Room, notably her being forcibly supervised by the two servants, just as Bertha is restrained by Grace Poole later on. Furthermore, it can be claimed that Jane refuses to submit to a position of inferiority to those in charge around her, whereas Bertha is the representation of Jane’s darkest side, and cannot survive. Going even further, Brontë uses the device of the mirror to express the duality between Jane and Bertha. When Jane looks at her face, she notices that the reflection in the mirror is colder and darker.

Throughout Brontë’s novel, Bertha progresses towards liberation, and Jane progresses towards freedom. In fact, Bertha puts end to her suffering by committing suicide, ending with their confinement immediately after Jane leaves Thornfield. Bertha’s suicide, which Rochester is said to try to prevent in Brontë’s novel, is instrumental for narrative purposes. Only then can Jane and Rochester marry at the end of the novel. Bertha’s presence in *Jane Eyre* and her final disappearance remains a mystery with different readings. My argument is that Bertha is Brontë’s accomplice in highlighting patriarchal intolerant attitudes towards otherness, of which women on the fringes of society are cases in point.

Different from Bertha’s hereditary insanity in *Jane Eyre* is the case of the nameless protagonist of *The Yellow Wall-Paper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who suffers a case of post-partum depression. The reader gathers that after giving birth, she is not feeling all herself, and is prescribed a rest cure by her male relatives. As explained by the narrator of *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, she finds a strong connection between her slow recovery and the presence of her physician husband. Power-knowledge operates in

the story, where the female narrator has no other choice but to acquiesce. In this case, after her childbirth, the female patient undergoes a rest cure without any kind of physical or mental stimulus, a common solution prescribed only for women with a nervous condition. As well as these two authoritative figures, doctor Silas Weir Mitchell's presence, the greatest nerve specialist in the country, threatens the patient and it seems clear in the text that she will be sent to Mitchell's sanatorium if she does not recover. Inspired by her own personal experiences to write the story, Gilman minutely describes a typical form of patriarchal control over women at the time:

For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia--and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still-good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," to "have but two hours' intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again" as long as I lived. (Gilman 1913, 1)

Similarly to the main character in her short story, Gilman had been forbidden any intellectual activity. In this article Gilman explains that *The Yellow Wall-Paper* was "not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" (Gilman 1913, 1). According to Helen Horowitz, Gilman's intention was also "to emphasize the distinction between nervous illness and insanity". (Horowitz 2010, 177)

The figure of the madwoman is associated with non-human characteristics, and in fact she is denied humanity to justify her confinement. Her insanity is made clear in the text by means of some symptoms such as tiredness, lack of sleep and an increasing psychotic behaviour. We also find instances of non-human traits at the end of Gilman's story. The act of crawling is related to the female figures appearing in *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, excepting Jennie. The women imagined by the main character behave like animals and so does she when her insanity becomes more intense. In fact, the uncanny final scene shows the protagonist crawling over her fainted husband. Apart from animalization, hallucination is another process associated with insanity in *The Yellow Wall-Paper*. The narrator experiences a great amount of hallucinatory moments, more precisely concerning the arabesque paper covering the walls of the room where she is

secluded. In the inmate's view, the yellow pattern has a revolting and repellent colour, a kind of fungus pattern (Gilman 1982, 41). The yellow pattern is described as hideous and unreliable, all of them terms that can easily be applied to herself. The 'horrid' wallpaper changes with the light, and has an irritating shape. Behind the paper, the unnamed character sees a strange, provoking, shapeless figure: "It's like a woman stooping down, and creeping about behind that pattern" (Gilman 1982, 37). She also asserts that "life is very much more exciting now" (1982, 43), and the narrator does not sleep at night, as she wants to observe the wallpaper while it develops. Consequently, she sleeps at daytime while her sleeping routine is interrupted. She carefully studies the wallpaper that becomes a material entity full of semantic dimensions for her.

The wall-paper can be read as a narrative in whose plot there is another woman who experiences a similar suffering to her own: the woman behind the wallpaper is also trying to escape. The narrator of Gilman's story finds herself absorbed in this narrative provided by the wallpaper, and her aim becomes to find some sort of sense and conclusion to the story. In fact, she moves from being a patient to adopting the role of analyst of the wall-paper. In so doing, the relationship between analysed and analyser is strengthened and often blurred, and the reader is at odds to distinguish them, the roles of doctor and patient constantly reversing and taking turns. The reader is given access to this complex mystery of the narrator's troubled mind: "There are things in this paper that nobody knows but me" (Gilman 1982, 37). The paper is further personified: it is said to "look" at the secluded woman with "two bulbous eyes" (Gilman 1982, 31), what reinforces the gothic nature of the story. The presence of a woman behind the wall-paper's pattern, struggling to extricate herself, haunts both the narrator-patient and even the reader, who becomes mesmerized following the intricate mental process of the protagonist, in a scene that often reminds us of Bentham's *panopticon*. The unnamed character explains that "unblinking eyes are everywhere" (Gilman 1982, 31), in a clear reference to the power of the look to control behaviour, reinforced in the case of the vigilance and surveillance of women in patriarchal societies. The paper is further associated with images of violence and aggression, as "it slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you" (Gilman 1982, 41).

We notice a transition in the female character from behaving as the 'Angel in the House' to becoming belligerent and rebellious. At the beginning of this short story she has a conformist and compliant attitude towards her oppressive marriage: "John laughs at me of course, but one expects that in marriage", "romantic felicity would be too much

asking” (Gilman 1892, 23), or “what is one to do” (1982, 25). However, she progressively understands that “[i]t’s hard to talk with John” (1982, 37), and that she is not taken seriously by her husband, who sometimes stares at his wife with a stern reproachful look. The narrator often underlines the intellectual strain she is subjected to and her attempts to follow John’s directives; she even blames him for being indifferent to her. She is interrupted and contradicted by her paternalist husband every time she tries to utter her point of view. Consequently, she gets progressively angry with John, and as the narrator’s insanity becomes more acute, we find a lack of cohesion and coherence in the text: “I’m getting dreadfully fretful querulous [...] It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight” (Gilman 1982, 33).

The narrator’s lack of independence reflects the status of American women in general at the time, and as Regina Morantz-Sanchez keenly observed: “Medical men [of the nineteenth century] were unable to cure most diseases-not just those of women but of everyone. Indeed, they tortured men and women indiscriminately” (Morantz-Sanchez, in Hartman 1976, 44). In *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, we notice the husband’s inability to understand the peril of the situation. In fact, there is a final confrontation at the end of the text, when John observes his wife crawling, to which he reacts by fainting (ironically a behaviour that is traditionally associated with femininity). Although John fulfils the role of villain in this neo-gothic tale, we can conclude that he finally assumes the traditional role of frail female whereas the female narrator emerges victorious, crawling over her fainted husband.

These mad figures in *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper* are secluded in spaces delimited for these purposes, being space another central issue in the two texts to understand British and American treatments of insanity. Furthermore, both Brontë and Gilman revise the gothic in their texts: according to Aparna Srivastava, gothic elements in *Jane Eyre* are symbolically used to create a new, ‘female’ language. However, we find gothic evidences in the references to female confinement within domestic spaces. The gothic is examined through the imagery of enclosed spaces of the ghostly mansions where both stories develop (Srivastava 2014). In the following section, the analysis of the places, buildings and rooms where the mad female characters are secluded will follow.

4. Images of confinement in Brontë and Gilman

Both *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper* draw a perfectly knit connection between female insanity and space, suggesting that British and American women were often constrained under strict systems of vigilance that prescribed their roles. At this stage, we will focus on the references, allusions and meanings of spaces of internment and seclusion, often authorized by the medical profession in the two novels under inspection. Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason in Brontë's novel, and the unnamed narrator in Gilman's story claim for textual and personal space in the two narratives.

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë's depiction of Lowood as a prison of horror is not exaggerated, as James Parton relates:

Its miserable diet, unhealthy situation, long lessons, rigid discipline, low type of religion, and continual sermons upon humility—nothing is there forgotten, nor is anything exaggerated. Moreover, the descriptions of both teachers and pupils are most of them portraits [...] A single incident related to Mrs. Gaskell by a fellow pupil of the Brontë girls of the way in which this studious and sickly child was treated, shows effectually that Charlotte's picture of Lowood is not overdrawn, and fully justifies the anguish and burning indignation with which she always recalled her sojourn there. (Parton 2008, 32)

Autobiographical details about Brontë show that reality regarding these institutions was even worse than the representation offered in her novel. It was a harsh time for vulnerable members of society, like the orphan Jane. Moreover, Rochester's attitudes towards the deranged Bertha confirms us the disposition of Victorian society towards the mentally ill. His secrecy regarding his former wife makes us reflect upon the fear of the other, which was deeply entrenched in the society: generally, there was a lack of sympathy concerning the insane. Bertha is unknown almost to everyone, "a defrauded wretch, already bound to bad, mad, and embruted partner", in Rochester's terms (Brontë 1847, 383). Bertha lives under extreme inhuman conditions, because she is not socially acceptable. Her unaccountability explains that she is made invisible to every one till the climactic moment of Jane and Rochester's wedding, where her dramatic discovery is instrumental to complete the last stage of Jane's development.

Several times throughout the novel, Jane's association with open spaces and evocative images of the Yorkshire landscape are contrasted with Bertha's (and Grace

Poole's) association with seclusion and imprisonment. She is locked in a windowless room, and with the only light of a fire where Grace Poole cooks. Bertha is chained within a claustrophobic space that enforces a regime of docility upon her. Initially powerless, or at least rendered powerless for most of the story, though her noisy 'absence' is a constant harbinger of danger and death in the novel, Bertha escapes Grace's inefficient surveillance several times in the narrative. On those few but significant occasions when she leaves the attic, she becomes a strong figure of agency, physically powerful and menacing, although she needs to wait till her jailer is asleep or drunk to have a chance to escape.

If Bertha is locked in a Gothic mansion, the protagonist of *The Yellow Wall-Paper* is made to inhabit a room in a 'colonial mansion' in the country, the echoes between the two being evident and very telling. From the very beginning in Gilman's story, the house is depicted as haunted, with a ghostly nature about it, a place reminiscent of trouble and mayhem. The place chosen by John is the perfect isolated site for rehabilitation since it is far from the village, and the idea of isolation is remarked also in the narrator's explanation that "John is away all day...even some nights" (Gilman 1982, 27). However, this isolation together with the fact that a woman is kept secluded in the upper floor, suggest gothic echoes and connections. Similarly to Rochester, he maintains his 'mad' wife at home, a situation that is commonly associated, as Chiara Battisti and Sidia Fiorato explain, with the notion of incarcerated wives in the gothic, where there is a metaphorical death of the wife who becomes increasingly fearful and suspicious of her husband (Battisti and Fiorato, in Carpi and Monateri 2012, 183).

The narrator's feeling of claustrophobia due to her seclusion is pressing in the narrative. For example, her use of "delicious" (Gilman 1982, 25) when she refers to the garden outside denotes that open spaces mean freedom for her. She is said to be interned in an "atrocious nursery" (Gilman 1982, 27) at the top of the house, without any contact with the external world or her newly born baby. Windows are barred "for little children" (Gilman 1982, 27), the narrator says to herself, and the keen reader is led to reflect about the connections between the paternal dependence of mentally impaired women and children. Both in *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, female characters are seen in patronizing terms by Rochester and John. Rochester refers to Jane as "my little wife" (Brontë 1847, 335) and "little elf" (Brontë 1847, 339) whereas John refers to his wife using the expressions "blessed little goose" (Gilman 1982, 29), "bless her little heart!"

(Gilman 1982, 39). Such diminutives and endearments used by the patronizing figures of Rochester and John establish a sense of hierarchical male superiority over women.

In *The Yellow Wall-Paper* the inmate's room also contains an "immovable bed" (Gilman 1982, 35), which reinforces the idea of imprisonment and stasis. Curiously enough, the protagonist behaves passively outside the attic, whereas she is only active inside, trying to decipher the mystery of the paper, which also shows bars. The room is finally depicted as a prison whose wallpaper is stripped off. Elaine Showalter interprets the narrator's hallucinatory visions as follows:

It seems clear that it is an abandoned private mental hospital. The barred windows are not to protect children, but to prevent inmates from jumping out. The walls and the bed have been gouged and gnawed by other prisoners. The women she sees creeping in the hedges are perhaps the ghosts of former patients. (Showalter 1991, 133–4)

Although this is mainly speculative, the description made by the inhabitant of the room paves the way to interpretations about the place being used to confine serious (and violent) mental patients, and it is possible that another crazy woman has lived there before. I prefer to read the woman's visions in less creepy and ghostly terms, and interpret the other women she sees as fantasies or hallucinations common to extreme cases of seclusion.

As we have seen so far, Charlotte Brontë and Charlotte Perkins Gilman recreate spaces of internment for the 'mad' female characters in their stories. Both authors aim to reflect the cruel reality of the nineteenth century, when the incarceration of disobedient daughters and wives became widespread. Fathers and husbands sent their rebellious female relatives to madhouses sometimes to avoid scandal. Nonetheless, class remained a strong determining factor in evaluating the mentally ill, as Showalter makes clear:

The rich could avoid the stigma of certification by keeping mad relatives at home, or by seeking private care. Among the wealthier classes, bizarre behaviour would be described as nervousness or eccentricity until the patient became unmanageable, suicidal, or violent. (Showalter 1987, 26)

Similarities concerning class between Bertha and the narrator of *The Yellow Wall-Paper* are remarkable. Both women belong to the upper class since their husbands are wealthy, and consequently they have escaped the asylum fate and are kept at home in a space designed to control and observe them. This is crucial especially in Bertha's case, since

that allows Rochester to move freely and woo other women, like Jane and the Ingrams, without being socially and publicly censored.

Despite the cruelty of the incarceration in both texts, in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* this reclusive room is described by the narrator as a place of refuge with a “beautiful door” that she feels it would be a shame to demolish (Gilman 1982, 53). As the narrative progresses, she aims to remain within the room, studying its wallpaper. The figure behind this pattern is depicted as a plain woman, with bare feet, subdued and quiet by daylight, as the narrator is, while they become active at night. The narrator embarks on a process of rescuing the woman from the oppressing pattern, and she evolves from an observer to an active participant in the changing patterns of the wallpaper. It seems that the narrator acts protectively towards the woman behind the pattern: not only does she scratch the paper, but also she ties the woman into the room, which I interpret as a way of helping the woman to remain in the room with her.

Similarly to the identification between Jane and her double Bertha, in *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, Gilman fosters the association between the narrator and the ‘woman on the wall’. In fact, there is a point in which the narrator recognizes the woman in the paper as herself, and the concept of the *doppelgänger* again recurs. This situation of duplicity goes further resulting in the two women becoming one. However, we can find not only a duplicity of characters but they triplicate since there is, thus, a correspondence between Gilman and the protagonist of the story, and between the protagonist and the woman behind the pattern. The same could be said about *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason and Charlotte Brontë, if we focus on autobiographical elements. Equally remarkable for the development of the story is the introduction of a new character, Jane. This remains a mystery in the story. It is highly probable, though, that Jane is the protagonist herself, who at this point in the narrative remains a stranger to herself, or at least until she manages to get free: “I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (Gilman 1982, 53).

Especial attention will be given to the idea of vigilance and surveillance in both texts. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason and her counterpart Jane are carefully subjected to close surveillance. It could be argued that not only Bertha, but also Jane are constantly watched over, not only by Rochester—who even cross-dresses to evaluate Ingram and Jane’s behaviour: “I wonder what thoughts are busy in your heart” (Brontë 1847, 259)—but also by the character of Mrs Fairfax, an updated version of the gothic servant or jailer, mostly ineffectual when the heroine is in need of protection, or when the

gothic villain is absent. Grace Poole is another interesting and enigmatic character in the novel. She takes care of Bertha and she is responsible for her wellbeing, though her main purpose is to keep her in the attic, far from everyone else's sight. Bertha is a burden for Grace, whose life is also one of seclusion. She is not even regarded by the other servants in the house, and occupies no definite social space. Similarly, in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* by Gilman, the madwoman is controlled by Jennie, her sister-in-law, who fulfils the role of vigilant. Their presence in the stories makes possible the perpetuation of male surveillance and female subjection. They are the faithful accomplices of the system. As mentioned before, the unblinking eyes within the yellow pattern in Gilman's story are vigilant agents, connected to the previously explained concept of *panopticism* by Bentham.

Physical punishment and torture are used to exert discipline over unruly inmates: the insane can be chained, barred from the world, their beds nailed on the ground or rings might be on the walls. These are visible reminders of the way in which deviance was regarded and the persuasive means by which the 'others' could be turned to 'normalcy'. To these restrictive measures, the patient in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* claims that some work would do her good (Gilman 1982, 25). Other remedies could include, as it is mentioned in Gilman's story, the use of cod-liver oil and other tonics, wine and meat, phosphates and phosphites, which opens up new interpretations about the possibility of the patient being prescribed drugs to weaken her mind.

The madwomen in *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper* devise their own means of escape from their confinement: Bertha Mason sets Thornfield on fire, whereas the unnamed protagonist of Gilman's *novella* resorts to writing as a means of escape, a route to her mental wellbeing. *The Yellow Wall-Paper* is composed by diary entries in which the narrator expresses a fragmented testimony of the horror experienced. Writing is described as a 'relief' and female writing becomes an act of rebellion and self-expression. Gilman develops the idea of writing as the only effective treatment. Nonetheless, the unnamed character of the story has to hide to write and is interrupted on several occasions by John and Jennie, moments in which the female writer uses the signs + + + + + to mark the end of the scene. Although Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is denied the power of speech, and the main character in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* is able to express herself, they act rebelliously: in the same way that Bertha fights back, the narrator in Gilman's story writes back against the patriarchal system which denies and silences them. Her use of the "I" inserts her own version in the text, making clear her

will to be heard and taken into account. Creativity, especially female creativity, has been often associated with madness, though, as Matsuoka explains:

Geniuses are perhaps, to varying degrees, persons with morbidly excitable imaginations, and it seems highly probable that a kind of lunacy is exercised. The creative activities of art and entertainment require a freedom of imagination in order to transform the mundane, yet madding, realities of daily life. (Matsuoka 2013, 228)

This quote is related to the lack of aspirations or prospects in life of women during the nineteenth century, and there is an apparent collusion between these two characters, since Jennie is the incarnation of the feminine ideal. The idea of self-destruction is also recurrent in both texts. In the British novel *Jane Eyre*, Bertha's inclination for havoc and destruction is remarkable, ruining her own life. Similarly, self-destructive inclinations also appear in Gilman's story: "The lines commit suicide" (Gilman 1982, 27). This suicidal tendency appears also in a reflection made by the female protagonist: "I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try. Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued" (Gilman 1892, 51).

The Yellow Wall-Paper can be perfectly understood as a story of transition from a slight hysterical tendency or a nervous breakdown, which becomes increasingly unhinged, resulting in a perilous situation of insanity. To this extent, we question whether the diagnosis and treatment prescribed to the protagonist is the proper one. Similarly, we can conclude that the seclusion offered for Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is neither beneficial nor fair.

5. Conclusions

As Smith-Rosenberg states, "physicians and psychologists have seen hysteria as a 'neurosis' or character disorder. [...] All define the disease as peculiarly female" (Smith-Rosenberg 1985, 197). In view of the ideas mentioned above, both Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and the narrator in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* are representatives of insanity, a common female disease during the nineteenth century. They are clearly victims of the oppressive patriarchal social system prevailing at that time. In both texts there is clear evidence of male control over women through fathers, brothers and husbands. Accordingly, there were institutions during the Victorian times, namely,

marriage or the legal system, which confined women and deemed them mad. Furthermore, not only were they victims of men but also were made victims of the medical establishment, kept as prisoners in reclusive spaces as a common treatment. In some way, Victorian psychiatry silenced women who threatened to step outside their assigned roles, and was responsible for the rise of the figure of the Victorian.

Concerning Bertha Mason, I would argue that female insanity is not only related to the illness but also to the situation of confinement both Bertha and Jane suffer. In the case of *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, the female character is incorrectly diagnosed of hysteria and is forced to take an unsuitable remedy that in fact entails the progressive deterioration of the character into an irreversible case of madness. The cure is worse than the disease, as Gray described, “[a] regimen of bed rest and confinement that almost drove her, she said later, to ‘utter mental ruin’” (2004, 136). Gilman criticises the medical establishment and its accomplices. John and Doctor Weir Silas Mitchell are ironically depicted as wise men by the unnamed protagonist, and also by Gilman herself in her article “Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wall-Paper*.”

Brontë and Gilman’s women do not accept being silenced and challenge patriarchal authority. Bertha Mason and the protagonist in Gilman’s story are examples of female rebellion against the social, domestic, and psychological confinements of the nineteenth century. In Gilbert and Gubar viewpoint, she represents an image of the anxiety and suppressed rage experienced by silenced and marginalised Victorian women writer (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 78). Bertha’s rage and violent tendencies against Rochester and Thornfield are remarkable. In a like manner, the female protagonist in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* is also transgressive regarding John’s prescriptions, for instance when she is prescribed not to write, yet she decides to do so. As it is claimed in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, *The Yellow Wall-Paper* symbolises the “oppressive structures of the society in which the protagonist/narrator finds herself” (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 130).

In the texts analysed, madness is understood not as an opportunity but as the only chance to escape from the traditional roles, and the places of confinement are to a certain extent places of refuge. Nonetheless, it may be suspected that Bertha Mason and the unnamed character in Gilman’s story were not crazy but marginalized women, condemned to seclusion because they did not fit into the social and dominant Victorian paradigm.

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