FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Traballo de Fin e Grao

Two Versions of the Antimaternal: The Change of the Conception of Motherhood and Female Sexuality in the Late Victorian Period

Autora: Lorena Bugallo Veiga

Titor: Jorge Sacido Romero

CURSO 2020 - 2021

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Título: Two Versions of the Antimaternal: the Change of the Conception of Motherhood and Female Sexuality in the Late Victorian Period.

Resumo: In the beginning of the Victorian era, women's role in society was still limited to the domestic sphere, with no access to the political sphere or the work place. A change for the better regarding said role took place at the end of the 19th century, when a reaction against the conception of True Womanhood rose, in the shape of the New Woman, who vindicated the right to break free from traditional boundaries.

Two aspects of womanhood were specially affected by this active feminist movement: motherhood and sexuality. Perspective changed so that many women began to oppose the view of motherhood as a duty, even rejecting it altogether to pursue a career in the public sphere. However, this change was contested not only by men but also by the many women who still praised the True Womanhood ideal. The New Woman soon became, for the most conservative people, an embodiment of everything a woman should not be: sexually active, seducing, independent, rejecting their socially imposed duties such as motherhood...

Another interesting topic brought to light by this struggle to change the terms of gender relations was the challenge that pregnancy and motherhood meant for women. Women who did not reject motherhood did in many cases decide to expose the hardships that conceiving, carrying, birthing and raising a child entailed, and in that way de-glorify motherhood. These women were not positively regarded either, since just like the ones who rejected motherhood entirely, they were undermining the foundations of Victorian society and the True Womanhood concept.

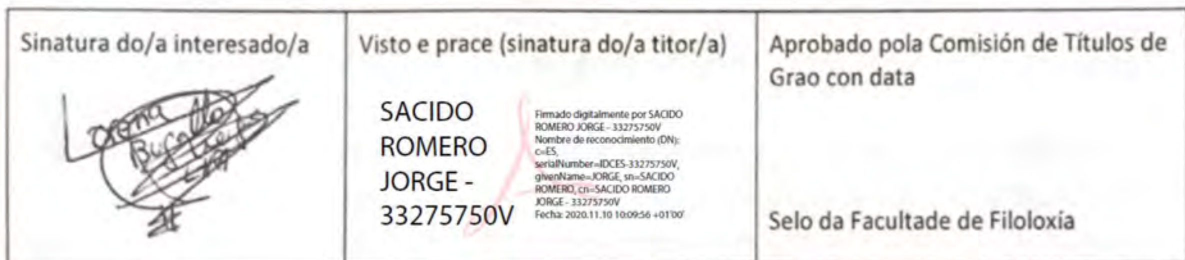
Thus, this dissertation aims to analyse from a contrastive point of view the way these revolutionary women were viewed by Victorian society, finding a connection between both versions of the antimaternal and female sexuality through the literary works of Bram Stocker, *Dracula*, (1897) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899), since such works articulate depictions of these new conceptions of motherhood

and sexuality, both from the male and female point of view, yet not devoid of conflict.

Perkins Guilman, Charlotte. 2019. "The Yellow Wallpaper." *The Yellow Wallpaper and other stories*, 7-24. London: Legend Press.

Stocker, Bram. 2003. *Dracula*. London: Penguin Books

Santiago de Compostela, 05 de Novembro de 2020.



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1. Introduction

Two decades into the 21st century, it is safe to say that feminism has made its way into the media and become a mainstream subject of conversation. Its presence in people's lives has brought on a change in politics, the economy, the public and private spheres, etc. Women fight tirelessly so that those guilty of perpetrating or consenting sexist and patriarchal behaviours and actions are held accountable for it. Thanks to their struggle, the most advanced countries of the world are progressively introducing equality bills into their legislations and toughening up the sanctions for those who transgress them. Unfortunately, the fight is far from over. Domestic violence, rape and all types of violence and discrimination exerted upon women are still a big problem. Patriarchal environments still resist to accept sexually liberated women, as well as those who decide to forego maternity.

Back in the 19th century, society held some extremely patriarchal beliefs: women were only fit for having children and taking care of them, of their husbands and of their homes. It was not infrequent that women who decided to step outside their domestic imprisonment were considered mentally unbalanced and admitted into mental asylums in an effort to keep the foundations of Victorian society intact. Fortunately, the *fin-de-siècle* saw the emergence of the ideal of the New Woman as a movement of feminist liberation. It vindicated women's sexual freedom, as well as the right to choose the path they desired in their lives. With great effort, this new ideal eventually reached the homes of many Victorian families, helping in women's emancipation and pursuit of a better life.

It is surprising how a fight that started more than a hundred years ago still carries on today. Analysing the past from a gender perspective is essential to understand how much - or how little - progress has been made regarding women's rights. The Victorian era lends itself to a historical analysis from a gender perspective given all the changes that took place in it. Taking

this into account, this dissertation aims to provide an overview of the different perspectives people had regarding women's issues during the *fin-de-siècle.* Many literary works of this period captured women's vindications and feature female characters who offer a glimpse into their creator's thoughts and considerations regarding the New Woman.

The two main works chosen to carry out this analysis are "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker. Though, or perhaps, because these two works are very different, they prove ideal to carry out a contrastive analysis. They have been chosen for the different approach and interpretation they offer on the question of female sexual liberation and the issue of maternity. The short story by Gilman tries to evoke sympathy and comprehension on the reader, with a female perspective sensitive to the hardships of the main character, whereas Stoker's novel is unforgiving on account of his representation of rebellious female characters.

Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady. Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1985) proved indispensable when it came to contextualize the discussion. It accurately explains women's situation before the New Woman movement and the changes that said revolution caused. An emphasis is made on the thoughts society and physicians had concerning women's issues. Gilman's story offers a deep analysis into the psychological problems that pregnancy, childbirth and the constricting patriarchal way of life caused on women, aiming at eliciting comprehension and compassion towards the character's suffering. On the other hand, Stoker's novel pretends to set the standard of the acceptable New Woman while demonizing and punishing sexually liberated women and those who rejected motherhood, presenting them as obscure characters.

Analysing and contrasting these two works and the points of view their respective authors, the main goal is to comprehend how these different perspectives portrayed women in

light of the decisions they made and the behaviour they had, to hopefully prompt further reflection on how much the New Woman movement foreshadowed the contemporary feminist movements and raise an awareness of how patriarchal conceptions and expectations still prevail in present-day societies. Furthermore, the differences that come to the fore in these two works will help to shed light on the different ways they present female vicissitudes, exposing the lack of empathy of people who do not share such like experiences as well as the lack of interest in trying to understand them.

Chapter one contextualizes women's situation during the Victorian period, in which they were expected to be Angels in the House. This is later contrasted with the changes introduced by the New Woman movement, specifically in the fields of maternity and female insanity. The issues discussed in this chapter are developed in my analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), which offers a female perspective on these matters. Chapter two focuses on the changes experienced in the field of female sexuality and society's reactions to these changes, as articulated in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1987).

2. Antimaternity and Madness: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Since the beginning of time, motherhood has been considered compulsory for women. While men have always had an easy way out of their paternal duties and have seldom been condemned for abandoning their children, the smallest mistake or misdemeanour made by a mother has earned her the title of negligent. Women who did not desire to become mothers but did so forced by society's expectations condemned themselves to a life full of monotony and unhappiness.

There are examples in history of women who defied conventions and expectations, contesting patriarchal rule and aspiring to live freer lives. Eventually, individual actions crystallize in a collective movement by the end of the 19th century, a time in which women decided it was necessary for them to take the reins of their future. To do so, they had to defy many conventions and confront many obstacles ranging from strange looks from friends and family to forced admittance into asylums for the mentally ill, where they had to undergo harsh, unnecessary treatments and therapies that tried to brainwash them out of their ideas. The fight was tortuous, but it eventually paid off.

2. 1. Rejecting the Angel in the House

The feminist movement struggles, as it has done for centuries, to expose the injustices suffered daily by women all over the world. These injustices vary significantly according to women's race, sexual orientation, economic situation and country of origin, given that many of the issues are rooted in specific cultural or socio-economic backgrounds. The heterogeneity of factors at play makes it impossible to defend the existence of just one feminist movement, but what feminism of all kinds shares is the contestation of patriarchal ideology everywhere in the world. One of the longest feminist struggles has been the fight for the recognition of women's intellectual abilities and their capability to partake in the same jobs as men, paired with the

demand of the right to be independent, legal subjects in full control of their lives and their future. In the 21st century, things have undoubtedly gotten better. Women in many countries have more legal and economic rights than they had in the past, they have access to the public sphere to pursue political careers and their desired jobs; their future is mostly theirs to plan. Although the old view that women are only suitable for the domestic sphere still remains in some cultures and individuals, it is undeniable that what the feminist movement has collectively achieved has meant a great improvement for women in general. Millions of women have been able to escape the "women's sphere" that unapologetically held them as prisoners of the patriarchal order.

Christine Stansell, in her article "Review: Revisiting the Angel in the House: Revisions of Victorian Womanhood", defines woman's sphere as "the part of society Victorians deemed to be properly within women's control" (1987, 467). Stansell laments the fact that, subjected to the claustrophobic domestic space, women earned the reputation of being "strait-laced, empty-headed and repressed" ladies. The repressive environment women inhabited carried with it many downsides, such as "thwarted hearts and minds, intellectual poverty, artistic blockage" (Stansell, 1987, 468). Nevertheless, many feminist theorists support the idea that this reclusive sphere unexpectedly gave women the ability to empower themselves and reach their emancipation, using this forced domesticity to their advantage. One of these theorists is Carrol Smith-Rosenberg, who in the essays compiled under the title *Disorderly Conduct* (1986), reflects upon the situation of women in the *fin-de-siècle.* As Stansell herself highlights, Smith-Rosenberg's opinion can result in controversy, as the latter believed the gender issue was the biggest concern during the 19th century, obviating the class and racial conflicts that shaped the *fin-de-siècle* and affected many women. But alas, the gender division of society did affect every aspect of women's life in the Victorian period.

Women's domestic status included all the housework: cooking, cleaning, raising children etc. In the case of middle-class families, women had to "perform the ideological work of managing the class question and displaying the signs of the family's status" (Langland 1992, 291). This meant, in short, ruling over the servants of the house. This space, however, extended to functions outside the house like church and charitable works, also considered appropriate spaces for women.

The term "Angel in the House" was taken from a homonymous poem written by Coventry Patmore, published in parts between 1854 and 1862. This long narrative poem was inspired by Patmore's wife, Emily, whom he considered to be the perfect wife according to Victorian standards: docile, submissive, domestic, obedient… The perfect passive subject who would not threaten the patriarchal system by trying to step off her social role. After the publication of this poem, the term "Angel in the House" became a synonym of "a good woman": a woman who followed the ideal of True Womanhood, who was a good housewife, a good mother and a good spouse, obedient and submissive to her husband; a woman who knew her place was in the domestic sphere and did not try to overstep her boundaries.

For a long time, women diligently followed the imposed social order and did what they were told to do. This *status quo* had many detractors, which became especially outspoken during the Enlightenment period, particularly those who followed the tenets articulated in works such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). General changes for the better began around the second half of the 19th century in the Western World, when many women started to grow tired of having their lives controlled by men as well as of the claustrophobic, monotonous lifestyle they were forced to carry out: getting married, handling the housework, and birthing and raising children ceaselessly. Together, these individuals started what seemed like a silent revolution in their own homes, but which

progressively trespassed the threshold of their houses to invade the public sphere, demanding sexual, economic and social freedom. A revolutionary movement grew progressively, and the ideal New Woman was endorsed by many.

2.2. Motherhood: from common goal to inconvenience

As Greg Buzwell argues in his "Daughters of Decadence: the New Woman in the Victorian *fin-de-siècle*" (2014), one of the biggest changes during the *fin-de-siècle* was the sexual freedom that the New Woman vindicated. The Victorian conception of woman included the belief that, by nature, women did not feel sexual desire: "As a general rule a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attention." (William Acton qtd. in Buzwell 2014). As the quote states, women were thought to only feel the need to have intercourse in order to procreate. Therefore, when women started to express their interest in non-reproductive sex and their growing distaste for the almost compulsory "task" of motherhood, the foundation of ~~the~~ Victorian patriarchal society was threatened, thus many opposed this idea. Linda Gordon, in her *Women's Body, Women's Right* (1976), states that this supposedly inherent asexuality of Victorian women became somewhat an advantage for them, as it functioned as a very practical contraception tool: by keeping their sexual relationships to a minimum they could more easily avoid unwanted pregnancies.

As Stassa Edwards explains in her article "The History of Abortifacients" (2014), when the limitation of sexual relationships failed as a contraceptive, women used abortifacient herbs, plants and seeds quite frequently along the 19th century. This action was only considered abortion after the women declared her own pregnancy, which usually happened after she felt the baby move inside her womb for the first time, a moment known as the "ensoulment", which "could occur anywhere between 14 and 20 weeks of pregnancy". Abortion was not really

regulated, as Edwards further explains, and the foetus was not recognized as a legal subject. Ultimately and for a long time, women did not have many difficulties in terminating their pregnancies, as abortifacients were available everywhere and midwives were trained for their safe use and administration.

Women's decision to end their pregnancies was almost always a product of their desire to break away from the domestic sphere and curb their seemingly unavoidable future as mothers and housewives. For this reason, the tendency of performing abortions was slowly rising towards the *fin-de-siècle* in the United Kingdom, at the same moment in which the New Woman ideal spread throughout the Western World, openly threatening patriarchy's foundation with their actions. Abortifacients were giving women an easy way out of their womanly duties. It was at this moment that the Church deemed it necessary to get involved in the matter, helping to make abortifacients illegal in the hope of fully controlling women's lives once again. This, however, did not mean the cessation of abortion, but a mere change in the marketing of abortifacients: as Edwards comments, pills and powders to "remedy female problems" could be found advertised in newspapers, with disclaimers not to consume during pregnancy as they could lead to an "unwanted" miscarriage. But because they were now illegal, many of these treatments were not tested to prove their safety and were usually very damaging for the consumer: "some of the pills were placebos, some purgatives or laxatives, and others straight up poisons" (Edwards, 2014). Eventually, in 1905 – after years of numerous documented cases of women suffering from lead poisoning and other conditions provoked by these so-called abortifacients - a bill was passed in England which stated that "the advertisement and sale of drugs or articles designed for promoting miscarriage or procuring abortion to be made illegal, and that to advertise drugs or articles designed from the prevention of conception should be illegal" (Edwards, 2014). This bill fixed the problem of dangerous drugs being sold as something they were not, entailing *de facto* the total incrimination of

abortion and the deprivation of means for women who did not desire to carry their pregnancies to term. They were forced to go back to square one: staying at home and performing their motherly duties compulsorily.

Something similar happened in the US a few years earlier with the passing of the Comstock Law in 1873. As Edwards remarks, the law "hunted down" abortion providers without changing the fact that abortion was still legal if it was performed before the moment of ensoulment. Realizing the loophole in their bill, the US states began to recognize that life began at the moment of conception and made abortions illegal at any stage of the pregnancy. It sum: at the beginning of the 20th century, women had officially lost almost every abortion right they possessed during the 19th century in the US and England. This is the reason why women who did not desire to become pregnant, finding more trouble to access abortifacients and safe abortions as time passed, resorted to use their undeniably made-up asexuality to their advantage, diminishing the sexual relationships they had to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

In her work *The Female Malady. Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1985), Elaine Showalter adds another reason why society thought that women's deviation from their predisposed path in life was problematic. As the author explains, while women were progressively expressing their wishes to break out into the public sphere, "doctors warned them that pursuit of such opportunities would lead to sickness, sterility, and race suicide" (Showalter, 1985, 121). Darwin, in his *The Descent of Man* (1870) claimed that "female intellectual inferiority" was a result of natural selection, which had made reproduction the only purpose of women, a task which did not require much intellect. Showalter also cites Henry Maudsley, who assured that "women are manifestly endowed with qualities of mind which specially fit them to stimulate and foster the first growths of intelligence in children" (Maudsley qtd. in Showalter 1985, 123). All these statements supported the conception of motherhood as the essence of

womanhood held by the Victorians: “women were mentally constituted to take care of children, as well as physically constituted to give birth” (Showalter, 1985, 123). If motherhood was avoided, it would lead to a series of physical and mental issues for women. Under the false pretence of caring for women’s health and basing their statements on unproven ideas, men tried to recover their total control over women’s lives.

Darwinian psychiatrists assured that “[m]ental breakdown [...] would come when women defied their nature, attempted to compete with men instead of serving them, or sought alternatives or even additions to their maternal functions” (Showalter 1985, 123). This way, these psychiatrists also sustained the idea that escaping maternity was the principal cause of women’s “hysterical breakdowns” (Showalter 1985, 147), while dismissing the impact that such a constricting lifestyle - based on serving others and living up to very strict standards - could have on their mental health. Furthermore, Maudsley assured, menstruation - an unavoidable cycle in a woman’s life - meant an “extraordinary expenditure of vital energy” (Showalter 1985, 125) during puberty. With energy being considered something “definite and not inexhaustible” (Showalter 1985, 125), experts assured that women were left with little energy to develop any other task or intellectual effort that deviated from their nature. As Showalter continues to recall, the worst possible outcome presented by the psychiatrists was the ultimate degeneration of the reproductive capacity, “beginning with the atrophy of the breasts and ending with a total loss of ‘pelvic power’, or sexless sterility” (Showalter 1985, 125). This meant that women who tried to escape their “duties” were eventually expected to lose their female attributes and become “sexless beings” (Showalter 1985, 125). Such a statement caused an ever-growing fear among women, whose physical appearance played an important role in their lives and for whom beauty standards were solely based on their femininity, effectively having them abandon the idea of stepping out of their designated sphere.

2.3. Consequences of disobedience: female insanity in the 19th century

Not having children made it easier for women to access the public sphere and increased their chances of controlling their future. Yet this was not the only reason why the New Woman was shying away from motherhood: committing to a task other than motherhood was not the only cause of women's mental and physical health problems, even though specialists forcefully insisted on this idea.

As Showalter states, "at the beginning of Victoria's reign, England [...] also led the world in madness" (Showalter, 1985, 24). In general, according to her, doctors insisted on relating madness and lunacy to physical causes like "inflammations of the brain and disorders of the blood" (Showalter 1985, 30). Other physical reasons to be interned in an asylum, as shown in the admittance data of the Colney Hatch asylum, were "intemperance, masturbation, head injury, epilepsy, and fever". But there were also "moral" causes like "domestic grief, unemployment, loss of property, [or] jealousy" (Showalter, 1985, 30).

With the Domestication of Insanity, as Showalter calls it, the rights of "the insane" and "lunatics" to be treated like people were prioritized. Asylums had been, for years, subjecting their patients to inhumane conditions which were later proved to be more harmful for their frail state of mind. Therefore, asylums were progressively reformed to feel homier and more familiar, giving patients a better quality of life. Mechanical restraints were abolished and the ultimate goal of the asylums, Showalter adds, was to cure insanity, not to manage it.

For women inmates, conditions were not the same as for the male patients, just as their reasons for hospitalization were different, too. In the chapter "The Rise of the Victorian Madwoman", Showalter observes that, while in 1845 men were generally more likely to be diagnosed with insanity, just a few years later – by the 1850s – there were more female than

male patients in public asylums. By the end of the century, the disproportion of male versus female patients had grown dramatically.

In addition, many psychiatrists believed that, apart from avoiding their womanly and motherly duties, women could also become insane because of their emotional instability which was believed to be influenced by the female reproductive system. Following this line of thought, female insanity was also commonly associated with biological processes like pregnancy and childbirth (as well as puberty, menstruation etc.). Showalter quotes G. Fielding Blandford, who stated that "Women become insane during pregnancy, after parturition, during lactation, […] The sympathetic connection existing between the brain and the uterus is plainly seen by the most casual observer" (Blandford qtd. Showalter 1985, 55).

Female puberty is characterized by the biological process of menstruation, which can potentially bring with it a series of side effects or issues which affect woman both physically and mentally, potentially making female puberty more troubling than male puberty. However, linking the brain and the uterus, making the latter responsible for the conditions of the former, implies that all women were expected to become insane at some point in their lifetime. As Showalter explains, female puberty was categorized by Dr. Edward Tilt as a state of "miniature insanity". This "miniature insanity" included drastic changes in behaviour which turned young girls "irreligious, selfish, slanderous, false, malicious, devoid of affection…" (Showalter, 1985, 56). These "symptoms" are nowadays acknowledged as the effect of the constant flow of hormones at puberty, which both young males and females experience indiscriminately. But for Victorians, a rebellious attitude was not a normal thing for a woman or young girl to display, as they ought to be docile, gentle and ever obedient. The simplest deviation from that expected behaviour resulted in a false diagnosis of insanity, which was essentially a way to pathologize women's puberty and invalidate their behaviour and feelings. An example of the habit of

pathologizing women's rebelliousness is given by Showalter: a young seventeen-year-old girl had been admitted to the Royal Edinburgh Asylum after she had run away from her house without warning to spend the night with some workmen. This rebellious act was immediately considered proper of an insane woman, who dared to disobey the authoritative figures present in her life and exhibit a very improper, promiscuous behaviour.

Showalter further explains how puberty, adolescence and menstruation could be significantly anxiety-inducing for young girls. As these issues should be kept private, many mothers did not warn their daughters about menstruation. When they first experimented it, many women "were frightened, screamed, or even went into fits [...] Some thought themselves wounded and frantically tried to wash the blood away" (Showalter, 1985, 57). As the author continues to say, menstruation also meant the beginning of the restrictions in life for women: "physical activities, traveling, exercise, and study were curtailed or forbidden" (Showalter, 1985, 57). The first menstruation was considered a decisive step into womanhood, which meant the end of a young girl's supposed freedom and her immediate insertion into the lady-like life framed by patriarchal expectations she was supposed to be up to.

Bearing all this in mind, two main issues can be pinpointed: on the one hand, the ignorance women had of their own body and its functions, which made their changes more dramatic and traumatic than they should have been. A process which could have been dealt with smoothly with the appropriate amount of information resulted in a shock for unsuspecting young girls, who then too had to keep everything regarding their female issues private, thus further aggravating their psychological state. On the other hand, said ignorance also made it easier for male psychiatrists and professionals to justify their unproven theories about female anatomy and mental functioning. Women had no place in the psychiatric field, only as caretakers in asylums, with no chance to voice their opinions or feelings, relying exclusively

on the conclusions male specialists reached without much proof other than Darwin's theory of female intellectual inferiority. All these reasons were enough to cause a mental breakdown, but society was not ready to de-construct itself and revise its flawed foundations to find a reason for the pandemic that seemed to be female insanity and instead put the blame on their apparent weak nature.

Considering the fact that the vast majority of women lived through a possibly traumatic period on account of the unavoidable process of menstruation and taking into account also that many of them had already been diagnosed with insanity at some point during their adolescence, it is highly likely that women were growing afraid of pregnancy and childbirth, as they were listed as risk factors to develop insanity.

2.4. Motherhood and insanity

With the fast spread of female insanity and the growing number of women admitted to mental asylums, fear had reached women, who were willingly avoiding pregnancies to minimize the chances of the deterioration of their mental health. While some did not believe gender was the reason for the evident imbalance in insanity diagnoses, most of the experts of the time, as Showalter comments, believed that one of the major reasons for the increase of female insanity was the "feminization of Victorian poverty". Poor women outnumbered poor men, and poverty was one of the moral reasons doctors listed as causes of insanity. But poverty was also linked to diseases like the one Victorian doctors named "lactation insanity", which Showalter describes as the "delirium of poor mothers who nursed their babies for long periods of time in order to save money and to prevent conception" (Showalter 1985, 55).

The "lactation insanity" phenomenon opens the discussion of other possible reasons why women in the 19th century were trying to avoid or delay motherhood. Being more susceptible to poverty, feeding children would have been a difficult task for many mothers, and

their options for survival were not optimal; the coining of the term "lactational insanity" proves as much. The idea of this method used as contraception does not come across as surprising: with abortifacients being illegal and without safe options in the market, women resorted to extend their lactational period and thus avoid becoming pregnant for as long as possible, risking their health with malnutrition and anaemia and further increasing the chances of becoming insane and being admitted in an asylum. Thus, whether for career, health, or survival reasons, being a mother was not a viable option to every woman.

Although lactational insanity was a common affection, Showalter affirms that by 1850 seven out of ten women were admitted into asylums after being diagnosed with "puerperal insanity", nowadays known as postpartum depression (Showalter 1985, 57). J. C. Bucknill and D. H. Tuke stated that women suffering from this "evidenced a total negligence of, and often very strong aversion to, her child and husband" (Qtd. in Showalter, 1985, 59). This condition deeply shocked Victorian professionals, as it entailed a complete deviation from the expected behaviour of women: "although the patient may have been remarkable previously for her correct, modest demeanour, and attention to her religious duties, most awful oaths and imprecations are now uttered, and language used which astonishes her friends" (Showalter, 1985, 59-60). Although misbehaviour in young women and girls was accepted as part of the process of puberty, the fact that women who had already gone through it and fulfilled their purpose by becoming mothers were exhibiting this kind of attitude was striking for both experts and society. Motherhood was highly glorified during the Victorian period and mothers were considered pure beings, so any example of misconduct coming from them was astonishing.

In present times, according to the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, postpartum depression is suffered by an estimated 15% of mothers, although the disorder remains dangerously underdiagnosed and undertreated. It is described as a "major depressive

disorder with a specifier of postpartum onset within one month after childbirth" (Pearlstein, Howard, Salisbury and Zlotnick 2009). Some of the symptoms associated with this disorder are: "depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance, loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, diminished concentration and thoughts of suicide" (Pearlstein, Howard, Salisbury and Zlotnick 2009). Instances of previous major depressive disorders, menstrual dysphoria, low income, young maternal age and poor social support are cited by the *American Journal of Obstetrics* as some of the factors that increase the possibility of developing postpartum depression for mothers.

However, back in the 19th century, the symptoms which worried physicians were not so concerned with the wellbeing of women. As it has been previously mentioned, the biggest issue that puerperal insanity presented for women – according to psychiatrists and other intellectuals – was the capability that said disorder had to drive women down the wrong path and propel them to exhibit improper behaviour. John Conolly assured that women could show a "great degree of excitement […] with a lively propensity to every kind of mischief" (Qtd. in Showalter 1985, 58). Other cases were assured to show "much moral perversion" in the form of women unprecedentedly "flaunting their sexuality" (Showalter 1985, 58). Masturbation was also associated with puerperal insanity, as it was believed that this condition deeply weakened the female mind and gave way to underlying corrupted thoughts and attitudes that women were able to keep at bay when in total control of their mind (Showalter, 1985, 57-58). What doctors did point out in favour of women was the severe depressive state and suicidal tendencies that came along with puerperal insanity.

Despite this, no professional considered the miserable conditions of women's lives as possible aggravating factors for this type of depression, which differed from common depression not only by the circumstances in which it developed, but by the horrible outcomes

that could come from it. For a society that worshipped motherhood and glorified the figure of the mother, any deviation from the expected behaviour was worrying, but infanticide, one of the probable consequences of puerperal insanity, was unconceivable. In her book *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986), Adrienne Rich reflects upon infanticide and the motives which could potentially lead women to commit such act. Although the topic of infanticide has been widely discussed, Rich provides a deep analysis of the conditions women endured, from ancient Greece to the 20th century, that led them to infanticide. On chapter X, entitled "Violence: The Heart of Maternal Darkness", Rich considers institutions such as the Church guilty of committing violence against women, even going as far as to say that "[t]he Church had much to do with creating the crime of individual maternal infanticide, by pronouncing all children born out of wedlock 'illegitimate'" (Rich 1986, 259). Added to the notion that contraceptives were sinful and to the lack of acknowledgement of marital rape, no reason was seen for women to resort to such things as infanticide or abortion, which were considered by the Church and the state equal in their gravity.

Rich also states that maternal infanticide remained as the most common crime committed in Western Europe, from the Middle Ages up to the end of the 18th century (Rich 1986, 259). During the Victorian period, rape was a big issue, and one of the biggest reasons why infanticide was committed. As Rich argues, servants and women in inferior positions to men were either fired for refusing sex or fired for getting pregnant after being raped by their superiors. With the ban on contraceptives and abortion methods discussed previously, the only solution these desperate women found was infanticide. Although Queen Victoria herself was opposed to the capital sentence for infanticidal crimes, these women were still regarded as the worst criminals of society. Doctors tried to explain this phenomenon, Showalter states, in the same way they explained other behavioural alterations: it was the product of a frail mind becoming weaker after delivery (Showalter, 1985, 59). The class factor became important in

order to distinguish those cases in which infanticide had a higher chance of being the ultimate outcome of this condition. Middle-class households had the means to hire nurses to take care of the new-borns, therefore the new mothers did not have to take care of their babies while they recovered, making infanticide rare in middle-class families. Lower-class mothers, the same ones who were prone to suffer from lactational insanity, were the most likely ones to suffer the most severe cases of puerperal insanity leading to infanticide (Showalter, 1985, 59). Although psychiatrists did not consider the conditions of these women – their poverty, violence-stricken and claustrophobic lifestyle – when diagnosing and later condemning them, Showalter assures that "judges and juries [...] were reluctant to sentence infanticidal women to death, and [...] responded compassionately to the insanity defence generated in their behalf" (Showalter, 1985, 59).

The problem laid in the fact that, although compassionate, neither the juries nor the doctors searched for an explanation to the great levels of mania these women were suffering from. The Darwinist explanation of the inherent weakness of the female brain was still highly accepted and no one seemed to refute it, "an unfortunate product of woman's 'nature'" (Showalter, 1985, 59). Some intellectuals found a connection between the poor quality of women's education and their mental fragility, saying that it provided them "little of self-discipline and inner sources psychiatrists deemed essential for the individual's struggle against moral insanity" (Qtd. in Showalter, 1985, 60).

Putting the blame partly on education was somewhat hypocritical, given that men and society were the ones who specifically designed the education women were to receive, as it was the best way to keep them under control. The lack of research paired up with the disinterest that psychologists and psychiatrists had in what women had to say about their own conditions. Throughout history, women's opinions have always been silenced, ignored or disregarded,

even if they had to do with their own affairs, and the subject of female mental health in the Victorian period was no different. As Showalter exposes, female asylum workers were not questioned about their opinions or experiences with female patients. Similarly, female patients were not inquired either. Samuel Tuke even assured that "[n]o advantage has been found to arise from reasoning with them on their particular hallucinations" (Qtd. in Showalter 1985, 61).

2.4.1. Literary Testimonies

This lack of information on women's perspective means that, to access the female point of view, resources are limited to personal diaries or representations in novels written by women. This perspective is not entirely objective since these sources only gather testimonies of middle-class women, the ones with a higher chance of receiving an education and being able to write, or at least having the time to do so. Either way, their written testimonies remain more truthful than the assumptions psychiatrists made. Showalter highlights how, contrary to the professionals, these women, rather than putting the blame on menstrual problems or their weak brains, complained about their "lack of meaningful work, hope or companionship" as the cause of their mental problems (Showalter 1985, 61). In a compilation of essays titled *Cassandra* (1852), Florence Nightingale dared to speak about the true main cause of women's mental afflictions, condemning the isolated and confined situation they were forced to live in in order to be accepted by society. She admitted that her wishes and desires had to be repressed to be able to fit into the prescribed societal role. This repression, she further argues, eventually led her to a deplorable mental state that culminated in acute suicidal tendencies. She even compared the situation of confinement women faced in their family life to the circumstances patients faced in mental asylums, without the possibility of engaging in any social interaction other than that within the family, her activities being limited to household chores (Showalter 1985, 65). Charlotte Brönte also depicted female lunacy in her famous novel *Jane Eyre* (1847),

in which one of the character's insanity is linked to her menstrual cycle and to hereditary factors. This woman, Bertha Mason, is kept captive in her home, isolated from the outside world to avoid her true condition being known and to keep her from harming others, since she is depicted as a rather violent character (Showalter 1985, 68).

Years later, Charlotte Brönte depicted again female insanity, but she did so in a different way. In her novel *Villette* (1853), Brönte deals with the so-called solitary confinement. This was a type of punishment used in prisons at the time that consisted in the complete isolation of inmates, who were denied the possibility of communicating with any other individual for long periods of time. It was also used in psychiatric asylums, as it was believed to help patients to work on their feelings. Years later, this practice was considered immoral and ineffective: the incidence of mental illness in prisons had risen exponentially since the isolation punishment was first introduced. Those subject to this therapy experienced a worsening of their condition, including nightmares, hallucinations, suicidal tendencies, catatonia and hysterical crying (Showalter 1985, 69). *Villette*'s main character lives isolated, has no friends, family or lover, and her loneliness pushes her into a deep depression, anxiety and hallucinations. This pathological state is effectively solved only when Lucy finds love and a fulfilling job, effectively abandoning her constricting isolation.

Almost a decade later, Mary Elizabeth Braddon published *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861), in which she dealt with the theme of puerperal mania and some of its possible consequences. The main character of this novel is a woman who develops puerperal insanity after giving birth and being abandoned by her husband. She rejects her child, as it feels like a burden left behind by her husband, and later tries to re-do her life by marrying again. She becomes murderous, tries to kill her first husband and later other men who threatened her. When she is being judged

for these murder attempts, her puerperal insanity serves as a fair justification for her acts, and therefore she is not condemned, but sent to a madhouse (Showalter 1985, 71-72).

All these accounts of female madness touch different aspects and consequences of female insanity and mental illness. Told by women, these narratives offer different perspectives on the causes of female malady, (which were beyond menstruation and the weakness of their minds) its symptoms and its consequences, as well as opinions regarding the treatments available for them, some of which had horrible consequences. However, there was one text which dealt with female insanity, puerperal mania and the side effects of isolation therapy, which proved instrumental in changing the conception of puerperal mania and the situation for mothers suffering this condition: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892).

2.4.1.1. "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860 - 1935) wrote what is possibly the most significant piece about female madness and puerperal mania of the Victorian period. She was an American woman and an avid feminist, who dedicated most of her work, as Catherine Golden states in her article "'Light of the Home,' Light of the World: The Presentation of Motherhood in Gilman's Short Fiction" (1996), to expose the harsh reality that women were subjected to under the constructs of "mother-woman" and the "angel in the house" (Golden 1996, 135). Gilman firmly believed in the need of a new model of motherhood, through which to expose the negative aspects of traditional motherhood and to demand the recognition of the fact that not all women are fit to "give right educational care to little children" (Golden 1996, 137). The writer defended the creation of a system in which childcare would be organized as professional social work so as to give mothers the chance of keeping their jobs outside of the house and provide children with the education they needed, as well as to help depressed new mothers recover from their illness

without babies being left unattended (Golden 1996, 137). She wrote short stories such as "An Extinct Angel" (1891), "Through This" (1893) and "Making a Change" (1911) featuring mothers who suffered under the suffocating life they led, leaving them no time to deal with their own affairs (Golden 1996, 138 - 140).

However, this new motherhood that Gilman defended was not exempt from polemic. The author was ascribed to the Eugenic Feminism current prominent back then. Many American 19th-century feminists believed the white, Anglo-Saxon race was progressively being tainted by the lack of discrimination women showed when choosing a partner to procreate. The mix of races, the threat of syphilis - which during the 19th century was quickly spreading - and the overall "carelessness" women showed when choosing a sexual partner were condemned for worsening the race's physical appearance and intellect. With these concerns in mind, Eugenic feminists, amongst which Gilman is to be counted, defended the need of measures to clean the white race of its imperfections. Some demands resulted reasonable as standalones (for instance the suggestion of imparting early sexual education to women, or the legalization and availability of birth control measures), but other suggestions were racist and ableist, including the legal segregation and sterilization of the "unfit", meaning those who would taint or degrade the white race (Seitler 2003, 66 - 70). Gilman specifically blamed women for the contamination of the white race. She believed that women's sexual desire pushed them to marry the men they were attracted to, with no consideration as to the defective offspring they would breed. The writer considered women's duty was that of preserving – or rather, rectifying – the purity of the race, so it was their responsibility to choose their sexual partners according to their reproductive suitability instead of giving in to their sexual desires.

In her article "Unnatural Selection: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Regeneration Narratives" (2003), Dana Seitler points out the possibility of "The

Yellow Wallpaper" being the first text to show Gilman's eugenic concerns (Seitler 2003, 69-70). In the story, as the main character's mental health deteriorates, she gradually regresses until she becomes, alongside the shadow living in her wallpaper, a sort of hybrid woman-child-animal. From the beginning of the story her character is infantilized, being treated like a child, not allowed to do anything by herself and in need of constant supervision. Even the space she is secluded in turns out to be a nursery, adapted for children to live in. During the 19th century, Darwinists considered childhood to be an imitation of human's most primitive stage, as infants lack speech and crawl around, unable to walk yet. The process of growing up emulates humanity's evolution, with adulthood standing as the completion of the process. Therefore, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper", being constantly stepped on by patriarchy (embodied by S. Weir Mitchell and the men of her family, who are also physicians), regresses to an animalistic, primal, child-like state, a possible fictional representation of how Gilman believed humans would end up like, brought about by the lack of procreation control and avoidance of mix-raced offspring (Seitler 2003, 70 - 71).

Eugenic feminism had a huge impact in North America. According to Lisa Ko in her article "Unwanted sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States" (2016), in the 20th century about 32 states had federally funded mass sterilization programs aimed at "immigrants, people of colour, poor people, unmarried mothers, the disabled, the mentally ill" (Ko 2016). Furthermore, between 2006 - 2010, already in the 21st century, the state of California had issued about 150 sterilization orders on female prison inmates, who allegedly underwent the procedure under coercion (Ko 2016). Eugenic activism spread and defended inhumane practices. Acknowledging this side of Gilman's activism remains important, although her suggestions regarding childcare and motherhood were quite advanced and would eventually help many women. Her feminism was, thus, exclusive, ableist and racist, only taking middle-class white women into consideration. She, along with the rest of women and men who openly

supported mass sterilizations and other procedures to accomplish eugenic goals, were part of the big race issue that tainted the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as the mistreatment of lower-class women and mothers. Gilman's accomplishments should not eclipse that other, darker side of her ideology.

Although most of her stories resulted at once ground-breaking and problematic – given that they all proposed a new motherhood model and, at once, voiced her eugenic concerns –, the story that changed the paradigm regarding motherhood and female lunacy was "The Yellow Wallpaper". This short story, first published in 1892, is written in the form of a diary kept by a new mother who, after developing puerperal mania, is prescribed the "rest cure" and advised to avoid any kind of intellectual stimuli. Although brief, it describes in a very accurate manner the symptoms of puerperal mania and the negative effects the rest cure treatment had on the mothers, painting a raw picture of the progressive degeneration of a woman's mind when subjected to isolation, which eventually results in the character's succumbing to her hallucinations after being neglected by both professionals and those she loved.

In an excerpt taken from a piece Gilman published in her own magazine *The Forerunner* (1909 - 1916), titled "Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*?" (1913), the author explains that the short story was created after spending three months trying to follow a rest cure she had been prescribed by doctor S. Weir Mitchell– the very creator of this treatment– after being diagnosed with severe depression, a condition she had suffered for years but which had worsened after giving birth to her daughter. When Gilman realized that her mental health was actually declining, she decided to forego the doctor's advice and resume her writing and other activities. "The Yellow Wallpaper", she explains, is not completely based on her own experience (for instance, she did not suffer from hallucinations as the protagonist of the story does), but she did draw inspiration from her own struggle with the rest cure, going as far as to

including in the story the name of the physician who developed it and prescribed it to her (Gilman, 1913). The most surprising fact about the story, which proves the impact that it had at the time, is that after reading it, the author claims, doctor S. Weir Mitchell was so appalled that he decided to alter his treatment to stop the harm it inflicted on insane mothers (Gilman, 1913). Many of the issues examined in full by Showalter in *The Female Malady* are exemplified in this story: from the woman's feelings, which were never taken into account, to her family's behaviour and misconceptions about her illness.

The short story starts with the narrator, the woman suffering with puerperal mania, describing the place in which she would be following her prescribed rest cure. The story is written as if it were the diary of the patient. As it has been already mentioned, most of the testimonies regarding puerperal mania and female insanity from the 19th century come in the shape of fictional novels or a few diaries kept by patients, most of them depicting just middle-class women's condition. With this partly auto-biographical short story in the form of diary entries, Gilman combines diary and fiction, using her own experience with puerperal mania as a source for the story but also adding other symptoms she did not deal with in order to widen the reach of the story she told.

The narrator's husband, John, is a physician, and the one who decided to isolate the protagonist from any stimulus which he considered to be damaging for her. From the very beginning, the narrator shows susceptibility towards the house: "Still I would proudly declare that there is something queer about it [the house]" (Gilman 1892, 7). This apprehension concerning the house could be translated as the apprehension the woman felt about the therapy she was being forced to go through. As previously mentioned, other authors like Charlotte Brönte had dealt with the negative psychological effects that isolation or solitary confinement

had on people. Gilman followed her lead, using the unease the narrator feels at the beginning of the story to foreshadow the suffering the main character will face because of it.

John, the protagonist's husband, is presented as someone who "is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (Gilman 1892, 7). This description serves as a prelude of the attitude John will have towards his wife and her illness. Like the rest of physicians, John disregards and underestimates his wife's malady: "You see, he [John] does not believe I am sick!" (Gilman 1892, 7). Thus, John, like many other professionals of the period, did not think anything was wrong with a person unless it manifested physically. As has been already discussed, physicians thoroughly insisted on linking female madness to physical causes and, if those were not found, the blame fell on women's mental inferiority (Showalter 1985, 30). The narrator continues: "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 [...] what is one to do? […] My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing" (Gilman 1892, 7-8). The situation of the patient is hopeless: she is at the mercy of her family's decisions, with nothing much to say on what she wishes to do or even on how she really feels. This offers a very accurate depiction of many insane middle-class women: their wellbeing fell in total control of the men of their lives, many times guided by prejudiced male physicians. Every decision was made for them so that their opinions or feelings were never taken into account. The narrator knows she is sick, that there is something wrong with her, but she is constantly told otherwise, gaslighted into thinking that her sickness is just a product of her mind and that, if she stopped thinking she was sick, she would instantly feel fine.

The rest cure the protagonist is forced to endure differs somewhat from the description Showalter gives of it. According to Showalter herself, Silas Weir Mitchell developed the rest cure after the American Civil War. It relied on five elements: seclusion, massage, electricity, immobility and diet. Throughout the therapy, the woman would be subjected to "six weeks of isolation from family and friends, confined to bed, forbidden to sit up, sew, read, write or do any intellectual work" (Showalter 1985, 138). Many feminist historians accuse Mitchell of being a "man unaware of his own hostility to women who 'cured' them by 'restoring them to their femininity or […] by subordinating them to an enlightened but dictatorial male'" (Qtd. in Showalter 1985, 139). Barbara Sicherman found a noticeable similarity between the rest cure and infancy, as the woman undergoing the rest cure was subjected to "a temporary yielding up of the will in childlike obedience to a charismatic physician" (Qtd. in Showalter 1985, 139). This last fact is verified in the way Gilman portrays the room in which the protagonist will be staying in during her confinement: "It was a nursery first and then playground and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children" (Gilman 1892, 9). She is forced to spend her time in recovery in a nursery, a room specially prepared for children to stay in, which naturally reduces her to an infantilized version of herself. This infantilization culminated in the women's being forced back to what Showalter describes as a "womblike dependence", in which the patient "was reborn, re-educated [...] and 'returned to her menfolk's management, recycled and taught to make the will of the male her own'" (Bertha Pappenheim qtd. in Showalter 1985, 139-140). However, it must be noted that she remains somewhat privileged as she is able to take a walk through the gardens of the house, whilst women interned in asylums were forced to permanently stay in their beds: "So I walk a little in the garden or down the lovely lane, sit on the porch under the roses, and lie down up there a good deal" (Gilman 1892, 14).

These relative advantages the protagonist enjoys could also be brought on by the fact that, as Paula A. Treicher points out in her article "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" (1984), Gilman's main character is diagnosed by her own husband, who is also the person who controls her recovery process. She does not seem to be subjected to any kind of strict diet, and she does not have to endure massages or electricity.

Following the idea that performing any kind of task that required intellectual work could be bad for her given her weak female mind, she writes that she is "absolutely forbidden to 'work' until I am well again" (Gilman 1892, 8). She was pulled away from her hobbies, her work and society in general, in an attempt to subject her to total isolation and have her improve faster. Gilman has the reader learn the patient's opinion regarding this decision:

> Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. [...] I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal - having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition. I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society stimulus - but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition. (Gilman 1892, 8)

This quote is very important because, as previously discussed, women's opinions regarding their conditions remained unknown for the most part, since no one wanted to acknowledge them. Here, Gilman is making a clear and blunt statement regarding the isolation therapy. Although she does so through a fictional character, it must be remembered that Gilman's story is partly autobiographical, and that she did go through this therapy herself, and is making a statement through a character of her creation. John's condescending attitude accurately represents the attitude that all physicians had towards women's illnesses. He not only underestimated her condition and diagnosis, making her undergo a very dangerous

treatment, but he also disregarded her feelings about it and did what he believed was best based on the (false) knowledge of the time regarding women's mental being. As Treichler states, the last sentence of the quote indicates that the narrator is "encouraged to exercise 'self-control' and avoid expressing negative thoughts and fears about her illness" (1984, 61), since that is how her husband believed that her 'nervous fit' would go away.

The protagonist admits that she tries to exercise this self-control, but only in front of her husband, because she knows that suppressing her feelings is not good for her: "I take pains to control myself, - before him, at least, - and that makes me very tired" (Gilman 1892, 9). In the same way, she expresses that she does still write in her diary as a form of catharsis despite her family's disapproval of it: "There comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman 1892, 10); "There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing. [...] I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!" (Gilman 1892, 13). Her feelings are, therefore, not only suppressed in the presence of others, but also while she is alone, as she is not able to be at peace at any moment, having to be careful of not being found writing them down.

However, it is not only the suppression of emotion what is causing her pain. It should not be forgotten that, even if she was a woman willing to break away from expectations and dedicate herself to activities such as writing, she had been raised to comply with patriarchal conventions and expectations. She cannot help but feel guilt for various reasons: on the one hand, she feels guilty for, while resting, not carrying out her wifely duties and helping her husband out: "I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!" (Gilman 1892, 10). On the other hand, there is the question of motherhood. This woman's struggle with puerperal mania is what brought her to her current situation. Despite this, few mentions are made about the baby she recently gave birth to. "It is

fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous" (Gilman 1892, 10). The first time she mentions the baby, she admits that being near him makes her nervous and therefore she cannot be with him. However, as mentioned above, this character was privileged in many aspects. Contrary to many working-class mothers, she did not have to take care of her child while she took time away to recover, so that the constant presence of the baby does not aggravate her frail state of mind. Gilman herself was a middle-class woman, so it is only reasonable that she wrote from this point of view and depicted an experience she knew first-hand.

It is also worth noting how the narrator at one point states that "I am glad my case is not serious!" (Gilman 1892, 10). This statement is most likely a product of the condescending attitude of her husband and brother making her question herself. Continuously disregarding her claims of being sick and her feelings has probably caused the protagonist's self-deceit about her real condition. Furthermore, even though in the end she completely succumbs to her hallucinations, hers is not the worst-case scenario regarding puerperal mania. Having middle-class privileges, money, a way out through her writing (even though secretive) and the advantage of having someone taking care of her baby helped her avoid the worst outcomes: lactational insanity and infanticide. Although these advantages do not take away the seriousness of her condition - given that all mental illnesses manifest themselves in various degrees depending on many factors - her privileged condition must be always acknowledged to obtain an analysis as accurate as possible.

Her second and last mention of her baby is very different from the first: "There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wallpaper. [...] Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in

such a room for worlds. [...] it is lucky that John kept me here after all. I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see" (Gilman 1892, 15).

Although she first mentions the baby to say that his presence makes her nervous, later in the story, when she has almost completely succumbed to madness, she still cares for his wellbeing. She states that she is happy that she is suffering and dealing with the wallpaper instead of her child, whom she wishes to protect. This quote stands out because of its importance. A depression caused by the birth of one's baby would most likely give way to the assumption that these depressed mothers were resented, angry or even disgusted with their own children. Furthermore, puerperal mania having such horrible consequences like child abandonment and infanticide most likely fed such assumptions. However tragic these events resulted, it must not be forgotten that they are mere results of the illness suffered by these women, who were also victims of it. Showalter recalls how judges in the 19th century refused to condemn infanticidal women for their actions, instead using the insanity defence on their behalf (Showalter 1985, 59).

Having her narrator come up with these thoughts whilst her mind is almost completely fogged up by her madness could be a way for the writer to defend those mothers, reinforcing the idea that insane mothers' actions were not moved by, or do not move towards, hatred toward their children. Contrarily, even in the midst of despair, they thought about their babies and cared for them. The threat of the wallpaper is inexistent, a product of the narrator's insanity, but for her, it is the source of all her suffering. She continuously complains about how harmful she finds the room, the wallpaper and the shadows that lay behind it and, still, she believes that it is better for her to go through that suffering to spare the newborn all the suffering she experiences.

Gilman, most likely, wanted to prevent putting all the blame on the baby. Although her story is a fictional depiction of puerperal mania, its main goal is to show the damage that isolation caused those suffering mothers. Along with it, the stigma towards mental illness, the negligence coming from the families of the ill and from physicians, the sexist and biased information regarding the female brain and intelligence, the patriarchal demands women were unable to keep up with during their illness and the subsequent guilt derived from it combined to drive women mad. Becoming a mother had a small part in it, and still it was one of the main factors psychiatrists cited as madness-inducing. The truth is, just as Gilman herself states in her text "Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*" (1913), that giving birth to her daughter aggravated her depression but it did not cause it as she had been suffering from depression for a very long time.

Being ascribed to the eugenic current, it is a possibility that, with this text, Gilman was somehow trying to erase all stigma regarding motherhood and break through women's fears of their mental health worsening because of pregnancy or childbirth. The rumours of the consequences some treatments had on the patients spread among the people: "John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!" (Gilman 1892, 13).

Added to the general fear of becoming mad, the impossibility of conciliating work with housekeeping and childcare, the high rates of poverty amongst women and other illnesses resulting from it such as lactational insanity account for the drastic decline the natality rate experienced by the end of the 19th century. According to Michael R. Heines, the crude birth rate - the number of births for every 1000 people - declined from 55 in 1800 to 25 in 1920 in North America (Heines 1994). Trying to take the fear away from women and mothers was

essential for the eugenics movement so more women would be capable of becoming mothers as long as the procreating process remained more selective.

The rising antimaternal tendency adopted by western women during the 19th century was not a product of a sudden hatred towards the idea of motherhood or towards children themselves. Oftentimes it was caused by the necessity to survive or live a freer, safer life. However, it is an undeniable fact that the perspective regarding motherhood became divided amongst the women of the 19th century: some thought it dangerous, others found it unaffordable or unattainable, and many, like Gilman and other supporters of the Eugenic ideal, found it necessary to manage and restrict it. Although Gilman worked to expose the hardships of pregnancy, childbirth and maternity to end the stigma surrounding women who decided not to become mothers, her Eugenic beliefs pushed her to, at the same time, encouraged women to pursue motherhood to help “preserve the race”.

3. Maternity, Sexual Desire and Decadence: Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

Antimaternal attitudes in women were not accepted by society. Those who favoured their entrance to the public sphere over becoming mothers and housewives were rejected or even deemed insane and imprisoned in mental health institutions. "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Showalter's *The Female Malady* bring forward the professionals' opinions and the patients' feelings, but they do not dig into the general conception that society had of these issues. These thoughts reached present times mainly through novels and written testimonies. However, the representation of these women varied depending on the position the author held regarding feminism and women's rights. One novel has been frequently studied through the feminist lens on account of its particular representations of its female characters. Through the deep analysis of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) focusing on its representation of womanhood, it is possible to gather a perspective of what was the general opinion and reactions towards these women who wanted to change the rules of the game as rendered in a novel published only a few years after Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper".

3.1. Decadence and the New Woman in *fin-de-siècle* writings

While some women were fighting to make way for themselves in the public sphere, society was preoccupied with voicing its opinion about them. Those opinions were very diverse, and many were expressed in literature. Whether positive or negative, female characters in many 19th century novels represent the author's take on the New Woman. In his article "Daughters of Decadence: The New Woman in the Victorian *fin-de-siècle*" (2014), Greg Buzzwell names some literary examples of the representation of the New Woman: Henry Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), which criticizes Victorian marriage conventions, Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which deals with subjects like premarital sex, pregnancy out of wedlock

and freethought, or Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887), which touches on the subject of female education and how it was viewed by society.

All the examples cited above deal with the image of the New Woman in a fairly positive light. They intended to make their readers reconsider social norms and the New Woman and her initiatives more acceptable. However, in Linda Dowling's article "The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890's" (1979) an association is made between the ideal of the New Woman and the concept of "decadence", which became extremely popular in Victorian times. The term was used to talk about situations, actions or people in general who broke the established rules. However, authors and critics had all different opinions on what was considered "decadent" at the time. Russel M. Goldfarb gives examples of what some authors considered decadent in his article "Late Victorian Decadence" (1962). In articles published in the magazine *The Yellow Book* (1894-1897), Max Beerbohm considered all literature based in artifice and falseness decadent. Robert Hitchens considered unconventional and exhibitionist behaviour to be signs of decadence. Jocelyn Quilp believed that literature was becoming immoral and, therefore, decadent, while G. S. Street defended the idea that the lust for "unusual experiences"' was a telling sign of decadence (Goldfarb, 1962, 369-370). In Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen-Nineties* (1913), decadence is described as the synonym of perversity, artificiality, egoism and curiosity (Goldferb, 1962, 371). Goldberb concludes his article by formulating a general definition of decadent literature current at the time:

> the exploration of immoral and evil experiences; never does it preach morality, nor does it strongly insist upon ethical responsibilities. Decadent literature is characterized by artistic concern for the morbid, the perverse, the sordid, the artificial, the beauty to be found in the unnatural and the representation of cleanliness in the unclean things; it is characterized by a self-conscious and weary

> contempt for social conventions such as truth and marriage, by an acceptance of Beauty as a basis for life (Goldferb, 1962, 373).

Taking into account the distaste that Victorians had towards the slightest deviations from the established social rules, it is likely that many were concerned about the example that this type of literature was setting for the public, as it discover new ways of living and tried to destigmatize what was considered improper behaviour. However, decadence has not always had the negative connotation the late Victorian period attributed to it. In her essay "'Lifeless, inane, dawdling': Decadence, Femininity and Olive Schreiner's *Woman and Labour*" (2006), Ewa Macura describes how, in the 19th century, the physical and mental decadence of a woman was found attractive and positive: "female weaklings were thought to epitomise the highest standards of womanhood as the physical weakness they displayed never ceased to announce [...] their delicacy, fragility, passivity, and self-sacrificial nature" (Macura 2006, 136). As Macura explains, this fragility translated into illness was not only a visual proof of a woman's femininity, but also of the amount of effort she put into her aspirations: "The sicklier the wife was, the healthier the husband was assumed to be" (Macura 2006, 136).

Following the idea that women were weaker than men, a healthy woman was believed to be "an unnatural woman" (Maruca 2006, 138). In his book *The Conditions Essential to Happiness* (1851), Herbert Spencer stated that any healthy organism with wholesome metabolic functions "excreted its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members" (Spencer ~~1852, 180~~ qtd. in Maruca 2006, 149). In this way, humanity showed its strength as a functioning organism by keeping women in their proper place, away from social interactions, due to their weakness. Siles Weir Mitchell's rest cure has been already discussed as a means to keep women away from pursuing a life outside of the domestic sphere, and Macura brings it up again in the decadence context. If a woman was not weakened by the life she led, if she did

not succumb to her illness, then she was *made* ill and unavailable: "Victorian medical discourse participated in literally producing the invalid woman" (Ellen L. Bassuk qtd. in Maruca 2006, 142). In sum: "medical inventions such as the rest cure made woman return to her proper place that was carefully marked by practices, which defined her most desirable mode of being" (Maruca 2006, 143).

So, decadence was not such a bad thing as long as it did not affect men. Men and their reputation thrived thanks to their women's decline and decay; therefore feminine physical decadence was desirable. Society worked together to ensure that female physical decadence was achieved, coming up with ways to artificially originate it in case it did not take place naturally.

Decadence turned into a negative thing when it started affecting Victorian standards and female morality. Dowling believes that the New Woman was "the first rebellious expression of that disenchantment of culture [...] that Lionel Trilling has taught us to recognize as 'modernism'" (Dowling 1979, 437). The New Woman brought about a sexual revolution which severely damaged the established order of Victorian society. On the one hand, women started to escape their designated place and were subsequently trying to introduce themselves into society. By escaping the domestic sphere women escaped falling victims of the system, they did not decay physically but morally. They were a challenge to men's superiority and power as they found themselves without the comfort of knowing they ruled every aspect of women's lives. Furthermore, Eugenic concerns were also to be taken into account. Although some women that were part of this "New" movement supported and vindicated the need for reproductive control (e.g. Charlotte Perkins Gilman), many started to reject procreational sex, whether by means of what Dowling calls "glorified spinsterhood" (in which women chose willingly not to engage in romantic affairs and not procreate), or by resorting to abortions or,

some even claim, infanticide when out-of-wedlock pregnancies took place (Dowling 1979, 445-447). The result, as advanced above, was a fall in the birth rate.

3.2. Bram Stoker's Decadent New Woman: Mina, Lucy and the Three Weird Sisters.

Many writers of the *fin-de-siècle* represented, in one way or another, what their views on the New Woman were. Tackling themes regarding marriage, work, education and sexuality, some of these authors expressed their concerns regarding the inequality and mistreatment women experienced in their daily lives, while others manifested their distaste towards the New Women and their practices, labelling them as *decadent*.

Amongst all the relevant works on the topic produced in the period, one gothic novel stands out, being the main focus of discussion about the literary representation of the New Woman. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is, likely, the most famous gothic novel written in the 19th century. Stoker, born in Ireland to a bourgeois family, wrote during his life many books and stories, and also worked as a literary and art critic. However, no work of his had as much impact as *Dracula.*

Stoker's novel continues to be analyzed and compared to other novels from many different points of view. William Hughes, in his work *Bram Stoker. Dracula* (2008), mentions and explains the vast array of approaches to Stoker's novel: psychoanalysis, physiology, imperialism and colonial politics, Irish studies (*Dracula*'s connection with Irish folklore) and gender and LGBTQ+ studies (the homoerotic subtext of the novel in particular), among others. Although all these approaches are interesting and relevant, the psychoanalytic and gender perspectives are the most adequate ones to discuss the connection New Woman, decadent femininity, sexuality and motherhood.

3.2.1. Female Sexuality and Gender Roles in *Dracula*

Stoker's novel has three main female characters: Mina Murray (Harker, after marrying Jonathan Harker), Lucy Westenra, and the Three Weird Sisters (three vampire women who will be dealt with as a unit given their pack-like behaviour). All these characters possess different features and attributes, yet all have some relation to the New Woman category as all of them violate Victorian conventions one way or another. However, depending on the perspective taken when analysing them, the views on Stoker's rendition and valuation of the New Woman model through these characters varies. So, while some critics see the characters as a transgressive way of portraying the New Woman, others consider them as a representation of what female decadence was for Stoker.

Kathryn Boyd's "Making Sense of Mina: Stoker's Vampirization of the Victorian Woman in Dracula" (2014) and Nilüfer Akin's "A Gender Based Study on Bram Stoker's *Dracula*: Liberating the 'Angel in the House' and Dominating the Dominant Victorian Man" (2011) contain some of the most common arguments on *Dracula*'s representation of the New Woman. Although the New Woman also stood out for her desire to break away from the domestic sphere, Boyd argues that many critics have put too much attention on the vindication of sexual freedom, ignoring other issues, and therefore reducing these women to over-sexualized beings with no other achievements (Boyd 2014, 2). This last perspective is the one adopted by Nilüfer Akin, who defends the idea that the true New Women in *Dracula* are the *decadent* Lucy Westenra and the Three Weird Sisters, separating Mina Harker from any association the New Woman. In her own words, "Mina, in *Dracula* is a complete portrayal of an ideal woman whose sexuality is not existent before being vampirised by Dracula" (Akin 2011, 3). Boyd, on the other hand, highlights Mina's non-sexual virtues as capacities not usually possessed by women: "Mina has a professional job, writes in shorthand, and is

responsible for collating the recovered texts that materially form the novel" (Boyd 2014, 2). The fact that she is a school mistress, learns to write in shorthand and is the text's keeper (even writing several copies to make sure the text is never lost) prove Mina's special status as a woman in the Victorian era. She is an educated woman. Her idea of being useful to her husband, Jonathan, is to learn stenography and typewriting, as well as keeping up with his studies to be of help, instead of carrying the typical tasks assigned to women such as cooking, cleaning etc (Boyd 2014, 4).

In Nilüfer Akin's analysis, these characteristics are ignored and, instead, Mina is only validated according to her sexual appeal. It is even claimed that "Mina is, in fact, a hypocritical character suppressing her real sexually demanding identity" (Akin 2011, 3). As women were expected to avoid having sex or even show disinterest in it, Akin considers Mina the perfect example of how women supressed their sexual nature to fit the established Victorian mould, as she "mentions no other man's love than she has for her husband Jonathan Harker" (Akin 2011, 13). Furthermore, Akin argues that Mina can be read in an androgynous light, as she does not show "specific characteristics of a gender exactly" and is even described by Van Helsing in the novel as having a man's brain (Akin 2011, 14). Boyd, however, interprets this quote by Van Helsing as a compliment, as well as a piece of evidence that Mina was definitely a unique female character, possessing an intelligence that was usually only attributed to men (Boyd 2014, 18).

Akin further argues that Mina is hypocritical because "[s]he desires Dracula in order to set herself free from the barless prison in which the Victorian society has put her" (Akin 2011, 14). In this way, Akin states that the scene in which Dracula punctures Mina's neck and later makes her drink his own blood, which is interpreted as a sexual attack (Akin 2011, 16-17), is "a blessing in disguise because it bestows her the ability to express herself sexually" (Akin

2011, 17). In the scene, Mina indeed states that "I was bewildered and, strangely enough, I did not want to hinder him" (Stoker 1897, 306), but immediately after, Mina herself reasons that it must have been a side effect of the Count's spell. Reasoning that a rape-like scene means a liberation for a "sexually frustrated" woman results problematic. Akin is not only reducing the character's value to her sexuality, but she is also masking the fact that rape is a serious form of violence against women, of men asserting themselves as dominant over women, stripping them of their dignity and securing their masculinity. Rape is never a liberating or desired experience for a woman, and this scene does not affect Mina's sexual status. Paradoxically, in the same essay Akin arguments that Lucy's death scene is also portraying a rape-like encounter, only this time it is categorized as "an immoral activity" and a "paradox of Victorian hypocrisy" (Akin 2011, 9). Since Lucy, sexually daring and challenging Victorian standards, was considered a "fallen woman", her rape in the form of the stake held by Arthur piercing through her heart is considered by Akin as a punishment: "Given that the vampire Lucy symbolizes the fallen woman, she deserves sexual violence and men's control over her" (Akin 2011, 10).

A disdain towards Mina is palpable in the way Akin deals with the characters. The disregard for her abilities, achievements and intelligence in favour of a critique for her lack of sexual energy is omnipresent throughout the essay. Even though many consider Mina the brains of the Crew of Light (even Van Hensing himself mentions it), Akin is convinced that her intellect is not a valid reason to consider Mina a progressive woman, as "she only makes the job of the Crew of Light easier, just as women were expected to act at that time". She even disregards Van Helsing's compliment as the normal attitude of a "typical dominant father" (Akin 2011, 13). Contrary to Akin, Boyd considers Mina's assistance to the Crew of Light as a clear indicator of her wisdom. She is not only the intellectual base of the crew, but her motherly behaviour towards the men makes Mina a "nurturing leader and a cohesive force", rather than a simple woman following her assigned role of mother and caretaker (Boyd 2014,

3). Mina's possession of characteristics usually attributed to men is a tell-tale sign of her progressive personality: "Mina's intelligence and actions challenge the gendered notion of a divide between logic and emotion [...] Neither male or female [...] Mina is both at the same time" (Boyd 2014, 20).

Mina's intelligence is further highlighted by the fact that she *owns* the text of the novel. She was the one who kept copies of all the texts and eventually decided which ones would make it into the final copy of the book. Stoker is directly attributing the entirety of the text to a woman. It could have been easy to have any of the other men of the Crew of Light do that job, yet it is Mina the one who puts the novel together. While the reason remains unknown, Stoker most certainly chose Mina as the text keeper due to her intelligence and skills. A woman like Lucy, not as educated, with no technological proficiency and no ability to write in shorthand, would not have been able to be up to Mina's tasks.

Regarding Lucy, both authors' opinions differ as much as the ones on Mina. On the one hand, Akin believes that Lucy "stands in-between an ideal woman to marry, and a sexually attractive female that Victorians do not approve of" (Akin 2011, 4). From this perspective Lucy could be considered a bridge character between Mina and the Three Weird Sisters. She challenges Victorian conventions, being "open about her feelings concerning sexuality" (Akin 2011, 6). At some point in the novel, she even expresses a fleeting wish to marry her three suitors, challenging the law of monogamy. Eventually, Akin suggests that the reason why both Lucy and the Three Weird Sisters do not make it to the end of the novel is because, representing what she believed are examples of the New Woman, they posed as a menace for the men in the novel and for society in general. Lucy "does not fit the dominant male paradigm". Her dominance, expressed pointedly after she becomes a vampire, challenged the Victorian

convention of women as submissive and sexless which, according to Akin, made Lucy a creature beyond saving, her murder being the men's only option (Akin 2011, 6).

Boyd, on the other hand, points at Lucy's lack of abilities in comparison to Mina as a weak spot on the character: "[Lucy] has no job, and her writings are primarily occupied with discussions of the suitability of her proposed suitors" (2014, 2). Boyd holds the belief that Lucy was killed, like the Sisters, because society was evolving to accept women like Mina, progressive, independent and skilled, and no just dependent women: "Lucy ultimately dies because there is no place for such a woman in the new modern world". (Boyd 2014, 2-3).

Lastly, regarding the Sisters, Akin points out their hyper-sexualized character as a reason to consider them progressive. The sexual undertone that surrounds the novel leads many to see the way vampires puncture people's necks with their fangs as an emulation of the sexual act. Sexually, women in Victorian times were meant to be submissive and receptive while men penetrated them. From this perspective, the fangs that the vampires possess are read as phallic symbols. Therefore, the vampire wives' possession of fangs would inevitably assign them a penetrative, dominating role over their victims. They seduce Jonathan when they meet him with the intent of penetrating his skin with their fangs: "I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there" (Stoker 1897, 46). Acquiring the dominant and penetrative part made them the opposite of what the Victorians considered proper. For this reason, Akin states that, like Lucy, the Count's wives are killed as they are seen as a threat to society.

What these two different perspectives prove is the lack of consensus regarding Stoker's opinion and presentation of the New Woman. It is undeniable that all the female characters presented in *Dracula* defy Victorian norms in different ways, but not all of them are rendered in the same light. As Boyd declares, reducing women's value to their sexual appeal is unfair

and even detrimental for them, who hoped to stand out in many fields and not only sexually. Seeing the differences amongst the characters and the way Stoker treats them, it could be said that he somehow divided the traits of the New Women among the three female figures. Mina would represent those women who tried to make a difference by getting out of the house, looking for a job and seeking education, proving that they were just as worthy as men. Stoker's construction of Mina as a character suggests that he was willing to accept or even encourage these types of changes. On the other hand, Lucy and the sisters represent the side of the New Woman who claimed sexual freedom by publicly discussing their sexual affairs, engaging in pre-marital sex and in any other practices that defied Victorian norms. By killing Lucy and the sisters and leaving Mina alive, Stoker seems to be making a statement. He accepted women like Mina, who acquired knowledge but always with the goal of helping their husbands or the men of their lives. Yet, he disapproved of women who searched for sexual freedom or any other right who did not favour men in the process. While the discussion is set to prevail for a long time, it remains important to keep acknowledging the impact and relevance of Stoker's female characters for any discussion around the New Woman.

3.3. Vampiric Maternity and Failed Motherhood

As discussed above, Stoker's novel stands out for the way in which its characters are constantly defying gender roles and social norms, especially in the case of the women. Their sexual behaviour and their professional initiative broke new ground, to say the least, although those were not the only ways they challenged Victorian conventions. Motherhood was a glorified institution in Victorian times, considered the ultimate purpose of women, their only truly acceptable contribution to society. For this reason, any behaviour or action that would challenge, defy or contradict women's maternal nature was strongly criticized, condemned and sometimes even punished.

Dracula has been read from a Freudian perspective. Many critics agree on the presence of the unconscious in the novel; the unconscious being that part of the mind in which humans stored their deepest, darkest desires and fantasies through repression. Others highlight the feminist side of the novel focusing on the topic of motherhood and the continuous violation and reversal of gender roles in the novel.

Although, at first sight, the issue of maternity seems to be nearly absent from the novel (only Mina becomes a mother in the end), the concerns of motherhood are actually present in *Dracula*. Brigitte Boudreau, in her essay "Mother Dearest, Mother Deadliest: Object Relations Theory and the Trope of Failed Motherhood in *Dracula*" (2009), breaks down the aspects of the novel that showcase Stoker's concern with maternity as a slowly decaying institution, which make Boudreau categorize *Dracula* as a "matrix-centered novel" (Boudreau 2009, 3). In her paper "Monstrous Infants and Vampyric Mother in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*" (2006), Barbara R. Almond suggests that some biographical elements of Stoker's life could have motivated his fixation with the issue of motherhood, especially of *failed* motherhood. As Almond recalls, Stoker spent most of his childhood laying on his bed due to a severe illness. He was almost an invalid and depended completely on his mother's care (Almond 2006, 3). This over-dependence on his mother for at least the first eight years of his life could have had an impact on the way he perceived motherhood and mother-children relationships as an adult. As Kendra Cherry explains in "Freud's Psychosexual Stages of Development" (2020), Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality development was divided into various stages. The first stage, which seems to have had a special impact on Stoker, is called the "oral stage". This phase begins at birth and lasts until the infant is one year old. During the oral stage, the infant carries out all kinds of interactions through its mouth. The child is totally dependent on its caretakers, especially its mother, whom it feeds from by sucking on her breasts. Once this phase is over, children are supposed to start becoming less dependent on their caretakers, but due to his

illness, although his oral phase came to an end, Stoker remained absolutely dependent on his mother. This is the reason why Barbara Almond believes the novel written by Stoker presents such oral fixation. The vampires attack with their mouths and fangs, both to eat and to transform people into vampires. The first time Jonathan sees the vampire sisters, he notices their lips, which he finds attractive: "I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips" (Stoker 1897, 45). Orality will continue being key in the novel, as it is a central element of vampirism, and, through it, sexuality and maternity are exposed, reversed and discussed.

The Three Weird Sisters are the characters which better represent Stoker's concern with motherhood, since they both "invert and pervert the natural role of the mother" (Boudreau 2009, 3). When Jonathan first meets them in the castle, he explains how "[t]here was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear" (Stoker 1987, 45). When the vampires approach Jonathan and put him under their spell, they are evoking in Jonathan feelings similar to those a mother would. Freud's Oedipus Complex theory, as explained by Saul McLeod, states that children from the ages three to six years feel a sexual desire for their opposite-sex parent, while they envy and resent the same-sex parent (McLeod 2018). However, although desired, the figure of the mother was also feared. Being the only one responsible for the care of the children, she was the major figure of authority in their lives, the one who should be respected and feared (Boudreau 2009, 5). For these reasons, the vampire sisters evoke in Jonathan child-like feelings, as he is experiencing the same sensations he would with his own mother. The sexual desire the vampires evoke in Jonathan - typical of the Oedipus Complex experienced during the phallic stage of development - collides with the fear they instigate in him as well as with the feeling of guilt, given that he should not be desiring them as they are monstrous creatures and he is engaged to Mina.

Jonathan perceives the sisters as maternal figures, the wives are the complete opposite of what a mother should be according to Victorian standards. They are overly sexual women, physically presented in an "almost pornographically" manner (Roth qtd. in Boudreau 2009, 4). Presenting those figures who evoke maternal feelings on Jonathan as overly-sexual women contradicts entirely the maternal standards. Moreover, the reversal of the maternal nature becomes clear when they try to feed off Jonathan. In the scene where the vampires seduce the man, the pale one hovers over him with the intention of biting his throat and sucking his blood. A mother is the one who, by nature, feeds the child with the milk from her breasts, but in this case the maternal figures are the ones trying to feed off the child - Jonathan. This situation is further confirmed in the final moment of the encounter. After trying to bite Jonathan, the vampire women seem to eat a living baby that the Count feeds them in exchange for leaving the man alone.

As discussed above, infanticide was a big issue in Victorian times as its incidence was on the rise, and it was the worst possible crime committed by a woman. The idea of infanticide tainted the sacred image of the mother, and it was a big concern among Victorians, who could not figure out the causes for its rise. The example of the female vampires eating the baby ("The women closed around [the baby], as I was aghast with horror;" [Stoker 1897, 45]), not only inverts the notion of maternal, but also completely demonizes it. Stoker's concern - or more likely, horror - towards infanticide is also verified by the way Lucy is represented once she becomes "undead". Lucy is "the central fallen woman of *Dracula*" (Boudreau 2009, 5). Before her transformation she was flirty and seductive, but overall sweet. However once Dracula's curse consumes her, she becomes a child predator. Vampire Lucy goes out at night to look for children to feed from, behaving in a very animalistic way. She lures them in with such charm that the children refer to her as the "bloofer lady" (beautiful lady) (Stoker 1897, 189), and they like to imitate her by "luring each other away by wiles" (Stoker 1897, 189). When the Crew of

Light find Lucy, she is described by Dr. Seward in the following way: "The sweetness was turned to adamantine, heartless cruelty and the purity to voluptuous wantonness" (Stoker 1897, 225). Presented in a seductive but monstrous way, Lucy is stripped of her purity and sweetness once she is under the Count's spell, just like Dracula's wives. Also emulating the vampire sisters' behaviour, Lucy is found while holding "something dark to its [Lucy's] breast" (Stoker 1897, 225), which happens to be a child she was sucking blood from. Once Lucy realizes she has been found, she "flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone" (Stoker 1897, 226). This sexual, barbaric and cruel being is a complete opposite of humane Lucy Westenra. Before her transformation, Lucy was not far from the traditional mother figure, even for her suitors. When she rejected John and Quincey, she felt bad about it and wished she could marry the three of them, guilty as a mother would feel if forced to choose a favourite amongst her sons (Boudreau 2009, 7). They felt sexually attracted by her, an attraction that later turns into fear once she is transformed.

Tainted by vampirism, Lucy has become a monster, and the biggest proof of this is the way she treats children. She preys upon them and feeds off of them, luring them in with her charms to later use them to her will and dispose of them when she does not need them anymore. However, it is to be noted that Lucy does not kill the children. Strangely enough, a hint of maternal instinct can be detected in the way Lucy clutches them to her chest when she sucks their blood. Children do not fear her, but feel drawn to her, referring to her as "the beautiful lady". It is likely that Lucy awakes in the children the same motherly feeling the wives evoked in Jonathan. Being beautiful and desirable, as well as scary and dangerous, reminds the children (and Arthur, who almost falls for Lucy's seduction when they find her) of their own mothers. Thus, they feel safe though they should not.

Out of all the characters, Mina embodies the most traditional form of motherhood. Until her death, Lucy plays the role of a mother for her suitors, but once she is gone, all the men turn to Mina for comfort. After killing his fiancé with his own hands, Arthur breaks down in front of Mina, who states how “I felt an infinite pity for him, and opened my arms unthinkingly. With a sob he laid his head on my shoulder, and cried like a wearied child, whilst he shook with emotion” (Stoker 1897, 245). She acts with a motherly instinct, opening her arms to comfort the man whom she perceives as a crying child. She confirms this statement saying: “We women have something of the mother in us that makes us rise above smaller matters when the mother-spirit is invoked; I felt this big, sorrowing man’s head resting on me, as though it were that of a baby that some day may lie on my bosom, and I stroked his hair as though he were my own child” (Stoker 1897, 245). She comforts Mr. Morris in the same way when she tells him: “I wish I could comfort all who suffer from the heart. Will you let me be my friend, and will you come to me for comfort if you need it?” (Stoker 1897, 246). Caring in nature, Mina represents the ideal mother figure for Victorians. She is a source of comfort, looks out for and takes care of all the men, not only of her husband, and in return they look up at her as they would at a mother. Unlike Lucy and the sisters, Mina does not have an overly sexual presence, which would taint her mother-like nature. As Mina is the only one with a motherly attitude, she is the only one who has children in the end. She gives birth to a son by Jonathan, whom they name after all the men that formed part of the Crew of Light, once more settling the idea of them being like sons to Mina.

There is one last figure who is represented as a mother in the novel, although in a very twisted way: Count Dracula. Dracula shows motherly traits on various occasions. What first makes him a motherly character is the fact that the three weird sisters are not only his wives, but also his daughters. The Count was able to create them by himself, without the need of a female counterpart. The Count further adopts the roles of motherhood in the scene in which he

makes Mina drink his blood from his chest. When the men come back to find out that Mina and Jonathan had been attacked by the Count, Mina recalls how the vampire "pulled open his shirt, and with his long sharp nails opened a vein in his breast. When the blood began to spurt out he [...] seized my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound, so that I must either suffocate or swallow some of the -" (Stoker 1897, 307). This passage of the novel emulates, reverses and demonizes the pure act of breastfeeding: Mina stops being the mother and becomes the child, while the Count becomes the mother.

Overall, *Dracula* shows that Stoker was aware of the changes Victorian society was going through. Although his opinion about those changes remains unclear given the different interpretations his work has been subjected to, it is clear that the issue of maternity was important to him. His complicated childhood and the influence of the movements and debates going on at the period could explain the presence of such themes in his work. However, in his demonized representation of motherhood, procreation and childcare a hint of concern regarding the general future of humanity can be spotted. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work was in part motivated by her eugenic concerns. She put her faith in regulating reproduction in order to preserve the purity of the race. She suggested ideas to keep control of population growth, proposing a series of questionable methods to do so. Stoker, in this novel in particular, does not directly address the eugenic issue. However, the way he presents vampirism as a disease that is transmitted from one undead being to another is parallel to how humans pass their genetic traits and faults when conceiving: the undead person who passes transmits vampirism in giving birth to a new, flawed being. Making characters like Lucy -pure and sweet - become vampires and portraying them in such a negative light - eating children, becoming barbaric and animalistic - Stoker is emphasizing the outcomes of immoral reproduction. If the root of the problem were not eliminated (as the Count is in the novel), the disease would never stop spreading and humanity would be forever damned.

4. Contrasted Results

It is interesting to see how the same matter can be presented in such different lights depending on point of view taken. Gilman and Stoker belonged to different continents - she lived in North America, he resided in Ireland - but they dealt with the same matters in these two works. The different approaches they take on these matters are not just a result of their difference in citizenship, age, or political affiliation, but, above all, in gender. The male versus female gaze to a great extent explains the different opinions and perspectives these two authors take when dealing with issues pertaining to women and the New Woman.

Basing her works on her own experiences, Gilman, in "The Yellow Wallpaper", creates a short tale which gives its reader an insight into the hardships of motherhood and the mental illnesses that were associated with it. Gilman's short story was needed in a moment in time where women were fighting to be heard and understood. Women who suffered from postpartum depression or committed crimes such as infanticide were confined in psychiatric asylums. Although the number of women meeting this fate was rising with time, not many people seemed to care enough to understand what drove those women insane. "The Yellow Wallpaper" exposes how damaging was the constricting patriarchal system for women's mental and physical health, along with the downsides of pregnancy and childbirth. Because pregnancy and childbearing were women's main functions, both society and medical professionals believed it was an easy process for them.

By exposing how much women suffered by being emotionally and morally held down by men and society, Gilman was actively asking for a change. She proved the positive impact that a little freedom had on women's mental and physical health, and how tragedies as infanticide could be avoided. By portraying the protagonist of the story as a worried and loving mother, she made sure readers would not consider this woman a neglecting mother. In turn, the

author makes them understand that these illnesses could deeply affect women, their behaviour not being a reflection of their true nature.

Stoker found himself on the contrary side to Gilman's. Like many who did not understand the hardships women experimented every day, he criticized those who defied Victorian conventions and rules. While Gilman defended them and wanted them to be understood, Stoker did not conceal how much bad mothers or infanticidal women horrified him. By portraying the female vampires as child-eating beings he is demonizing the figure of the mother. Unlike Gilman, he does not dwell on the reasons that would lead women to these actions and instead condemns them for carrying them out. By killing the infanticidal women in the novel he makes clear that the only solution he considered for these criminals was their extermination.

Although their gender determined their different points of view, they also shared some opinions. Both Gilman and Stoker seemed to agree in the idea that having jobs and a career of their own was beneficial for women. It should be noted, however, that while Gilman defended women's rights for independence for their own sake, Stoker seemed to look at the bigger picture and consider independent women beneficial in general for society and, above all, for the men around them (as in the case of Mina). But arguably, their most important point in common is their eugenic concerns. Gilman does not introduce this issue in "The Yellow Wallpaper", but it was part of her daily fight. She believed that female sexual promiscuity was leading the white race to ~~its~~ damnation, as women were not being selective with their partners. This same concern is portrayed in *Dracula* through the metaphor of vampirism. The most sexualized women in the novel - Lucy and the vampire sisters - are the ones affected by vampirism, the ones that eat children, bad mother figures that, along with the Count, must be eliminated to restore social

order. Therefore, Stoker and Gilman did not only share their eugenic concerns, but also coincided in who they blamed for social degeneration.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Dracula* offer a good overview of the Victorian concerns regarding women issues. The give us an insight on what society thought of the changes women were vindicating and how they thought they would affect the future. Thanks to activists like Gilman women had a better chance of being understood so men like Stoker would not criminalize them without understanding what they had to go through. Some of the claims of the New Woman are still pertinent today. Women have definitely gained more freedom of choice, but the battle for full acceptance has not finished yet. Many people today, like Stoker in the past, fail to understand women and the issues which affect them, and instead resort to rejecting and criminalizing them.

These works showcase the importance of capturing changes and progress in literature. Thanks to the numerous representations of the New Woman to be found in literature, the New Woman question can be temporally understood, contrasted and considered.

5. Conclusion.

Elain Showalter illustrates thoroughly the conditions women had to endure to be up to the ideal of the "Angel in the House". Relegated to the domestic sphere, they were only allowed to have children and take care of them, while at the same time pleasing their husbands and taking care of the house chores. This constricting way of life took an immense toll on their physical and mental health, but society failed to notice this. It was not until the end of the 19th century that women started to voice their displeasure with the life they were forced to lead, denouncing patriarchy for causing their misery.

Exhausted from following the rules, women collectively decided to abandon conventions and create a better life for themselves under the New Woman ideal. The threat that their liberation meant for the foundations of Victorian society was too great, therefore measures were taken to ensure that women remained in their place. Deviations from the expected female behaviour earned them a diagnosis of insanity and a possible confinement in an asylum. Abortifacients and abortions were progressively banned to ensure women did not dodge their motherly duties, and sexually active unmarried women were shamed and blamed for the faults.

The literary works of the *fin-de-siécle* offer a wide range of progressive female characters which embody aspects of the New Woman. Charlotte Perkins Gilman offers, in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), the point of view of a woman who had suffered the suffocating pressures of the Angel in the House ideal, whose pregnancy and delivery had caused her severe mental issues, and whose cries for help were ignored or dismissed by her family, friends and professionals.

On the other hand, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) offers the point of view of those who rejected the cries for help of women like Gilman or the main character in her story. The demonization the writer does of his female characters and the way he presents them as

monstrous mothers and hypersexual, demonic beings show a deep resentment toward the women who tried to overcome the barriers imposed by patriarchy. While he did approve of women getting a job, he only did so under the idea that a knowledgeable woman would still be useful for her husband and for patriarchal society as a whole. Independent, single, childless women who had no plans on settling down and becoming Angels ~~of~~ in the House did not have a place in the society that Stoker and many others defended.

Together, these literary work, alongside the work by Showalter and other authors mentioned in this dissertation, offer a good overview of the opinions different social sectors held concerning female issues and the New Woman alternative model.. Professionals and men seemed to generally coincide in thinking of these women as a threat for their superiority and resorted to all kinds of measures to keep them at bay. On the other hand, women like Gilman were tired of remaining silent and, risking the rejection of society, voiced their feelings and vindicated their rights while asking to be listened to and understood. This dissertation has tried to explore the two conflicting points of view articulated in these literary works.

Other aspects from these works could be considered as topics of further research. *Dracula*'s homoerotic subtext complicates the issue of the reversal of gender roles and the revolution of sexuality during the Victorian period. Furthermore, both authors share an obvious concern for the Eugenic question and the future of the race. A further analysis of their take on this matter would provide a further understanding of the racial problem as well as the syphilis crisis that tainted their society.

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