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Gothic Fiction and the Ideals of Womanhood in *Carmilla* by
Sheridan Le Fanu and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The
Yellow Wall-paper" and "Through This"

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Introduction

With its rich tapestry of narratives, Gothic literature has long served as a canvas for exploring societal norms, especially concerning femininity and gender roles. This dissertation delves into the intricate layers of this genre, focusing on the portrayal of female characters who navigate the delicate balance between conformity and rebellion in the face of prevailing Victorian ideals. Through a meticulous analysis of selected works, namely *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu, “The Yellow Wall-paper” and “Through This” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, this study seeks to unravel the nuanced expressions of femininity and gender dynamics within Gothic fiction. The relevance of this dissertation is underscored by its attempts to weave connections between distinct narratives, highlighting patterns, and thematic continuities. Although the selected Gothic literary works are transatlantic and span different sub-genres, they collectively contribute to the broader discourse on women’s roles and the societal expectations imposed upon them during the Victorian era.

Essential to this dissertation is the notion of the ideals of womanhood during the Victorian era. Burstyn’s *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* explores the ideology of true womanhood that prevailed during the nineteenth century: “Women spent their time organising the household, overseeing the care of their children, shopping for necessities and luxuries, practising philanthropy, and nurturing friendships, while their male relatives left home each day to earn money for these activities. This way of life became the ideal for the whole of society.” (30) The set of roles mentioned by Burstyn includes managing domestic affairs and childcare, this assignment of duties places women as the main caretakers of the household, and therefore, men are cast as providers. Since the dissertation involves gender, domestic ideologies, and ideals of womanhood, I plan to approach these themes and stories through a feminist lens, which will involve scrutinizing how female characters interact

with societal expectations and their level of agency portrayed in the texts. This approach, then, may not fully capture other factors such as race, class, or male agency since it will solely hinge on a close reading and comparative analysis of these texts and an exploration of how female characters negotiate, conform to, or rebel against these prescribed roles within the Gothic genre.

Many things have been said about gender in Gothic literature. Davison focuses one of her chapters on the specific scope of “Female Gothic” and how they contributed to the genre:

In the process of highlighting the intersection of gender and genre, the Female Gothic brought the Gothic to bear on women’s vexed experiences of love and romance, and the multifaceted ideology of femininity, particularly the constraining roles advocated for women and the institutions of marriage and motherhood. [...] Their ‘dark romances’ explored and exposed the potentially nightmarish underbelly of the middle-class romance/marriage mantra, and articulated their authors’ sometimes irreconcilable anxieties, fears and desires with regard to it. (85-89)

Davison, by zooming in on the intersection of gender and genre, sheds light on how “Female Gothic” acts as a lens through which the Gothic genre is brought to bear on the experiences of women, emphasizing the agency, struggles, and triumphs of female writers in the genre.

Through an analysis of Le Fanu’s and Gilman’s works, this paper uncovers the complexity of Victorian womanhood explored by female and male authors, portraying female characters who simultaneously conform to and defy societal expectations, thereby challenging and deconstructing prevailing gender norms. These female characters exhibit how they navigate a spectrum of behaviors and are not one-dimensional characters. At the same time, I believe it proves how even the authors play into the hands of the societal norms of their times. Le Fanu, while seemingly inclined towards perpetuating Victorian ideals, introduces ambivalent

natures in *Carmilla*, challenging the very norms he might have intended to uphold. Similarly, Gilman, in “The Yellow Wall-paper,” and “Through This” critiques and questions the Victorian ideal of womanhood with female characters that conform or want to conform to these ideals.

The first element to be explored will be dominance and sexuality in *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu, exploring how female characters in this novel are perceived and how each of them interacts with the Victorian ideals of womanhood and femininity. In the second chapter, I discuss the theme of female mental health in the story “The Yellow Wall-paper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. There it discusses how conforming to societal norms has affected the protagonist's mental health and how her mental deterioration enables her to conform to the ideals of womanhood. Finally, chapter three explores Perkins Gilman’s “Through This” and how Gilman presents a character that successfully carries out her prescribed tasks but is in fact, on the brink of a mental collapse. These three stories navigate through the complexity of female characters in Gothic literature and prompt readers to reflect on the consequences of adhering to or rebelling against societal expectations within Gothic Fiction.

Chapter I: Female Dominance and Sexuality in *Carmilla*

My aim in this dissertation is to explore the different ways in which gothic literature deploys gender norms and ideals of femininity. This chapter focuses on how *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu interacts with these norms through female sexuality and dominance. I believe that in *Carmilla* Le Fanu constructs female characters that comply with the ideal image of Victorian womanhood but at the same time, these female figures transgress and even defy gender stereotypes. To support this argument, this chapter analyses the main female characters in *Carmilla*, namely Carmilla herself, her mother, and Laura, and how each of them defies some socially expected traits. Laura, on the one hand, sticks wonderfully to the model of the “angel in the house” that was preferred during that time, as described by Peterson, Spencer, and Signorotti. On the other hand, Carmilla is an openly sexual vampire who defies the expected model for women, while her mother is depicted as an authoritarian and elegant female character, in charge of introducing Carmilla to her victims. Through their contrasting portrayals, the novel offers a complex exploration of female domination and sexuality in the Victorian era. While Le Fanu tries to morally condemn women who do not conform to the Victorian ideal, some aspects of the story do in fact question the ideals of womanhood.

In her article, Peterson mentions this ideal and the term “angel in the house” to refer to Victorian women, saying that:

The Victorian lady is understood today much as she was three decades ago when J. A. Banks and Olive Banks wrote their classic works on the Victorian upper-middle class. Leisured, superficially accomplished, busy with the management of servants and the family’s social life—this is the socioeconomic stereotype of the Victorian lady. Her sociopsychological profile is contained in

one phrase—the “angel in the house.” [...] In the narrowest sense the angel was the one near to God, the pious one who kept the family on the Christian path (677)

According to Peterson, then, the “angel in the house” was a woman who was mainly kept in the domestic sphere, words such as “leisured” and “superficially accomplished” suggest a certain level of privilege and a focus on pursuits that may be seen as ornamental rather than substantive. As they are supposed to keep their families on the Christian path, their worth is often defined by their ability to uphold moral values and social respectability. Spencer, in her paper “Purity and Danger: *Dracula*, the Urban Gothic, and the Late Victorian Degeneracy Crisis”, further expanded on the notion of the “angel in the house”, stating: “[She is] the image of purity, sweetness, and beauty —the traditional [...] angel in the house” (211). While describing a female character in *Dracula*, Spence associates all of these qualities with the concept of the “angel in the house” that prevailed in the Victorian era. Women had to be beautiful, kind, gentle, and morally virtuous. According to Peterson, authors of that period, such as Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, and Sarah Stickney Ellis, very much reinforced this ideal in their literary works, creating a model for Victorian women. Le Fanu, in *Carmilla*, presents two female characters, representing the perfect ideal versus an unconventional image of women for that time. The idea of the “angel in the house” is present and also questioned and broken throughout this text, offering a dual portrayal of women, challenging and reinforcing the notions of purity, domesticity, and male dominance that existed in the Victorian Era.

Carmilla and her mother are introduced at the beginning of the story in a very peculiar and mysterious manner when the carriage that was carrying both women crashes in front of Laura and her father. During this scene, *Carmilla*’s mother is described by Laura as a lady

with a commanding figure: “There was something in this lady’s air and appearance so distinguished, and even imposing, and in her manner so engaging, as to impress one” (254). Emphasizing the dominant figure this lady was and leaving an impression on Laura and us as readers, she is not only physically imposing, but she also carries a sense of authority. This description is a contrasting view to the figure of the angel. While the “angel in the house” is supposed to be the image of purity and sweetness, Carmilla’s mother is an imposing and authoritarian figure. Regarding this first encounter, Signorotti argues that the dynamic between Carmilla’s mother and Laura’s father is important to set the image of women in this novel and how she is constructed as a dominant figure: “This exchange—one that allows Carmilla to renew relations with Laura—is the first step in breaching established patterns of exchange by forcing a man to negotiate with a woman for the ‘charge’ of a third woman” (613). Signorotti refers to the negotiation between Carmilla’s mother and Laura’s father, where the lady convinces Laura’s father to stay with Carmilla and take good care of her. Carmilla’s mother not only portrays some kind of dominance over males, attributed to her respective social class but also her independence and autonomy as a woman and not just a mother figure. Beyond the responsibilities of childcare, she embodies a sense of individuality by having her own pursuits and tasks. Since the Victorian woman’s role was solely defined by maternal duties and confined to their domestic spheres, Carmilla’s mother challenges the conventional norms expected during her time and portrays her as a dominant, and independent woman. Spencer refers to the general ideas that existed during the Victorian era regarding men and women, claiming that the roles between genders were clearly distinguished:

Victorian science, especially Victorian medicine, lent the weight of its prestige to the position that the physical distinctions between women and men were absolute, and absolutely determinate [...] It was woman’s special nature that fitted her for the task she had been assigned by Victorian society. In her guises

of maiden, wife, and above all mother, Woman (with a capital) had been appointed the guardian of moral virtue; the home. (205)

In Victorian society, the prevailing idea was that the nature of women predisposed them to fulfill the roles of mothers, wives, and caretakers of their homes. This quote helps us to understand how strict and rigid societal expectations were for women during the Victorian era, allowing us to recognize Carmilla's mother as a character who challenges the image of women as mothers and housewives. In addition to this, Binhammer in her paper on the sexual history of lesbianism, mentions that "female sexuality was disciplined within a new bourgeois ideology to figure as passive rather than active, as 'Angel in the House' and not as voracious daughter of Eve. [...] literature in the 18th century fetishized not only physical virginity but a hyper-restrictive mental propriety" (5). This idea forced women to maintain their purity and innocence, even repressing their own desires and passion. Ironically, in *Carmilla*, Le Fanu presents the main character as a vampire, linking the image of women to something dark and evil. A creature that is not as sexually pure as the "angel in the house" was supposed to be and that is indeed able to corrupt human beings.

In the novel, Laura is a character that easily fits into the role of "angel in the house," who is later sexually corrupted by Carmilla and her charms. Veeder claims that Le Fanu chooses female characters in order to question literary and social conventions regarding Victorian women, rejecting the idea of purity and innocence they were expected to own: "To have strong passions is held to be rather a disgrace for a woman, and they are looked down upon as animal, sensual, coarse, and deserving of reprobation. The moral emotions of love are indeed thought beautiful in her; but the physical ones are rather held unwomanly and debasing." (Drysdale as qtd. in Veeder 198) Even though the character of Carmilla does defy conventional ideas, I believe that Le Fanu is not actively rejecting the ideal of the "angel in

the house”. By portraying Carmilla as a vampire, and then murdering her for her acts, he is perpetuating the standard ideologies forced on women. However, using women as sexual figures not only defies their ideal as sexually and morally pure beings but also fights the male domination that was supposed to exist in marriages during the Victorian era. In the story, we can perceive that Laura feels conflicted about her feelings for Carmilla: “I did feel, as she said, ‘drawn towards her’, but there was also something of repulsion. [...] However, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed. She interested and won me; she was so beautiful and so indescribably engaging.” (260-261) In the story, Laura repeatedly talks about her loneliness. The fact that she was under her father’s control, resembles the image of the submissive and innocent young woman that was expected of Victorian women. However, she feels undeniably attracted to the charming and beautiful figure of Carmilla, who pushes her Laura confront her own desires, thus challenging the ideal of pureness and innocence in the prescribed role of women in Victorian society. Vicinus explores Victorian marriages and how women’s homoerotic bonds were perceived by society, stating: “When lesbian sex intruded into marriage, or when it seemed to prevent a young woman from marrying, or when it was linked with heterosexual adultery, it became the visible subject of anger, mockery and dismissal.” (94) In consequence, it is correct to say that Laura’s behavior deviated her from her prescribed path, even making her “bold” in courtship, as when she says: “I took her hand as I spoke. I was a little shy, as lonely people are, but the situation made me eloquent, and even bold.” (259) Essentially, Laura’s attraction to Carmilla is arguably a powerful rebellion against the societal conventions assigned to Victorian women.

In the case of Carmilla, Le Fanu also plays with a dual image of the ideal and the non-ideal prototype of women during that time. He physically presents Carmilla as the perfect model of Victorian women: “‘She is, I almost think, the prettiest creature I ever saw; [...] and so gentle and nice.’” (256). I believe that in *Carmilla* Le Fanu is constantly constructing

female characters that represent the ideal image of Victorian womanhood but at the same time his characters appear to fight and defy these stereotypes. Laura, who is initially portrayed as the embodiment of purity and innocence, struggles with her desires, and represses herself for most part of the story, her attraction and connection to Carmilla represent a break from the conventional expectations for women. As for Carmilla, who disguises herself as a weak and benevolent woman, is in fact a manipulative and sinister character, disrupting the idea of women as submissive and docile. As I stated earlier, the fact that Carmilla and Laura have an active sexual tension, disrupts the ideal of women as pure beings. In an intense encounter, Laura narrates: “[Carmilla] drew me to her, and her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses; and she would whisper, almost in sobs, ‘You are mine, you *shall* be mine, you and I are one for ever.’” (264) This quote captures a moment of intimacy and desire between both women. Carmilla establishes physical intimacy and passionately kisses Laura’s cheek. Through possessive language and taking an active role in their relationship, Carmilla claims her hers. In addition, she uses this emotional and physical connection to be able to manipulate and exert influence over Laura’s behavior and thoughts. All of these elements contribute to challenging the ideal of womanhood prevailing in the Victorian era.

In conclusion, these characters in *Carmilla* conform and defy, simultaneously, societal expectations. Laura and Carmilla are initially characters that seem to conform to these ideals. Laura is presented as a submissive and innocent woman, lonely and under her father’s control, and Carmilla as a beautiful and weak young woman with a mother who to some extent conforms to the role of being a maternal figure and apparently concerned for her daughter’s well-being. By weaving together conformity and defiance, the novel challenges the rigid boundaries of what was deemed “womanly” and “manly” during this period. Laura’s journey in the novel is through the discovery and acknowledgment of her sexuality and desires, as her attraction to Carmilla grew, the ideal of women as individuals who had to suppress

themselves was challenged. On the other hand, Carmilla's dominant, sensual, and manipulative nature disrupts the image of a sweet and innocent woman. Furthermore, Carmilla's mother surfaces as a character that does not conform to the role of confining herself to be only a mother and a housewife. Essentially, the characters and their complexities allow us to have a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of women's experiences during the Victorian era.

Chapter II: "The Yellow Wall-paper" and Female Mental Health

In the previous chapter, I delved into the theme of female empowerment and sexuality in Le Fanu's *Carmilla*. It explored the female characters, their desires, characteristics, and their identity within the Victorian context in order to demonstrate how Le Fanu is able to create characters that defy and conform with the role model Victorian society had. This second chapter aims to explore in depth how female mental health and mental illness are presented in "The Yellow Wall-paper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and how the female character presented in Perkins Gilman's story differs from the women portrayed in *Carmilla* but at the same time, both manage to create ambivalent female characters. I believe that throughout "The Yellow Wall-paper" Gilman tries to question the Victorian ideal of womanhood by accentuating the consequences that societal norms and beliefs could have through a character that wishes to conform to Victorian roles but does not succeed. The chapter intends to, first, investigate how mental illness was perceived during the nineteenth century. Then, I will analyze the "rest cure" treatment and what roles the societal norms played during the Victorian era in women's mental health. Furthermore, I will refer to the Victorian ideals of women and how Gilman's characters interact with them.

Ellen Bassuk explains how mental issues were treated during that time. She refers to the "rest cure" method which was applied during that time to control some mental illness

symptoms: “During the late nineteenth century, Victorian doctors frequently administered S. Weir Mitchell’s famous “rest cure” to women with severe nervous symptoms. [...] Supposedly, many benefited but others, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf, became even sicker and condemned both Mitchell and his treatment” (245). The rest cure is crucial in “The Yellow Wall-paper,” since it is the method that the husband prescribes to his wife, which according to Bassuk is considered “sadistic, controlling and intrusive.” (Bassuk 245) Moreover, the author underscores the significant impact of societal norms and beliefs on women and their bodies in the Victorian era, shedding light on their potential influence on doctors’ perceptions of women’s health.

The “rest cure,” first created by S. Weir Mitchell to treat soldiers with battle fatigue, included absolute seclusion and confinement, resting, and excessive feeding (247). However, he began to prescribe this treatment to women who suffered from nervous diseases, where the patients were removed from their homes and isolated. For this treatment, Mitchell said the patients should give themselves up to the doctor’s care, to allow him total control over them physically and mentally. The beliefs behind Mitchell’s treatment encapsulated everything that was believed during the Victorian era, his treatment aligns with these beliefs by aiming to suppress women’s emotions and maintain their ideal roles.

Women, [Mitchell] thought, were too emotionally expressive [...] certainly prone to inappropriate displays of feeling which weakened physical endurance. [...] Both father and son [Weir Mitchell and John K. Mitchell] advocate that women be more like men, but not equal to them. They should run their household and their domestic lives according to male “rules”. [...] Mitchell insisted that women were irreversibly constrained by their bodies and should not aspire beyond traditional domestic roles. (249-252)

The previous quote reflects how he supported and promoted the power dynamics and female ideals that existed during that period. He wanted women to be in control of their emotions, to not express themselves, to be more like men, but never above them. He was opposed to the idea of allowing women to have more opportunities outside the domestic sphere and encouraged the idea of keeping them confined in their homes. The “rest cure” and Mitchell’s beliefs are a clear reflection and product of societal norms during the Victorian era.

This background information regarding the “rest-cure” and the beliefs Mitchell had are crucial to provide a context for Perkins Gilman’s story. This is the treatment, as I mentioned, that Charlotte Perkins Gilman went through, and which is reflected in her writing of “The Yellow Wall-paper,” exhibiting the consequences of confining and restricting women to a certain role and standard. In “Why I wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” she says: “I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near to the border line of utter mental ruin that I could see over.” (265) Her personal experience under Mitchell’s treatment proves how impactful these Victorian beliefs were on women’s lives. Although Perkins Gilman was not a British author, the Victorian beliefs, and American beliefs during the nineteenth century were quite similar.

The ideal female in nineteenth-century America was expected to be gentle and refined, sensitive and loving. She was the guardian of religion and spokeswoman for morality. Hers was the task of guiding the more worldly and more frequently tempted male. [...] aggression, independence, self-assertion and curiosity were male traits, inappropriate for the weaker sex and her limited sphere. [...] At no time was she expected to achieve in any area considered important by men and thus highly valued by society. She was, in essence, to

remain a child-woman, never developing the strengths and skills of adult autonomy. (655-656)

In both, women had limited access to education or life options beyond the domestic sphere. They were expected to be wives, mothers, and homemakers. The dominance was to remain on the male gender and women were to remain submissive, loving, and pure. Victorian and American women were supposed to be the ones who kept the family on the Christian path. Thus, we can say that due to its multiple similarities, it is correct to apply and refer to Victorian ideals while talking about Perkins Gilman and her stories.

The story begins with the narrator and her husband John, a physician, moving to a colonial mansion for the summer in order to seclude the narrator from any overwhelming environment, and help her to “get better”. Thraikill’s paper “Doctoring ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” refers to the treatment of mental illness during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and focuses on Perkins Gilman’s short story and what role the story played during the Victorian time and what it caused for later discoveries. According to Thraikill, “‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ has since become a case study of the psychological consequences of the masculine refusal to listen to a woman’s words, a refusal that critics link to the more general proscription of female self-expression—literary and otherwise—within a patriarchal culture.” (526) As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, the Victorian era was a time when the power dynamics favored men and women were marginalized and ignored in their patriarchal society. Thraikill talks about the consequences of masculine refusal because it is one of the issues present in the story as the narrator does not agree with her husband—as well as her brother’s—measure to cure her of her nervous depression, but she believes she has no say on what is best for herself. It is not only her husband’s refusal to listen to what she believes, as Thraikill says, but the fact that the narrator herself believes that her opinion, about her own

well-being, does not matter. She repeats: “And what can one do? [...] What is one to do? [...] Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?” (179-180). As John, her husband, dismisses her opinion and autonomy, the problem extends to the narrator own’s perception of herself. She, as a woman, feels powerless and has internalized the idea that her voice and opinions hold little value in relation to those of the men around her. In consequence, the protagonist starts losing her agency.

The dynamics between John and the protagonist in “The Yellow Wall-paper” mirror the power structures of the Victorian era, portraying the protagonist as a submissive figure obedient to her husband, an emblematic trait of the prevailing societal norms that constrained woman to a child-like image. John is portrayed as a loving and caring husband who would do anything for his wife. The narrator is constantly remarking on John’s actions: “He is very careful and loving [...] he takes all care from me [...] He said we came here solely on my account” (181). However, he dismisses her opinion and treats her as a child. In representation of the treatment, John forbade her wife to think about her condition, to express her feelings, to write, among other things. Lorelee MacPike explores and analyzes the environmental symbolism behind “The Yellow Wall-paper” and perceives John’s restrictions, especially his control over her writing, as a conscious decision from John in order to not lose control over his wife-. MacPike states: “Her work is, as he suggests, dangerous; but its danger is for him, not her, because it removes her from his control.” (287) Regardless of the accuracy of this statement, John’s actions, in my perception, are just clear evidence of the power dynamics that existed during the Victorian era. He did want his wife to recover, and he, due to the social context in which he lived and how they managed women’s mental health during that time, thought that denying his wife from any real decision and liberty was doing something beneficial and favorable for her. John’s beliefs and behavior in the story reflect the societal

norms and the common beliefs during the Victorian era, where the rest cure, forcing women to hide and control their emotions away from the outside world, was the right thing to do.

Gilman exposes how in these patriarchal societies, women's health and well-being were commonly misunderstood by male figures, criticizing gender inequalities and shedding light on these societal issues.

Ann Oakley, in her paper referring to women and health matters, talks about women as providers of health in their domestic labor and what is called "housework" is an essential way of providing health for the ones surrounding them. Oakley states: "Emotional support promotes health: there is good evidence that a person's social relationships or lack of them are crucial influences on physical and mental functioning" (30). In the case of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator, due to her condition, lacks emotional support and social relationships in order to cure her of her nervous depression. John tries to support his wife and unknowingly fails when he decides to apply the "rest cure" method and isolate her wife, which confirms Oakley's statement because, isolation, instead of helping her to recover, slowly worsens her mental condition: "John is away all day, even some nights when his cases are serious. [...] John does not know how much I really suffer" (182). The control John has over her wife, by restricting her from any activity and interactions with the outside world, he also disconnects from his wife's reality, his absence, and his unawareness of her condition, are crucial aspects that contribute to her wife's mental deterioration. The narrator grows a sense of powerlessness and helplessness that is reflected when she states: "I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!" (182). In the Victorian social context, her current mental state, worsened by the conditions of her treatment, led her to become an unproductive and incompetent mother and wife, failing to comply with what was expected of her as a woman.

In Perkins Gilman's short story, this ideal Victorian model is not truly defied but rather shattered by showing the consequences of the societal norms in the narrator's reality. The narrator, in her deteriorated mental state, fails to accomplish what she is expected to do as a Victorian wife and mother. She feels unable to complete simple things such as dressing and also to carry out any housework: "Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able, —to dress and entertain, and order things." (182). Her role as a wife cannot be fulfilled due to the severity of her condition, as well as her role as a mother, which she laments saying: "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" (182). In this scene, Mary reflects on what was expected from women during the Victorian era, behaving as a caring and loving mother. The narrator, on the other hand, due to her mental state is unable to fulfill her roles and has to live and endure a patriarchal society, in which she is now useless because of her condition.

As the narrative unfolds, the protagonist's descent into madness is vividly depicted in her obsessive interactions with the yellow wallpaper that adorns the nursery room she is confined. MacPike in her exploration of the symbols within "The Yellow Wall-paper" considers the paper as the main element of the novel and explains what it symbolizes:

Slowly, the wallpaper becomes something more than an object for the narrator. She begins to see in it a movement and a purpose she has been unable to realize in her own life. As her madness develops, she shifts her own desire for escape from the limitations of her husband's expectations onto the figure behind the undulating bars of the wallpaper, the figure of a woman. (288)

MacPike explains how the yellow wallpaper is a symbolic representation of the protagonist's deteriorating mental state. The obsession she had to liberate the imprisoned woman inside the wallpaper mirrors her own psychological unraveling, to escape from the limitations she

herself had. On top of that, by the end of the story, she mentions herself as something that was part of the wallpaper: “There are so many of those creeping woman, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?” (195) At this point in the story we notice the culmination of her mental deterioration due to her self-indentification with the woman inside the wallpaper, highlighting the loss of her identity and agency. The consequences of societal norms and the “rest cure” treatment are highlighted as the protagonist ends up identifying herself as a woman trapped within a wallpaper.

In essence, “The Yellow Wall-paper” navigates through the complexities of Victorian ideals of womanhood and women’s mental health. Furthermore, by analyzing the “rest cure” treatment and the beliefs behind the doctor who introduced this method it was possible to gain a deeper understanding of the suppressing and controlling nature of Victorian ideals and norms. The gender power dynamics are also present since John, the protagonist’s husband, epitomizes a dominant male figure and the protagonist embodies a submissive and obedient wife. Ultimately, the female character, to some extent, both conforms to and challenges the prevailing ideals of women as mothers and efficient wives. While the protagonist aspires to conform to the prescribed roles of a Victorian wife and mother, her earnest attempts are disrupted due to her mental distress. She does not consciously defy societal expectations; rather, her rebellion is an unconscious manifestation driven by her deteriorating mental which enables her to fulfill her roles of mother and a housewife.

Chapter III: “Through This” and Female Roles

As we have seen in the previous explorations of *Carmilla* and “The Yellow Wall-paper,” gothic literature provides a spectrum of authors and works that have the ability to depict female characters who simultaneously challenge and conform to societal norms regarding femininity and gender. As *Carmilla* engages with female characters through their

sexuality, “The Yellow Wall-paper” explores the deployment of females through their mental health. This chapter will continue exploring Charlotte Perkins Gilman and “Through This,” where Gilman introduces a character who, on the surface, dutifully adheres to her prescribed female roles, reinforcing conventional gender norms. Yet, beneath this conforming façade lies a potent narrative subversion, where she seems to be on the brink of a mental collapse. This tale unfolds in the backdrop of Gothic literature’s intricate tapestry, where gender expectations are both reinforced and challenged, and it adds a unique layer to our understanding of women’s roles in literature. In this chapter, I will analyze the female characters presented in “Through This” and juxtapose them with those from our previous discussions. In doing so, I aim to unravel the distinctive ways in which these characters defy conventional expectations, thereby contributing to the ever-evolving discourse on gender and femininity in Gothic literature and to the Victorian ideals that prevailed during the nineteenth century.

In “Through This,” Perkins Gilman does an interesting job by presenting a totally different female character from what we saw in “The Yellow Wall-paper”. The woman presented in this short story is depicted as one who conforms, checking all the boxes on the list of Victorian ideals of femininity. Her depiction in the story is that of a mother and devoted wife, embodying values and behaviors propagated by the predominant societal norms. Nonetheless, as we go deeper into the story, the protagonist appears to struggle while trying to convince herself that she has an ideal life.

Expanding upon these Victorian ideals, Peterson talks about how women who were supposed to fulfill the roles of wives and mothers had to behave:

The angel’s stereotypical social role varied, of course, according to her age and status. [...] As a wife and mother she obeyed her husband, adored him, and

promoted his spiritual and physical well-being. She supervised the servants' activities under the watchful eye of her husband and became the devoted and loving mother of a large Victorian family. (678)

In "Through This," the protagonist plays the role of such a devoted wife. She devotedly attends to her husband's needs and incessantly cares for her marital responsibilities, which is demonstrated when she expresses: "I live, I can help. Here close at hand lie the sweet home duties through which my life shall touch the others! Through this man made happier and stronger by my living; [...] John likes morning-glories on the breakfast table [...] All is ready—healthful, dainty, delicious." (208). In this quote we can perceive how she is constantly worrying about her husband's well-being and her devotion to him is one of the things that move her throughout the day, just as the Victorian "angel in the house" would do. Oppositely to this female character and her ability to please and serve his husband's necessities, Jane, the female character from "The Yellow Wall-paper" is unable to serve or provide any assistance to her husband due to her condition, and instead, she is more of a burden to him: "I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!" (182) Her poignant declaration of being a "burden" to her husband, John, starkly contrasts with the proactive agency exhibited by the protagonist in "Through This." However, as it is reflected in the quote, both of these female characters have in common their desire to conform and be able to fulfill their socially assigned role.

Delving deeper into this female character and her qualities that allow her to fit into the idea of the "angel in the house," it is appropriate to say that she extends her role to the epitome of mother and housewife. She is loving and caring to her children, she is attentive to the baby's needs and, when it is time to go to bed, she sings her to sleep. Beyond that, she skillfully manages household responsibilities and is in constant movement throughout the day,

“There, I forgot the eggs! I can make these go, I guess. Now to soak the tapioca. Now the beets on, they take so long. I’ll bake the potatoes—they don’t go in yet. Now babykins must have her bath and nap.” (208-209) This quote reflects her dedication and endless thoughts regarding her household tasks. We can notice how while cooking, she is not only focused on one task, but also thinking about the eggs, soaking tapioca, boiling beets, baking potatoes, and as if that were not enough, she is already worried about other tasks. Her thoughts are constantly interrupted by task-related thoughts. She is immersed in a routine where she mirrors the ideal Victorian woman, successfully complying with the role of wife and mother. On the other hand, due to her mental instability, Jane’s character cannot bring herself to complete any task. Even though she wants to make her husband happy and pleased, she is unable to take care of him, her child, and even herself. She expresses: “Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much.” (186) She did want to fulfill her roles, but she is not able to pretend to be the ideal housewife or mother as she is no longer comfortable around her husband and does not stand to be near her child due to her condition: “Such a dear baby! And yet I *cannot* be with him.” (182). In this quote, the use of the term with which she refers to the baby, “dear” conveys the societal expectation of a loving and caring mother, however, the stark contrast is presented when she admits to being incapable of being around him.

During the Victorian era, only one of these characters would be accepted by society. Even if the character from “Through This” is loaded with burdensome tasks, she is perceived as an ideal woman, while the character from “The Yellow Wall-paper”, due to her mental exhaustion, is treated as if there was something wrong with her for being incapable of fulfilling her responsibilities as a wife or mother. Moreover, the protagonist herself has internalized the idea that something is wrong with her since she is unable to carry out

activities such as taking care of her baby or even serving her husband. This sheds light on the lack of knowledge and negligence regarding women's mental health during that time.

However, despite appearing to successfully conform to the imposed roles, the protagonist of "Through This" seems to be trapped in her house and motherly routines while truly suppressing her own needs to conform to societal roles. Throughout the story, she is constantly ensuring that she loves to carry out all of her tasks. Her thoughts appear to be rushing all over the place, and she proudly states that housework is noble if it is done in the right spirit: "That was a good dinner. I like to cook. I think housework is noble if you do it in a right spirit." (209) romanticizing how she has to bear with an irrational number of activities and responsibilities and at the same time providing a reflection on her internal struggles while fulfilling her tasks. While being immersed in her role and her duty to care for her husband and children, she does not take care of herself and does not consider her individual wishes:

"Through this dear work, well done, I shall reach, I shall help— but I must get the dishes done and not dream [...] I'd like to have joined. I believe in it, but I can't now. Home duties forbid. This is my work." (208-209). She feels pressure to comply efficiently with her prescribed duties as a woman and sacrifices her personal dreams and desires in favor of conforming to societal expectations, however, this quote expresses a lack of fulfillment in the tasks that she is performing. This is evident due to the lack of an object after the verbs "reach, help," she knows that she has a role to conform to, but she is not able to express what is she reaching through these actions. There is no purpose in her actions, highlighting the lack of satisfaction or sense of purpose in the roles assigned to her. Within the quote, she expresses her desires and immediately justifies why she is not capable of pursuing them, resigned to conform to her societal roles because "This is my work."

Knight argues that “The Yellow Wall-paper” “depicts the tragic consequences of one woman’s struggle against the patriarchal values that determined her position in society. [...] ‘Through This’ strikes back with Gilman’s feminine (and feminist) anger toward the patriarchy, in general, which subjugated women to their “feminine” roles.” (288) Both of these stories approach societal norms and the roles assigned to women differently. However, both manage to critique, and question said roles. In “The Yellow Wall-paper” Jane struggles socially and psychologically. She is trapped in her mental state, and it is noticeable to the people around her that she is not useful for society. She cannot be an ideal wife, and neither can she be a mother. Perkins Gilman presents this mental instability as a consequence of women’s suffering while trying to conform to societal norms. As opposed to that, “Through This” manages to approach societal norms with a female character that seems to perfectly conform to the idealized type of woman. She dutifully fulfills her domestic tasks; she is an excellent wife and mother. Nonetheless, her ceaseless motion provokes an uneasiness in the reader. She is not only physically dedicated to completing her tasks but also mentally absorbed in the responsibilities she is charged with. Perkins Gilman successfully demonstrates how this female character, who externally appears to flawlessly comply with societal expectations, mentally is trapped in a performative and restrictive role that does not allow her to enjoy her individuality as a woman.

Contrasting this short story with *Carmilla*, where characters such as Laura or Carmilla, both defy conventional expectations in distinct ways. Laura, the protagonist, shifts from an innocent image to a more complex understanding of her desires and sexuality. Carmilla, on the other hand, challenges societal norms through her manipulative, dominant nature, and her seductive aura. Unlike these characters, Perkins Gilman’s character does not appear to be sexually active or at least, does not express any sexual interest toward her partner. In addition, it is interesting to notice how Carmilla acts as a weak and innocent

woman to manipulate and control people. This manipulative nature can be appreciated in this interaction with Laura: “[Carmilla’s] evasion was conducted with so pretty a melancholy and deprecation, with so many, and even passionate declarations of her liking for me, and trust in my honor, and with so many promises that I should at last know all, that I could not find it in my heart long to be offended with her.” (263) Despite Carmilla’s evasion, she employs passionate declarations and a melancholy tone to manipulate Laura into trusting her. Carmilla makes herself look weak and delicate. On the other hand, the protagonist in “Through This” is forcing herself to truly belong to these womanhood ideals. She is a devoted mother and wife, and she has internalized social expectations, even though they do not bring her a sense of fulfillment, she seems to take pride in her domestic tasks and claims to find nobility in fulfilling her prescribed duties. These characters are highly different and so are their respective stories. On the one hand, Carmilla is killed by the end of the novel for defying these societal expectations, however, the protagonist in “Through This” does conform to her prescribed roles and she still ends up on the brink of a mental collapse.

The exploration of “Through This” alongside “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Carmilla* reveals the rich tapestry of Gothic literature’s portrayal of female characters navigating societal expectations. Drawing upon “Through This” and Victorian ideals, the character seems to embody a devoted wife and mother, nevertheless, the ceaseless routines and tasks she is undertaking cause her to be on the edge of a nervous breakdown. Comparatively, the characters in *Carmilla* challenge norms more explicitly. Laura goes from portraying an innocent young woman to then accepting or dealing with her sexual desires, while Carmilla defies societal expectations through her dominant and seductive nature. As a consequence, Carmilla meets a fatal end for her defiance, while the protagonist in “Through This” experiences a mental collapse despite conforming to traditional roles. Moreover, it is noticeable that the restrictive role that traps the protagonist in “Through This,” echoes the

struggles Jane had to face in “The Yellow Wall-paper.” In essence, exploring these novels and their differences contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender and femininity, underscoring the complexity of female characters in Gothic literature and the challenges or negative outcomes individuals may experience regardless of whether they conform or not to these societal norms.

Conclusion

Exploring the intricate paths of Gothic literature through the lenses of female sexuality, mental health, agency, and societal expectations, this dissertation has uncovered the complexities and contradictions that define the ideal of womanhood in the Victorian era.

The first chapter explored how *Carmilla* challenges the Victorian ideal of womanhood through the themes of female sexuality and desires. It also discussed the power dynamics present in the novel and how Carmilla and Carmilla's mother challenged the traditional, male-female structure of dominance that prevailed during that period. The second chapter focuses on the theme of female mental health in "The Yellow Wall-paper," analyzing the historical context of the "rest cure" treatment and how it impacted women during the Victorian era. In addition, Perkins Gilman's own experience with the treatment and how "The Yellow Wall-paper" is a reflection of what she had to undergo. The last chapter analyzes "Through This" within the roles of mother and wife the female character had to conform and how this led the character to an internal struggle that situates her on the edge of a mental breakdown. Moreover, the chapter compares the characters in "Through This," "The Yellow Wall-paper" and *Carmilla* highlighting how female characters navigate through societal expectations in diverse ways. Collectively, these chapters revolved around the theme of female characters and their interactions with the ideal of womanhood, simultaneously conforming to and defying those expectations. Furthermore, the chapters emphasized the patriarchal norms and the consequences they had on female characters' mental health, establishing a deeper understanding of the portrayal of female characters within Gothic literature and exposing their complexities and the challenges posed by societal norms.

Overall, the arguments discussed in this dissertation present the struggles female characters face due to society's patriarchal ideals of womanhood and the intricacies with

which they interact with these ideals. In addition, I think the transatlantic nature of this dissertation allows us to have a broader understanding of how the Victorian ideals of womanhood were also present in other parts of the world. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. As I mainly focused on female gender struggles, I did not delve deeper into the categories of race, class, or male representation within the texts. The strengths of the dissertation lie in its meticulous exploration of specific themes within the chosen works and therefore, future research could build upon this study and expand on the themes of male representation or emphasize specific class or race issues related to the female gender.

Through this dissertation I was able to realize the ambivalent nature of female characters, being able to adapt themselves to their prescribed ideals but also being able to defy them. Authors, I noticed, could not maintain their female characters on a one-dimensional path, which made them create characters that cannot help themselves to comply with ideals and rebel against them, either consciously or unconsciously. Consequently, it would be true to state that we as individuals end up, somehow, playing into the hands of society.

Moreover, delving into the transatlantic nature of Victorian ideals prompts consideration of how globalization and cultural exchange impact evolving perceptions not only of womanhood ideals but also the broader theme of gender roles. Are there echoes of these Gothic struggles in contemporary works from diverse cultural backgrounds, and how do they manifest in the present sociocultural landscape? Are we still defying some aspects of the ideal of womanhood and conforming to others? Essentially, the themes discussed in this dissertation could encourage a wider exploration of how Gothic literature presents issues that are still present nowadays and the transatlantic nature of cultural and normative exchanges.

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