

“SHE FELT IT, CREEPING OUT OF THE SKY”: MADNESS AND DEATH AS LIBERATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN’S FICTION¹

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Women have been deemed mad for centuries. Such a diagnosis leads them to two paths: they either die within themselves, or, more advantageously, they ascend to a different level of freedom. In this paper, focusing on three texts produced in the late nineteenth century, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892), and Kate Chopin’s “The Story of An Hour” (1894) and *The awakening* (1899), we argue that, with a Gothic-like morbidity, their self-destructive protagonists, when facing restricting and limited lives, are aroused by a death instinct more satisfying than the unbearable reality they live in. Thus, it is through the annihilation of life, either via madness or death, that they reach liberation.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Death. Gothic Poetics. Kate Chopin. Madness.

*“If we do well, and if our husbands bear
the yoke without discomfort or complaint,
our lives are admired. If not, it’s best to die.”*
Euripedes (2008, p. 12, 244-246)

In *A room of one’s own* (1929), Virginia Woolf does more than simply investigate the history of women and fiction. She discusses the most diverse and urgent topics concerning not only literature but the female experience in general – something that has been either lost or misunderstood. And when we consider literature’s mimetic relationship with life, it goes without saying that both subjects, more often than not, are perceived to be intertwined. Thus, Woolf’s claim that women “have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of

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¹ This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001.

reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (2015 [1929], p. 74) impels us to wonder what would happen if they would stop doing so altogether.

The dynamic depicted in the quotation above is rather similar to the lines Medea utters, brought to this essay through its epigraph, in Euripides’s tragedy centuries earlier. Both of them frame the same picture: women are a necessity to men as long as they function as a mirror that enlarges their images. Otherwise, they are better off dead – or insane. In this distorted relationship, in which the female is barely an active subject, all of her experience is insisted on as inferior because, Woolf argues:

if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgement, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is? (2015 [1929], p. 74-75).

When the Angel in the House meets the Devil in the Flesh and women start to speak, think and act for themselves the male figure in the looking-glass decreases because he loses his ability to control his female antagonists. With this in mind, it is our goal here to investigate how Woolf’s reflection was already being explored in the last decade of the nineteenth century. To do so, we have selected three texts: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s (1860-1935) “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892) and Kate Chopin’s (1850-1904) short story “The Story of An Hour” (1894) as well as her novel, *The awakening* (1899). Besides the 1800s alone being a period that dealt very closely with medical accounts and treatments for madness, most of them centred on women, there seems to be, in these texts, a Gothic-like morbidity alongside self-destructive protagonists who are prompted by a death instinct more satisfying than the unendurable reality they are faced with.

The nineteenth century is known for its long history with insanity and its close connection with womanhood. And it is in this era, as reported by Athena Vrettos in her essay “Victorian Psychology” (2002, p. 75), that an effort was made to “modify the behavior of the insane according to proper codes of conduct drawn from the middle-class home”. Thus, the previous means employed to discipline the insane, notably the use of chains and mechanical restraints, gave way to techniques of social and medical control. These new practices culminated, according to Andrew Scull, in *Madness* (2011, p. 46), in the end of the “coercion, fear, [and] constraint of the madhouse regime”. Within this latest and optimistic scenario, the bourgeois household became the compass to what would be considered a well-regulated mind.

Such centrality on the bourgeoisie and their alleged rationality and superiority of mind, as argued by Peter Gay in his celebrated work on the bourgeois experience

(1986, p. 289), was rather exaggerated. He reports that the nineteenth-century middle-class family lived under an agonizing amount of scrutiny to the point that it was almost impossible to lead a fulfilled life. Moreover, it was widely agreed that women were the most common victims of mental illnesses, even though the roots of this issue were disputed. On this matter, Gay (1986, p. 290) mentions two North-American researchers with opposing perspectives: although both doctor William Alcott and Catherine Beecher believed women's susceptibility to nervous tensions was not accidental, whereas the former credited it to their natural fragility and vulnerability, the latter pointed out a political cause. According to Beecher, North-American women, especially those from the middle class, suffered from nervous conditions due to idleness and lack of practise of their talents. Madness here, then, seems to meet Émile Durkheim's understanding of it as a social fact (SCULL, 2011, p. 2), an argument often made among feminists.

Along these lines, Phyllis Chesler, in *Women and madness* (2018 [2005], p. 90), states that madness is "an intense experience of female sexual and cultural castration and a doomed search for potency". This quest for something more that already begins sentenced to ruin implies that the possibilities and opportunities women were – and, we would argue, still are – denied in a patriarchal society, as well as the oppressions and limitations representative of the feminine as a construct, may have caused a considerable amount of damage to the psyche to an extent that is has driven women mad. In this context, the question that remains, one which literature has been trying to answer, is: what can women do to escape their small and limited lives?

Given this background, the emergence of a short story as Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is not unexpected. Described by Elaine Showalter, in *A literature of their own* (1977, p. 203), as "a horror story of a woman going mad during a rest cure", we see in the narrative a nameless protagonist slowly, but spectacularly, sliding into madness. She seems to be suffering from postpartum depression, that is, according to her husband John, a "temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency" (GILMAN, 2009 [1892], p. 166)². As part of her treatment, known as the "rest cure"³ and despite her wishes, she was sent to spend some time in an isolated colonial state, something like a "haunted house" (p. 166). And just like Gilman herself was recommended to "live as domestic a life as far as possible, [...] to have but two hours' intellectual life a day, [and] never to touch a pen, brush

² All references to Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" are from the Penguin Classics 2009 edition, indexed in the list of References.

³ Created by Silas Weir Mitchell (1829-1914). He specialized in the treatment of neurasthenia through methods that involved isolation, immobility, prohibition of intellectual activity and overfeeding (SHOWALTER, 1977, p. 274). According to Gilman, she sent a copy of her story to Mitchell, from whom she never heard back. However, she later found out that he had admitted changing his treatment of neurasthenia after reading "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (GILMAN, 2015 [1913], p. 2330).

or pencil again” (GILMAN, 2015 [1913], p. 2330), the narrator was forbidden to work or to see her friends and family until she was well.

She was, then, locked up in a nursery with marks resembling a cell for the confinement of the mad, with barred windows, scratched floors and a bed nailed down to the floor with its posts gnawed. And, as expected, she turned into a mirror of her husband’s conceptions of her: the more he insisted on her being in that room for her safety, the more diminished she became, the sicker and the madder. As the narrative advances and after some weeks since their arrival had elapsed, we see the protagonist completely stripped of power. This is clear when, for instance, she tries to argue about her case with John, insisting that her treatment besides inadequate was in fact deteriorating her mental state, saying that “I told him I was not really gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away”, to what he responds, ““Of course if you were in any danger, I could and would, but you are really better, dear, whether you see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, I know.”” (p. 174). In addition to John’s authoritative undertone – him being not only her husband but also a physician –, there’s a condescending hint to his voice, which only makes clearer her complete lack of agency in this situation. And as Showalter suggests, in *The female malady* (1985, p. 5), if madness is the “desperate communication of the powerless”, then being mad is her only means of expressing her self.

Once incapable of making her life decisions, the unnamed protagonist keeps a secret diary in which she writes sparse accounts, unreliable as they are, of her days in custody. Not having much to do, the only tangible choice within her grasp is to investigate the pattern in the yellow wall-paper that surrounds the room she is in, something that quite intrigues her. Thus, as the days go by, the shape she used to see turns into a woman, a “faint figure behind [the wall-paper that] seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out” (p. 174). And as she grows more obsessed with it, her husband, unknowingly, sees this as a sign of improvement:

John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wall-paper.

I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was **because** of the wall-paper. (p. 177, original emphasis).

It is through a sort of symbiosis that her becoming-mad takes place: the many women that she sees creeping around the garden and fighting for freedom merge into herself to the point that she joins their army: “I don’t like to **look** out of the windows even – there are so many of these creeping women, and they creep too fast. / I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?” (p. 181, original emphasis). Her confinement, then, ends in escape: into madness.

A similar but rather morbid fate is met by Kate Chopin’s protagonist in “The Story of An Hour”. Mrs Mallard is first introduced as a woman with a heart condition and as a wife who is about to be widowed. When a friend of the family arrives at her house with the news of a train wreck, one in which her husband was expected to be on the list of casualties, her reaction, the narrator informs us, was unlike that which women in the same situation had experienced: “When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.” (CHOPIN, 2006b [1894], p. 352)⁴. Alone in her room, she has a realisation while sitting on a chair and looking out the window:

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know it; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air. (p. 353).

What she feels, like an orgasm, while her “pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body” is uttered through her slightly parted lips: “free, free, free!” (p. 353). Now, as a widow, she would finally taste the freedom her existence seems to have been lacking. In a line that is often omitted in some editions of the short story, the narrator tells us about Mrs Mallard recognition that from now on “there would be no one to live for her during these coming years; she would live for herself” (p. 353). Thus, we see a woman completely aligned with her desire for life. We can only imagine her surprise – and disappointment – when she comes down the stairs embracing her sister to meet her husband walking in through the front door, unharmed. What then happens to her, upon such a vision, the doctors tell us: “she had died of heart disease – of joy that kills” (p. 354).

In *The awakening* we meet another of Chopin’s protagonists, Edna Pontellier, who is just as confused and seemingly as powerless as Gilman’s unnamed character. According to Per Seyersted (2006, p. 28), in his introduction to the Louisiana University Press collection of Chopin’s works, her novels deal directly with the issue of what it means to be a woman – and, we would like to add, it hands openly with female sexuality and desire. The story is set in the late 1800s and follows Edna, a Creole⁵ woman, mother of two children and neglected wife, who, during a family vacation to Grand Isle, a popular resort nearby New Orleans, faces major challenges and changes in her life.

What *The awakening* indicates from the beginning is that it is a narrative of self-discovery and self-encounter of a solitary soul. Edna, someone who is “rather

⁴ All references to Chopin’s “The Story of An Hour” are from the Louisiana University Press 2006 edition, indexed in the list of References.

⁵ In a North-American context, the Creoles were descendants of French and Spanish colonists.

handsome than beautiful” (CHOPIN, 2006a [1899], p. 883)⁶, is experiencing an awakening to a new life while managing to find her self apart from her family. As the narrator puts it: “In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relation as an individual to the world within and about her.” (p. 893). It is mainly through sexuality that her new consciousness of selfhood arises and after meeting her first lover, Robert Lebrun, for whom she has deep feelings, she rises “in full to an imperative craving for sex, for independence, and for clarity and self-knowledge” (SEYERSTED, 2006, p. 28). Now that she is aware of what she could have in a relationship, the one she has with Léonce, her husband, becomes even more strenuous, and as time passes by she grows more assertive and unwilling to take his orders. At a certain point in the novel, for instance, after having an intimate and sentimental moment with Robert, Edna is on the porch at night when Léonce comes home. He wants to know what she was doing up so late and tells her to come inside, a command that she simply ignores. He insists, saying that she is being foolish and that he will not permit her to stay there all night:

“You must come in the house instantly.”

With a writhing motion she settled herself more securely in the hammock. She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted [...].

“Léonce, go to bed,” she said. “I mean to stay out here. I don’t wish to go in, and I don’t intend to. Don’t speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you.” (p. 912).

It is this type of behaviour that leads Léonce to seek a doctor, thinking that Edna must be mentally unstable, claiming that ““She’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning eternal rights of women”” (p. 948). Edna, however, continues in her path of self-discovery and growth: she is left by Robert, moves out of her husband’s house to one of her own and starts painting. She does not attempt anyhow to suppress her sexual desire and, at the end of the novel, even confronts Robert upon his return to the city, once she realises she will never be able to live as an adjunct to a man again: ““I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose.”” (p. 992). Her melancholic ending only reinforces her commitment to denial and resistance to others’ influence in her life: she commits suicide by drowning, a final exertion of freedom.

The dreary fate met by the protagonists in the stories we have been discussing, either driven into madness or death, is a flirtation with a Gothic aesthetic of morbidity

⁶ All references to Chopin’s *The awakening* are from the Louisiana University Press 2006 edition, indexed in the list of References.

and gloom. It is not our intention to romanticise and endorse both of these extreme forms as means of rebellion, but to show how these stories, following a Gothic tradition of denouncement, especially when it comes to the condition of women's living, catch the readers entangled with mixed feelings of fright and fascination, repulse and seduction, horror and allure when faced with protagonists who are willing to take a step further in claiming back their lives through experiences that take place at the edge of life itself.

The three stories introduce heroines who, as far as we are aware, live under comfortable economic conditions. Although they do not seem to practice any profession – Edna is only starting to paint –, their husbands are successful in their careers. In Gilman's short story, for instance, John is a renowned physician who spends more time at work than with his sick wife, and Léonce, in Chopin's novel, is a wealthy and popular man who, just like his peer, finds his professional and social duties more pressing than his commitment to his family. This framework, then, sets the three protagonists in the picture portrayed by Beecher, previously mentioned, of how middle-class women had to endure small and limited lives and, for this reason, they were more susceptible to suffer from what Showalter (1985, p. 3) calls the female malady, that is, madness.

Furthermore, something that these women have in common is the fact that they seem to identify passivity and renunciation, characteristics long associated with femininity and womanhood, with negativity, a means of limiting their lives. When living in a world too small, turned into some sort of cage – or nursery –, these women find the possibility of self-annihilation more satisfying than enduring oppression to the point that giving up their lives is a better option than giving up their selves.

Showalter (1977, p. 131) associates Edna Pontellier with a kind of heroine who "has moments of illumination, awakenings to an unendurable reality; but she quickly finds a way to go back to sleep; even death is preferable to the pain of growth". Edna indeed comes to realise the insufferable reality she lives in, but what Showalter fails to see is that growth is not subtracted from her path because in the end she chooses death. What we see in the whole plot of the novel is precisely Edna's development into an independent, self-sufficient woman, as it is clear when the narrator states that, after refusing to host the neighbours in a house gathering and causing Léonce's wrath, "She began to do what she liked and to feel as she liked" (p. 938), or, as a response to this behaviour, Léonce's preoccupation with her new ways: "He could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world." (p. 939).

This same process happens in Gilman's short story. In the well-known final scene, when the narrator is at last one with the mob of creeping women and crawling all around the bedroom floor, John is at the locked door trying to get in, calling and

crying for an axe. When he finally manages to enter the room – using the key she told him she had thrown out of the window – he stops at the door in complete shock of the scene and asks what she is doing.

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

“I’ve got out at last,” said I, “in spite of you and Jane! And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!”

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time! (p. 182).

It is through madness that she escapes the wall-paper and John. Consequently, she grows into some sort of liberated self, one that no longer reflects her husband’s image of her, but one of her own. Thus, Gilman anachronically explores the question Woolf would pose a few decades later: when the narrator finally ceased to replicate her husband’s image, he shrank and fainted.

Just as her peers, what Mrs Mallard grasps through her senses is ultimately what Edna herself finds in her own path. Chopin makes both of her protagonists beautifully meet and unite in the same feeling and words. Mrs Mallard’s whispered “Free! Body and soul free!” (p. 354), when she comes to understand that her life is now her own, echoes Edna’s thoughts in the final moments of her life when she is thinking about her husband and children: “they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul.” (p. 1000). They are, at last, free.

These stories are connected precisely at this place of (masculine) oppression that their protagonists want to flee. They desire to be what Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1989 [1949], p. 153), describes as the emancipated women: “they wish that in themselves, as in humanity in general, transcendence may prevail over immanence”; that is, they insist on the active transcendence of a subject rather than the passive immanence of an object. And it is men that have always lived in terms of their existence – transcendence –, whereas women are defined by their essence, assigned to the realm of immanence: their femininity is what dictates their lives. Thus, women have existed confined to their own bodies, reflecting a cultural standard that not necessarily, often never, mirrors their identity. In *The awakening*, Edna makes very clear that this position is no longer one she will take for herself. In a conversation with Madame Ratignolle, she says: “I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money [...] but I wouldn’t give myself” (p. 928). It is the awareness of this essence of being that these women are unwilling to let go of. Even if it tastes like a “monstrous joy” it is, at last, “a possession of self-assertion” that Mrs Mallard, as well as her peers in this paper, recognise “as the strongest impulse” (p. 353) of their beings.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000 [1979]), recall Adrienne Rich’s metaphor of the “thinking woman”⁷, one that has been imprisoned within her own alien and loathsome body and that “has become not only a prisoner but a monster” (p. 89). Caught up in the same position, these protagonists know that the only way out of this situation is going through it; thus, they embody an Other that is unwomanly, a monster, mad and led by a death-like instinct so they can find release. It is for this reason that the narrator in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is fearless when she is finally in symbiosis with the woman behind the pattern, and also why Edna is unafraid to be the bird that “soar[s] above the level plain of tradition and prejudice [and that] must have strong wings” (p. 966). It is also why Mrs Mallard dies of a “joy that kills”, one that the narrator cleverly leaves us wondering about: is she happy because of her husband’s return or, as we prefer to read it, because she finally found her self and that life she saw in her husband, the one she used to lead, was not one that could hold her anymore – and, thus, she dies? These women, when facing the mirror, do not reflect anything but themselves, their selves – even if it means death or the nothingness of madness.

And why do these women go to such lengths as to cross the border of sanity or even of life? Because it is what finally gives them agency over their lives, as well as a more acute perception of existence. Aligned with their death instinct, they satisfy a self-destructive impulse: they refuse to fall back into immanence, into their positions as mirrors. As Sigmund Freud has shown us, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961 [1920]), the death instinct, with its conservative nature, “seeks to lead what is living to death”, but in such a way that “the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion” (p. 40, 33). The creeping force that drives these women is the “life’s delirium” that Edna thinks Madame Ratignolle’s “colorless existence” (p. 938), one that is overtly domestic, lacks: freedom, the ability to transcend. It is only too morbid that it is achieved through the annihilation of life. When there is no room for desire, the exercise of creativity or life in its bare form, then all that remains is despair, destruction, madness and death. However, if insanity or death, as Medea prophesies, appear as the way-out, they are not the ending, but a liberation, a means of transcendence and resistance; a return to fullness.

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⁷ In the poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” (1963): “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grips her, she becomes.”

- **RESUMO:** *As mulheres têm sido consideradas loucas há séculos. Tal diagnóstico as leva a dois caminhos: elas, por um lado, morrem dentro de si ou, por outro mais vantajoso, ascendem a um nível diferente de liberdade. Neste artigo, mantendo o foco em três textos produzidos no final do século XIX, “The yellow wall-paper” (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1892), “The story of an hour” (Kate Chopin, 1894) e o romance *The awakening* (Kate Chopin, 1899), argumentamos que, com uma morbidez gótica, suas protagonistas autodestrutivas, diante de vidas restritas e limitadas, são despertadas por uma pulsão de morte mais satisfatória que a realidade insuportável em que vivem. Assim, é através da loucura ou da morte que elas alcançam a libertação.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Kate Chopin. Loucura. Morte. Poética gótica.*

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