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# Figuring Female Agency in the Victorian Ghost Story

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A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in  
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
**Master of Arts by Research in English Literature**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation investigates three highly regarded Victorian writers, Elizabeth Gaskell, M.R. James and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, exploring their vastly different experiences in life. The manner in which each approaches the idea of female agency differs considerably, particularly in regards to the way they chose to figure it within the uncanny elements of the ghost story itself. Gaskell used the figure of the ghost to highlight the lack of agency that women were afforded within their daily lives, focusing on the lingering and often punishing presence of the past. James, meanwhile, predominantly wrote from the point of view of male characters and has developed a reputation for the lack of female presence in his stories. However, James's hesitancy to write complex female characters does not mean that there is nothing to explore in relation to female agency. On the contrary, this thesis will argue that James used the animism in objects to represent more than just a ghostly possession, but also his anxieties over change, including the rise of the "New Woman" as a figure

of female agency. As for Gilman, this thesis will focus solely on her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” – a text that, for some, would not be counted amongst the ghost story genre at all. This thesis will seek to interrogate the manner in which she used elements of the ghost story, including the gothic setting, the narrator’s relationship with her husband and the ghostly figure existing behind the wallpaper, ultimately as vehicles for exploring the liberation for women’s agency. By studying each author’s individual approach to figuring female agency, this dissertation will expose the ways that society dealt with cultural anxieties through literature, considering the manner in which the ghost story allowed writers to push boundaries and confront concerns that were not always easy to express in reality.

**Key Terms:**

Elizabeth Gaskell; M.R. James; Charlotte Perkins Gilman; experiences; antiquity; male perspective; female agency; figured; uncanny; ghost story; objects; anxieties; “New Woman”

Word Count: 22,724



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## Introduction

Ghosts have not always been perceived as powerful entities. Of course, ghosts have long been a source of fear and uncertainty, but in literature specifically, for a long time, the relevance of the ghost was merely to propel the plot of the protagonist, acting as “more of a stage device” than “central character” (Ashley, 1997: p. 403). Mike Ashley (as cited in Smith & Hughes, 2012) notes that, Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists tended to deploy the ghost as a “melodramatic warning, a harbinger of doom, or an unwanted manifestation of an individual’s guilt” (p. 94), with the trope extending well into the following centuries with texts like *The Monk* (1796) contributing to the Gothic trend of ghosts primarily being used to “frighten and horrify rather than teach moral lessons” (Smith & Hughes: 2012: 94). Even during the nineteenth century, when the ghost story hit the height of its popularity, authors of the likes of Dickens were still implementing ghosts as vehicles to progress the agency of their characters, rather than use the ghosts themselves as figures of their own agency. In *A Christmas Carol* (1843), for instance, the character of Marley is portrayed as being entirely restricted as a ghost, stripped of all agency and punished in death for the actions of his life, with Jennifer Bann writing,

The reprehensible actions of Marley’s life are embodied as heavy, restrictive objects after his death ... in presenting ghosts as essentially restricted figures – catalysts to another’s actions rather than the agents of their own – Dickens places Marley’s ghost in a long tradition of the limited



dead. (Bann, 2009: p. 663)

If the ghost stories of the early-mid nineteenth century, what with their chains and regrets, represented limitations, then those that came later were a breath of fresh air to the genre, with authors beginning to recognize that, in an entity that need not conform to the expectations of the living, issues and anxieties could be explored in a manner that would not have been possible when confining the plot to the abilities of the human characters. In turn, ghosts of the mid-late nineteenth century were no longer always mere props within the plot to move a story along; authors were recognizing that, in a world of increasing change and uncertainty, the realm of the supernatural offered their characters a space for escapism, and in turn, rid themselves of the shackles that previously held them to life. In other words, in death, ghosts were able to obtain a sense of agency that was, in many cases, denied to the living.

As Bann notes, “in the supernatural fiction of the later nineteenth century, death began to bring freedom ... and ghosts became active figures empowered rather than constrained by their deaths (Bann, 2009: p. 664). In *Wuthering Heights*, for example, the scene where Catherine Earnshaw breaks through the window, forcing her way through and initiating physical contact with Lockwood by grabbing his hand, leading to him having to drag her hand across the glass in order to break the contact, is a bold display of a ghost displaying significant power and agency over their actions for reasons of their own. The development of ghostly agency and control can be seen in characters that are not even supernatural at all, such as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Readers first meet

Bertha Mason, not as a human being, but as a ghostly, unseen force haunting and terrorising Jane and Mr. Rochester. Perhaps “meet” is not the correct word, for readers do not exactly *meet* Bertha until Jane herself does: hidden away, seemingly powerless and unstable, locked in an attic. Described as a “wild animal” (Brontë, p. 525) and a “lunatic” (p. 526), Bertha is no longer the calculating, purposeful figure that she was earlier in the novel for, here, Bertha is rendered powerless, controlled by not just by her own mental illness, but her husband. In presenting the contrast of Bertha’s power and agency as a ‘ghost’ who is able to actively move around the house, displaying “her ability to move spatially and aurally to resoundingly proclaim her existence” (Davis, 2015: p. 17), against the deeply powerless portrayal of her as a living woman, the possibilities that the ghostly figure could offer to Victorian writers becomes apparent. As Rosemary Jackson notes, the characteristics of the ghost story allow for “fiction dealing with an extension of the idea of what is possible ... spirits invading and inhabiting different bodies, able to break the boundaries of time and space, or to transcend the ordinary limits of matter” (Jackson, 1989: p. xvi). Despite *Jane Eyre* not being a ghost story and Bertha not even being a supernatural entity, while Bertha’s physical presence was something that held her back and stripped her of agency, it is the power she possessed when her character was the subject of Jane’s projection of female agency that highlights the potential that the ghost had for not only embodying that which was not accessible to humans, but also pulling on the deep anxieties of the living, as was the case with Jane. In light of this, the following thesis will argue that, just as Jane was able to create a representation of female agency through the ghostly figure, writers including Elizabeth Gaskell, M.R. James and Charlotte Perkins Gilman

also used the supernatural as a means to project agency within their stories, ultimately allowing them to explore their hopes, and, in some cases, fears.

Existing scholarship concerning female agency has, for the most part, been interested in the lived experiences of humans, as opposed to spectral beings. Nicole Lyn Lawrence, for example, considers the way female writers use their literary voice to vocalise the frustrations of females during the Victorian period, highlighting the isolating impact the domestic sphere had on women within the period. At one point, she compares the deterioration of the woman trapped in the home with a Christmas tree, writing, “like the Christmas tree the figure of the Victorian woman confined within the domestic space suffered from a similar enervation, which caused her physical and social identity to atrophy” (Lawrence, 2015: p. 6). Throughout her thesis, Lawrence investigates “the ways in which ghost stories reveal the figure of the woman herself as an object worthy of investigation” (p. 3), an idea that, while certainly true, is not necessarily presenting an idea that had not already been explored prior to her dissertation. Publications such as *What Did Mrs. Darrington See? An Anthology of Feminist Supernatural Fiction* focuses specifically on the contributions of female writers who were “clearly feminist” (Salmonson, 1989: p. ix), explaining,

The authors, for the most part, were or are active in movements for women’s rights and other social change; they also are (or were) writers with a vision of the short story as art, not lecture, through art that reflects their social concerns. (Salmonson, 1989: p. ix)



In turn, each of the stories curated by Salmonson heavily focus on the agency of female characters and the effect that social and domestic limitations had. More recent scholarship, such as Clare Stewart's *Fighting Spirit: Victorian Women's Ghost Stories* (2000) and Melissa Edmundson Makala's *Women's Ghost Literature in the Nineteenth-Century* (2013), for example, considers the work of female Victorian ghost story writers, arguing in favour of considering the experiences of the woman, focusing on both the characters and the writer, ultimately "raising awareness of unsafe domestic spaces" (Makala, 2013: p. 5).

However, what proved to be particularly striking about Makala's work, especially when compared with the other literature that focused on female agency, was her heavy focus on the effect of placing agency within the supernatural as opposed to the human, with her highlighting the fact that "women writers of the supernatural frequently used the motif of the haunted house to comment on property, class and economic issues" (p. 93). From here, the idea of examining the supernatural elements of the ghost story as a tool to figure female agency began to evolve, leading to Jennifer Bann's *Ghostly Hands and Ghostly Agency* (2009), which influenced the direction that this thesis eventually took. In her study, Bann examines the relationship between the ghost story and the rise of spiritualism, with both having gained traction in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Of particular interest within the article was Bann's focus on "the appearance, behavior and agency of literary ghosts," and, while my own dissertation is less interested in the rise of spiritualism, Bann's contributions in terms of "a new concept of the dead" has proven to be invaluable in terms of

interpreting the possibilities that the figure of the ghost can offer in regards to figuring female agency.

Upon approaching this thesis, it became apparent that, although previous scholarship had shown that it is important to explore female writers' approach to female agency, it was difficult to find much scholarship regarding the position of male writers who, as Bann observes, "largely ... dominated the genre" (Bann, 2007: p. 9). While certainly tempting to focus on lesser-known authors, the three that stood out, particularly in relation to previous scholarship, were Elizabeth Gaskell, M.R. James and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, all who have been subject to much discussion over the years. In light of their popularity, it was crucial to engage with recent and influential contributions within the field in order to find lacunae in their research, thus allowing room for this dissertation to make its own, valid contributions.

In terms of Gaskell, Jenn Cadwallader's *Spirits of the Age: Ghost Stories and the Victorian Psyche* (2009) was worth reading, particularly in regards to its rejection of the concept of "the divine nature of the supernatural" (Cadwallader, 2009: p. iii). Within the thesis, Cadwallader argues that writers such as Dickens, Le Fanu and Gaskell each strove for "a greater degree of human agency in determining experience's spiritual value," (p. iii), however, despite positing the significance of Gaskell's contributions to her original thesis statement, Cadwallader focused heavily on the work of the Dickens and Le Fanu, leaving a gap in her research to further develop her point in relation to Gaskell. Furthermore, while influential in its ideas concerning agency and its ties with



experience, again, Cadwallader was occupied with the manner in which each author figured agency through the human as opposed to the ghost.

Among some of the most detailed studies into the work of Gaskell, particularly in regards to her approach to gender, is Terence Wright's *Elizabeth Gaskell: 'We Are Not Angels': Realism, Gender, Values* (1995), which, through close reading of Gaskell's work, offers insight into how she tackled the social issues of her time, even if he does focus mostly on her realist novels. Wright opens the text explaining that,

Most feel the need to apologise for Mrs. Gaskell in one way or another. Her penchant for melodrama, her religiosity, the glibness of her storytelling talent, her supposed Victorian optimism, are all cited as reasons why we should not accord her full honours in the pantheon. (Wright, 1995: xii).

While Wright does not necessarily argue against this assessment, he does argue in favour of reading Gaskell's work "in an expansive, open and comparatively unjudgemental way, allowing the reader to assess her achievement for what it *is* rather than for what it might not have been of is not" (p. xiii). Despite feminist studies having advanced further since Wright's book, his sentiments towards looking at Gaskell's work in regards to what she has done rather than what she has not still holds true, and is what largely inspired dissertation's focus on Gaskell, despite her having, for the most part, fallen out of favour with feminist critics.





In terms of more recent additions to the field, Kara L. Barrett's study *Victorian Women and their Working Roles* (2013) was highly useful in researching the conditions that Gaskell was writing in, especially in terms of her interest in women's roles within society. In her thesis, Barrett notes "women throughout the Victorian era were treated as secondary citizens to men in society. Women were restricted within their classes and were even more restricted in the work place" (Barrett, 2013: p. 6). Having lived in both the countryside and industrial Manchester, Gaskell witnessed two very different lifestyles for women, with both ultimately proving to be oppressive and difficult – something that this thesis will consider in relation to her approach towards the ghost story. Laura Kranzler builds upon Barrett's idea, focusing more specifically on Gaskell's attempts to work, while still attempting to conform to the role as wife and mother. Referencing Jenny Uglow, Kranzler suggests that one of the reasons why Gaskell was keen to write articles for magazines was because that allowed her to "sneak such work in" alongside her duties within the domestic sphere. (Kranzler, 2000: p. 17) – a role that, despite clearly having strong beliefs in regards to a woman and her ability to have a meaningful life outside of the home, was still something Gaskell was "keen to preserve and prioritize" (p. 17), and an issue that this dissertation will explore in relation to Gaskell's approach and attitude towards female agency.

While researching M.R. James, it was very difficult to find much academic study regarding his representation of women due to the lack of female characters in his texts. With that being said, there have been some recent contributions to Jamesian discourse that influenced the direction that the chapter focusing

on James was able to take. Perhaps the most influential article was Nataliya Oryshchuk's *The Hunters of Humanity: Creatures of Horror in M.R. James's Ghost Stories* (2017), which examines the way James explored his fears by linking them with the non-human, thus turning them into "creatures of horror" (p. 13). Oryshchuk argues that one of the prominent fears within James's ghost stories is sexuality, linking it to what she perceived as a "homosexual panic" from James. (p. 18). However, inspired by Oryshchuk's work here, this dissertation will explore James's representation (or lack thereof) of sexuality as a means to consider his stance on the role of women within society, taking the focus away from the male protagonist, instead highlighting the ways that he figures that which he is scared of within the supernatural.

As this thesis highlights, one of the most recognizable elements of an M.R. James ghost story is his tendency to bring objects to life, having them be the source of the supernatural elements of his ghost stories. As Oryshchuk notes, James had a tendency to link that which he was scared of with the non-human, including seemingly inanimate objects. In light of this, Bill Brown's *Thing Theory* (2001), as well as Martin Heidegger's *The Thing* (1962) were both invaluable in terms of looking at the human-object relationship within James's ghost stories. However, as previously mentioned, there has been little previous scholarship regarding James's use of women within his texts, let alone the manner in which their agency is figured. In light of this, when exploring how thing theory highlights the space within an object as a means to contain something, there proved to be a discussion to expand upon in terms of the issues raised by previous critics regarding the suffocating environment of the domestic sphere.

While initially researching each author, it was useful to read broadly about their life experiences, considering the contextual background that affected the content of their stories. While there has been much written about Gilman and her struggles with mental health, some of the most valuable contributions included: Catherine Golden's article *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook for "The Yellow Wallpaper"* (1993), which examines the impact the text had in the years following its publication; Cynthia Davis's *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Biography* (2010), which gave a detailed insight into Gilman's life from birth to death; Stephanie Craig's *Ghosts of the Mind: The Supernatural in Victorian Gothic Literature* (2012), which explores the connections between mental health and psychology in relation to Victorian Gothic literature – something that has proven useful when exploring Gilman and her relationship with Silas Weir Mitchell; and Anejda Rragami's recent contribution *An Analysis of the Image of the Woman in "The Revolt of the Mother" and "The Yellow Wallpaper"* (2017), which considers marriage, motherhood and domesticity, as well as insights into Gilman's own life alongside a close reading of the text.

Throughout researching for this dissertation, it became apparent that the majority of analysis had close ties with the concepts that Tzvetan Todorov developed in his text *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre* (1975), in which he explored the differences between the uncanny, the marvelous and the fantastic in order to “establish the boundaries and distinguish the fantastic genre from other types of fiction” (Geyer: 2018: p. 176). According to Todorov's theory, in order for something to be fantastic there must be three requirements:

The first one of the three requirements is that the reader must hesitate between natural and supernatural explanations to the events described in the story. Secondly, the same hesitation can also be experienced by the character of the story and thus it could be said that the reader identifies herself with the character. At this point, hesitation becomes one of the themes of the work. The third requirement concerns the readers' attitude towards the work at hand: a work of the fantastic must be read literally, the reader must reject allegorical or poetic interpretations of work. Both allegory and poetry are adjacent to the fantastic. (Suora, 2000: p. 8)

With that being said, should the reader be able to find an explanation for the supernatural events by the end of the text, it would therefore make the story "uncanny" (p. 9) In addition, if a reader is able to "accept the supernatural events and there is no natural explanation" then the text can then be classified as being "marvelous" (p. 9). In many cases throughout researching this thesis, Todorov's theory, while controversial, proved enriching when exploring the techniques applied by each author in order to explore agency – particularly in regards to the uncanny and the fantastic, with his theory substantiating many of the ideas presented within each chapter.

As many of the contributions above show, for the most part, when it comes to investigating female agency within ghost stories, critics are interested in how it is expressed through the human characters themselves, with their relationship with the supernatural being somewhat secondary. This dissertation, however, is interested in exploring the manner in which Gaskell, James and Gilman instead



figure female agency through the ghostly as opposed to the human. Furthermore, as the literature review highlighted, when exploring female agency within the ghost story, most tend to focus solely on the female author. While it is certainly important that female authors' voices are recognised, it is interesting to see the approach of male Victorian writers, many of which are neglected in relation to female representation because it is seen to be lacking, and therefore not worth considering.

In terms of each specific author, recent studies have categorized Gaskell as "assuredly not a feminist writer" (Weiss, as cited in Borojević, 2018: p. 42), with her approach to female agency therefore somewhat lacking in terms of seeing what she was trying to do as opposed to what she was not doing. While this thesis does not exactly argue against this, given that Gaskell's ghost stories often leave readers feeling disheartened, it will argue in favour of reading female agency beyond the human characters, and exploring the way she explores the impossibility of agency alongside the impossibility of the uncanny, supernatural occurrences that she writes about. The first chapter of this dissertation will consider two of Elizabeth Gaskell's contributions to the genre: "The Old Nurse's Story" and "The Poor Clare," both texts that focus on the experiences of both female humans and ghosts. Gaskell was interested in the concept of the role of the woman within society, with her time spent in rural Cheshire as a young woman, followed by Manchester once married meaning that she witnessed domesticity in its most traditional form, as well as the rise of the working woman within industry. As a result, Gaskell's work was highly influenced by female experience, and, while each text in question offers evidence that she believed in female

empowerment, she ultimately leaves readers with a distinct sense of hopelessness at the difficult, powerless situations women were often subject to.

The second chapter will explore M.R. James: a man described as being the “master” of the ghost story (Davies, 2007: p. v). Generally, James’ stories focussed on men and their role within society, leading to him becoming renowned for the lack of female representation within his work. However, in reading two of his short stories, “The Ash Tree” and “The Rose Garden,” this chapter will argue that there is still something to be interpreted in the absence of the female character, especially when one considers James’s tendency to contain his fears within the ghostly object.

The third chapter will focus on Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” exploring how she figures female agency through the various ghostly, “uncanny” elements of the tale. With most critics rejecting the story as even being within the ghost story genre, the text has been somewhat neglected in terms of how Gilman uses the uncanny in order to highlight female agency, as I will seek to show throughout the chapter. The text is particularly interesting when read in relation to Gaskell, given that both women, despite each having been heavily influenced by their own experiences, clearly have differing opinions on the possibility of female agency.



## **How does Elizabeth Gaskell use the ghost story as a tool to explore female agency in the Victorian period?**

When a man becomes an author, it is probably merely a change of employment for him. He takes a portion of that time which has hitherto been devoted to some other study or pursuit ... and another ... steps into his vacant place, and probably does as well as he. But no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother, as well as she whom God has appointed to fill that particular place: a woman's principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice; nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed. And yet she ... must not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others.

- Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*

When one thinks of the Victorian household, it is easy to picture a scene from a Dickensian novel: a man who goes out to work; a woman who remains at home with her sole focus being on maintaining a working household and caring for her family. In fact, given that families were encouraged to conform to this expectation, with the publication of books like William Andrus Alcott's *The Young Wife, or Duties of Woman in the Marriage Relation* in 1837, the stereotypical image is not exactly inaccurate. Rather, it is just a little limited. While there were many women that spent their time at home, there were also the women that were left with no option than to go to work alongside their

husbands (and even children), contributing to the vast development that we know as the industrial revolution. Despite women from disadvantaged backgrounds being encouraged to contribute to their households, those that chose to work rather than remain in the home were still “treated as secondary citizens with society” (Barrett, 2013), receiving much less money than their husbands, as well as being extremely limited in the job opportunities that were available to them. As Barrett notes,

Women were often placed into roles and situations that were not considered suitable during this time period. Mill workers, prostitutes, and even unwed motherhood concerns were all a part of the growing issues with women workers. (Barrett, 2013)

One author that was particularly interested in the career prospects of Victorian women, as well as exploring both the differences and the crossovers between the two ways of life was Elizabeth Gaskell, who wrote several novels that gave insight into both the rural and the industrial environments.

Gaskell herself stands as an intriguing figure, for, despite living in Manchester, she is noted as having lived a rather family, home-oriented life. What separated Gaskell from other women like herself was her ability to write and the success of her novels, making her a working woman in a way that was very unique at the time. With that being said, Gaskell’s distant view of what life was really like for much of the working population meant that, when it came to critical opinion, her

work was often left out of the discussion – especially in regards to her input to the feminist literature of the time. In fact, Uglow notes that,

Gaskell does not take one's breath away at her breadth and penetration as George Eliot does, nor can she match the visionary intensity of Charlotte Brontë, but her unforced storytelling power and impassioned sympathy create an unrivalled range of fully imagined worlds (as cited in Wright, 1995: p. xii).

However, it seems that Gaskell was not entirely oblivious to the strange space she occupied as a woman writer, with there being several instances within Gaskell's work that represent the split she likely often felt between providing for her family, community and continuing to be a successful writer – something that Laura Kranzler believes,

...must have been a constant source of tension and anxiety for her, as it doubtless was for so many other women writers in the nineteenth century ... thus the theme of the Gothic doubling of female identity which recurs so often in Gaskell's fiction ... could be seen to have its source in Gaskell's own compartmentalized life. (Kranzler, 2000: p. 16)

Despite Gaskell mostly occupying the domestic space, the fact that her family spent time living in Manchester meant that, like her character Margaret Hale in *North and South* (1855), she was exposed to a wide range of issues that made their way into her work, with Linda Hughes and Michael Lund arguing that,

although Gaskell herself was not necessarily involved in the political issues regarding the working-classes, “what is important about her work is her openness to a many-sided reality that includes oppression, harm, suffering, ambition, opportunity, and even opportunism” (Hughes & Lund, 1999: p. 2). And yet, despite her open-minded approach to writing, for a long time Gaskell’s legacy was a woman who was “recognised for much of her own century as a voice of Victorian convention: the loyal wife, the good mother, the respected woman writer,” (p. 2) even being commonly referred to as Mrs. Gaskell. And so, when bearing her respectability *and* her desire to write about issues she was passionate about in mind, does her conservative reputation make Gaskell less worthy of considering in a feminist, progressive light, or does it reveal a tactfully courageous woman writer who found a way to engage with people who may not have been willing to entertain her ideas?

If one considers the latter argument, then it forms an interesting lens to read her ghost stories through, several of which have recently been considered amongst the feminist literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century following “a steady decline in her standing among twentieth-century literary critics” (Hughes & Lund, 1999: p. 2). If one considers the political narrative Gaskell weaved into works such as *North and South* (1855), *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), then it would make sense to explore her ghost stories for similar themes. Even during the rise of critical interest in the Victorian ghost story, Gaskell’s work has mostly been overlooked, overshadowed within the genre by mostly male authors. And yet, in Gaskell we have a woman with what this chapter has already established as a unique viewpoint into life – restricted by her reputation, but also clearly

very talented and with a desire to challenge expectations. Why should Gaskell not be counted amongst the other women writers that, as Rosemary Jackson notes “protest against a social system that has defined reality and, particularly, women’s reality and identity in such restrictive ways” leading to them being “strongly drawn towards non-realistic narratives” (Jackson, 19889: p. xvii)? More so than any other genre, the ghost story offered Gaskell a highly creative space in which “she was able to push the boundaries further than she may have felt comfortable within her own life” (Stewart, 2000: p. 126), thus making her stories and approach to female agency fascinating to study, especially considering her unique, perceived position of power amongst society. And so, in light of this, the following will consider two of Gaskell’s ghost stories: “The Old Nurse’s Story” (1852) and “The Poor Clare” (1856), examining whether Gaskell’s stories uncovered more than just the supernatural, but something equally as chilling, and, for many, much closer to home.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the two ghost stories is the way that they are presented to readers, with “The Old Nurse’s Story” having a female narrator, and “The Poor Clare” being told by a male lawyer. In both texts, it is clear that Gaskell chose her narrator’s very carefully, highlighting, as Melissa Edmundson points out in her essay for *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, “women’s ghost stories tend to show a more developed sympathy for the complexities of human relationships than is typically found in stories ... by men” (Edmundson, 2017: p. 69). When comparing the two texts, especially considering the representation of each character, it is certainly possible that Gaskell was attempting to show that, just as she was capable of having a reliable voice, so are



her female characters, as “using a female narrator allows Gaskell to present the ghost story as a female genre associated with oral storytelling and to condemn a system of male power which represses women and deforms their relationships with each other” (Brewster & Thurston, 2017). In the case of “The Old Nurse’s Story,” readers are presented with an account that not only had first-hand experience of the events, but one that is presented as being consistently level-headed and rational, even appearing to admit that she was wrong about her experiences in the house. On the other hand, in “The Poor Clare,” we have a male narrator that, despite his job as a lawyer implying that he would be a logical, honest man, is regularly seen to act irrationally – even hysterically – in a manner that, in other ghost stories of the time, is often reserved for the opposite gender. The fact that he is described as regularly getting sick, and even developing an obsession with Lucy (the character whom readers eventually find out is plagued by a ghostly mirror self), it begs the question of whether or not readers should trust his account in the same way that they would if reading a story from a writer such as M.R James or Sheridan Le Fanu – two writers that were known for writing from the male perspective.

Upon first reading both texts, one of the most striking elements was, like most ghost stories, the setting. In “The Old Nurse’s Story,” the journey to the house sees Hester and Rosamund leave “all signs of a town, or even a village” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 3), with the house itself being situated “inside the gates of a large wild park – not like the parks in the north, but with rocks, and the noise of running water, and gnarled thorn-trees, and old oaks, all white and peeled with age” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 3). Within this passage, Gaskell establishes not only how





separated the characters are from the rest of the world, but how unfamiliar they are with their surroundings – a narrative choice that is instantly unsettling for the readers and characters alike. Upon arriving at the house, matters only get worse:

The road went up about two miles, and then we saw a great and stately house, with many trees close around it, so close that in some places their branches dragged against the walls when the wind blew; and some hung broken down; for no one seemed to take much charge of the place. (Gaskell, 2000: p. 3).

Gaskell's description of the trees here proves to be immensely striking, provoking suffocating imagery of the uncontrollable, "wild" landscape, quite literally pushed up against the house, and, in turn, the people that live inside. We see this description within "The Poor Clare" too, with Gaskell using it to describe not just Lancashire, but two of the characters, Bridget and Mary Fitzgerald as "wild and passionate" (Gaskell, 2000: p. 104). In terms of the nature imagery here, to state that a landscape is wild, simply overtaken by nature, it could be argued that Gaskell was using the scenery as a metaphor for the experiences of the female characters, particularly in regards to how they have no control over that, like nature, which has more power than them. Having said that, in the case of both texts, it is worth noting that, as Maureen T. Reddy states, "in Gaskell's short fiction, 'wild' often means sexual or passionate" (Reddy, 2000: p. 260).

Considering that both texts have a strong focus on female experience, the idea that Gaskell was knowingly trying to incorporate the theme of female sexuality provides readers with an interesting lens to view her texts through. In much the same way that Gaskell herself struggled to find a line between her work and home life, in reading her work it is clear that “many of [her] novels deal in part with the dangers of female sexuality in a society that requires women to de-sex themselves in order to become angels of the house,” something that was “clearly ... a theme that fascinates Gaskell, but it is also one that could not be dealt with straightforwardly in a realistic novel, partly because of social constraints, to be sure, but partly also because of the author’s own fears and internal conflicts” (Reddy, 1984: p. 259). As a writer that had built a reputation as a respectable woman, although Gaskell was evidently concerned with the expectations of her gender, it was only through the unrealistic format of her Gothic tales that we really see Gaskell explore female sexuality and repression in a more overt manner, ultimately gaining an agency, even if only through her pen, that her characters struggled to possess.

There are several instances throughout “The Old Nurse’s Story” where Gaskell makes subtle links between female sexuality and the price that women pay for both embracing and repressing any such feelings. Maude and Grace, both struggling with a father that will not let them marry, experience very different conclusions in regards to their relations with the same man. As Clare Stewart points out, “this turns them against each other, where previously they were each other’s support” (Stewart, 2000: p. 111). The fact that both sisters find themselves suffering and living in isolation, regardless of the fact that they both

took different paths, could show Gaskell's belief that, when it came to female sexuality, the battle against the endless circle of judgment and punishment could not be won.

Within both "The Old Nurse's Story" and "The Poor Clare", readers see the expression of sexuality not only as a punishment for the women that were directly involved in the event, but the generations that followed, also. In the case of Miss Furnivall and Mrs. Stark, their prolonged misery is clear to the other residents of the manor, with Hester believing that "no good could be about them, with their grey hard faces, and their dreamy eyes, looking back into the ghastly years that were gone" (Gaskell, 2000: p. 68), however, the true impact of past mistakes are more chillingly manifested through the interactions the ghosts have with Rosamund. Several times throughout the text, Gaskell writes of Rosamund being visited and dangerously drawn towards a ghostly child, leaving Hester desperately trying to keep her safe. Towards the end of the story, readers see the true effect that the ghosts have had on Rosamund when she tries to escape the living, exclaiming "Oh Hester! Hester! ... It's the lady! the lady below the holly-trees; and my little girl is with her. Hester! Hester! let me go to her; they are drawing me to them. I feel them - I feel them. I must go!" (Gaskell, 2000: p. 70). At the start of the story, Rosamund is the only pure character given her young age and childish vulnerability, and yet, as the above quote shows, by the end of the text Rosamund is being pulled towards the darkness, unable to escape from it, a victim to the "seductive allure" (Armitt, 2016: p. 63) that the supernatural possesses. The manner in which Rosamund is plagued by the ghosts, especially given her near brush with death at their hands, ultimately strips her of

innocence, and, although this is not overtly sexual, the punishment she receives throughout the remainder of the novel serves to highlight the lasting impact past sins can have on the future generations.

Likewise, in "The Poor Clare," the most striking instance of past haunting future generations comes in the form of the demonic double that Lucy is forced to live with. In first discovering Lucy's secret, the narrator describes the event as such:

I saw behind her another figure – a ghastly resemblance, complete in likeness, so far as form and feature and minutest touch of dress should go, but with a loathsome demon soul looking out of the grey eyes, that were in turns mocking and voluptuous. (Gaskell, 2000: p. 118)

And yet, despite his obvious distress at what he is seeing, the narrator still expresses a sexual interest in Lucy, noting,

I never loved her more fondly than now when – and that was the unspeakable misery – the idea of her was becoming so inextricably blended with the shuddering thought of it. (Gaskell, 2000: p. 118)

When considering how Lucy's trauma is intrinsically linked with not just "the sins of the fathers" (Gaskell, 2000: p. 119), but, crucially, her mother's mistake in initially giving herself to a man that turned out to be cruel, the fact that the narrator is still romanticising Lucy is somewhat uncomfortable. Rather than feeling pushed away by the horror of the double, the narrator is drawn in by its



“mocking and voluptuous” stare, not only showing sexuality in a demonic way, but also that, even though seemingly negative, it will always be able to attract men, thus proving that the pattern of sexuality and punishment will never end.

Having said that, some have argued that, although Lucy may seem to be at the mercy of her double, it does in fact act as a manifestation of her own repressed sexuality, ultimately producing an ‘other’ version of herself that possesses an agency that she feels she does not have. The idea of the double being a form of self-expression, specifically in regards to Lucy’s fractured sense of ego and agency, can be found in Freud’s theory regarding doubles in *The Uncanny* (1919), when he writes that, often with doubles “a special agency is slowly formed ... which is able to stand over the rest of the ego, which has the function of observing and criticizing the self and of exercising a censorship within the mind” (Freud, as cited in Shiloh, 2011: p. 14). Adding to this, Valeria Ann Hyatt notes that, in Lucy’s case, her demonic mirror self is the stronger ego, and is “employed by Lucy as a defence mechanism ... the double ... can act out sexually in ways that Lucy’s own conception of herself simply would not permit into her conscious mind” (Hyatt, 2006: p. 16). In contrast to the idea that the double is a punishment, this interpretation provides Lucy with an unusual tool for agency, for, even though bred from a lack of power, in presenting an intimidating ‘other’ version of herself, Lucy is able to protect herself in a way that the other women of Gaskell’s stories are not.

The theme of female isolation and powerlessness is made particularly clear in “The Old Nurse’s Story,” when, upon entering the manor, Hester quickly learns

that there are large sections of the house that she and the others are simply not allowed access to.

“Oh!” said I, at last, “can she have got into the east wing and hidden there?”

But Dorothy said it was not possible, for she herself had never been in there; that the doors were always locked. (Gaskell, 2000: p. 59)

While this acts as an effective tool to provoke mystery, there is certainly room to speculate that Gaskell has hidden more than just a suspenseful plot point behind the locked door, but a comment on the fact that, in reality, so many doors truly were closed to women.

When reading the Victorian ghost story in an analytical manner, it soon became apparent that the locked door is a common motif employed by many writers, and, despite its popularity, it never fails to unnerve. The symbolism of the door is certainly not a new concept and can be found within many cultures and religions, however, given the idea that a door can act as a passage that enables one to both enter and leave a space, it is hardly surprising that it held great appeal for ghost story writers. Gaston Bachelard considers the concept of thresholds within his book *Poetics of Space*, writing,

...For the door is an entire cosmos of the Half-open ... the door schematizes two strong possibilities, which sharply classify two types of daydream. At times it is closed, bolted, padlocked. At others, it is open, that is to say, wide open. (Bachelard, 1958: p. 222)

Bachelard's ideas regarding the door being a "cosmos of the Half-open" is fascinating when read in relation to the ghost story, given that, in the ghost presenting itself within the human realm, the door between the living and the dead instantly becomes ajar. Interestingly, once one has noticed the locked door trope, it appears in much more than just the Victorian ghost story; you can find it in Gothic tales, mystery novels and even in more modern contexts, with moviemakers still clearly seeing its value in creating suspense. However, what also became clear was its relationship with women. From Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, where readers see both Jane and Bertha Mason being the ones to be locked behind the door by their oppressors; Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, with Cathy attempting to force herself over the threshold; to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1864), where the doors Alice comes across act as both a passage for adventure, mystery and growing up, it cannot be denied that, in the same way that an open door can signify a journey, a closed door could be a metaphor for quite the opposite, proving that, in literature, a door is rarely ever *just* a door.

In *The Poor Clare*, readers see similar instances of characters finding themselves in desperate situations, but, while Miss Furnivall and Mrs. Stark seem to somewhat accept their grief and turmoil, the women in "The Poor Clare" are not



quite as passive, making active attempts to change their circumstances – even if they are not always successful. For example, after completely losing touch with her daughter, in a desperate bid to try and solve the mystery of what has happened, Bridget is described as having “stolen away from her home, and left no trace wither she was departed” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 96). Rather than letting the grief overcome her entirely, Bridget displays a clear example of self-agency, taking it upon herself to travel in search of her daughter, not letting other people find the answers for her. Furthermore, Bridget’s granddaughter Lucy displays similar agency, when, after discovering that her double self is the result of a curse, she travels to meet with her grandmother in an attempt to fix the problem. Rather than act with hatred and revenge in the same way as the family in *The Old Nurse’s Story*, Lucy is described as acting with kindness:

Full of tender pity ... seating herself on the turf, she took Bridget’s head into her lap; and, with gentle touches, she arranged the dishevelled grey hair streaming thick and wild from beneath her mutch.

“God help her! murmured Lucy. “How she suffers!” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 125)

In treating Bridget with a familial respect, even lowering herself to the ground and placing herself on the same level, Lucy not only gains agency in the way that she is trying to solve her own problem, but in the way that she is subverting the common ghost story trope of revenge. Having said that, it is worth noting that, although Lucy is the one to approach Bridget, the meeting would not have

happened if not for the work and negotiation of the male narrator of the text. Throughout, we see him acting as a messenger, ultimately leading Lucy and Bridget together once more. Although Lucy's strength in forgiving her grandmother remains admirable, the moment is somewhat detracted from by the fact that it would not have happened had she not met the narrator.

While Gaskell makes clear attempts to display female agency in "The Poor Clare," "The Old Nurse's Story" shows quite the opposite. While Bridget and Lucy attempt to take charge of their own misery, Miss Furnivall and Mrs. Stark, despite having lived in Furnivall manor for years, have clearly always been so passive in regards to their fear of the house. Despite their concerns, they have spent years trapped in a situation that brings them great unhappiness, all because they do not have any accessible alternatives. In one notable moment, readers see Miss Furnivall's familiarity with the misery of the house, with Gaskell writing: "Miss Furnivall lifted up her sad, heavy eyes, and said to Mrs. Stark 'I am afraid we shall have a terrible winter,' in a strange kind of meaning way." (Gaskell, 2000: p. 64). Beyond this being a clear use of foreshadowing, this moment stands out as Gaskell emphasising just how helpless the women that live in the house are – rendered powerless by their own terror, denied agency by something that, as we see in the final act, is simply beyond their reach, making it impossible for them to escape their circumstances.

The brokenness of the characters is highlighted not just by the exterior of the run-down manor house, but by the objects inside, too. In one of the most chilling moments of the text, Hester hears mysterious music from somewhere within the house, only to discover that the organ is in fact “all broken and destroyed” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 57). The significance of the organ as the object that is initially responsible for making the ghostly sounds, alerting the others to something supernatural, is intriguing when compared alongside what we know about not just the characters in this text, but the ghost story in general, raising the question of whether or not the organ is a subtle allegory for the state of the character that speaks of the paranormal – especially if they are female. This point is further proven by the statement that the music “did no one harm, if we did not know where it came from” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 58), for, it is when there is a figure that can be identified that blame can be placed, just as is so often the case when female characters speak out.

Through the organ scene, we see Hester as not hysterical, but as a sceptic – a theme that, as Gilbert and Cox note, is “not often apparent in ghost stories of the 1830s and 1840s” (Cox & Gilbert. 1991: p. x). During the first instance of a paranormal occurrence – the sound of the organ playing – Hester tries to find some kind of logical explanation, asking around the occupants of the house (Gaskell, p. 6), ultimately, as previously noted, brushing the mysterious music off as she did not know and therefore care where it came from, noting that “by-and-by, I got not to care for that weird rolling music” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 64). Here, Hester completely subverts the trope of women acting hysterical following an unexplainable event, even dismissing the experience given that it did not seem to

be doing any harm. Later, when Rosamund states that two mysterious girls led her into danger, Hester completely rejects the idea, concluding that Rosamund is simply “telling stories” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 68). By setting up Hester as a disbelieving character, Gaskell effectively makes the story all the more compelling, for, as Carol Martin notes, when a skeptical, level-headed character such as Hester becomes “convinced of the supernatural powers, the reader too must be convinced” (Martin, 1989: p. 36). What is particularly important here, especially in regards to the readers’ assessment of the sanity of those experiencing the supernatural occurrence, is that, if the reader is beginning to believe that the ghostly sightings are indeed happening, then surely it is unfair to judge the character with the usual assumption that their mental health is compromised.

Furthermore, it is interesting that, following Rosamund’s account of how she mysteriously found herself outside, upon seeing Miss Furnivall react with fear to the events, Hester wonders whether she is “crazy” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 62), even worrying that Rosamund would become the same due to her close proximity to the older woman. This is a clear misunderstanding of how mental illness works, and, when placed alongside the fact that, in the end, Hester is wrong about the ghost, it is potentially a significant comment to consider in regards to Gaskell’s stance on mental health. While the cultural interest and understanding of mental health issues is certainly only a recent development, in having a sympathetic, reliable protagonist dismissing something that is proven to actually be happening, it could be argued that, even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gaskell was putting readers in the uncomfortable position of seeing themselves and their attitudes

towards female characters through Hester – the sceptic, so quick to blame insanity rather than just take the time to listen.

When considering the fact that Gaskell often wrote characters that challenged preconceived stereotypes, – such as the rebellious Mr. Higgins in *North and South*, and even the sympathetic prostitute Esther in *Mary Barton* – it is certainly not unlikely that she would introduce a character that asked readers to rethink their stance on what really counted as being mentally unstable. Ultimately, Hester had to experience the events before she could truly understand, finally referring to the ghostly girl as “the phantom child.” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 63). In Hester’s acceptance of the supernatural, Gaskell makes the point that, given the resemblance between the readers and Hester, it is important that readers have experience and understanding on something themselves before they begin making damaging presumptions, especially when it comes to mental health.

While the ghostly figure within “The Poor Clare” is very much tied to the living, within “The Old Nurse’s Story” we see the spirits that are very much their own, separate characters. Particularly striking is the child ghost, who is ultimately a manifestation of contradictions: the innocence of a child juxtaposed with the unnaturalness of her ghostly existence; the adjectives used to describe her, “pretty and so sweet,” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 61) are at odds with her cruel actions; the time that she appears within the story – when the weather is so brutal – sets the purity of the snow and the harsh winter weather against each other. The manner in which she is unable to conform to any set expectations, in some ways, makes her all the more powerful and uncanny, especially within the setting of a

ghost story, where the effectiveness of the narrative often revolves around the unexpected. The power of the ghostly entities within the house can be further seen through the corporeal abilities they appear to have, such as holding hands with Rosamund, banging on windows, even alarming the residents enough that they feel the need to “shut the back-kitchen door fast, and bolt it well,” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 64) implying that the ghosts are powerful enough to forcefully enter the house. Here, the ghosts almost seem to have as much, if not more, power over the living human beings, for they appear to be much more frightened of the ghosts than the ghosts are of them.

It is notable that, even though the residents are scared of the physicality of the ghostly child, she is noted as not making any noise:

I had heard no sound of little battering hands upon the window-glass, although the phantom child had seemed to put forth all its force; and, although I had seen it wail and cry, no faintest touch sound had fallen upon my ears. (Gaskell, 2000: p. 63)

With this moment in mind, when one considers the fact that the Old Lord’s ghost is described as being capable of making a “booming” (Gaskell, 2000: p. 56) sound while playing the organ, this is potentially Gaskell proving that, even in death, the male is able to possess more power than his female counterparts.

Overall, there are several terrifying things readers can take away from their experience reading “The Old Nurse’s Story” and “The Poor Clare,” and not all of

them are to do with ghosts. Ultimately, there is a strong argument that, although Gaskell certainly seems to believe that society has the space for female empowerment, it was undeniable that women constantly found themselves at the mercy of men, whether they were alive or dead. Even with the introduction of strong female characters like Hester and Bridget, the two are far outnumbered by weakness and overpowered by Gaskell's frustrations with the limits placed on her gender. Gaskell's lack of conclusion to "The Old Nurse's Story" story shows not just the culture in which it was written, with Miss Furnivall's death proving that there was truly no escape, but that, while writing, Gaskell saw no answer. The final line of "The Old Nurse's Story" encompasses this perfectly: "what is done in youth can never be undone in age!" (Gaskell, 2000: p. 71), enforcing the idea that, no matter how much time passes, a woman's sins will always follow her, even to the grave.

As for whether or not this essay can draw a clear conclusion in regards to whether or not Gaskell has figured out the key to female agency in the ghost story, it cannot. While Gaskell certainly uses the supernatural forces within her text as a tool to have some form of commentary on female experiences, ultimately, her stories seem to be a contradictory combination of women that challenge stereotypes, and characters that are constantly punished and denied by both their pasts and the patriarchy, each refusing to let the female characters live their own lives. And yet, while the agency of the characters remains restricted, the same does not apply for Gaskell herself. For, in spite of Gaskell's characters struggling to gain control over their own lives, implying that there is little to be done in regards to female agency, Gaskell, on the other hand, used her

writing and popularity as an author to challenge a system that clearly frustrated her, thus presenting two different readings of female agency at the same time.

As Maureen Reddy notes, “the female author writing about female experience is claiming a cultural place for that experience and, by extension, is seizing power and authority from the patriarchal order”. (Reddy, 1985: p. 191). If one takes anything away from the two texts, it is that, even though Gaskell’s women are neglected strong agency throughout the story, the manner in which Gaskell presented her stories provides not just her, but female readers with plenty. While the texts are certainly hopeless in tone, the injustice readers experience at the end of the stories allows women to feel like they are heard, and that writers such as Gaskell were using the voice they had to speak up.



**How does M.R. James use the ghost story as a tool to explore  
female agency in the Victorian period?**

Reticence may be an elderly doctrine to preach, yet from the artistic point of view I am sure it is a sound one. Reticence conduces to effect, blatancy ruins it, and there is much blatancy in a lot of recent stories.

- James, *Some Remarks on Ghost Stories*

“The sphere of woman’s happiest and most beneficial influence is a domestic one,” (Ellis, 1839: p. 36) writes Sarah Stickney Ellis in her best-selling book *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*. The text presented the ideal portrait of family life, focusing specifically on the appropriate roles of the man and the woman. While a man is described as “industrious”, having spent “the whole of their waking lives in scenes and occupations” (p. 197), a woman, she notes, should seek an “appropriate sphere” which has “duties of its own, from which no woman can shrink without culpability and disgrace” (p. 61), with the most important being “marriage and her vocation to raise and bear children” (Harrison, 2014: p. 30). As was noted in the previous chapter, while working-class women were often left with no choice but to join their husbands in occupations that led them away from the home, unmarried, middle-class women chose work that, while still taking them away from their own home, placed them within somebody else’s, “most of these as governesses” (Harrison, 2014: p. 31), therefore allowing them to still conform to the domestic ideals that were outlined in books such as Ellis’s.

In terms of the Victorian ghost story, the figure of the woman ensconced within the domestic setting has been well-trodden within supernatural literature, with Gaskell in the previous chapter showing instances in both *The Old Nurse's Story* and *The Poor Clare*, in which both texts feature maternal women working in households that were not their own: Hester as Rosamund's governess, and Bridget working as a servant while still caring for her own daughter. Similarly, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) follows a governess struggling to maintain the harmonious environment of the home, in a quest that only results in "a deepening of domestic chaos," and therefore, her downfall. (Davidson, 2011: p. 13). Despite Gaskell's aforementioned qualms with the restrictions faced by women in the home, in each text, the importance of the secure, domestic setting is highlighted not through the presence of the female, but through the discomfort evoked when that setting is compromised *in spite* of their presence.

When discussing the ghost story in any capacity, it is hard to avoid the contribution of the man deemed "the master" of the genre (Davies, 2007: p. v): M.R James.

Having had a strong academic background, including being a Fellow of Cambridge's King's College, James's writing was heavily influenced by academic settings, with his first foray into the genre being when he would write stories "for his friends and students, reading them aloud at Christmas in memorably spooky performances in his college rooms" (Smith & Hughes, 2012: p. 102). When not exploring the halls of a university, James would often take his readers out amongst nature, writing about "ancient abbeys or the lonely isolated locales of his beloved East Coast" (Davis, 2007: p. VII), basing his stories in settings that very much mirrored his own experiences as a single man "and the

closed, masculine world of academics he delineates, which almost completely excludes women” (Stewart, 2000: p. 15). As one would imagine, with a neglect of female characters came a lack of focus on the traditional domestic setting that was commonly used within the Victorian ghost story. Even when James did write female characters, the majority of them “only have walk-on parts” (Rowlands, 1993), retreating into the background of the action revolving around the male protagonist, thus making it difficult for James to establish their role within any given environment. In ‘Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook’ (1904), for instance, readers are briefly introduced to the sacristan’s daughter, with there being little detail beyond the fact that “she was a handsome enough girl” (James, 2007: p. 4) and that her and her father shared some “remarks” (p. 4) – neither of which add any degree of depth of insight into her as a character or her role beyond being a daughter.

With that being said, James’s lack of female representation has led to speculation as to whether or not he was in fact a misogynist; a claim that is supported by James’s own political actions in regards to female education, given that he is known to have voted against women obtaining degrees in 1875. He is further noted for his criticisms of the female scholar, Jane Ellen Harrison, who he is described as going to great lengths to “discredit” (Shelley, 1996: p. 167) in an attack that “diminished her reputation and effectively silenced her voice for several generations” (p. 166). As for the silencing of women in his own work, Penny Fielding comments that James’s lack of reference to females and, in turn, sex, hints towards both an “obsession” and “fear” towards them (as cited in Oryshchuk, 2016: p. 18), and that, “the main threat is represented not by the ...

‘other’ or by a male companion [in reference to the belief by some that James was homosexual] but by the deadly female sexuality” (p. 18). Fielding’s claims are supported further by James’s own comments towards other horror writers, writing:

[Writers] drag sex in too, which is a fatal mistake; sex is tiresome enough in novels; in a ghost story, or as the backbone of a ghost story, I have no patience with it. (James, 1929).

James was certainly not alone in his fear of female sexuality, with the theme underpinning some of the most notable gothic novels. *Dracula*, for example, is a text renowned for its reflection of the disintegration of traditional familial values (Kovač: 2015: p. 21), specifically focussing on the emergence of the “New Woman.” (p. 12). As demonstrated through Mina Murray and Lucy Westerna’s changes throughout *Dracula*, the New Woman “represented a threat to the conservative society of that time” (p. 13):

New Women were often described in terms of their likeness to men. Predominantly middle class, they aspired to higher education, to the vote, and to careers; they might ride bicycles, smoke cigarettes, or embrace dress reform, and they uniformly displayed an uncomfortable readiness to shock the sensibilities of traditionalists. (Nelson, as cited by Kovač: 2015: p. 13)

While Stoker was much more overt than James in his anxieties towards the emergence of female agency and the shift in the male/female dynamic, it was James's hesitancy to approach the subject, despite having strong opinions, that is of interest within this chapter.

Sexuality is just one anxiety scholars believe James to have possessed, with Oryshchuk noting that "his work can be perceived not as the decline but the innovative development of the Gothic horror tradition that expressed the social and cultural fears of James's generation," with the human being "turned into prey ... hunted and haunted" (Oryshchuk, 2016: p. 13). Often within James's texts, the human is haunted not by a clear manifestation of a spirit, as seen in the likes of "The Old Nurse's Story," but by objects that contain, and are therefore possessed by "unseen demonic forces" (p. 14). James's fear towards objects is perhaps best summarised in one of his own stories, "The Malice of Inanimate Objects" (1933):

The Malice of Inanimate Objects is a subject upon which an old friend of mine was found dilating, and not without justification. In the lives of all of us ... there have been days, dreadful days, on which we have had to acknowledge with gloomy resignation that our world has turned against us. I do not mean the human world of our relations and friends ... No, it is the world of things that do not speak or work or hold congresses and conferences. It includes such beings as the collar stud, the inkstand, the fire, the razor... (James, 1933)

While it is the narrator of the text speaking here, one only has to look at some of James's other works to see that, for him, there is indeed a sense of malice within objects: "The Mezzotint" (1904), which features a haunted painting; "The Haunted Dolls House" (1923), where an antiques dealer witnesses the animism of the dolls; and "Number 13" (1904), where a door mysteriously vanishes and reappears without explanation. While there is no doubt that James intended for each object to be the source of terror, that is not to suggest that James was terrorised by every door he saw in his daily life. Rather, in his work, it is what is the *cause* of the terror that radiates from the inanimate objects; in other words, it is the anxiety that is contained within each object, that is the real cause of fear for James.

James's preoccupation with things and their function within the ghost story is intriguing when investigated in light of recent developments on the study of 'things', with the most relevant being Bill Brown's *Thing Theory* (2001). In his essay, Brown posits that "objects become 'things' when we begin to take notice of them; mundane material objects are transformed into mysterious and/or evocative things via the subject-object relationship" (Bissell, 2014: p. 10), Expanding upon this, Brown writes:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of

how the thing really names less an object than a subject-object relation”  
(Brown, 2001: p. 4).

Brown’s work builds upon previous scholarship in the subject, including Heidegger’s essay *The Thing* (1971), which uses the metaphor of a water jug to illustrate the fact that, in order for something to be classed as a ‘thing,’ it must possess a quality of relation to and/or estrangement from the material world. “What is the jug?” he asks, to which he assumes “we say: a vessel, something of the kind that holds something else within it” (Heidegger, 1971: p. 166). From here, Heidegger concludes that it is the empty space within the jug that makes it a ‘thing’, given that you do not pour water on to the outside material of the jug, but within the space inside. Likewise, in James’s “A View from a Hill” (1925), which follows a man who, using some borrowed binoculars, is able to see the ghostly presence of the past within the present, the thing-ness of the binoculars is not a result of the material that they are made out of, but by the transparent space that is looked through within the glass. In using the void within the glasses as a vessel to view the past, thus implying that it is something that should cause unsettling feelings for readers, it can be argued that James has taken an uncertainty and fear for change and attempted to contain it within the material object of the binoculars.

Therefore, returning to the original point of this thesis concerning female agency within the ghost story, this chapter will explore the idea that, in spite of his lack of female representation, James was not oblivious to the altering status of the woman and the shifting attitudes towards their agency. As indicated by his

rejection of female education and impatience for sexual references, James was fearful of the uncertainty that the progression of female agency meant for society, unsure of how to tackle something that was seemingly uncontrollable, much in the same way as he portrayed the supernatural. Specifically focusing on the inside of the tree in “The Ash Tree” (1904) as a vessel for female agency, as well as the space within the domestic setting in “The Rose Garden” (1911), this chapter will argue that, rather than confront his fears head on, James used the empty spaces within his stories as a means to contain his anxieties, thus aligning them with those he had towards the supernatural.

During the time James was writing, the idea of what it meant to be a man and what qualities he had to possess in order to be viewed as masculine was not certain, with “the transformation of masculine ideals” occurring “due to many different events and alterations during this era, which affected how the ideal man was supposed to behave” (Landin, 2017: p. 1). With that being said, there was still a significant emphasis on the home, as,

Being in possession of an occupation or an estate were some of the ways a man could become ‘somebody’ ... to become the head of a household or live a libertine lifestyle were therefore ways to assert your manliness in the sphere of men, and to be too dependent on somebody else was to be too much like a woman, which compromised your manliness. (Landin, 2017: p. 6)



As mentioned previously, James seldom explored the traditional domestic setting, instead focusing “upon a main character that is usually a middle-aged English academic or antiquarian” (McCoristine, 2007: p. 54) who represented that which James was familiar with in his own life. Much of James’s ghost stories “sought to examine the male character ... as solitary types” (p. 54), typically foregoing marriage in favour of living as bachelors.

However, in “The Rose Garden,” James offers readers with his single most significant insight into not only his representation of a dominant female character, but what this means for the traditional setting of the domestic sphere and marriage. While the husband within the text has seemingly conformed with what is traditionally expected of him, owning his own home, presumably establishing himself as a “somebody”, the dynamics between him and his wife show that he is far from “the head of the household”, and, in turn, becomes a victim of the “New Woman.” As Wilt notes, “[b]eing, or becoming, ‘somebody’ is the conventional rite of the Male mystery; becoming ‘nobody’ is its hell; a descent towards femaleness” (Wilt, 1982: p. 60), with James displaying this “descent” and therefore criticism of powerful women within the text. In his essay, Rowlands argues that James “certainly never uses [women] as objects of scorn or derision” (Rowlands, 1993), and, while this is true for much of his work, “The Rose Garden” stands as an exception to this argument. Throughout the text, readers only really recognize characters and their motivations in relation to Mrs. Anstruther, for she is the catalyst for everything that happens within the story. Even characters that only briefly enter the household are heavily influenced by her directions, arguably making her the character with the most overt display of

agency throughout the text, to the point where it is her actions that influence the agency of everybody else, including the men.

The story begins with a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Anstuther, where she is giving him clear orders in a way that subverts traditional household expectations. The way that she speaks to her husband, George, as well as his responses, indicates a strong sense of dominance, and, in George's case, fear:

"George" said Mrs. Anstruther, "I think you had better take take to Maldon and see if you can get any of those knitted things I was speaking about which would do for my stall at the bazaar."

"Oh well, if you wish it, Mary, of course I can do that, but I had to arrange to play a round with Geoffrey Williamson this morning. The bazaar isn't until Thursday next week is it?"

"What has that to do with it George? I should have thought you would have guessed that if I can't get the things I want in Maldon I shall have to write to all manner of shops in town: and they are certain to send something quite unsuitable in price or quality the first time. If you have actually made an appointment with Mr. Williamson, you had better keep it, but I must say I think you might have let me know."

"Oh no, no, it wasn't really an appointment. I quite see what you mean. I'll go." (James, 2007: p. 104)

The above exchange does much to establish the relationship between the two characters, while also hinting towards James's negative opinion of marriage and how the power dynamics are shifting within the domestic setting. Mrs. Anstruther's way of speaking is very commanding, with the use of words and phrases such as "you had better", and the accusatory, almost argumentative tone when she remarks "what has that do with it George?" and "I must say I think you might have let me know." In response, George comes across as extremely willing to please his wife, not only instantly giving up his own plans for her demands ("oh well, if you wish it"), and the quick, short sentences "Oh no, no ... I quite see what you mean. I'll go" indicating a need to quickly appease and fix the situation

– presumably out of fear for upsetting Mrs. Anstruther. His relationship with his wife does not go undetected by the other characters within the text, with her "absolute despotism" (Rowlands, 1993) being noticed by the gardener during a conversation with George in which he says "well not, it ain't for me to go against orders no more than what it is for yourself" (James, 2007: p. 106). Although one could argue that James is giving Mrs. Anstruther control that is not often seen within his stories – even by his male characters – one has to wonder whether this is to her benefit. While it cannot be denied that Mrs. Anstruther possesses a greater agency than anybody else in the story, in making her the dominant character here, she has a harsh, almost villainous personality for seemingly no reason, corresponding with the popular stereotype of the harridan wife versus the downtrodden husband, with one of the most known literary examples being Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Of the marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Austen writes that "respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown" (Austen, 2014:

p. 272) in a line that closely mirrors the relationship that can be seen between the Anstruther's. In a way, it is as though James is willing people to sympathise with George, portraying him as the suffering husband, a victim of his own wife's agency. In other words, while the text is primarily a ghost story, a further interpretation places James's anxiety, not within the supernatural, but within the home, in a story that proves that an empowered woman can be just as unsettling as any ghost.

In the antagonistic portrayal of marriage that James displays within "The Rose Garden," readers view the idea of domesticity when it has seemingly broken down and is unrecognizable when compared with traditional values of the husband/wife power dynamic. When thinking back to Brown's description of how people "confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us", there are clear parallels between the objects cited by Brown, and James's portrayal of a domestic setting in an environment where women possess agency. The marriage is clearly failing to conform to the traditional standards outlined by Ellis at the start of the chapter; in other words, the domestic ideal has "stopped working," with the space within the home and all that it contains – including Mrs. Anstruther's agency – becoming contained "things," and therefore a threat.

As previously demonstrated through the binoculars in "A View From the Hill," James was very much conscious of the relationship between the past and the present, with the concept of the "New Woman" being no exception. James's interest in maintaining and holding on to the past is made clear throughout *The Rose Garden*, with the final warning of the text "quieta non movere" translating to

“do not move that which has been set still.” (James, 2007: p. 113). With James’s previous indications that he is not entirely welcoming of change in mind, especially considering that the events occur after Mrs. Anstruther decides to try and make changes, it is possible that James was making links between his hesitancy to accept change, and his attitudes towards women being given prominent roles within society. Even in *The Rose Garden*,” in which James has written a seemingly strong female character in Mrs. Anstruther, the way she overpowers her husband can read as emasculating and humiliating in tone, thus prompting a reaction of negativity towards her rather than any form of support, with the implication being that a dominant female in charge of her own agency is something that should not persist in households or marriages in the future.

Just as James used the space within the Anstruther’s home to contain his fear of female agency within the domestic sphere, the same method can be found in his use of the tree in “*The Ash Tree*.” Throughout the text, several generations of men are found dead in their bed, with James ultimately indicating that the tragedy occurs because of the possession of a tree beyond the window of the room. Also heavily implied is the relationship between the tree and a woman called Mrs. Mothersole, who is accused of witchcraft by one of the men that die, largely due to her actions within the aforementioned ash tree, having “climbed into the branches, clad only in her shift, and was cutting off small twigs” (James, 2007: p. 31). Following this, James heavily implies that she takes her revenge using the very same tree, writing, “as with Sir Matthew, so with Sir Richard – dead and black in his bed ... and the Bishop of Kilmore looked at the tree”, in which they later find:

The anatomy or skeleton of a human being, with the skin dried upon the bones, having some remains of black hair, which was pronounced by those that examined it to be undoubtedly the body of a woman, and clearly dead for a period of fifty years. (James, 2007: p. 40)

James's representation of Mrs. Mothersole presents a contradiction within his work, especially in regards to his intentions to contain the threat of the woman within the haunted object. For, while she is certainly presented as being dangerous and something to be fearful of, ultimately, she is able to still express her agency using the tree as a vessel to do so. In light of this, while James still certainly seeks to place the danger within the tree, just as he contained Mrs. Anstruther's agency within the domestic sphere, the difference here is that he recognises that, ultimately, female agency is a threat that cannot be contained despite his best efforts, and that it is the impossibility of this that is the real anxiety of the text.

More overt examples of James attempting to contain women can be found through his representation of their gender and the manner in which they conduct themselves in their interactions with the supernatural. In "The Ash Tree," for example, although the story mainly concerns the male members of one family, in much the same way that Mrs. Anstruther is the catalyst for the events of "The Rose Garden," it is the female character, Mrs. Mothersole, who influences the stories of the other characters. On first reading, while there are indications that James intends for Mrs. Mothersole's execution scene to be alarming for the

reader, with her even described as presenting “the living Aspect of a mad Divell” (James, 2007: p. 31), when reading with female agency in mind, Mrs. Mothersole is possessed by not the devil, but by a power that is so unexpected in such a situation. In noting that she was “as in life so in death, of a very different temper” to the other accused witches who were “apathetic and broken down with misery” (James, 2007: p. 31), Mrs. Mothersole is not a victim, as the narrator tries to suggest, but a woman that refuses to be broken down by the circumstances that she cannot control – something that, when compared to even some of the characters that Gaskell introduced, is incredibly refreshing. Her character is surprisingly complex, and challenges the reader to consider whether her ghostly revenge is justified throughout the story. While what happened to the men was certainly harsh, what was originally done to her was just as, if not more, cruel. In light of this, Mrs. Mothersole’s character can be interpreted in two vastly different lights: as a strong, unbreakable woman, powerful in both life and death; and, alternatively, as a villain, guilty of punishing innocent men. Given James’s track record for writing female characters, as well as his documented attitudes towards them gaining power within what he clearly saw to be a man’s world, it is tempting to be swayed towards the latter view. However, even if he did it unintentionally, it cannot be denied that Mrs. Mothersole has the capacity to challenge the reader, just as Mrs. Anstruther proves to be strong and domineering; a “force to be reckoned with” (Rowlands, 1993), even, and a standout character amongst the backlog of the vulnerable, often weak female characters that were so common within the ghost story genre.

Despite this, while James does much to impress upon readers the strength of Mrs. Anstruther, she still falls victim to one of the most common tropes of the Victorian novel: the fainting woman. Often found within not just literature, but art, too, the idea of the woman being so overcome by emotion that she simply cannot remain standing has become one of the staple images from the Victorian period. On the topic, Dana Wright links the theme of femininity with fainting, with female characters often being characterised by “emotional excess that gives way to physical affliction as well as flights of fancy; her sensitivity render her susceptible to suggestion, vulnerable to persecution and seemingly helpless against the various malevolent forces she encounters” (Wright, 2012: p. 1). While much of this description is true for many supernatural tales of the era, it goes entirely against everything James has established Mrs Anstruther to be – for a woman that is in control of everything around her, why would she not be in control of herself?

Likewise, there is a similar display of hysteria within “The Ash Tree,” in the characters’ reactions to the inside of the tree outside Sir Richard’s window. Upon hearing the screams emanating from the tree, “Lady Mary Hervey fainted outright, and the house-keeper stopped her ears and fled till she fell on the terrace. The bishop of Kilmore and Sir William Kentfield stayed” (James, 2007: p. 39). What is particularly worth noting here is that readers are able to compare the actions of the men and the women to the same situation, and, while the women react very physically and dramatically, the men remain stoic and present, naturally taking control of the situation. The implication that the women were weaker than the men serves to further the claim that the text is intended for



male readers and their entertainment, but, more so, indicates James's attitude towards women and their place within the ghost story genre. Linking back to earlier in this chapter, considering James's opinion towards sexuality, and, in turn, female expression, he notes "I have no patience with it." James's words here, paired with his portrayal of women as having no control over themselves, ultimately being weaker than the male characters, serves to highlight not only the dominant male figure, but is further proof of James linking what he deems as explosive, sensational incidents with both the female *and* the paranormal, and thus further connecting the two together as something to be fearful of, and therefore something to be suppressed.

In summary, while many critics have neglected James's approach to female agency because it is not figured through human characters, both "The Ash Tree" and "The Rose Garden" show that it is through the ghostly figure and the supernatural elements of his stories that his beliefs become clear. For, although many are quick to look at his use of objects as a source of anxiety surrounding change and that which he has no control over, not many have investigated his use of objects in relation to traditional domestic ideals and the emergence of the "New Woman."

In James and his writing, readers are presented with a representation of the anxieties surrounding female power, specifically in regards to them subverting expectations and embracing sexuality. To James, the thought of sexuality and femininity was even more horrifying than the events that he writes about, to the point where he rejects more recent work for being "tiresome" for including it,

choosing to confine it and reduce it to being an uncontrollable 'thing' in his own. What is particularly disconcerting about James's attitude is that it comes years after Gaskell wrote her ghost stories – texts that try to contend with the concerns and restrictions surrounding female sexuality. There is a clear sense of her trying to question attitudes, and, for James to approach the subject in such a regressive manner, even years after Gaskell was writing, does nothing towards destigmatising female sexuality.

However, while some may link this to apparent misogyny and hatred of women, I am more inclined to believe that it was more a display of uncertainty and fear on James's part, and that rather than accepting change, he was more comfortable with placing it inside a box (which, in the case of his stories, is the haunted object) and attempting to hide it from view. And yet, as is often the case in his stories, no matter how seemingly contained the ghostly entity is, it almost always finds a way to escape, proving that it is a power beyond the control of man.

Overall, while James was certainly guilty of attempting to suppress the agency of his female characters, there is the acknowledgement on his part that, ultimately, as displayed through the ghostly forces in his stories, the progression and changing status of women within society was unavoidable, and it is therefore this that is the real source of horror within his stories.

## **How does Charlotte Perkins Gilman use the ghost story as a tool to explore female agency in the Victorian period?**

I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again—work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite — ultimately recovering some measure of power.

- Gilman, *Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper*

Throughout her lifetime, Charlotte Perkins Gilman remained a difficult woman to pin down. Having spent time as a teacher, a poet and a painter, it was her time as a writer that, as Cynthia Davis claims, “sealed her reputation ... writing a series of books on women’s economics and economic dependence, domestic confinement, and desire for public service” (Davis, 2010: p. xi). Gilman’s exploration of the female experience was very much influenced by what she witnessed as a woman, with Stuehser noting “Gilman ... created masterpieces through using [her] own life experiences” (Stuehser, 2018: p. 1) including roles as “a woman, wife, daughter, mother and worker” (Davis, 2010: p. xi) in an approach to writing that bore strong resemblances to that of Elizabeth Gaskell. With that being said, while Gaskell used the female experience of her characters and their relationship with the figure of the ghost to discuss the injustices faced by women, ultimately being able to find no likely resolution to their oppression, this chapter will seek to demonstrate how Gilman used the ghost as a vehicle for liberation, with the ghostly figure embodying the *possibility* of female agency rather than the

impossibility, as Gaskell seemed to believe. Gilman's popular short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), published forty years after "The Old Nurse's Story," is vastly different in its approach to the figure of the ghost and the agency that it possesses, despite the similar premise of each story: women locked inside a house, punished by the distant men in their lives, with this oppression ultimately being embodied by a ghostly figure that reveals themselves at the end of the text. But, while Gaskell used the ghost to resign her characters to a life of endless punishment because of their sex, Gilman used the ghost and the uncanny elements that the ghost story presents as a tool for possibility and change – a theme that will be explored further throughout this chapter.

While many critics are quick to note that, although Gilman was far from oblivious to the struggles of her sex, "she was not an introspective person" (Lane, 1991: p. xvi), possessing a strong sense of "civic mindedness" with a "profound aversion to psychological theories of identity" (Davis, 2010: p. xii), for, while "The Yellow Wallpaper" is deeply rooted in Gilman's personal experience, "most of her works explore ways of countering the despair and madness documented in her famous story" (Davis, 2010: p. xii). Her utopian story *Herland* (1915), for instance, presented a country of women working together, able to produce children through asexual reproduction, thus resulting in what Gilman posits as an ideal society free of conflict and domination. "The Yellow Wallpaper," a text that follows a woman's declining mental health, is noted as being the only one of her texts to include such a deep self-exploration, given Gilman's own experience with mental illness and the deep similarities she shares with the narrator of the text. And yet, for a writer that displayed such hesitation to look too deeply into her

own life, none of Gilman's work has experienced as much longevity and acclaim as a text that does exactly that. "The Yellow Wallpaper," despite being overlooked at its time of publication, received significant critical interest during the second wave of feminism, and has continued to interest academics in the years since.

Despite generally being included within the ghost story canon – with the narrator seemingly experiencing an apparition within the walls of the room she is confined in – for many, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not a supernatural story at all, with the true haunting element of the text being the restrictions and treatment faced by the female protagonist throughout. For the most part, the story seeks to criticize Silas W. Mitchell's popular recommendation of the rest cure, with Julie Dock noting in her study of the text that it stands as "a story that angry male doctors sought to suppress" (Dock, 1998: p. 16). In his book *Doctors and Patient* (1888), Mitchell reflects on the fact that a woman is "physiologically other than the man" adding,

With all her weakness, her unstable emotionality, her tendency to morally warp when long nervously ill, she is then far easier to deal with, far more amenable to reason, far more sure to be comfortable as a patient, than the man who is relatively in a like position. (Mitchell, 1888)

One of the women treated by Mitchell was Gilman herself, with her experience of the rest cure affecting her so much that she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper," foregoing her usual tendency to avoid any overt self-exploration, and then

proceeded to send it directly to Mitchell. In her own words, Gilman writes “for many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown,” eventually leading to a specialist applying the rest cure, following which, Gilman “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” (Gilman, 1913). Ultimately, the treatment led to what Gilman described as the “inevitable result” of “progressive insanity” (Gilman, 1935: p. 119), with her writing “The Yellow Wallpaper” in order to “convince [Mitchell] of the error of his ways” (Dock, 1998: p. 88). Despite Gilman directly appealing to Mitchell, she notes:

Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” with its embellishments and additions to carry out the ideal (I never had hallucinations or objections to my mural decorations) and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it. (Gilman, 1913)

While Gilman did not get a response from Mitchell, many were affronted by the content of the story, especially in regards to how it could potentially affect the women that read it. In much the same way that a classic ghost story can evoke terror within its readers, “The Yellow Wallpaper’s” aggressive approach to exposing the injustices experienced by women had a similar result, yet for a very different reason. For traditionalists, the story was a threat that should be avoided, with one anonymous reviewer writing “it is a strong book, a little yellow book, a well-done, horrible book, - a book that should be kept away from the

young wife” (as cited in Golden, 2004: p. 85). For women, however, Gilman and her story acted as a voice calling for change.

As well as challenging the medical world, Gilman’s text confronted the injustices found within the domestic environment, using the motif of the wallpaper itself to do so. Throughout the text, the narrator is tormented by the wallpaper covering the room that she is living in, only for her to discover that the wallpaper hides an entity (or, entities) much like herself. From a literary perspective, it is in this moment that readers understand Gilman’s true intentions with the wallpaper, for the horror and dread built up towards it throughout the story does not come from an insidious ghost living within it, but from the metaphor that it stands for. In ripping the wallpaper from the walls and freeing the trapped souls within it, Gilman draws clear parallels between the experience of not just the narrator, but every person that has ever felt trapped by the confines of the domestic sphere – perfectly encapsulated by a seemingly mundane object found within most homes: the wallpaper. In many ways, the animism of the wallpaper mirrors the themes and plots found within the ghost stories of M.R James, and yet, while James used objects and symbols (such as the ash tree) within his ghost stories as a tool to contain female agency, with its escape ultimately being something to be fearful of, Gilman shows that, while the wallpaper is certainly a symbol of confinement, it is possible to break free, and that this is not something to be afraid of in the way that James implied.

Years after Gaskell’s locked doors and veiled commentaries, here was a text that forwent tip-toeing around social injustice, going head to head with both science

and the patriarchy, with Gilman relying on the expression of not only her experience as a woman, but on the use of mundane objects as a way to symbolize themes such as domestic repression, womanhood and agency. While the previous two chapters of this thesis have shown the manner in which both Gaskell and James figured female agency within the supernatural, with Gaskell using the ghost as a tool to enforce oppression, and James seeking to link the terror of the ghost and female agency in order to contain them within objects, Gilman, as this chapter will show, instead used the figure of the ghost as a positive force within the fight for female empowerment. Using the limitless genre of the ghost story as a way to stretch boundaries, Gilman showed that the ghost does not necessarily have to be a paradigm of the past or a fearful figure, but instead a powerful force that is capable of breaking the boundaries that were faced by the women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It only takes three sentences for Gilman to begin establishing the narrator's situation as being restrictive, with her making reference to the fact that there is "something queer" (Gilman, 1892: p. 647) about the house in which she is to live. First, she compares it to a "colonial mansion" (p. 647), then a "hereditary estate" (p. 647), with each setting being rich in historical connotations. In describing the house as a "colonial mansion", Gilman foreshadows the narrator's lack of control by comparing her experience "to a history of oppression that the narrator is still facing during the time of writing, literally haunted by versions of herself in the wallpaper" (Rochat, 2017: p. 9). A hereditary estate, meanwhile, draws upon the weight of history and tradition, similarly to the house in the "Ash Tree." However, in the case of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator has no hereditary



claim on the home, placing the house itself in a position of 'otherness' due to its unfamiliarity.

The narrator's home is not the only thing that she perceives as being queer, with her commenting on the discomfort that she feels while in the presence of her husband, John. She writes, "the fact is I am getting a little afraid of John. He seems very queer sometimes" (Gilman, 1892: p. 653). While on the surface, John appears to be trying to do the best thing for his wife, it soon becomes clear that the marriage between the two has resulted in nothing but isolation for the wife – both physically *and* mentally, given that his job as a physician often requires John to be away "all day and even some nights" (p. 649), leaving her alone and unsupported during her lowest moments. Even when John is present, there is still the distinct impression that there is a significant distance between the two, with the narrator remarking, "John does not know how much I *really* suffer" (p. 649). Throughout the text, when speaking of her relationship with her husband, there is rarely any reference to an enjoyable relationship, with her, in one telling moment, writing that "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in a marriage." (p. 647); a line that is rich with unsettling undertones, giving an insight into what kind of marriage this truly is. For one thing, the fact that John laughs *at* her rather than *with* her – especially in response to the valid questions that she is asking (p. 647) – displays a husband that has placed himself above his wife and does not hesitate to show it. Furthermore, we see just how little the narrator expects from her husband and their marriage, as proven when she writes "of course" he would be laughing at her expense, because that is what "one expects ... in a marriage." While on the surface, the line shows the degree to

which the husband is capable of belittling his wife, even implying that this is what should be expected from a marriage, a closer reading shows that Gilman is highlighting just how damaging the relationship is for her mental health. By saying “of course” one would expect to be laughed at by a husband, although there is the implication that the narrator is of a shared understanding with readers, the extract has the opposite effect, with John instead reading as cruel and condescending. With this in mind, the irony of the “of course” becomes clear, for readers simply cannot agree with the narrator’s opinion that her marriage is normal, thus further establishing the unreliability of the narrator, while also creating a distance between readers and the implied author of the text, who uses the figure of the narrator to highlight just how desperate the unreliable narrator’s situation is, even if she is not able to see that. While the above is an example of the couple’s uneven relationship in a relatively unimportant moment, the effects of his lack of respect for his wife naturally appear in more serious cases, too, as can be seen in his response to her mental health struggles, where she writes: “you see he does not believe that I am sick!” (p. 647). The exclamation displays a strong sense of desperation from the narrator, all the while further establishing the lack of support that she receives in her marriage, to the extent that John will not listen to his wife’s concerns over her own body and mind.

The theme of the unsupportive husband is something that Gilman continues to reiterate at several points throughout the text, further establishing the implication that the damage that is being done by John is beginning to manifest within the narrator, with her even starting to doubt her own judgment in regards to her mind. For example, the narrator explains that her husband:

...says that with my imaginative power and habit for story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fantasies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check my tendency. So I try. (Gilman, 1892: p. 649).

What is particularly striking about this statement is that, although the husband used the phrase “imaginative power” in relation to his wife’s experiences, he ultimately belittles her and reduces her mind to being a “weakness” as opposed to something that should be taken seriously and celebrated. With that being said, although the narrator is clearly affected by the words of her husband, she never hides from her illness, using writing as a way to deal with her emotions, therefore taking her creativity and turning it into her coping mechanism.

Although her husband is of the belief that it is her “imaginative power” that is the source of her “weakness,” it is only through the suppression of the narrator’s creativity that we see her mental health decline, implying that it is her attempts to quell her imagination that is the cause of her “sickness.” On the topic of Gilman’s belief that creativity is key when it comes to female independence, Steuser writes, “*The Yellow Wallpaper* shows what occurs when someone is suppressed and forced to do nothing to the point that their mind goes crazy and degenerates in unnatural ways in an effort to break free from its constraints.” (Steuser: 2018: p. 12), with the narrator clearly expressing her belief that it is her imagination that is capable of saving her – something that is proven by her discovery of the ghostly, liberated figure at the end of the text. Despite the narrator’s qualms regarding the validity of her husband’s opinion, the narrator

does attempt to obey, with the fact that she is even “trying” to stop revealing a woman that has had her opinions trivialized and discarded for so long that she has started to believe that any form of self expression is a weakness on her part, even if it is the only thing that she has any control over in her life.

This conflicting attitude towards her own creativity can be seen in her complicated relationship with paper, with it representing two very different concepts throughout the text. As mentioned above, the narrator’s creative freedom proves to be a topic of great contention throughout the text, with the narrator expressing shame at the thought of her husband discovering her writing, noting that, upon seeing John approaching, she must “put [her writing] away, - he hates to have me write a word” (Gilman: 1892: p. 649). And yet, the narrator seeks to write whenever she can, recognising that “if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me” (p. 649), creating a secret life for herself, hiding the very thing that she believes will help her. As Maysoun Muhi notes, “it seems that the narrator, caught between the practical world of her husband and her own imagination, attempts to save herself through writing, detailing her journey inward to discover and find her selfhood” (Muhi, 2010: p. 7). Gilman herself emphasised her beliefs regarding the importance of female expression through work, writing in *Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper*, “work [is] the most important activity in defining a sense of self, because what we do is greater than what is done to us” (Gilman, 1913). When bearing Gilman’s strong beliefs towards working women in mind, especially given that she had first hand experience of not being able to write while being on the rest cure, it cannot be denied that the creativity displayed

throughout the text is intended to be seen positively, as opposed to being the catalyst for the narrator's mental ruin, as John and Weir may suggest.

However, while paper is certainly displayed as a force for good when used a tool for the narrator to express herself, Gilman portrays a very different representation of paper in the form of the wallpaper that occupies not only the narrator's mind, but also the paper that she writes on throughout the text. For most of the story, the wallpaper is portrayed as being an antagonistic figure for the narrator, with her initially commenting "I never saw worse paper in my life." (Gilman, 1892: p. 648). As the story progresses, the narrator's distaste for the wallpaper begins to take on a new form, becoming more intense and all-consuming, with her exclaiming "this paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had." (p. 649). On the surface, this reads as an extreme reaction to something as basic as wallpaper covering a bedroom, and an indicator of the narrator's declining mental health. However, upon the reveal at the end of the text that it was the wallpaper that had been trapping the figures the narrator had seen within it, it becomes clear that the narrator was never concerned with the aesthetics of the paper, but with the fact that it closely mirrored the oppressive figure of her husband, and that she was able to see herself in the figure(s) caught behind it, with her ultimately confirming this when she asks "I wonder if [the figures] all came out of that wall-paper as I did?" (p. 656). Many critics have proven to be preoccupied with the negative connotations of the wallpaper, focusing on the fact that, for much of the story, it is seen as a restrictive symbol, with Anejda Rragami summarizing that the wallpaper stands for the "imprisonment within the domestic sphere" (Rragami,

2018). While this is true, the fact that, in the end, the restrictive confines of the wallpaper can be broken proves that there is more to the wallpaper than it being symbolism for imprisonment, as critics such as Rragami have suggested. Instead, while both the wallpaper and the writing paper present their own challenges and certainly symbolize the uncertainty she feels in regards to her own agency, ultimately, the two papers work as symbols for creative and domestic freedom. In her recognizing that she can use it to not only free herself, but the other oppressed figures she sees behind the wallpaper, shows that the paper should not be viewed as an immovable barrier, but as a challenge that she is willing to tackle, and even benefit from.

Although the wallpaper is certainly an important element of the story, it is that and the narrator's relationship with John that ultimately lead to the manifestation of the figure of the ghost(s) that is the real inspiration of this chapter, especially in regards to the manner in which Gilman has used them as a way to figure female agency. As Brunk-Chavez notes, "during the last day at the house, Gilman's narrator appears both freeing and freed – a result of her own agency" (Brunk-Chavez, 2003: p. 79), which Gilman heavily implies is due to her recognition of herself in the walls and the destruction of the paper. For much of the story, the ghostly figure is very closely connected to the wallpaper, acting as a symbol of the strong hold John has over his wife, with her writing that "I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness" (Gilman, 1892: p. 650). As the story progresses, however, the wallpaper and the figure behind it become separate within the narrator's mind, with her noting "the figure seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" (p. 655) –

something that mirrors the narrator's own eventual denial of her husband's control. It is upon this separation that Gilman's intentions with the figure of the 'ghost' become clearer, for, rather than having it resign itself to confinement, it resists, trying to break down the boundaries and thus discover the agency that the narrator has so far been neglected, as shown in the following extract:

She is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads. They get through, and the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white. (p. 654 )

While the above emphasizes just how challenging it was for women to break through that which traps them, the fact that the figure is trying to free herself, eventually managing to do so, shows not weakness, but strength, and a repossession of her own power and agency.

A further way in which Gilman uses the narrator's connection with the ghostly figure to challenge society's treatment of women was in relation to the role of motherhood, and whether or not that is something that can strip a woman of her agency, or provide it. For much of the text, the implication is that the narrator's role as mother has had a deteriorative effect on her mental health, with Gilman suggesting that the narrator's current situation is largely due to post-partum depression, as shown when she writes "I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous" (p. 649) when speaking of her child. Gilman herself experienced mental health issues following the birth of her daughter, which eventually led to the

diagnosis of neurasthenia, as well as being placed on the rest cure by Mitchell. The nervousness that the narrator feels, therefore, was likely very familiar to Gilman, with her feelings of being an unfit mother having close ties with the perception of her being an unfit woman, therefore. While Gilman clearly recognises the effect that post-partum depression can have, by the end of the text, readers are able to view the events in terms of ideas surrounding rebirth, and therefore a reclaiming of the narrator's sense of motherhood and agency. As Brunk-Chaves notes, "the narrator of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is ... reborn through the tearing of the wall", adding "as the woman inhabiting the room, she has played the role of midwife by pulling the woman out of the paper. As the woman in the wallpaper, she has freed or birthed herself with this assistance" (Brunk- Chavez, 2003: p. 76). The language used during the event, when the narrator "pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled" (Gilman, 1892: p. 655) evokes the imagery of labor, working to give life to something (in this case, herself) in the same way a woman would if she were actually giving birth, thus showing that, in her effort, the narrator is reclaiming the role of mother and tethering it with the reclaiming of her freedom.

Despite the narrator clearly feeling as though she is alone in her struggles, separating herself from not just her husband and child, but her sister in law, Jennie. Throughout the text, there is little indication that Jennie has done anything to warrant the narrator's distrust, with her even being described as "a dear girl" (p. 650), however, the narrator is still clearly wary of her interactions with Jennie, writing "I must not let her find me writing" (p. 650). Clearly, the narrator feels somewhat threatened by her sister-in-law, or, at least convinced



that she shares the same attitudes as her brother. However, it could be argued that there is much more to Jennie than the narrator sees, and that, in being able to view the two women alongside each other, Gilman is introducing dramatic irony to her writing. In reading the narrator's thoughts, there is the potential to be swayed by her inner dialogue, which is far from trustworthy. At one point in the story, the narrator discovers Jennie examining the wallpaper, resting her hand on it, and, when discovered "she turned around as if she had been caught stealing, and looked quite angry" (p. 653). Gilman's use of the word "stealing" here is particularly intriguing, implying that Jennie has some form of understanding in regards the narrator's experience with the wallpaper, and that she too is identifying with the need to be close to whatever it is that exists within it, and therefore sympathises with the narrator's lack of control.

In much the same way that the narrator labors to reclaim her sense of motherhood at the end of the text, Gilman also heavily implies that the narrator is seeking to reclaim her sexuality and her status as an adult woman, which she has previously been denied. Many critics cite the story as being an illustration of "imprisonment within the domestic sphere" (Rragami, 2017: p. 107), thus characterising the character as a doomed housewife. However, while domesticity was certainly something that interested Gilman, with her writing extensively on it in texts such as *Women and Economics* (1898) and *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), deeming the idea of the domestic lifestyle a "myth" (Gilman, 1903), there is an argument to suggest that the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," while existing solely within the domestic setting, far from conforms to what would be expected from a housewife, contradicting the belief that this is

what traps her. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," while describing the room, the narrator expresses annoyance at being made to feel like a child, given that the windows of the room John has chosen for her "are barred for little children" (Gilman, 648), as well as the fact that her bed is "immovable ... it is nailed down I believe" (p. 650), forcing the narrator to experience "static-sexuality" that proved to be as "immovable as the heavy bedstead" (Nazrul, 2009: p. 18). Furthermore, the ghostly figure within the wall suffers from a similar fate, for "in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard" (p. 654). Here, Gilman not only emphasises the controlled environment that the narrator and her ghostly double are forced to live in, with the idea of bars and secured furniture and wallpaper creating an unsettling, prison-like image within readers' minds, furthering the claim that the narrator (and therefore the ghost) has lost her sense of womanhood. What is worth noting here is that, although John is determined to confine his wife within the home, unable to work, her lack of control over the house means that she is unable to take on the identity of housewife that he wishes her to have, leaving her feeling more like a "little child" than his wife.

Returning to the initial quotation regarding the barred windows, we see the narrator being isolated from the other people around her in the physical sense of the bars, but also in the way that she compares herself to "little children." The narrator's recognition that they were originally intended for children, paired with the fact that the room was specifically chosen for her by her husband, makes it very clear how he sees her: as nothing more than a powerless, vulnerable child with little to no self agency, constantly needing taking care of.

This sense of childlike innocence, specifically in terms of how the husband views the narrator, is echoed throughout the text, as seen through the way the husband refers to his wife, such as “little girl”, and “bless her little heart” (Gilman, 1892: p. 652). His reference to his wife as “little” may initially seem affectionate, but, when one considers the fact that he constantly undermines her, the reading takes a much more condescending turn. In a society where women such as herself are supposed to be the ones in control of the children, in comparing her to one only serves to make her seem small both physically and mentally, as well as denying her almost all sense of womanhood, and, in turn, sexuality.

The representation of female sexuality within Gilman’s work has been a popular line of critical study, with King and Morris further supporting the concept that the narrator’s lack of faith, not just in herself, but her writing, is inherently tied to her relationship with patriarchy and her own repressed sense of sexual identity and agency. They write,

Increased awareness of sexual inequality made it easier to read the story as an almost scientific case study of breakdown, caused by the repressive prohibition against any unwomanly activity imposed on the protagonist by her physician husband. (King & Morris, 1989: p. 24)

Expanding on this, while society already governed what a woman should and should not do with her body, the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” found herself in a difficult position, given that she is married to a doctor who has a huge amount of control over her body as both her spouse and her physician. As Nazrul

notes, “in the Victorian age, a wife used to be considered as a commodity. She belonged to her husband wholly and her husband could do anything with her body” (Nazrul, 2009: p. 18). This is evidently something the narrator battles with, finding herself helpless against his assessment, writing,

If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there really is nothing wrong the matter with one but a temporary nervous depression - a slight hysterical tendency - then what is one to do? (Gilman, 1892: p. 648)

The relationship between the two as doctor and patient highlights the lack of power that women had over their own bodies, both in terms of their mental health and sexuality, as shown through the repetition of the phrase “what is one to do?” throughout the text. This use of the rhetorical question shows once again that the narrator is not in agreement with her husband, finding the idea that he knows her body more than she does ridiculous, and yet she acknowledges that it is something she must deal with.

While the text does not necessarily have a happy ending, with the narrator descending into madness because of the oppression she has faced, it is through her projection of female agency using the supernatural elements of the story that she is ultimately able to see a vision of what freedom could look like. Although the narrator is presumably still stuck in the same situation, Gilman’s figuring of female agency through the figure of the narrator’s ghostly double highlights that, in a woman ridding herself of the confines of domestic expectation and

restrictions (as the figure did when ripping herself out of the wallpaper), she will ultimately be able to find liberation and a renewed sense of womanhood.

When compared with Gaskell, although the two women depict domesticity as an oppressive entity within a woman's life, while Gaskell seems unsure of how to overcome the challenge it poses, Gilman presents clear ideas of how woman may challenge the stereotype, emphasising the importance of work and independence, offering a decisively more hopeful outlook than Gaskell. The same can also be said when compared alongside James's approach to figuring female agency, given that, while like James, Gaskell has also chosen to contain agency inside an object (i.e. the wallpaper), its eventual escape does not represent terror, but liberation and progression for women. Ultimately, for Gilman and her readers, the figure of the ghost is not intended as something to be feared, as was the case in the previous chapters, but as something that is capable of representing an essential change in the way society treated women.

## Conclusion

Despite each author's vastly different viewpoint and approach, several themes became prominent throughout each chapter of this dissertation, ultimately proving thought-provoking as points of comparison. Sexuality, for instance, was highlighted by all three authors as being a key theme in relation to female agency. While Gaskell portrayed sexuality as one of the major threats of "The Old Nurse's Story" and "The Poor Clare," ultimately being a cause for punishment for generations of women, for James, his fear of female agency was closely linked with his uncertainty of change and the emergence of the sexually liberated "New Woman." However, while both Gaskell and James clearly view female sexuality as something to be wary of, Gilman, on the other hand, implies that it is the repression of female sexuality that is one of the causes of the narrator's declining mental health, and that the liberation of her body and reclaiming of her womanhood is essential.

Similarly, all three authors were clearly concerned with the concept of domesticity, albeit in different ways. For James, while many of his stories subverted the traditional domestic setting, following single, male protagonists, when writing of a married couple, he clearly sought to support the concept of the household in which a man is in charge, demonising Mrs. Anstruther when she threatened to subvert that. Gaskell and Gilman, meanwhile, both represented the domestic sphere as being oppressive and damaging for women. However, while Gaskell was somewhat conflicted, adhering to domesticity in her own life, while also striving to make her place in the world as a writer, Gilman's portrayal was

purely critical, showing that, like the repression of sexuality, the denial of a life outside of the home and the family for women could prove highly damaging.

Taking my research further, there is scope to develop the concept of female agency in terms of looking beyond the texts above. While Gilman predominantly wrote realist and non-fiction texts, Gaskell and James both wrote many ghostly tales, many of which would have been worth considering in a longer study. Furthermore, scholarship concerning James's female representation is hugely lacking, therefore any further research into James's approach to writing women would be a valuable contribution within the field, perhaps making further attempts to compare his depiction of femininity and masculinity and the way that he chooses to figure both.

Overall, while Gaskell, James and Gilman each had their own unique perspective towards female agency, as the above chapters show, all were able to explore their feelings – positive, negative and even somewhere in the middle – through the figure of the ghost and the supernatural elements that the ghost story allows. While previous scholars were often drawn towards the human characters to explore the ways that each author conveyed their human anxieties, this thesis has highlighted the manner in which the supernatural story has enabled each author to go beyond the limits human beings: Gaskell, using the figure of the ghost, haunted by their life experiences even in their death, to show her frustrations towards what she perceived as an inescapable oppression; James, fearful of change, unsuccessfully seeking to contain female agency within the haunted object; and Gilman, who saw the ghost and the limitless realm of the

supernatural as a tool to showcase freedom and possibility.



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