FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

# TRABALLO FIN DE GRAO

## GRAO EN LINGUA E LITERATURA INGLESAS

# Women's "Domestic" Ghost Stories:

# A Study of Three Texts

Aldara Pernas Suárez

Titora: Margarita Estévez-Saá

Santiago de Compostela, XULLO 2025

Curso académico: 2024-2025

USC UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA
FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

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**Formulario de delimitación do título e resumo**

Traballo de Fin de Grao curso 2024/2025

| | |
|---|---|
| APELIDOS E NOME: | Pernas Suárez, Aldara |
| GRAO EN: | Lingua e Literatura Inglesas |
| (NO CASO DE MODERNAS) MENCIÓN EN: | |
| TITOR/A: | Margarita Estévez-Saá |
| LIÑA TEMÁTICA ASIGNADA: | Literatura en Lingua Inglesa |

SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

**Título: Women's "Domestic" Ghost Stories: A Study of Three Texts**

**Resumo** [na lingua en que se vai redacta-lo TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]

From the late 19th century onwards women have made a significant contribution to the genre of the "domestic" ghost story, a Gothic mode that has served as the most suitable vehicle for women to express their fears within the patriarchal society of their time. Women found themselves deprived of their individuality, excluded from the public sphere, and confined to their homes and domestic duties. Metaphors of imprisonment have been widely used in this genre to depict what happens 'when you force all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain immured in their families groping in the dark' (M. Wollstonecraft, 1792). Deprived of their identity and possessions within marriage and pressured into motherhood, women had to address their main struggles by means of alternative and metaphorical strategies. Female writers started to project ghosts and haunting figures in their stories to indirectly denounce how they were being oppressed, disempowered and silenced.

This dissertation aims to explore the social and historical context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries from a gender perspective, and to study how women expressed their most intimate anxieties by means of the ghost story. The main objective is to analyse how these circumstances, along with the characteristics of the genre, are reflected in the three stories selected, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Shadowy Third" (1916) by Ellen Glasgow and "The Shadowy Third" (1923) by Elizabeth Bowen. In these stories, the haunting of a woman by a ghostly figure is the central trope, serving as the metaphor that unveils their hidden fears and the ways in which patriarchal authorities exerted control over women. The ghost serves as the catalyst that deploys women's psychological distress, a consequence of the immense challenges of motherhood and marriage that they, like many other women of their time, had to endure.

Santiago de Compostela, 23 de abril de 2025.

SRA. PRESIDENTA DA COMISIÓN DO TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

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**Keywords:** Women, Ghost Story, Oppression, Domesticity.

## 1. Introduction

Over a century ago women would have found it unthinkable to enjoy many of the rights and freedoms that are now taken for granted. Although full gender equality remains a distant goal, feminist movements have ensured that women's rights are a central topic of public discourse. Nowadays, women are able to participate in the public sphere and to have autonomy over their own bodies, voices and identities, but this has not always been the case.

Throughout the nineteenth century, women belonged exclusively to the domestic realm and they were not considered as individuals with agency. At the time, their rights were very limited, as the institution of marriage subjected them to their husbands: the wife's properties and income were transferred to the man of the family. Lacking agency and freedom, confined to the household, women faced immense pressure. A woman's worth was often measured by her ability to care for her family and to create a harmonious family environment, as motherhood was an unquestionable duty. However, this idealized image imposed by society was far from reality. Immense challenges came along with motherhood and the overwhelming burden of domestic labor. Furthermore, these struggles had to be endured in silence, as their duties were considered sacred and the expression of dissatisfaction was conceived by society as unacceptable, or even seen as ingratitude, reinforcing the belief that women should sacrifice everything for the sake of their families.

The voices of female writers from the past reveal the struggles of women in a patriarchal society that sought to control and silence them. Literature served as a medium for women to express their concerns and the anxieties of their time. The restrictions imposed by society lead female writers to address these taboo subjects in a socially acceptable manner. Gothic fiction, patricularly the ghost story, became the ideal tool through which female

authors could represent their psychological distress, forced silence and their feelings of entrapment within the domestic sphere, all of this by means of supernatural metaphors. These elements rendered them capable of addressing these societal issues, disguising their critiques with symbolic narratives.

This dissertation will explore various aspects of women's circumstances, particularly at the turn of the twentieth century, and how they relate to the ghost story within the Female Gothic tradition. These themes will be examined through the analysis of three selected stories: "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Shadowy Third" (1916) by Ellen Glasgow and "The Shadowy Third" (1923) by Elizabeth Bowen.

The starting point of this research initially emerged from "The Yellow Wallpaper", a story that has drawn significant attention as a classic of the Female Gothic and as an essential of feminist literature. The exploration of mental deterioration within a patriarchal society, subtly addressing postpartum depression, continues to resonate with readers to this day. This story has not only gained significant recognition, it has also been considered as a precedent for later narratives exploring female psychological distress and oppression. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself stated in "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper", "It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being crazy, and it worked" (1913). Its success and impact paved the way for other works within the Female Gothic tradition, which similarly explore in an indirect way women's circumstances at the time.

Exploring the themes in Gilman's story led to further research into the ghost story and the identification of other short stories which addressed similar concerns. Ellen Glasgow and Elizabeth Bowen's "The Shadowy Third" proved to be suitable for this analysis, as they follow the same patterns and similar themes dealt with in "The Yellow Wallpaper".

Remarkably, despite coming from different cultural backgrounds, Glasgow being American and Bowen Anglo-Irish; both authors chose the same title for their works. This parallel highlights the universality of women's concerns, transcending national and social contexts. The strong parallels between these stories suggest that literature at the time was shaped by recurring motifs and that these shared female experiences ultimately ended up shaping a collective imaginary in Gothic fiction. The ghost story created a distinctly feminine Gothic mode in which authors questioned constructs that were inviolable about the role of women, combining realistic settings and the supernatural element: the ghost.

The objective of this research is to explore how the ghost story subgenre has provided women the tools to address taboo topics that were traditionally endured in silence. It aims to analyse how the three selected stories make use of ghostly elements as metaphors for female oppression, and to examine their historical and social context to understand why these issues were so prevalent in literature.

Chapter one will examine women's circumstances at the turn of the century, focusing on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This chapter will analyze the social context of the time and the oppressive roles imposed on women, particularly regarding motherhood, marriage and domestic duties. It will also explore how this patriarchal society has imposed silence upon women and restricted their access to the public sphere, rendering them invisible and unable to address crucial issues such as mental health issues or marital violence, among other important topics.

Chapter two will explore how the oppressive social structures in which women lived led to the creation of a shared narrative framework for women to articulate their most secret concerns. This second chapter will examine the nature of the ghost story as a subgenre,

analyzing its characteristics, recurring themes and their symbolic function. Accordingly, it will consider how ghostly figures serve as metaphors for repression and resistance, highlighting the connection between spectral presences and the silenced voices of women. In addition, the cultural and historical significance of the ghost story will be examined to provide a deeper understanding of why it became such an effective method for addressing what women were forbidden to discuss openly.

The last chapter will focus on the analysis of ghostly figures and their correspondent symbolism articulated in the three selected short stories. This study aims to explore their connection to the subgenre of the ghost story and the characteristics they share. Although their similarities will be analyzed in greater depth in the corresponding chapter, it is important to highlight that these stories exhibit significant parallels. As many other ghost stories, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Bowen and Glasgow's "The Shadowy Third" use the figure of the ghost as a strong metaphor to explore the complexities of female oppression. Their similarities are rooted in their exploration of the constraints of motherhood and marriage, the dominance of male figures, the household as a place of confinement and the repression of women's emotions. As a result, these narratives metaphorically unveil the haunting realities of women in a society that has systematically confined and marginalized their identities and experiences.

## 2. Women in the Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries

Throughout history, female circumstances have been deeply embedded in the structures of power and the organization of society, both of which have been traditionally rooted in patriarchal ideas. Central to this social order was the expectation that women would marry and bear children, as these roles were seen as essential for their integration and

acceptance within society. As a consequence, the family became the primary institution through which women's identities were defined. Within familiar structures, authority was typically placed in the hands of the male figure, the husband, who was regarded as the only arbiter of family decisions. This system implied that women were frequently denied their autonomy, reducing their roles to subordination and obedience under male dominance.

### 2.1. The Historical Construction of the Domestic Ideal

Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English depict in their book *For Her Own Good* (1978) how the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of the Victorian ideal, which further reinforced a distinct domestic order. It promoted an idealized conception of women as caretakers of the home, and "defined woman as a perpetual alien, and the home as an idyllic refuge" (p.36).

Prior to industrialization, women played a vital role in household production. They engaged in essential tasks such as baking bread, weaving cloth and taking care of what was needed to survive. However, the arrival of the Industrial Revolution changed this dynamic significantly. As Ehrenreich and English further explain, once goods produced in the household became available through factory labor and markets, many middle-class women experienced what has been defined as the "domestic void". They found themselves confined to the domestic sphere with fewer tasks to perform. This, combined with the restricted access to education and limited professional opportunities, led to a growing awareness of their social confinement and lack of opportunities.

To fill this "domestic void", domestic science emerged in a way that presented house making as an almost professional endeavor. The time freed up by modern methods was

redirected towards educating women on how to properly manage the house, focusing on what "the domestic scientists concerned themselves with—the correct ways of cleaning, sorting, scheduling" (Ehrenreich and English, 1978, p.159). As a matter of fact, this promotion of domestic science and idealization of homemaking was a deliberate procedure to ensure women remained subordinate, unable to enter education systems or have opportunities within society that could have given them a chance to participate equally in society.

Although it may have seemed to be a step forward for women's education, it ultimately reinforced traditional gender roles, further confining them to the private realm and restricting their autonomy. The prevailing family model remained an idealized form in which the perfect mother and wife was expected to stay at home and devote herself to her children and home. This ideal reveals how the institution of the family has been central to the historical subjugation of women.

Whereas industrialization meant a return to domesticity for women, it broadened men's opportunities by increasing the range of occupations available for them. The creation of a public and private sphere in the nineteenth century further emphasized this difference. Only men participated in public life, departing from their responsibilities within the family. "Adult women remained almost entirely within the private sphere, defined politically, economically, and socially by their familial roles. Thus, the public sphere became man's arena; the private, woman's." (DuBois, 1975, p. 64) Therefore, industrialization resulted in women's restriction to the sole space of the home, as a direct consequence of the modern construction of femininity, linking their identity to the household duties and childcare. Ann Oakley (1990) described female confinement in *Housewife* through a powerful metaphor: "Our window on the world is looked through with our hands in the sink" (p. 32). This image

vividly captures the oppressive nature of their roles, emphasizing their separation from other worlds beyond the home.

The domestic role assigned to women transcended national boundaries as a shared experience among many women in many industrialized societies, holding relevance across different countries. This oppressive ideal was particularly documented in Britain and the United States, revealing a broader pattern defined by their exclusion from the public and economic spheres, remaining in subordinate positions.

### 2.2. The Social, Cultural and Legal Frameworks Sustaining Patriarchy

The widespread domestic archetype did not emerge in isolation; it was the outcome of a broader patriarchal system operating through social roles, cultural narratives and legal institutions that shaped women's identities and circumstances. It reinforced an organization of society in which gender inequality was not only normalized, but actively maintained through these interconnected structures.

Since the Victorian era, numerous representations of the perfect woman have been produced. One of the most enduring is "the Angel in the House", an ideal of womanhood that originated from Coventry Patmore's 1854 homonymous poem which represented the ideal woman. Virginia Woolf described this "angel" in her essay *Professions for Women*, in the following terms:

> immensely sympathetic, immensely charming, utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily [...] in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind but preferred to sympathize always with the

> minds and wishes of others. Above all [...] she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty. (1961, p. 202)

Femininity imposed specific expectations upon women. These were not merely social preferences but deeply ingrained moral codes that framed selflessness as a natural and fulfilling obligation. One of the earliest and clearest critiques of this ideology can be found in philosopher John Stuart Mill's 1869 essay *The Subjection of Women*, where he denounces the moral framework that confined women to lives of self-sacrifice:

> All the moralities tell them that it is their duty, and all the current ideas about feelings tell them that it is their nature, to live for others—to set aside their own wishes and interests and have no life but in their affections. And by 'their affections' are meant the only ones they are allowed to have—those to the men with whom they are connected, or to the children who constitute an additional and unbreakable tie between them and a man. (Mill, 2017, p. 18)

This nineteenth-century perspective reveals how moral discourses played central roles in sustaining female subordination, attaching their identities to the needs of men and their children while denying them their personal autonomy. Women were systematically trained to be complacent and obedient, rather than encouraged to cultivate reason or autonomy. Their value was framed in terms of self-sacrifice and submission. Intellectual freedom, essential for any form of liberation and independence, largely depended on access to education. Yet, such opportunities often remained inaccessible under the prevailing social order, leaving them confined to the domestic sphere and dependent on male authority.

Moreover, this social order was further supported by cultural narratives that sought to naturalize women's domestic confinement. As Anne Oakley argues in *Housewife*, the use of

myths aims to “validate an existing social order”, elevating tradition to a higher status and perpetuating a vision of the future meant to mirror the past (pp. 156-157). When tradition is held sacred, it reinforces the idea that things have always been a certain way; and therefore should remain unchanged. Oakley describes how “the myth of division of labour by sex” presents domestic roles as naturally and universally suited to women. She notes that scientific disciplines have helped perpetuate this myth in order to justify the division. For instance, men were considered as biologically stronger and as a consequence, destined to perform strenuous tasks, while women were relegated to carry supposedly less demanding tasks at home. This ironically overlooks the physical and emotional toll of such labor. By framing housework and caregiving as instinctive and necessary female traits, these narratives have served to legitimize women’s exclusion from public and economic life.

Similarly, as John Stuart Mill illustrates in *The Subjection of Women*, power structures often mask their oppression behind good intentions. When women are excluded from public roles, it is justified by claiming that they are incapable of success in such areas and that their true path towards happiness and fulfillment lies in domesticity. (2017, pp. 56-57).

Nevertheless, not only cultural and social frameworks perpetuated female subordination. It is crucial to address how these structures became deeply entrenched within legal systems. In a society in which women have historically been subordinated under male authority, laws simply formalized and reinforced this existing inequality. What started as a social reality, soon became a legal assumption: women, who were already pressured to obey, were now forced by law to do so. This way, the law denied women of their rights by making the barriers to freedom much harder to overcome.

Anglo-American laws reinforced the dependence already inherent in the institution of marriage. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, legal structures were still shaped by a deeply patriarchal logic. Under the legal doctrine of coverture, a woman's legal identity was erased upon marriage: she could no longer own property, retain her earnings or sign contracts. Cott (1998) described marriage as a civic status that "removed from her and transferred to her husband her property and income, the very items that indicated free will. The property cession both symbolized and operationalized a husband's independence and his wife's (economic) dependence and consequent civic disability." (p. 1452).

In this system, any money earned or inherited was no longer hers to use. This way, there was little point in earning money if the law transferred it directly to her husband. Marriage, therefore, reveals how women's agency was not merely limited by social expectations, it was structurally denied by law. Property, income and personal decisions fell under men's authority, exercised "in the name of the family". These concepts, rooted in British Common Law, shaped Britain but also extended across the Anglo-American sphere, remaining profoundly influential in many legal systems such as the United States.

Furthermore, through marital union the couple became one legal unity, yet this unity was deeply unequal. Although they were considered "one person in law", that one person was the husband, retaining full control over all economic and legal decisions. Dependency meant that women could not be recognized as full citizens.

However, marriage offered a paradoxical position: while it legally subsumed the wife's identity under her husband's, it was often the only social legitimate path towards financial stability. Unmarried women could retain control over their property, but this independence came at the cost of severe social and economic limitations outside the

institution of marriage. In this way, women often saw marriage as a means of economic and social survival.

As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English explain: “The problem in the middle to upper classes was that marriage had become a “sexuo-economic relation” in which women performed sexual and reproductive duties for financial support.” (1978, p. 98). Even if men did not perceive this dynamic as an expropriation of their wives, it was a transaction in which women owed their labor and bodies in exchange for protection and economic security. In effect, marriage had become not only a cultural expectation, but a legal mechanism ensuring dependency and maintaining patriarchal power. Certain legal reforms in the late nineteenth century such as the Married Women’s Property Acts, began to hint meaningful challenges to this structure. However, during most of the period under consideration, marriage still remained as a legal tool preserving male dominance.

### 2.3. Motherhood as an Unquestionable Duty

Women’s expected obedience extended beyond marriage and devotion to a husband, it also included childbearing as a core element of their value to society. While legal structures secured female dependence within marriage, their subordination was further reinforced by framing motherhood as their ultimate purpose.

At the turn of the twentieth century, as described in *For Her Own Good* (1978), the centre of the family began to pivot towards the figure of the child, progressively linking the ideal of the perfect woman to that of the devoted mother. As production moved out of the household, childhood began to be seen as a fascinating phase of life. Maternity was regarded

as a source of joy for women, but also as a unifying force that would consolidate domestic harmony and strengthen familiar bonds.

Ann Oakley, in *Housewife*, discusses different myths, including the previously mentioned myth of division of labour. One particularly influential belief is the myth of motherhood, which holds women as the only suitable caregivers for children. Oakley describes this myth as:

> the most persuasive and the least questionable. [...] Women's position in the family is founded in their maternity, now and for all time. Simple logic produces the conclusion that since women's maternal role is unalterable, their oppression as housewives might just as well continue. (1990, p.186)

She aims to describe the modern situation, where maternity was portrayed as the destiny of women. Maternal roles were regarded as inherently feminine characteristics, implying that rejecting motherhood was to reject womanhood itself. *Housewife* thoroughly explores the expectations placed upon women to bear and raise children. Motherhood was framed as the ultimate life goal for women, a role in which they were supposed to find the greatest satisfaction. Society's romanticized ideal of motherhood painted a perfect life centered around selflessness and passion, where nothing would fulfill a woman more than meeting the needs of her child, considered as her most suitable companion.

According to prevailing social norms, women were expected to enjoy being pregnant, breastfeeding and caring for their newborn. In such a way the myth's function "is to keep women in their place — with their children — [...] convinced that their desire for motherhood is self-constructed and self-fulfilling, rather than, as it actually is, a convenience to their culture, and an inconvenience to them." (Oakley, 1990, p. 190). As a result, women came to

internalize that motherhood was a genuine personal aspiration, when in reality it was a product of strategically constructed gender roles designed to confine them to the household as caregivers.

These gendered expectations positioned the mother as the sole responsible for child-rearing, reinforcing another cornerstone of domesticity. Paternal responsibilities were largely overlooked, as if the men played no active role in bringing an infant into the world. Only women were subjected to moral scrutiny regarding maternity, as any failure was assumed to be the mother's fault. While no public discourses or media addressed fathers' responsibilities on parenting, emerging scientific approaches to child raising emphasized maternal accountability, placing tremendous burden on their shoulders.

Motherhood has never been an easy task, contrary to the widespread belief that idealized and underestimated it. The reality of maternity often dismantled the preconceived ideal imposed by society. As Oakley comments, citing Alice Rossi, "homemakers had romantic notions concerning marriage and family roles which the reality of marriage and motherhood tempers... . Marriage and family roles are less fully satisfying to the homemakers than they expected them to be." (1990, p. 198). These roles often turned out to be far more demanding than expected. Domestic labor and child raising presented many challenges, leaving women unsure of how to proceed. They quickly realized that these responsibilities were not as automatic or instinctive as they had been led to believe. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English describe how women began to realize that maternity required more than instinct. As a result, female collectives were formed to share knowledge and their experiences on parenting and domestic work. Many women realized they lacked the so-called maternal instinct that should be natural to all women. In reality, this instinct was not inherent, but

culturally constructed, and the assumption that all women were destined to be mothers was fundamentally flawed.

In a field in which women often lacked formal knowledge or guidance, it was common for them to feel inadequate and guilty about meeting their children's needs. Especially given the belief that only them, as women, could ensure their infant's well-being and security. Society was quick to label women as bad mothers whenever they were regarded as falling short of the prevailing expectations, subjecting them to scrutiny and blame. Such expectations inevitably created self-doubt and an immense feeling of responsibility. With a human life in their hands, the burden of motherhood could often be immense, taking its toll on their mental health. These pressures, combined with the demands of the idealized model of womanhood, could not persist without serious consequences. The cost of sustaining such a system has proved profoundly damaging over time.

### 2.4. The Burden of Domestic Expectations

All of the idealized stereotypes of women, the social and structural factors, gender inequalities as well as the myths described by Ann Oakley constitute critical sources of women's oppression. Together, they effectively tie their identities to the domestic sphere. This dual role of being a good mother and a good housewife, brings enduring physical and psychological consequences, as it involves constant and demanding responsibilities. Housework, often undervalued, is a form of work that can be exhausting and deeply isolating. In interviews regarding gender roles within marriage, Ann Oakley includes the testimony of a housewife that illustrates this matter clearly. When asked about whether women work as hard as their husbands, she replied:

> I always say housework is hard, but my husband doesn't say that at all. I think he's wrong, because I'm going all the time. When his job's finished, it's finished . . . Sunday he can lie in bed till twelve, get up, get dressed, and go for a drink, but my job never changes. (1990, p. 99)

Domesticity imposes ceaseless time demands and offers no free time, it is a constant activity from which women cannot ever disconnect. Moreover, household activities are often performed in complete isolation. Unlike many paid occupations, domestic work does not offer sociability. There is no place for social interaction, as their occupation is inherently individualistic. Social conditioning often leads women to perceive domestic and maternal roles as a permanent obligation and lifelong duty, placing a heavy emotional burden upon them. These isolating and tedious conditions frequently resulted in profound distress.

The emotional toll of domesticity often manifests not through intense outbursts, it often is presented in quiet and subtle forms. Ehrenreich and English, taking Adrienne Rich's testimony, reveal the invisible violence embedded into the system. Rich relates:

> … the guilt, the powerless responsibility for human lives, the judgments and condemnations, the fear of her own power, the guilt, the guilt, the guilt. So much of this heart of darkness is an undramatic, undramatized suffering: the woman who serves her family their food but cannot sit down with them, the woman who cannot get out of bed in the morning, the woman polishing the same place on the table over and over, reading labels in the supermarket as if they were in a foreign language, looking into a drawer where there is a butcher knife. (1978, p. 197).

This passage encapsulates the internalized pain many women endured. Their roles became saturated with guilt: for falling short of perfection, for feeling exhausted, for not

feeling what they were expected to… Such “undramatized suffering” often remained unperceived, existing quietly while constituting a significant psychological and physical burden. Rich’s depiction powerfully reflects the feeling of isolation and mental fatigue that provoked many women to operate on autopilot, fulfilling expectations without personal satisfaction. It sharply captures the emotional exhaustion and alienation within the domestic sphere, and its impact on women’s well-being and sense of self.

This impact of domestic expectations was far from anecdotal. As Elaine Showalter explains in *The Female Malady* (1985), by the mid-nineteenth century women already constituted the majority of patients in public asylums, persisting into the twentieth century outnumbering men’s cases. Showalter interprets this high rate of mental disorders as a direct consequence of their social roles: expected to carry out the demanding duties of motherhood and wifehood while being subordinated by a male-dominated society and psychiatric institution. Across social classes, women have complained about distress and dissatisfaction within marriage as well as anxiety over maternity, significantly suffering higher rates of depression than men.

Motherhood carried significant emotional content and entailed numerous risks during pregnancy and childbirth. These risks went beyond the physical, they were also mental, as emotional sensitivity often intensified during maternity. For instance, purperal insanity was a usual diagnosis in the nineteenth century. It was commonly defined as the “mental breakdown of women following childbirth”, suggesting that suffering was a natural part of motherhood. This constructed motherhood as a dichotomy: it was framed as a woman's most sacred role, yet it could cause many physical and psychological threats. In some cases, this conflict led to cases of maternal detachment or postpartum depression, often rooted in feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy or unfulfillment. These emotional responses, if

unaddressed, could escalate into more severe cases, such as psychosis. As pressures of domesticity escalated, women were commonly diagnosed with conditions such as hysteria or neurasthenia, applied by default to explain female exhaustion or instability. However, these symptoms were not inherent to their biology, but rather responses to the socio-cultural burdens placed on them, accumulating over time. Mental health issues were not acknowledged as a consequence of weariness, isolation or high expectations, they were ordinarily accepted as inherent to the female condition.

Yet, this was not the only consequence of the rigid system of domesticity. The unequal power structures within marriage placed women in a position of dependency, granting men unlimited authority within the home. The domestic space became a private sphere where this inequality could take place without external supervision, often facilitating various forms of abuse. As John Stuart Mill notes in *The Subjection of Women* (1869/2017), the privacy of the household allowed men to act differently in private than they did in public, exercising unlimited power over women, denying them the means to resist or escape:

> Even the commonest men reserve the violent, the sulky, the undisguisedly selfish side of their character for those who have no power to withstand it. [...] We know that the bad tendencies in human nature are kept within bounds only when they are allowed no scope for their indulgence. [...] When this encroachment doesn't come from deliberate purpose, it comes from impulse and habit. Because this is the common tendency of human nature, the almost unlimited power that present social institutions give to a man over his wife....seeks out and encourages the latent seeds of selfishness. (2017, pp. 20-21).

This male concentration of power within the family could lead to various forms of control, such as physical or verbal abuse, emotional manipulation, economic control… Marriage functioned as a contract that made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get out. Subordination was so deeply institutionalized that even in more extreme cases, such as those of marital violence, the law still did not offer women protection.

Divorce was a social taboo and it was a restricted process, not only was it expensive and long, it also carried a big social stigma. Divorced women were likely to experience shame and exclusion, which disencouraged many women aiming for divorce. Even if divorce came to occur, women usually lost custody of their children, as well of any property or earnings, as the law recognised them as the husband's possessions. Therefore, leaving the marriage often meant losing everything.

Although by the 1850s legal reforms began to appear in many states in order to make divorce more accesible, the social stigma and fear of ruin persisted. In such a way, one of the most burdensome consequences of domesticity was this inequitable distribution of power, subjecting women to their husbands with no real possibility of escape, forcing them into silence and resignation for fear of losing their children, their homes or their social status.

As a consequence, silence became a defining feature of women's identity. They were expected to endure quietly, internalizing suffering as a natural part of their condition. The private home disguised their pain, rendering it invisible, normalized and socially unacknowledged. Voicing dissatisfaction or discontent was not only discouraged, it was considered to be a personal failure of their prescribed role. It would have been nearly impossible to measure how many women felt dissatisfied with their lives when they had always been taught that complaining, desiring more or resisting their roles was improper.

The internalization of silence became deeply rooted, as after generations of submission, subordination became almost inevitable. Women were kept quiet under a legal and cultural system that perpetuated their oppression, a system that left them unprotected and kept under an unstoppable cycle of oppression and voicelessness.

Despite the extended nature of these oppressive structures, women did not passively accept their subjugation. Women were brought together as a crucial means of support, voicing their fears about roles imposed by a society in which they were denied their autonomy. Throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the growing awareness of these structural inequalities encouraged early feminist movements, particularly among the educated middle classes, which advocated reforms aimed at challenging the patriarchal system that had long oppressed women. Suffragists fought for the right to vote, but also for access to education or to restricted professions. As Ellen DuBois argues in *The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (1975), feminists pursued suffrage with the expectation that political participation would enable them to impose their view on politics. Through the strategic use of their vote, women aimed to engage in public occupations, support strikes and create reforms within marriage that could protect them from the tyranny of their husbands or threat of losing custody of their children.

DuBois emphasizes that “the significance of the woman suffrage movement rested precisely on the fact that it bypassed women's oppression within the family, or private sphere, and demanded instead her admission to citizenship, and through it admission to the public” (1975, p. 63). This marked the beginning of the gradual decay of the division between public and private spheres while leaving women’s domestic position mainly intact, but still challenging the prevailing social norms. Such efforts were met with significant opposition, often dismissed as radical threats to the natural social order, leaving women’s resistance still

heavily limited by social norms. However, the absence of a meaningful transformation in the gender relations did not imply that women were satisfied with their situation or had no complaints. Many women abstained from protesting because formal spaces for them to express their realities were scarce. Although this suffragism did not directly attack the institution of the family, it initiated women's entrance into the public space. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the rise of suffragism accelerated women's socialization beyond the household, facilitating their access to work, education and politics. This marked the beginning of female emancipation.

Ultimately, women's identities during the period under consideration were shaped by a social, legal and cultural context that restricted their autonomy and confined them to the domestic sphere. The prevailing patriarchal system not only defined their roles as wives and mothers, but also systematically silenced their experiences. Nevertheless, women began to find in writing a space to voice their oppression and reflect on their identities. As John Stuart Mill observed "a great number of women do not accept it [their oppression]. Ever since there have been women able to make their sentiments known by their writings (the only form of going-public that society permits to them)" they have done so (2017, p. 8). In this context, writing emerged as a fundamental tool for articulating change: a way for women to question their prescribed roles at a time when their voices were often silenced.

## 3. The Domestic Ghost Story

The conditions that shaped women's lives throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as explored in the previous chapter, were defined by the prevailing system of subordination: domestic confinement, rigid gender roles and lack of autonomy and

legal recognition. However, these restrictions did not only shape their lives, but also affected their literary production. In this context, Gothic literature offered a space for female authors to articulate their anxieties. Within this tradition, the female ghost story emerged as a distinctly symbolic mode of expression, allowing women to criticize patriarchal structures by means of supernatural tropes. In a society that systematically silenced women's voices and restricted their access to public discourse, the figure of the ghost became a frequent metaphor for female oppression and the ghost story a coded form of social critique.

Situated at the intersection of several literary categories, the female ghost story belongs simultaneously to the Gothic tradition, the Female Gothic subgenre and the short story form. The Female Gothic makes use of Gothic conventions to reflect women's oppression under patriarchy. The short story, in turn, offered an accessible and concentrated format well suited to the ghost story form. Combining these two traditions, the female ghost story emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Unlike any other literary forms that often reinforced dominant ideologies, the ghost story served to challenge this order through supernatural metaphors expressing the unspeakable. The female representations of ghosts did not seek to provoke a fear of the unknown, but rather portraying the terrors of their everyday lives.

Despite their depth, women's ghost stories have been overlooked in literary history, as criticism has privileged male authors. Yet writers such as Louisa May Alcott, Mary Wilkins Freeman or Harriet Beecher Stowe used this form to critique social conventions and oppression.

In both American and British traditions, women often portrayed the domestic space as haunted and suffocating with spectral figures reflecting their dissatisfaction and entrapment.

These narratives shared anxieties about marriage, motherhood, patriarchal authority and female subjectivity.

### 3.1. The Gothic Legacy and the Rise of the Short Story

Gothic fiction, from which the ghost story draws many of its conventions, has historically been associated with the representation of social and cultural fears through the supernatural. As David Punter and Glennis Byron expressed in *The Gothic* (2004), it is a psychological mode where "repressed fears are represented in textual forms" (p. 18). From its beginnings, Gothic literature has addressed what society deems forbidden and repressed. By the Victorian era, the Gothic began to be domesticated: exotic and historical elements typical of early Gothic gave way to domestic environments that represented "the horror of the familiar". For women, whose fears were often rooted in the domestic realm, this change in setting created a space for women writers, known as the Female Gothic, which allowed them to articulate psychological and domestic terrors.

Barbara Patrick (1995) argues that while Gothic literature has traditionally explored evil and its origins, in women's writings this evil often referred to social injustices and systemic oppression within a patriarchal society. Writers such as Mary Shelley, Charlotte Brontë or Elizabeth Gaskell have introduced these concerns into the Gothic, paving the way for many other female authors.

Redefined through a female lens, the Female Gothic, as Wallace and Smith note in *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (2009), began to be considered by critics during the late 1960s and 1970s alongside the rise of feminism and feminist literary criticism. She illustrates how the subgenre has been described as "a politically subversive genre articulating women's

dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures and offering a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body" (p.2).

Central to the Female Gothic is its focus on gender and familial issues, articulated through Gothic themes and supernatural conventions, mostly throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Gothic tropes provided a space of freedom for women to incorporate supernatural elements while simultaneously addressing the gender's traditional concern with cultural and social fears. They offered female writers the possibility to illustrate their fears and anxieties within a context marked by male dominance and patriarchal rule. As Diana Wallace (2009) explains:

> Female Gothic metaphors have enormous power to convey women's experience of living in a culture which historically denied them legal status as 'subjects' within marriage, and which has continued to make women feel that they are denied a full subjectivity. Such metaphors offer an emotive and compelling way of challenging established and 'rational' hegemonies and 'theorising' alternative truths which may be difficult to express in other ways. (p. 38)

Through this mode, women created a symbolic language that addressed their legal invisibility and the psychological consequences of such exclusion, reclaiming agency by rewriting their histories.

Gothic and supernatural motifs functioned as strategic tools to confront key questions embedded in domestic ideology, particularly the terrors rooted in institutions such as that of marriage and motherhood. These concerns closely align with those explored in female ghost stories, where oppressive figures such as fathers, husbands and institutions exist within haunted domestic settings marked by spectrality and confinement.

This critique often examined the legal and financial systems that systematically excluded women and enabled their mistreatment. A notable example would be *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, which questioned the legal constraints placed upon women, particularly in marriage, and highlighted their lack of subjectivity and autonomy while presenting the domestic space as a site of entrapment.

Diana Wallace in *Female Gothic Histories* (2013) examines the figure of Elizabeth Gaskell who, like many other female authors, understood the potential of the Gothic:

> as both a mode of history and a symbolic language of the psychological which could convey the female experience repressed in other modes of writing. [...] Her powerful stories use Gothic motifs and conventions – particularly the haunting figures of the lost mother and the dead or dying child − to figure repressed anxieties and desires and to symbolise and explore the psychologies of oppression. They offer a searing proto-feminist indictment of the vulnerability of women and children within structures which support and even encourage male power and violence. (pp. 67-68)

Nevertheless, Gaskell also recognised that, as the novel in the nineteenth century became progressively associated with realism, the short story offered her a place to experiment with supernatural fiction through a mode that offered greater freedoms. It is essential to consider this literary medium, to which many women writing ghost stories turned to as a suitable vehicle to express their concerns.

Supernatural stories tended to thrive in the short story form. Many women writers turned to this brevity for several reasons, such as its accessibility, its appeal to marginalisation and invisibility and the practical advantages of its short length. The rise of the short story during the nineteenth century can be partly explained by historical

circumstances. Literacy increased significantly at the time, creating a broader reading audience. Additionally, technological advancements in the publishing industry facilitated the growth of magazines and periodicals, which helped popularize short fiction. This situation was especially beneficial for women, whose time for writing was often limited by domestic responsabilities. The brevity of the short story gave them the opportunity to write in shorter intervals, making writing more compatible with their domestic constraints. Moreover, it allowed quicker publication and quicker financial contributions for their work. As the periodical market expanded, female authors were increasingly drawn to this form.

Nevertheless, the use of the short story form by women can also be considered ideological. In *British Women's Short Supernatural Fiction, 1860–1930*, Victoria Margree (2019) discusses how short fiction has been recognised as a form particularly associated with writers marginalized by society. As noted by Frank O'Connor, the short story often centers on "outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society" and he suggests that its primary difference from the novel lies in ideology (cited in Margree, 2019, p. 9). It has been argued that the short story form serves as a form well-suited to explore issues of gender, class, race or sexuality, which has made it particularly attractive to women writers. This form allows the representation of what has been silenced and overlooked by mainstream literature. Female ghost stories clearly connect to this idea, as they inherently engage with the unspeakable aspects of society and articulate women's exclusion from dominant narratives.

In addition, it also offered freedom in terms of content. Although short fiction was widely published in popular magazines, it was still regarded as a minor literary form compared to the novel. As Margree (2019) argues, this marginalization provided women an unique opportunity to express subversive ideas while escaping critical scrutiny. Under the form of "harmless" supernatural tales, such as the ghost story, "women could produce 'multi-

layered' narratives whose 'popular form […] allowed them into print initially, whilst the supernatural element and the social comment were, cleverly, so indistinguishable as to make vague misgivings difficult to identify and vocalize'" (Stewart, cited in Margree, p. 10). In short, the subversive potential of the supernatural was often overlooked, and women, as it will be explored in more detail through their use of the ghost story, found that the short story provided them strategies to voice the unspoken, taking advantage of the genre's perceived benignity and low status.

The short story also offers distinct narrative advantages. Unlike the novel, which demanded a more realistic construction, the short story "frees it from certain requirements placed upon novels (particularly nineteenth-century realist ones), such as to explain events by establishing cause and effect, or to end with narrative closure." (Margree, 2019, p. 10). In *The Haunted House in Women's Ghost Stories*, Emma Liggins (2020) argues that many short story writers felt that the supernatural was more difficult to sustain in novels. She cites Elizabeth Bowen's reflection on the short story as a form "not weighed down (as the novel is bound to be) by facts, explanation, or analysis." (p.10). Bowen suggested that short stories are more closely tied to moods and fears without clear causes, which makes them ideal for creating mystery through the unexplained and haunted settings. Therefore, supernatural elements can remain ambiguous or unresolved, in contrast to more thorough explanations and conclusions typical of novels.

Furthermore, the brevity of the short story makes it particularly effective for sustaining a continuous atmosphere of supernatural terror. Edgar Allan Poe, as discussed in *Scare Tactics*, argued that shorter narratives evoke anxiety or fear more powerfully when they could be read in a single sitting. As Margree (2019) remarks:

> It is also these qualities that have arguably made short fiction particularly hospitable to ghosts. Ghosts are not always so well accommodated in narratives that require suspension of readerly disbelief over a sustained duration, but they flourish in the intensely charged, unfamiliar and uncertain moments in which short fiction specialises. (p. 10).

It is this capacity of the form for ambiguity and concentrated emotional impact that created an attractive space for women to reveal their narratives.

These thematic and formal characteristics created a new mode of expression for women through spectrality. Drawing on Gothic traditions and shaped by the short story form, the ghost story emerged as a literary mode combining the symbolic language and social critique of the Female Gothic with the ambiguity and narrative freedom of the short story.

### 3.2. Women's Ghost Stories

Women's writing has long incorporated spectrality and haunting as a means of challenging patriarchal structures. The ghost story provided an opportunity to represent female histories of subordination, reclaiming their voices as a form of empowerment both for its authors and readers. As Gina Wisker explains in *Contemporary Women's Ghost Stories* (2022), the Gothic tradition casts "new light on whatever has been repressed, ignored, marginalised, misrepresented and silenced, upsetting and emptying out the social, cultural, personal complacencies". Although ghost stories were often dismissed as mere entertainment, Wisker argues that they possessed enormous potential, as they "open up the cracks and through these cracks and fissures leak, then storm out, contradictions and suppressed evils,

the hidden histories of gendered and racial injustice". In this light, the ghost becomes a voice exposing wrongs, particularly those linked to gender and unequal power relations.

The ghost story, as a distinct mode, provides shared narrative elements through which critique becomes possible. Among the most prominent and employed is the ghost as metaphor: a vehicle for expressing the marginalization of women, who, just as ghosts, were invisible in the prevailing patriarchal culture. As Wisker mentions, they both have "historically lurked in the background, trapped in grand and humble houses, disenfranchised legally and politically, and incarcerated in domestic spaces and in domestic roles by norms of family, heredity and inheritance." They have remained "voiceless, penniless, without rights, unable to own even their own bodies, defined by [...] their fathers, brothers, husbands and, then, their sons" (p. 2).

Therefore, the figure of the ghost helped women writers engage with the political and social issues of their time, particularly those of the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which coincided with key feminist movements demanding suffrage, property rights, access to education… The ghost story became a mode of recovering and articulating, in this climate of change, women's experiences that had been lived silently and privately.

During this period, the ghost story as a subgenre experienced a significant growth among women writers. *Haunting the House of Fiction* (1991) highlights how strong affinities could be observed between female-authored ghost stories in England and America. Although each retained ties to their traditional literature, an Anglo-American ghost story tradition can be identified.

Drawing on Female Gothic conventions, women developed a ghost story that differed from the male tradition of these stories, creating a ghostly form through which women could

explore their own experiences. As Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar (1991, pp. 4-5) explain, although authors like Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne influenced the development of supernatural fiction, as it was the case of Poe through haunted houses and Hawthorne through his attention to gender politics, American women were more profoundly influenced by the tradition of British women writers. Unlike their male counterparts, who often focused the terror on unknown forces, women tended to situate fear around the context and settings of a patriarchal world, which offered greater terror to them.

This terror of the world women inhabited served to put into words their repressed realities: their desires, fears, angers and frustrations, particularly in relation to marriage, motherhood and cultural expectations. They began to question the systems that alienated them: gendered division of spheres, the cult of womanhood and motherhood and the dissatisfaction these ideals brought about. Ghost stories allowed them to reimagine their roles and challenge social norms, using a symbolic language to conceal their critiques. Apparitions, such as that of the ghost, and supernatural events encoded meanings that could not be spoken openly, dealing with subjects such as domestic abuse, mental health issues, the difficulties of household activities or the oppressive nature of male figures. By embedding their critique in the ghostly, women avoided direct contact with those social taboos while still expressing their messages.

Ghost stories merge realism and the supernatural. As Gina Wisker (2022) recalls through the words of Sara Maitland, the ghost story intertwines the language of social realism with the unexplained to lend credibility to the fantastic. In fact, the ghost story presents more realistic hauntings as they are tied to domesticity. *Haunting the House of Fiction* (1991) highlights that they frequently center on heroines haunted in their own homes, where they, even their children, suffer the dangers of male power. The fears they experience are not

rooted in the unknown, but in the familiar: the terrors of everyday life, the confinement of domesticity and the alienation brought about by their roles as mothers and wives.

### 3.3. Formal and Symbolic Features of the Ghost Story

The female ghost story often diverged from traditional narrative expectations. As Diana Wallace (2004) observes, these stories frequently resist conventional structures of closure. They avoid the typical resolution through marriage and the rational explanations of the supernatural that often characterize the Female Gothic and more realistic genres. Instead, they locate meaning in ambiguity, narrative gaps and silences, allowing ghostly presences to remain unexplained, as their complexities cannot be fully grasped.

Many different topics are embedded within this tradition. Recurrent themes often include the idea of the home as a prison, financial dispossesion, fear of male figures and various forms of violence. *Haunting the House of Fiction* (1991) describes how ghost stories were frequently used to explore the "failed home", that is, the familiar domestic setting which, contrary to its idealized image, often produced conflict and suffering. These stories mainly focus on marriage and motherhood, repeatedly criticising male figures as the source of distress and lack of agency. As *Scare Tactics* (2008, p.105) mentions, common issues addressed included: infidelity, psychological and physical abuse, incompatibility or the pressure to live up to a widower's former wife. Motherhood is also a central theme, unveling the horrors of childbirth and maternal duties, challenging the ideal of motherhood as a woman's inherent vocation.

Many of these stories are structured around a hidden backstory that, once revealed, provides deeper insight into women's lives and their relationships. They are about "digging

things up—bodies, family secrets, repressed memories—and shining the light of day on them." (Weinstock, 2008, p. 191), which reshape the events of the present.

Kolmar and Carpenter (1991) reminds us that domesticity often creates histories where violence is almost always present. Women were frequent victims of abuse within the home and they had no means to change their circumstances. These situations commonly resulted in themes of familiar annihilation, in literal or symbolic ways, such as the murder of the mother by the father. This represents a reality in which women were unprotected by the law. In this context, the figure of the ghost often emerges as witness to the mistreatment done by men and, at times, helps to remedy them or bring the situation to light.

### 3.3.1. The Ghostly Element

The figure of the ghost emerges not as a mere fantastic element, but as a narrative strategy through which women voiced experiences excluded from dominant discourse. Robin Roberts (2018) emphasizes that the ghost, seen "as a reflection of living women's concerns shows the importance of women's ways of knowing as an alternative to patriarchal constructions of knowledge" (p. 11). In this sense, spectrality becomes a metaphor for silenced female experiences, especially within the domestic sphere, that may not have found expression through traditional literary forms.

Many female authors have turned to this figure to expose the realities of family life and domesticity. As *Scare Tactics* (2008) explains, the ghost highlights patriarchal tyranny and the need to restructure society to grant women autonomy and identity. The ghost often actively condemns misogyny, representing the different forms of abuse and control to which women were subjected.

In this context, the ghost appears as a figure that uncovers concealed and repressed histories. Gina Wisker (2022) notes, "contemporary women's ghost stories are often set in domestic locations, and open up the doors hiding oppressive behaviours, hypocrisies" shaking the illusion of the perfect home (p.14). Through their shadowy presence, ghosts offer knowledge and warnings, even if "women might well not recognise and admit to this abusive control, is it is veneered over by romance, seduction, marriage, but there are ghostly warnings" (Wisker, 2022, p. 158). Figures such as the ghost of the dead first wife, a mother or a child return to haunt the woman and awaken her to the true nature of the men in her life and the violences embedded in the domestic space.

The encounters of these ghostly visitations rarely provoke terror. Instead, the women of these stories often recognize themselves in the ghosts. They experience a shared condition of exclusion, powerlessness and invisibility, which render them ghost-like. *Haunting the House of Fiction* (1991) notes that women in these stories "are often called upon to understand and act upon the messages brought by those who haunt their houses" (p. 14). As Kolmar and Carpenter describe, these messages often warn of the dangers of domesticity and establish connections between women's histories and those of the ghost. In this way, the ghost is usually known or familiar and its presence signals the existence of another, untold and hidden narrative meant to be acknowledged.

### 3.3.2. The Haunted House

One of the most salient elements of the female-authored ghost story is its haunting setting: the home. These stories took place in realistic, contemporary domestic spaces which represented a central metaphor for women's confinement and oppression. As they were

largely restricted to the private sphere, they found themselves depicting dark and claustrophobic interiors to reflect their own entrapment.

Emma Liggins (2020) explains that these narratives frequently took place in ancestral mansions or modernised households described with detailed architectural characteristics. In these works, the house is not only haunted by a ghost, in fact, the home is itself haunting. It embodies the dichotomy between the supposed security of the home and the danger it holds for many women.

As Liggins remarks, “home may be a sacred place, a site of security and shelter, but also a prison-house, where women in particular are bound by the rules of domestic mythology or constrained by boundaries and limits” result of the dominance of men (2020, p.5). The domestic space reflects the impact of the doctrine of separate spheres, economic dispossesion, the exhaustion of domestic work and motherhood… For many women, the home became inseparable for those elements and from the sense of suffocation and invisibility.

As a result, the haunted house motif emerges as a recurrent symbol of this tension. In many of these stories, the architectural space is not only marked by oppression, it is also occupied by a violent patriarchal figure, often a husband who imprisons or even murders his wife. As Liggins interprets it, this figure mirrors the villain of early Gothic fiction. The intrusion of ghostly presences within these spaces further exposes the hidden violence and control embedded in the household.

Essentially, as Liggins (2020) expresses, the architecture of the haunted house is never neutral: it reflects the gendered structures of power, its exclusion and control. Not only ghosts produce the hauntings, but the conditions of domesticity under patriarchy.

### 3.3.3. The Female Figure

A crucial element in many ghost stories written by women is the choice of narrator. These stories are frequently told through the eyes of a woman, allowing a view into her world. The female protagonist often represents disruptive femininities, breaking away from the ideal of the "angel in the house". Their narratives reveal anxieties over their identities and roles within a rigid gender system. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2020), "even the most apparently conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all the patriarchal structures" (p. 77). They express how these characters can often be read as the "author's double", a literary reflection of the author's own fears, anger and resistance to male power and the limitations imposed on women.

In many ghost stories, female characters embody a complex and contradictory position: they are both heroines and monsters. This duality often arised from their refusal to conform to patriarchal expectations. As Punter and Byron (2004) explain in *The Gothic*, the emergence of psychiatry in the late nineteenth century coincided with the rising exploration of psychological states in literature. As a consequence, the madwoman began to appear as a recurring figure. These characters represent the social consequences of expressing their discontentement and concerns or breaking out of their prescribed roles, which were often interpreted as a loss of reason and even a sign of madness.

Frequently women in fiction are locked up, institutionalized or kept away under the justification of mental instability. As Lauren Talairach-Vielmas argues in *Women and the Gothic* (2016), the figure of the "mad" woman locked away "offers the reader a bleak vision of women's fate in a male-dominated world" (p. 33). This trope critiques how madness was

constructed as inherently feminine regardless of whether the woman's condition was hysteria or exhaustion.

These stories reveal not only the gendered nature of madness but also the violence in medical and psychiatric discourses. As Talaraich-Vielmas (2016) points out, the locked up madwoman served to symbolize the voicelessness and lack of autonomy that defined many women's realities.

### 3.4. Female Authorship and Disregard of the Ghost Story

Although women have been central to the reading, characterization and writing of ghost stories (often behind pseudonyms or anonymity), their contributions have been historically overlooked. This is largely due to their marginalization within literary tradition, where attention has been centered on a male canon. As Margree (2019) explains it "women ghost story writers have been an active though marginalised presence within an already marginalised literary form" (p.7). The neglect of the short story format further contributed to this erasure.

This genre was long dismissed for its domestic content, reinforcing the idea that what women wrote was not truly "scary", even when the domestic sphere was, for many women, the place of their deepest fears. In other cases, these stories were disregarded for being considered too critical of traditional norms.

Women's stories have been largely excluded from historical literary narratives, which highlights the importance of their ghost stories to acknowledge their past. As *Haunting the House of Fiction* (1991) depicts, "women's ghost stories spoke particularly to a female readership and drew their key concerns from women's culture" (p. 8). That a genre so

centered on the haunting of the home attracted so many writers and readers reflects how deeply it resonated with their lived experiences.

Despite being pushed to the margins, women used the ghost story to reinterpret their social positions. Beyond being a vehicle for social critique, the ghost story offered them a space to imagine alternative realities and a space to reclaim their voices. This tradition made by women served as a recording of exclusion and as a form of creative resistance. As Gina Wisker (2022) powerfully concludes, ghost stories "might have messages for the present about re-understanding histories, learning for these damaged histories to build something vital, balanced, positive, sustainable. Lessons learned from such ghost stories are warnings with creative potential." (p. 269).

## 4. Analysis of Case Studies

This chapter analyzes how the ghost story tradition is employed in three selected texts, each of which uses the figure of the ghost to symbolically criticise the conflicts and tensions embedded in women's experiences.

The selected stories for analysis are "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and two stories titled "The Shadowy Third", one by Ellen Glasgow (1916) and a homonimous one written and published by Elizabeth Bowen (1923). Each was written in different historical and cultural contexts: Gilman's originates from the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century within the framework of proto-feminist thought; Glasgow's reflects the transitional period between Victorian norms and modernity as an American woman and Bowen offers her Anglo-Irish viewpoint situated within the modernist movement.

Although these narratives emerge from distinct historical and cultural backgrounds and portray ghosts in different ways, they share central symbolic themes. Each connects the supernatural to the domestic sphere, explores psychological turmoil and critiques the oppresive nature of patriarchal power structures.

### 4.1. Framing the Selected Stories: Gilman, Glasgow and Bowen

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) was written in response to her personal experience with postpartum depression and the treatment she received for it. She was prescribed the "rest cure" by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a treatment which, as explained in *Haunting the House of Fiction* (1991) "Gilman found [...] to be worse than the condition itself" (p. 65-66). Forbidden from writing or engaging in intellectual activity and isolated from social life, her condition deteriorated. Gilman left her husband and daughter and got better, and decided to write a story that would denounce the dangers of such treatment. As she explains in "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper" (1913), the story achieved its purpose: her doctor had read it and changed the treatment. Essentially, "it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked." Drawing on her own experience, she created one of the first literary works to critique medical practices and the power structures within marriage, exposing the psychological consequences for women.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" tells the story of a woman confined to her home as part of the "rest cure" prescribed by her husband, a physician, to treat her nervous condition. Kept inside a room with an unsettling yellow wallpaper, forbidden to write or leave, she becomes increasingly obsessed with the wallpaper, eventually perceiving a woman trapped inside of it.

Her growing obsession and desire to peel the paper to release the figure serve as a metaphor for her own entrapment and as a critique of male power over women's bodies, minds and agency.

Written during personal loss, Ellen Glasgow's "The Shadowy Third" (1916) reflects a period marked by grief and haunting. As Lynette Carpenter (1991) explains, after the death of her father and sister, Glasgow returned to her family home, where "she felt herself haunted by the ghosts of dead loved ones" (p. 118), a feeling that resonates strongly with her ghost stories. As a writer, she was committed to exposing the damaging results of patriarchal power on women's lives. Her ghost stories frequently critique marriage, often rejecting it in favor of supportive female bonds. As Carpenter notes, she placed significant value on female friendship, as it provided her female characters with "the understanding and sympathy her male lover seemed unable to offer" (p.138).

Glasgow's "The Shadowy Third" presents a young nurse hired to care for the wife of a prominent surgeon, Mrs. Maradick, who is confined and dismissed as mentally unstable for claiming to see the ghost of her dead daughter. As the nurse also begins to witness the ghostly apparition, she gradually empathizes with the woman and starts to question Mr. Maradick's authority and intentions, especially after the wife insists that he was responsible for the child's death. The story explores repressed narratives, the silencing of women and patriarchal control, using the ghost as a vehicle for unresolved grief and resistance.

For her part, Elizabeth Bowen, writing in the early twentieth century, offers a modernist and ambiguous approach to the ghost story. Her first collection of stories, *Encounters* (1923), which includes "The Shadowy Third", often reflects the anxieties of a rapidly changing world and the shift from tradition to modern life. As Punter and Byron

(2004) note “all of her work suggests a certain haunting quality, whether it be haunting by unresolved issues from the past or by ghosts of the present” (p. 92). In her writing, the ghostly is not limited to spectral figures: it is also present in the atmosphere and setting which evoke the haunting presence of the past.

In Bowen’s story, the protagonist is a young, pregnant wife, living with her husband in the house that once belonged to him and his former deceased wife. The new wife, Pussy, begins to feel haunted by the presence of the first wife, sensing her in the atmosphere of the home. As Magot explains in *The Female Fantastic* (2019), the first wife “died of neglect and unrequited love after losing her own child” (p. 84). The ghostly presence also emerges through the silences and emotional distance between the couple. This ghost story explores the fear of repetition, anxieties surrounding marriage and the burden of the repressed past.

### 4.2. Comparative Reading of the Texts

Despite differences in historical context and narrative details, the three stories share central themes related to women’s subjection to patriarchal structures: the domestic space as the scene of confinement, the depiction of female mental distress, male authority as a source of control… The figure of the ghost acts as a unifying thread, embodying resistance and repression. The following analysis will examine these ghost stories through key focal points, highlighting how each author draws on the supernatural symbolically to articulate their critiques.

### 4.2.1. The Architecture of Haunted Homes and Medical Violence

The three narratives analyzed are set in domestic environments, each depicting confinement and haunting within the home. As previously mentioned, this type of narrative is closely linked to the domestic sphere, historically understood as the natural domain of women within the private realm. In these stories, the home becomes the space of familiar residence, but also as one charged with mysteries and anxieties.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Gilman’s narrator starts her story introducing the setting as a colonial mansion, but her description immediately conveys an eerie and unsettling atmosphere. She refers to the mansion as a “haunted house” and senses “something queer about it” (Gilman, 1997, p.1). Although she mentions legal troubles surrounding the property which has made it vacant for years, which she claims spoils her “ghostliness”, her rational explanation does not fully ease her inquietude, as she continues to feel scared as “there is something strange about the house” (Gilman, 1997, p.2). As noted in *Haunting the House of Fiction* (1991), this introduction reveals that “before Gilman’s narrator ever begins her description of the fateful yellow-papered room at the top of the house, she, an emotionally charged woman, has entered what the reader should understand as recognizable territory for ghosts, hauntings, and possessions” (p.70). The narrative primarily centers around the upstairs room with the yellow wallpaper, where the narrator is confined and where the ghostly figure begins to emerge. Although she tries to justify her husband’s choice of room by saying it is “big” and “airy” (Gilman, 1997, p. 3), the barred windows already suggest imprisonment. Her immediate aversion to the wallpaper deepens the sense of discomfort: “I never saw a worse paper in my life [...] the color is repellant, almost revolting” (p. 3).

Their stay in the house is prescribed by her husband, John, as a treatment for what he considers a nervous condition. However, it becomes clear that she is suffering a breakdown as a result from giving birth, eventually entering postpartum psychosis, as hinted when she says of her baby: “and yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous” (Gilman, 1997, p. 4). The dark atmosphere of the house, combined with the disturbing yellow wallpaper, accentuates her sense of entrapment and her increasing need to escape.

Glasgow adopts a similar approach to the domestic setting in “The Shadowy Third”. Upon her arrival to the Maradick’s home, the nurse, Miss Randolph, describes a bleak and oppressive atmosphere. The weather is gloomy and rainy, and she refers to an “old house, with damp-looking walls” (Glasgow, 2009, p. 440). From the beginning, she senses a strong feeling of entrapment, especially in relation to Mrs. Maradick.

However, unlike Gilman’s narrator who rejects her domestic space, Mrs. Maradick is emotionally attached to the house, despite being confined within it. As the narrator explains, “Mrs. Maradick had been born in the house [...] she had never wanted to live anywhere else (Glasgow, 2009, p. 440) ”. As Domínguez-Rué (2004) notes: “Although according to the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres, Mrs. Maradick’s only power resides in the domestic, her husband reminds her of her powerlessness by turning her house into a prison (p. 431). The house, then, becomes both a space of identity and imprisonment. Her confinement is framed as a response to her mental illness: she is considered delirious for seeing the ghost of her dead daughter, rather than being understood as a sign of grief or trauma. As a result, her treatment revolves around controlling her environment, intensifying the sense of entrapment inside her own home.

Both Glasgow and Gilman's stories depict domestic confinement as a consequence of women's perceived mental instability. Gilman's narrator undergoes the "rest cure", which forbids her from writing or engaging in any activity, she must simply rest. Similarly, in Glasgow's narrative, although not explicitly described as the same treatment, Mrs. Maradick is subject to a cruel form of isolation. This is emphasized when Miss Randolph says: "It seemed strange to me that she was never allowed to get any fresh air except the air that came through her windows" (Glasgow, 2009, p. 452).

While Gilman and Glasgow depict domestic confinement as directly linked to medical authority, the sense of entrapment in Bowen's "The Shadowy Third" operates more subtly, manifested by emotional unease, tension and the weird atmosphere of the domestic space. There are no doctors or treatments involved; instead, the architecture of the household becomes a psychological trap, containing unspoken grief and unresolved presences. The house is described from the start as "coldly distempered, which he hated" (Bowen, 1991, p. 75), suggesting that even the husband, Martin, senses its disturbing atmosphere.

However, it is the wife, Pussy, who most clearly senses the ambiance of the home. She consistently avoids entering it, preferring to linger in the garden, which makes Martin remark: "One would think you were afraid of the house" (Bowen, 1991, p. 77). Her fear grows gradually, as she perceives the home, and everything inside of it, as inhabited by the spectral presence of the former wife. As Liggins (2020) notes, drawing on David Punter, "there will never be a moment when the 'robust frame' of the new house, the house of the new, will be free from the impress of the ghosts of the past" (p. 250). Pussy is not simply moving into a new home, but entering a narrative already shaped by another woman's experience, which remains unspoken.

Unlike the protagonists in the other two stories, Pussy is not confined to a room, but rather experiencing a sense of displacement. The home does not welcome her, she does not feel the comfort that the domestic space should offer to her. Her feeling of entrapment emerges from her inability to assert herself or take the place of her predecessor. She feels judged by the house and she is not able to reclaim her space or rationally explain the roots of her anxieties. In this way, her confinement is emotional and enforced through the silent rejection of the domestic space.

In these narratives, ghostly presences are closely tied to the home and its experience of confinement. However, the nature and timing of their appearance vary across the stories, but they all reflect the tensions accumulating within the household.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the ghost is not a literal apparition, but a spectral projection that fulfills the symbolic function of ghosts in ghost stories. The narrator’s aversion to the yellow wallpaper in her room intensifies gradually, beginning to perceive a woman trapped behind the wallpaper. It emerges as a psychological response to her confinement. Deprived of intellectual stimulation and forbidden to write, she begins to project her imagination into the wallpaper. As a writer, silenced by the “rest cure”, she retreats into fantasy as a form of resistance.

In contrast, Glasgow’s ghost precedes confinement. Mrs. Maradick sees the ghost of her dead daughter, Dorothea, a presence visible only to her and Miss Randolph. Unlike Gilman’s narrator, whose visions emerge during isolation, Mrs. Maradick’s haunting is presented as the reason for her diagnosis and seclusion.

Bowen’s ghostly presence differs the most, as it is not a visible apparition, but sensed in the atmosphere surrounding the home and the marital relationship. This is emphasized by

the narrative strategy of Bowen, who refers to the former wife through ambiguous pronouns or terms such as “one” or “Anybody”. This choice amplifies her construction as a ghostly figure who is more of a shadow than a once existing woman. The deceased wife’s haunting is omnipresent: it inhabits Martin’s thoughts, emphasizes Pussy’s insecurity and haunts the new marriage.

The supernatural presences in these stories further deepen the protagonists’ psychological distress. The hauntings act as mechanisms that either trigger or intensify their instability, which in turn becomes a justification of medical intervention. These narratives critique, to varying degrees, the pathologization of women’s expressions of anxiety or grief. In particular, Gilman and Glasgow highlight the violence inflicted upon women within male-dominanted medical systems.

In the case of Bowen’s “The Shadowy Third”, there are no doctors or medical treatments, yet the story offers a subtle critique of the way women’s emotional sensitivity or perceptiveness is implicitly dismissed as instability. Pussy, the new wife, constantly senses the ghostly presence of the former wife and her behavior is altered because of it. She becomes increasingly restless and emotionally unsettled, as the narration notes: “Something was making her restless; she was out in the garden too much … he had heard her on the stairs and up and down the passages”. However, Martin quickly dismisses her unease: “he knew that women in her state of health were abnormal, had strange fancies” (Bowen, 1991, p. 77). Instead of acknowledging that her inquietude is a response of the unspoken inside the home and the anxieties to fill the former wife’s shoes, he attributes it to her state of health, suggesting that her pregnancy is reason enough to disregard her distress, not recognising her restlessness as a response to the memory of the previous wife or the unspoken tensions within

the home. Though Bowen does not attack medical discourse, she exposes the cultural tendency to equate femininity, as well as maternity, with emotional instability.

In contrast, the other two stories offer more explicit critiques of male-dominated medical discourse and its impact on women's lives. In "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Glasgow's "The Shadowy Third", medical authority becomes a tool of control, silencing, confining and invalidating women under the guise of treatment. Both narratives expose how male power can undermine their autonomy and ultimately shape their future by controlling their capacity for self-determination.

From the beginning, the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" expresses disagreement with the "rest cure", believing that work and stimulation would help her. She remarks: "Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good" (Gilman, 1997, p. 1). Her opinion, however, is continually dismissed, as when John remarks: "you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know" (Gilman, 1997, pp. 8-9). Medical authority prevails over the woman's voice, imposing her silence under the pretext of healing. According to Ford (1985), "The Yellow Wallpaper" "is replete with contradictions. The conjunction of contradiction — "but"— occurs 56 times in this short space [...] Every time the narrator speaks, she is interrupted and contradicted until she begins to interrupt and contradict herself" (p. 311). Her plan for recovery, such as visiting her family or returning to writing, is constantly rejected by her husband, whose authority seems to be above the narrator's self-knowledge. The result is that she internalises her struggle, retreating into secrecy and obsession over the wallpaper. Gilman's story denounces medical control as a means of patriarchal repression, where the cure becomes another form of confinement and oppression for women.

Glasgow's narrative operates within the same logic, portraying a husband, who is also a doctor, who manipulates his wife's freedom with the support of other medical professionals who disregard her suffering. Their rationalism invalidates maternal grief and emotion. The alienist in charge, Dr. Brandon, is described as "the sort of physician [...] who deals instinctively with groups instead of with individuals [...] and that he had learned over there to treat every emotion as a pathological manifestation." (Glasgow, 2009, p. 448). Male medical discourse is not just dismissive, but it treats emotional responses such as grief as illness.

As Lynette Carpenter (1991) argues, this story reveals how "masculine insensitivity can be harmful to women" (p.126). This insensitivity takes form in decisions that exacerbate Mrs. Maradick's distress, such as removing her daughter's toys from her room, supposedly as "it was best for her not to be allowed to keep the room as it was when Dorothea was living" (Glasgow, 2009, p. 448). She is not allowed to express her own grief as it is silenced by rationality. Furthermore, her husband reinforces this emotional disempowerment by threatening to send her to an asylum. This threat is ultimately carried through, which separates her from the only space where her daughter's presence survives.

Carpenter (1991) notes that "adherence to rationality prevents white men, and especially professional men, from seeing ghosts" (p. 137). In these ghost stories, the inability to perceive the supernatural is due to patriarchal blindness to feminine experiences, emotions or loss. The rationality inherent in medical discourse is what enables systems of power and violence to be enacted against women under the guise of care.

### 4.2.2. Spectral Doubles and Hidden Narratives

The women in these stories are forced into silence, and what cannot be spoken often returns in spectral form. The ghosts that haunt these narratives are not merely signs of emotional breakdown, but function as doubles of the protagonists and, often, as carriers of hidden truths. These presences articulate what these women themselves cannot express: repressed trauma, buried memories and silenced narratives within a male-dominated reality.

Gilman's narrator becomes obsessed with a figure trapped behind the wallpaper, a figure that gradually emerges as a reflection of herself. Both are confined within a space they long to escape, as she describes: "the faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out." (Gilman, 1997, p. 8). The wallpaper's pattern "becomes bars" at night (p. 10), mirroring the actual bars on her window and symbolising the constraints imposed by the rest cure. The ghostly woman becomes a version of herself, one that shares her frustration and need to escape. As her mental state deteriorates, the boundaries between the spectral and herself fade. The narrator tears down the wallpaper to free the woman inside, which also signals her psychological breakdown. She, at last, identifies fully with the ghostly figure, stating: "I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night" (p. 14). As Carpenter (1991) expresses, this fusion reveals that "her identification with the woman in the wallpaper is explicit and complete" (p. 76).

Nevertheless, Glasgow's ghost of the child serves as a more ambiguous double to the mother. They share the same experience of oppression, one through death, the other through confinement, as well as the same physical features: "The child was so much like her that you would have known them anywhere for mother and daughter" (Glasgow, 2009, p. 439). The ghost works as a double of her emotional experience, especially of her grief and as a symbol

of the unbreakable bond between them. This vision of motherhood is very different from Gilman's, which explores the pressures and consequences that motherhood can bring. In contrast, Glasgow presents a maternal bond that resists erasure, even after death. As Banks (2016) writes, "Glasgow reflects the powerlessness of mother and daughter—each subordinated by both gender and disability —to protect each other from the dominant presence of the father." (p. 367). The return of the daughter as a ghost confirms that no death or confinement can destroy their bond, reinforcing their unity as double figures under a system that silences them.

The similarities between the former wife and Pussy in Bowen's "The Shadowy Third" suggests that the ghost functions as a double of the protagonist. Pussy seems to follow in the footsteps of the first wife: they share the same home, the same role within marriage and even the same emotional state. Both are described as restless and unsettled, particularly in connection with pregnancy and the domestic space. As said of the previous wife: "before the child came she had been in an aimless bustle" (Bowen, 1991, p. 81), and Liggins (2020) notes: "The pregnant Pussy mimics the behaviour of her dead predecessor, both of whom find an outlet for their restlessness and repressed anxieties in the unused room half-ready for children" (p.253). Up to the point where the story takes place, Pussy seems to have followed the same path as the other woman, sharing her restlessness, pregnancy and emotional unease. However, the story tells how her decline only began after childbirth, so the narrative leaves open the question whether Pussy will meet the same fate after giving birth.

In fact, ghostly doubles frequently carry warnings and knowledge drawn from their own experiences, alerting the female protagonists, as previously mentioned, about hidden narratives, potential dangers or even the future that may await them.

Bowen's ghost carries a hidden narrative, that of the former wife, which acts as warning to the new one. As Magot (2019) explains, the story reveals that "the first wife died of neglect and unrequited love after losing her own child" (p.9). This is subtly introduced through the inner thoughts of Martin, her husband, who hides this reality throughout the story. Although his version is filtered and even might be unreliable, the cruelty behind it becomes clear when he recalls "his heartlessness to his dying wife before and after the loss of their child" (Magot, p. 87). He recalls:

> how he had heard Her in the east room those last two months before she went, opening and shutting the drawers. It had disturbed him, working at his desk in the dining room below, and he had come up angrily once or twice […] before the child came she had been in an aimless bustle, but afterwards she did nothing, nothing at all, not even keep house for him decently. That was probably what had made her ill - that and the disappointment." (Bowen, 1991, p. 81)

This extract shows Martin's lack of empathy and how he reduces his first wife's grief to a failure in domestic duties. The ghost haunts the house as a reminder of the consequences of neglect within marriage. It brings to light a story that Martin conceals, one that Pussy may be starting to sense. The ghost appears to open her eyes to the kind of man she lives with and the danger of repeating the same ending. In fact, Pussy starts to fear that her life might follow the same path, as she declares to Martin: "I am so frightened, I am so frightened. […] 'We're not safe and I don't believe we're even good. […] Suppose we had taken somebody else's happiness, somebody else's life . . . " (Bowen, 1991, p. 82). Her fear is not irrational, she already feels emotionally distanced from her husband, telling him: "You never let me know the feel of wanting" (p. 82). This growing distance intensifies the ghost's warning.

The ghost warns her about the dangers of marriage and even motherhood, showing how both can become harmful. Like in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, pregnancy is linked to vulnerability and loss of control. In these stories, men hold power over women’s autonomy, choices and property. In fact, the ghost in Glasgow’s story reveals a second narrative about male abuse of power within marriage and inheritance. These tales challenge what the reader believes to know about these women’s histories and their marriages.

The child’s ghost in Glasgow’s “The Shadowy Third” is described as enigmatic and aware, as Miss Randolph notices from the beginning: “For the odd thing about this look was that it was not the look of childhood at all. It was the look of profound experience, of bitter knowledge” (Glasgow, 2009, p. 441). Although she is a child, what stands out is that she carries knowledge, she has witnessed something that no one else is willing to see. Banks (2016) emphasizes that her role is not to frighten, but “to expose the terrifying conditions of subjugation and confinement experienced by women in a culture of male dominance” (p. 353).

In this sense, the ghost becomes the living proof of the story that remains hidden. Mrs. Maradick accuses her husband of marrying her for her fortune and of causing the child’s death to access the inheritance. Only she and her daughter know the truth, and they are described as sharing “that enigmatical and vaguely wondering expression” (Glasgow, 2009, p. 444). Once the nurse begins to understand what has really happened, the narrative reveals how the surgeon dismissed her, labelled as mad, confined and discredited her to keep her silent. Behind medical authority lies a buried past: the death of the child, the suggestion of murder and a marriage built on manipulation and power. The truth is gradually uncovered through Miss Randolph’s sympathetic perspective. The apparition awakens Miss Randolph’s awareness of the patriarchal violences surrounding her. It also serves as a warning to her, a

young and unmarried nurse, about the dangers of marriage in their society. The ghost reveals the surgeon's true nature: "his position as a modern man in the rising middle class has been acquired through the displacement and, in this case literal, destruction of women" (Banks, 2016, p. 359).

Both versions of "The Shadowy Third" show how ghosts can have a protective and revealing function. Although the figure in "The Yellow Wallpaper" does not expose a hidden past, it still signals the dangers of patriarchy by showing how confinement and silencing affect women's lives. In all three stories, the spectral reveals what is socially repressed: the real power dynamics in marriage, where patriarchal control remains dominant.

### 4.2.3. Power Structures within Marriage

Once the reality inside the home is revealed, subtle signs of power imbalance that might have gone unnoticed become clearer. From the beginning of each story, the relationships between men and women already appear unstable. On the surface, these couples may seem structured, with husbands taking care of wives in moments of distress, but beneath this image lie dynamics of control that silence the female characters.

In Glasgow's story, Mr. Maradick is admired by everyone around him, which helps conceal the harm he causes to his wife. He is described as "charming and so kind and handsome" and "born to be a hero to women" (Glasgow, 2006, p. 437). Even the protagonist, Miss Randolph, initially idealizes him. As Niewiadomska-Flis (2012) explains, his perfect public image protects him from suspicion: "speculation about his reasons for entering matrimony, which might reveal his cold logic and his skill at manipulation, is always quickly dismissed" (pp. 46-47). However, Miss Randolph, begins to question this ideal as she

observes the “look of terror in her face whenever his step passed down the hall” (Glasgow, 2009, p. 451). Her perception eventually shifts, as she adds: “Few men, I imagine, have been the objects of so many foolish infatuations” (p. 455).

His dominance within the home reveals his true nature. Miss Randolph notices his absences and disregard for his wife’s condition: “he was always going somewhere. I believe he didn’t dine at home a single evening that winter” (p. 449). Ultimately, he sends her to an asylum against her will, emphasizing her erasure. His final cruelty is seen through what happens after her death, allowing the destruction of the home she was so attached to. As Niewiadomska-Flis (2012) notes, her death is not unexpected, but rather the result of the constant psychological violence she suffered, aligning with Miss Randolph’s observation that she had died “simply of the terror of life” (Glasgow, 2009, p. 455). That terror, in fact, comes from the figure who is described early on as “almost a god” (p. 441). The admiration he receives gives him the freedom to play god, allowing him to control women’s lives and fate to achieve his own goals.

Acts of cruelty towards their wives seem inherent to these male characters. John, in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, is mostly defined by his constant dismissal of the narrator’s opinions, his condescending tone and the restrictions he imposes. While the narrator tries to express her unease at home, John continously silences her, refusing to let her make any decisions about her own condition. He does not allow her to express herself, not even by writing, which she comments on sarcastically: “He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction” (Gilman, 1997, p. 2) . His language reveals his condescending power, as when he calls her “a blessed little goose” (p. 4), which reflects how little he values her intellect. These attitudes are so normalized in their relationship that she

simply states “John laughs at me, but one expects that in marriage. (p. 1). His authority as a husband and a doctor places full control on her, keeping her quiet and isolated.

Bowen, in turn, depicts a more ambiguous marital relationship, but even from the beginning subtle signs of imbalance of power are visible. Many of Martin’s actions reflect disdain and emotional distance. As Magot (2019) points out, “the text hints at his latent violence by giving him the features of a stereotypical vampire” (p. 85), as he is described as a “pale little man, with big teeth and prominent eyes” (Bowen, 1923, p. 75). His fixation with domestic tasks also hints at an underlying desire for control. As Liggings (2020) notes, he resented his grieving wife for failing to maintain the house and both wives are described as restless, trying to meet Martin’s expectations (p. 250). Martin also deprives these women of “a personal identity”, as “the way he considers them is in both cases problematic: to give a degrading nickname or no name is a form of domination” (Magot, 2019, p. 87). The first wife is never named, and the second is only called “Pussy”, a name that can be interpreted as degrading. While there is no explicit mistreatment, the erasure of identity and lack of emotional connection suggest that this marriage is also marked by silence and dissatisfaction. From the beginning, communication is broken and real intimacy and understanding seems absent.

The ghosts in these stories point to marriages built on control, silence and emotional erasure. Nevertheless, the women in these stories do not simply accept this. In different ways, they all try to rebel or break out of their prescribed roles. When justice cannot be found in a system that dismsses their voices, they reclaim their agency in various forms. In doing so, they briefly destabilise the patriarchal structures that confine them.

### 4.2.4. Female Resistance and Subversion

These female characters shift from submission to resistance by stepping outside traditional models of femininity, such as silence, obedience or passivity, and begin to assert new forms of independence.

In “The Shadowy Third”, Bowen presents a protagonist who, despite feeling rejected by the house and unsettled within it, attempts to reclaim the domestic space by arranging it to her own liking. Rather than remaining silent or passive, she expresses her thoughts, often disagreeing with Martin and insisting on her perceptions. Her rebellion also comes through her ability to empathize, gradually connecting with the memory of the previous wife. This resistance culminates in the final scene, where Pussy articulates the emotional violence she senses: “not to want a person must be a sort, a sort of murder. I think a person who was done out of their life like that would be brought back by the injustice much more than anybody who was shot or stabbed .” (Bowen, 1923, p. 82). As Magot (2019) explains, this moment marks that “the fantastic completely merges both women into a powerful whole and as possessed Pussy has acquired the dead wife’s voice” (p. 94). Through this spirtual bond, they denounce emotional abandonment, revealing it to be as destructuve as physical violence. Together, they break the silence that had shaped their marriages: the former wife by refusing to disappear and let her past be buried, and Pussy by refusing to conform. Her rebellion lies in speaking aloud what was once hidden and reclaiming her space and voice within the household.

At the time, mental instability was often associated with a departure from established gender roles, as its traits conflicted with those of the ideal woman: the “angel in the house”.

The uneasy and anxious women portrayed by Gilman and Glasgow challenge this ideal through their behavior and inner resistance.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the narrator’s rebellion lies in her secret thoughts and actions. Although she is forbidden from writing, she continues to do so in secret, deliberately disobeying her husband’s instructions. Her docile and feminine exterior gradually dissolves as she descends into psychosis, which breaks the social expectations of passive womanhood. On her final day in the house, she locks herself in the room and tears down the wallpaper. In doing so, she attempts to reclaim the space where she was confined, turning it into something of her own: “It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!” (Gilman, 1997, p. 14). Her behavior, shocking and incomprehensible to her husband, results in his fainting as a symbolic reversal of power. In this final moment, she asserts her autonomy by rejecting all expectations of sanity, obedience and femininity. Her breakdown becomes an act of resistance.

Nevertheless, Glasgow offers a different kind of rebellion against patriarchy. As in much of her work, the key to resistance lies in female alliances, in this case between two women who assert their point of view and refuse to be silenced.

Mrs. Maradick refuses to forget her daughter or dismiss her ghostly visions. She is portrayed as a woman who rejects the ideal of the docile wife. She chooses to hold on to her memories and share the truth, even if that means being labelled unstable.

Miss Randolph, the nurse, becomes part of this resistance through empathy. Although initially obedient and fascinated by the doctor, she gradually allies with his wife. Before even meeting her, she already can “feel her pathos and her strangeness” (Glasgow, 2009, p. 439). As Carpenter (1991) explains, it is precisely “her sensitivity to atmosphere, and then because

of her sympathy for another woman" that she is able "to see the ghostly child even before she has met Mrs. Maradick" (p. 127). Her bond with her continues even after her death, as "Miss Randolph does not see the ghost again until she hears that Mrs. Maradick's beloved house is to be torn down" (p. 123). This connection helps expose the surgeon's abuse and, as Niewiadomska-Flis (2012) argues, "transform stories of oppression into stories of support" (p. 44). As opposed to the stories created by Gilman and Bowen, where the protagonists endure their oppression in solitude, Glasgow presents a female alliance that, even if she is still isolated, offers support and resistance.

It is through this connection that Miss Randolph becomes a rebellious figure. Her solidarity leads her to speak out and take a stand, as she realizes that she must "take sides in the household" (Glasgow, 2009, p. 449). As a nurse, she risks her career by defending Mrs. Maradick's mental state: "She may be mistaken, unstrung, piteously distressed in mind [...] but she is not— I am willing to stake my future on it— a fit subject for an asylum." (p. 450). She is the only one who dares to confront the husband's authority and defend the woman's right to be heard.

In the end, the final act of revenge comes through the empowerment of the ghost. After the mother's death, the child reappears to undo the surgeon's control. As Carpenter and Kolmar (1991) note, "children are also given opportunities for revenge" (p. 18). On the eve of his remarriage, the ghost intervenes: the child's skipping-rope on the stairs causes him to fall and die. Miss Randolph, as a witness of the fatal death, interprets it as "an invisible judgment" (Glasgow, 2009, p. 459), suggesting poetic justice. While "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Bowen's "The Shadowy Third" end on a more ambiguous note, Glasgow provides closure: the patriarch is removed and power relations are momentarily reversed. Through death, resistance is achieved and women regain narrative and symbolic control.

### 4.2.5. Narrative Framing and Perspective

All of these stories reject the rational explanation of the supernatural and challenge the conventional ending in marriage, as in many ghost stories. Even when marriage is present, it no longer offers safety and becomes a site of anxiety and oppression. However, their structures vary significantly, particularly in how they are framed.

Glasgow's story follows a more conventional structure: the setting and the characters are clearly introduced, the story develops and revelations from the past emerge before reaching a marked ending. The use of a first-person narrator, the nurse, allows the reader to witness the household dynamics, while also accessing the history of the wife and the child. Her empathetic gaze makes space for the supernatural to appear. As Banks (2016) notes, "she provides an alternative to the male/medical gaze [...] empathizing with her patients to learn from them rather than reducing them to textbook definitions of disease" (p. 361). Although the story does not reach closure, the ghost is never explained or rationalized and the domestic order is not restored.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" also follows a recognizable structure with a beginning, development and ending, but its framing differs. The story is told through the narrator's personal diary entries, which fragment the narration and offer an insight into her mental deterioration. Through these entries, the reader witnesses her growing obsession with the wallpaper and her progressive withdrawal from reality. Although there is a final scene, it does not offer a complete resolution: her identification with the woman behind the wallpaper becomes complete, but its meaning remains ambiguous. The ending hovers between freedom and psychological collapse.

Bowen's story differs most from the other two. Its structure is not linear and relies on memory, suggestion and interior thoughts. Narrated in the third person, the story allows access to Pussy and Martin's thoughts, but there is no traditional plot progression. The action takes place mostly within a narrow time frame, and the haunting is never shown, only felt and implied. The ambiguity in this story lies in what is not said as it features many silences and omissions. Closure or resolution is avoided in Bowen's modernist style, and the ghost remains a diffuse presence, never explained, but embedded in the atmosphere and unresolved tensions of the domestic space.

When looked at together, these three stories demonstrate how the ghost story allowed women to expose the tensions of domestic life and the female experience. Through haunted spaces, ghostly figures acting as doubles, and silenced and confined women, these narratives reflect the control patriarchal systems exert over female bodies and voices. Gilman, Glasgow and Bowen critique patriarchal power and they challenge the societal expectations of women as perfect wives and mothers, ultimately rejecting the assumption that femininity is defined by passive submission to male control. Whether through spectral returns, rebellion or madness, each woman resists and reclaims the agency that has been taken from her. These female authors, by refusing to rationalize the supernatural or restore society's idealized image of marriage, leave unsolved what society has failed to resolve: the constraints imposed on women by male authority.

## 5. Conclusions

Throughout this dissertation, it has been demonstrated how women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century lived under social, cultural and legal patriarchal structures that restricted their autonomy and confined them to the domestic sphere. This

context reinforced their roles as wives and mothers, often at the expense of their individuality, freedom and well-being. Silenced, many women turned to literature, particularly to ghost stories, as a subversive space where those silences could be broken and resistance could be imagined.

Far from being mere tales of horror, these narratives reveal that the true terror lay in the mundane: the unbalaced dynamics of marriage, the burdens of motherhood and the rigid boundaries of domestic life. The spectral in these stories serves as a manifestation of systemic injustice. The ghosts witness what society has dismissed as irrational or unimportant: female suffering, silenced trauma and the violence of patriarchal control.

The three stories analyzed, “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the two versions of “The Shadowy Third” by Ellen Glasgow and Elizabeth Bowen, share central motifs: the home as a place of confinement, oppressive male authority, disruptive femininity and spectral returns. Nevertheless, each story deals with these elements from unique perspectives as their authors reflect different historical and cultural backgrounds. Together, they transform the ghost story into spaces of defiance, where the “unspeakable” is voiced through metaphor.

Ultimately, this study has not only explored the ghost story from a literary and gender perpective, but has also uncovered a legacy of this genre. Writing becomes, for female authors of ghost stories, a way to reclaim agency. By encoding their realities into ghostly fiction, they preserved truths that history has overlooked. Their legacy endures as a literary innovation but also as a political testimony that serves as a reminder that even the most marginalized voices can haunt the same structures meant to oppress them.

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