

JACLR

Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research

SIIM project — Universidad Complutense de Madrid — vol. 12 — no. 2 — December 2024, ISSN: 2340-650X





*Journal of
Artistic Creation and
Literary Research*

JOURNAL OF ARTISTIC CREATION AND LITERARY RESEARCH

ISSN 2340-650X - <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

VOL. 12, NO. 2, 2024

GUEST EDITOR

Pedro MORA-RAMÍREZ, Universidad de Sevilla, Spain

CHIEF EDITORS

Asun LÓPEZ-VARELA, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Jaime SEGURA SAN MIGUEL, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

ASSISTANT EDITORS

LITERARY RESEARCH UNIT

Pedro MORA-RAMÍREZ, Universidad de Sevilla

Paula LOBATO-DÍEZ, Universidad Complutense
de Madrid

Edurne MARTÍNEZ-FERNÁNDEZ, Universidad
Autónoma de Madrid

ARTISTIC CREATION UNIT

Tatjana PORTNOVA, Universidad de Granada

Maya CARAVELLA-CASTILLO, Universidad
Complutense de Madrid

SCIENTIFIC BOARD

Emrah ATASOY, Honorary Fellow, University
of Warwick, UK

Raffaella BACCOLINI, University of Bologna,
Italy

Pilar CUDER-DOMÍNGUEZ, Universidad de
Huelva, Spain

Libe GARCÍA-ZARRANZ, Norwegian University
of Science and Technology, Norway

Felipe GONZÁLEZ ALCÁZAR, Universidad
Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Aparajita HAZRA, Diamond Harbour
Women's University, India

Gabriel LAGUNA-MARISCAL, Universidad de
Córdoba, Spain

Irene LÓPEZ-RODRÍGUEZ, Universidad
Complutense de Madrid, Spain

José Manuel LOSADA-GOYA, Universidad
Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Luis MARTÍNEZ-FALERO, Universidad
Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Mónica MARTÍNEZ SARIEGO, Universidad de
Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain

Juan Ignacio OLIVA-CRUZ, Universidad de La
Laguna, Spain

Gesa STEDMAN, Humboldt University of
Berlin, Germany

Tony M. VINCI, Ohio University, USA

Chiara XAUSA, Marie Skłodowska-Curie
Global Fellow, University of Bologna, Italy



CC BY-NC-SA 4.0



*Journal of
Artistic Creation and
Literary Research*

JOURNAL OF ARTISTIC CREATION AND LITERARY RESEARCH

ISSN 2340-650X - <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

VOL. 12, NO. 2, 2024

CONTENTS

Editorial Note.....	4
LITERARY RESEARCH	5
Poe’s Influence on Crime TV Shows: Auguste Dupin and the Modern Detective Story.....	6
Carmen Maria Machado’s <i>In the Dream House</i> and the Representation of Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence	21
Transforming the Vampire for Young Adults: Mr. Cullen’s Distorted Reflection in the Mirror of Lord Ruthven.....	47
The Role of Science Fiction in Shaping Future Posthumanist Scenarios	71
Happiness and the Female Identity in Sylvia Plath’s <i>The Bell Jar</i> and Ottessa Moshfegh’s <i>My Year of Rest and Relaxation</i>	96
Social Media Utilization in English Language Learning and Teaching: Benefits and Challenges.....	124
Doomed for Life: Modernist Representations of Male Homosexuality in Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case” and Sherwood Anderson’s “Hands”	154
ARTISTIC CREATION.....	171
Yellow.....	172
The time of the lights	174
The Mystery of Oneself.....	178
Voicelessness	183
The Reflection in the Mirror was never mine	184
Presents	186

Siren Song	188
The Dreamcatcher	190
Journal Information	195
Submission Information	195



*Journal of
Artistic Creation and
Literary Research*

JOURNAL OF ARTISTIC CREATION AND LITERARY RESEARCH

ISSN 2340-650X - <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

VOL. 12, NO. 2, 2024

Editorial Note

Pedro Mora-Ramírez¹

CONTACT: pedmorram1@alum.us.es

ORCID: [0000-0002-1604-7159](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1604-7159)

Universidad de Sevilla, Spain

I would like to extend my gratitude to the editors-in-chief, members of the Editorial Board and members of the scientific board for dedicating their time and expertise to the successful completion of this issue. I also thank the external experts who generously evaluated the articles and artistic works.

¹ Department of English and North American Literature, Faculty of Philology, University of Seville, C/ Palos de la Frontera s/n, 41004 - Seville, Spain.

LITERARY RESEARCH

Poe's Influence on Crime TV Shows: Auguste Dupin and the Modern Detective Story²

Natalia del Viso Domenech³

Abstract:

Many argue that Edgar Allan Poe invented the modern detective story or detective fiction as we know it today with his character C. Auguste Dupin. His contribution to this type of story has modelled many works after him, including those of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. The primary interest of the detective story lies in uncovering a mystery, arriving at its resolution through a thorough and rational process of investigation. Poe created a plot in which a character external to the police solved a crime that the police could not solve. By using the process of ratiocination, following clues, and pulling loose threads, this external agent or consultant is capable of solving any crime, although it tends to be a murder. The aim of this paper is to analyse to what extent this schema formed in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" parallels that of many popular TV crime shows, mainly focusing on *Castle*, specifically on one case. The analysis will focus on the development of the story, the process of ratiocination that allows them to reach a conclusion and point to the murderer, and similarities and differences between the main characters. Additionally, this essay will look for references to Poe's work in this type of shows, either direct allusions or similar plotlines. Finally, it will draw a conclusion which tackles to which extent modern detective stories are based on Poe's models and structure.

Keywords: detective story, crime, ratiocination, *Castle*, Edgar Allan Poe, Auguste Dupin

² Recommended Citation

Del-Viso-Domenech, Natalia. "Poe's Influence on Crime TV Shows: Auguste Dupin and the Modern Detective Story." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 6-19: <<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

³ **CONTACT:** Natalia del Viso Domenech <ndelviso@ucm.es>

1. Introduction

The detective story is a sub-genre of crime fiction, and some scholars like Jenner divide it into the police procedure and the 'genius' detective genre, even though they still can mix or overlap.⁴ Poe's invention of the detective story established a pattern and a set of features that remain relevant today. The C. Auguste Dupin's short stories are not the only detective tales Poe wrote, but they are the only ones that have the detective figure as the centre of the tale.⁵

Referred to as tales of ratiocination, Dupin's stories concentrate on the detective's mental process of uncovering the truth about a committed crime, known as the "ratiocination process." Therefore, one could conclude that both Poe's trilogy and *Castle* (2009-2016), the TV show this essay will analyse to discern Poe's influence on it, belong to the so-called 'genius' detective genre. Both belong to that genre because they "feature one, often unofficial, agent who solves crimes and is accompanied by one or more sidekicks" and have 'genius' detectives "who work independently from institutions, do not follow police procedure, and often break the law in the course of the investigation."⁶ In the case of recent TV shows like *Castle* or *The Mentalist* (2008-2025),⁷ these agents are called consultants.

⁴ The police procedure genre involves a method of detection that "does not rely on 'instinct' or 'coincidence'" and in which "science can be an important aspect" (Jenner 18). On the other hand, the 'genius' detective genre pushes "the detective's extraordinary deductive skills to the foreground" (18). Moreover, while the police procedure genre is usually starred by "teams of investigators who work within the legal system to provide enough evidence to prosecute suspects in a court of law" (47), the 'genius' detective genre's protagonists tend to be consultants or unofficial agents.

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," (*The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore*, 1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (*The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore*, 1842), and "The Purloined Letter" (*The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore*, 1844).

⁶ Mareike Jenner, *American TV detective dramas* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 47.

⁷ The plot of this show revolved around a famous "psychic" that outs himself as a fake and starts working as a consultant for the California Bureau of Investigation so he can find "Red John," the madman who killed his wife and daughter.

In the subsequent sections, this essay will discuss the process of ratiocination and the development of the investigation in the sixth episode of the second season of *Castle*,⁸ by comparing Poe's short story with said episode in parallel, so that all the similarities and differences can be easily observed and understood: both with those with Dupin and the direct or indirect allusions to Poe's work in general; that is, intertextuality.

2. The Process of Ratiocination

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," to which I will refer as "TMRM" from now on, begins with an essay-like explanation of the ratiocination process and the psychological features of those people who have the power of analysis.⁹ The narration claims that this "primitive faculty" has not been studied in detail yet, but it has been appreciated for its effects, and the fact that it brings much pleasure to those who have the privilege of possessing it.¹⁰ Paying attention to things is the first step in the process of analysis and ratiocination, but having excellent memory is not the only necessary skill. People who have this power need to make inferences and observations: "The necessary knowledge is that of what to observe."¹¹ This is followed by the introduction of the main character, C. Auguste Dupin, and how he fits into this description.

Dupin reads about the murders and the incrimination of Le Bon, a bank clerk who did him a favour once, and after reading the witnesses' accounts, he decides to use this ability he has and investigate the case himself. On the other hand, in *Castle*'s episode "Vampire Weekend," a young man with a stake through his heart lies dead in a cemetery.¹² In both cases there seem to be no visual witnesses, but in "TMRM" there are some people

⁸ *Castle*, season 2, episode 6, "Vampire Weekend," directed by Karen Gaviola, created by Andrew W. Marlowe, aired October 27, 2010, www.disneyplus.com/es-es/video/beab1c97-0001-4cc8-86cb-ad75d4058fc4.

⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," (*The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore*, 1841).

¹⁰ Poe, 1.

¹¹ Poe, 3.

¹² "Vampire Weekend," 00:02:23.

who heard at least part of the disturbance provoked during the murder: all witnesses agree on having heard two voices, one of them indistinguishable. Dupin's contacts allow him to access the crime scene, while, thanks to Castle's ones, he and Beckett find out the victim's real name – Matthew – and where he lived. There, they get the first account of a fight that had happened not long before the murder, and their first suspect is Vixen. She used to be Matthew's lover, the one who introduced him to her 'coven', as both liked to dress and act like vampires, and the last person who was seen with him. Vixen's black hair was on the victim when they found him, but her own account and the fact that she had an alibi led them to the second and more obvious suspect.

The aforementioned Le Bon, from Poe's short story, and Morgan Lockerby, a mentally unstable man from the show, are, respectively, the most obvious suspicious characters in the beginning of both stories. However, the clues are not conclusive. In "TMRM," the money Le Bon delivered to Madame L'Espanaye and her daughter was still in their house after the murder, so that could not have been his motivation, and there is no further evidence to incriminate him. On the other hand, after arresting Lockerby because his fingerprints marks were found on the stake that killed Matthew, they quickly discovered that he suffers from a mental illness known as porphyria, which causes mental instability.

Both stories examine the crime scene and the lives of the victims, present various accounts from individuals who heard or knew something about the victims, and, crucially, attempt to solve the case retrospectively.¹³ Dupin wonders how any human could have had "the almost præternatural character of that agility which could have accomplished" the murder.¹⁴ Moreover, while the investigation is taking place, the prime suspects in both cases remain under arrest.

A thorough examination of the crime scene highlights Dupin's method, including his keen observation of the right clues in the crime scene and the way he connects them and

¹³ Michael Cook, "Edgar Allan Poe and the detective story narrative," in *Narratives of enclosure in detective fiction*, edited by Clive Bloom (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4.

¹⁴ Poe, 25.

examines them without holding them too close, claiming the police “have fallen into the gross but common error of confounding the unusual with the abstruse. But it is by these deviations from the plane of the ordinary, that reason feels its way, if at all, in its search after the true.”¹⁵ His reasoning makes him and the narrator conclude that the clues point at a non-human perpetrator, and they finally solve the crime. Castle follows Poe’s schema of examining the crime scene, looking for clues, and hearing/reading witness accounts. The ink on the stake leads Beckett and Castle to whom they believe to be a second suspect, encountering a second murder instead. After ruling out Daemon – Matthew’s friend and the second victim – they remember that Lockerby’s illness makes him extremely sensitive to sunlight. Thanks to forensic evidence, that fact absolves him of at least Daemon’s murder and makes the team question his former charges.

While the rational-scientific method is important in *Castle*, it is not the driving force of a show that leans more into the so-called “whodunit” tradition set by Dupin:¹⁶ science is helpful, but Castle and Beckett’s mental analysis is what solves most of the cases. This differentiates it from other shows such as *CSI* and its many variations.¹⁷ A folder found in Daemon’s apartment adds more insight to the case. It turns out that Matthew and his friend were investigating an old case of an unknown murdered woman, whom Matthew constantly drew and who – he claimed – haunted him, “his own personal ghost.”¹⁸ Castle noticed an inscription on a gravestone at the beginning of the episode that did not specify the woman’s death date. He remembers this and the woman’s name, which brings him and Beckett again to the cemetery: the woman was Matthew’s mother. Matthew’s mother went missing when he was a child; his father remarried and changed his surname to that of his new wife, Janice.

¹⁵ Poe, 18.

¹⁶ This type of narrative focuses more on the detectives’ analysis, their ability to connect clues, and the reasoning that leads them to solve a crime through their power of deduction, without really including major, or any, scientific explanations: a narrative based on an unknown criminal in which “the role of the police detective, using his or her superior sleuthing abilities, is to solve the mystery” (Jenner 55).

¹⁷ *CSI* (2000-2015) and its derived shows focus on the use of physical evidence to solve murders and, thus, heavily rely on the rational-scientific method.

¹⁸ “Vampire Weekend,” 00:28:33.

Matthew's father did not mention any of this, which is incriminating. However, Castle is not convinced and notices Janice's animal print coat, remembering Lockerby's nonsensical chatter: "spots all over, blood all over."¹⁹ Lockerby did witness the murder after all, but his condition did not allow him to testify in a comprehensive way. Castle brings Janice to Lockerby and his reaction is decisive. Janice finally confesses to the three murders: Matthew's mother, Matthew, and Daemon.

Both Dupin and Castle have an eye for detail that makes both characters stand out against the police force. Dupin dismisses the police, claiming that "the Parisian police, so much extolled for acumen, are cunning, but no more. There is no method in their proceedings, beyond the method of the moment."²⁰ Dupin and Castle do not have to follow police procedures. The model has changed because characters like Castle are not part of the police but work alongside it. This is a pattern that repeats itself in other shows such as *The Mentalist* or *The Blacklist* (2013-).²¹

Nonetheless, what is distinct about Castle and Dupin is their ability to think outside the box. As Rutigliano says, "several clues linger about, each more baffling than the next," but these detectives, these aficionados, are able to connect all the pieces and find a solution.²² Dupin is the only one to consider the murderer's non-humanity, and Castle is the only one who links Lockerby's testimony to Janice's involvement in the case.²³ In both *Castle* and Poe's tale, delay is what heightens the tension, achieved through equivocal clues or misleading witnesses' reports:²⁴ the story arc ought to entice the audience and make them

¹⁹ "Vampire Weekend," 00:35:33.

²⁰ Poe, 16.

²¹ *The Blacklist* premise centres around Raymond Reddington, the fourth on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives, who suddenly surrenders himself and claims he would only talk to one person: Elizabeth Keen, a new FBI profiler.

²² Olivia Rutigliano, "When Poe invented the detective story, he changed the literary world forever," *Crime Reads*, January 19, 2021, <https://crimereads.com/when-poe-invented-the-detective-story-he-changed-the-literary-world-forever/>.

²³ Sarah A. Winans, "Edgar Allan Poe and true crime: Origins of two character types in crime fiction," *Culture in Focus* 2, no. 1 (2019): 37.

²⁴ Cook, 128.

a bit anxious about the final conclusions. Crime and murder take on the form of an intellectual puzzle that requires solving.

3. The Detective as a Character

C. Auguste Dupin is a gentleman from an illustrious family, a bookish man that is removed from mainstream society and has a love for the “Night” and darkness.²⁵ Richard Castle was also born into a well-off family, he likes to read and is a renowned author himself. In one episode he said that, as a child, he spent most of his days at the New York City Public Library, where he cultivated his love for the classics, amongst which he mentions Edgar Allan Poe.²⁶ Furthermore, his love for the metaphorical darkness, that is, crime, murder, and all the macabre, is a product of childhood trauma, as he witnessed the murder of a woman when he was a child. This is reminiscent of all the dead women in Poe’s life, particularly his mother and wife, and how they haunted the author throughout his life. Both Castle and Dupin belong to the ‘genius’ detective genre, which one could argue that originates in Dupin.²⁷ Dupin’s impact is reflected not only on Castle, but on a multitude of detectives from other crime TV shows.²⁸ As mentioned in the previous section, Dupin and Castle’s ability to think creatively or unconventionally is what makes them such good detectives or ratiocinators.

It is interesting to note, however, that some other shows have shifted from the morally good *aficionado* that Castle represents to a more morally grey character. In *The Mentalist*, Patrick Jane’s motives to help the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) are completely individualistic, as he has his own agenda to find the murderer of his family. His powers of observation and ratiocination seem sometimes supernatural, and one could say

²⁵ Jenner, *American TV detective dramas*, 48; “It was a freak of fancy in my friend (for what else shall I call it?) to be enamored of the Night for her own sake” (Poe 5).

²⁶ *Castle*, season 1, episode 5, “A chill goes through her veins,” directed by Bryan Spicer, created by Andrew W. Marlowe, aired May 5, 2010, <https://www.disneyplus.com/es-es/video/5de54e35-55ce-4024-b7e4-9c09dd2e55f6>, 00:12:45.

²⁷ Jenner, *American TV detective dramas*, 48.

²⁸ Some examples are Patrick Jane from *The Mentalist* (2008-2015), Sherlock Holmes from *Elementary* (2012-2019), or Adrian Monk from *Monk* (2002-2009).

he resembles Dupin in the extraordinariness of his gift. Nonetheless, one could situate Jane somewhere between the ethically upright and the morally dubious. In *The Blacklist*, Raymond Reddington is the fourth on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives, a crime lord with sociopathic tendencies who is always three steps ahead of everyone else. This type of character embodies the morally grey consultant who is willing to kill and torture to get what he wants. He decides to help the FBI on his own terms, without revealing his true motives, and most of the time because the outcome will suit his business. Although Dupin cannot be said to be an altruistic character, taking into account little details in Poe's stories, like when he keeps the stolen letter until the police comes explicitly asking for it again in "The Purloined Letter," he is not purely a morally grey man. *The Urban Dictionary* defines 'morally grey' as a character "who does too much bad to be a good character, yet too much good to be a bad character. A character who is in between good and bad."²⁹ This type of character often attracts audiences due to their unique blend of debauchery and likability. Reddington falls into this category.

Furthermore, if there is something that originates in the detective story that has clearly been inherited by the TV format, it is placing the detective, or detectives, figure in the forefront. The detective's mind, with its twists and ingenious deductions, takes centre stage. Dupin is, first and foremost, a thinker and it is his intellectual brilliance – together with his personal eccentricity – what makes him such a compelling figure.³⁰ Castle echoes these traits and, by adding Beckett's backbone to the mix, the result is an engaging dynamic that would keep spectators hooked on the show. All in all, Dupin and Castle (or Dupin, Castle and Beckett), are more similar than one would have thought. Castle was modelled after Poe's detective and the tradition he created, maybe even after Poe himself, completing this

²⁹ "Morally gray," *The Urban Dictionary*, accessed March 13, 2023, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Morally%20Gray>.

³⁰ Lewis D. Moore, *Cracking the Hard-Boiled Detective: A Critical History from the 1920s to the Present* (McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2006), 20.

characterisation with Beckett's personality and a more humorous tone that works well on TV.

3.1. The Split Detective

Shrewdness is what distinguishes the modern. Jenner asserts that two detectives who typically exhibit different characteristics can share Dupin's model of detective brilliance.³¹ One could argue that this is the case with Castle and Beckett. They are a representation of Dupin himself and two halves of Poe's ideal detective: the mathematician – Beckett – and the poet – Castle.³² Where Castle is creative, Beckett is resolute. Castle prefers the mystery over its resolution, while Beckett concentrates on identifying the culprit. The detective genre appears to have evolved from Poe and Doyle and now emphasises the idea of the partnership tradition.³³ Consequently, although the original detective loses some of their autonomy, they achieve a balance with their partner in lieu, together creating the perfect detective. In these types of works, the detective has one or more sidekicks, which can be exemplified by the narrator in Dupin's story, and by Ryan and Esposito in *Castle*.

The detective character exemplified in Poe's story is not really a man of action by today's standards. Nowadays, action, blood, and guns surround these types of characters, especially in repetitive formats like TV shows, to make the story more entertaining and hold the average viewer's attention. Dupin's method, which is slow and steady, would not be as effective in this format. Beckett brings the necessary action to the show. She is a homicide detective and a former Federal government agent, a dangerous job that requires intelligence and physical strength. However, she is not a mere "mathematician," as Dupin would say. While Castle's mind bears a stronger resemblance to Dupin's, both of them

³¹ Jenner, *American TV detective dramas*, 49.

³² "As poet and mathematician, he would reason well; as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all" in "The Purloined Letter," 1845. This statement is about Minister D., the main suspect and the thief, who Dupin claims is both a poet and a mathematician. It is also interesting to note that some studies have demonstrated that Minister D. is Dupin's doppelgänger.

³³ Lewis D. Moore, *Cracking the Hard-Boiled Detective: A Critical History from the 1920s to the Present*, 14.

typically carry out the ratiocination process. They even finish each other's sentences and ideas, solving more cases together than the NYC police department had before they started their collaboration. When Castle's imagination makes him too unreasonable, it is Beckett's logic that allows him to take a step back, and when Beckett's rigidity does not let her see the full picture, it is Castle who pushes her to think outside the box. They would not be able to solve as many cases on their own, they complement each other, and it is their collaborative work that creates the perfect detective.

This split detective is not uncommon in crime TV shows, and it is even more common to find that the partnership is formed by two members of the opposite sex. In *The Mentalist*, Jane's tricks would not work without Lisbon's intervention. In *Bones* (2005-2017),³⁴ Booth and Brennan's dynamic is what engages the viewers and solves the cases. These are some of many TV shows that follow this pattern. What is also common is the portrayal is these characters as the love interests of the perfect detective and as the primary heterosexual couple.

It is not the same relationship that Dupin and the narrator had: they are equals in the process of ratiocination, two parts of the same coin, and at the same time, they could not be more different. They simultaneously push each other to be their best selves and at the same time they fight with each other more than with any other character, probably because they are so disparate. Intellectually and in their job, they balance each other, but their private relationship is a completely different thing. This split detective makes up Poe's perfect detective; it creates a dynamic that works well on TV, and it shows its effectiveness in the success of the police department and the subsequent promotion of many of its members.

4. References to Poe's Work

³⁴ The premise of the show revolves around an unlikely alliance between Temperance "Bones" Brennan, a forensic anthropologist, and FBI Special Agent Seeley Booth.

The analysed episode, along with the entire show, incorporates numerous allusions to Edgar Allan Poe and his creations, showcasing numerous examples of intertextuality. One of the most obvious ones is Castle's name, as he changed it from Richard Alexander Rodgers to Richard Edgar Castle, "Edgar" in honour of Poe.³⁵ He mentions reading, amongst others, Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle when he was a child, which clearly influenced his own thriller novels. Moreover, both Poe and Castle had an absent father, a bit of a rebellious phase, and childhood trauma that affected not only their lives and personalities, but also their writing. Lastly, it's important to note that both Poe and Castle abruptly vanished, only to reappear days later (or a couple of months, in Castle's case), delirious and in a critical medical condition, prompting their founders to take them to the hospital. Of course, Castle survived while Poe did not.

"Vampire Weekend" starts with Alexis, Castle's daughter, reading "The Pit and the Pendulum," acknowledging Poe's contribution to the horror genre by calling it "the original Saw."³⁶ Cook argues that this tale is a response to the dominance of reason in the detective story, "a vision of an arbitrary world of cruelty" that advocated for "the complementary nature of instinct and reason,"³⁷ which could be a way of introducing instinct in a genre that originates from Dupin's purely rigid logic. Another direct allusion happens at the end of the episode, when Castle dresses up as Poe for his Halloween party, with a stuffed raven on his arm.

The victim's 'vampire' name was Crow, a bird that is very similar to a raven. This could be a reference to one of Poe's poems, "The Raven," in which a man is haunted by the presence of said animal, just as Crow's presence haunted Janice and prompted her decision to kill him. Furthermore, the atmosphere is quite gothic, with cemeteries, gravestones, and many references to supernatural monsters. The vampire plotline is reminiscent of Poe's

³⁵ *Castle*, season 3, episode 2, "He's dead, she's dead," directed by John Terlesky, created by Andrew W. Marlowe, aired March 16, 2011, <https://www.disneyplus.com/es-es/video/0a03048c-67df-413b-bd37-75d436ab2ba2>, 00:39:00.

³⁶ "Vampire Weekend," 00:00:36; Saw is a horror movie franchise that focuses on torture and gory imagery.

³⁷ Cook, 19.

tales, such as “Berenice” or “The Fall of the House of Usher,” but it moves away from the vampiric woman and its threatening presence. Also, there is Matthew’s mother, Elizabeth. She is a haunting presence in Matthew’s mind, he constantly dreams about her and draws her face. It is revealed that this is because he witnessed her murder and is traumatised by it. On the one hand, in “The Philosophy of Composition” Poe claimed that “the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world,” which applies to Matthew’s artistic expression. He portrays her like an angel, but always in violent contexts. On the other hand, Poe himself lost his mother to tuberculosis, a long and traumatic illness, and he had to witness her decay. This, together with all the women he lost in his life, including his wife, had a clear influence on his work: many of his texts present narrators that are haunted by the return of their loved lost woman. One can observe how this parallels Matthew’s own experience and its consequences.

Finally, there is the tension between a supernatural or a rational explanation, between the marvellous and the uncanny, which is commonly found in Poe’s texts, even if it’s more subdued. Are they real supernatural creatures? Lockerby sleeps in a coffin and burns when exposed to sunlight, Matthew was found with a stake in his heart, and Daemon was dressed up as a werewolf when he was killed. Science and ratiocination give an explanation to all of it.

According to Todorov, these types of mysteries approached the fantastic and, at the same time, opposed it: “In fantastic texts, we tend to prefer the supernatural explanation; the detective story, once it is over, leaves no doubt as to the absence of supernatural events.”³⁸ The supernatural is the easy solution for a mystery, the rational is more convoluted and, in a way, entertaining. In Poe’s “TMRM,” Dupin claims that the only way a human being could have committed the crimes was by being some kind of supernatural creature, something in which, he assures the narrator, neither of them believe, rejecting an

³⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *The fantastic. A structural approach to a literary genre* (Cornell UP, 1975), 50.

explanation of that nature and the possibility of the fantastic.³⁹ Apart from the plot of the episode aforementioned, this tension between the supernatural and the rational is represented during the show by Castle and Beckett. While Castle prefers to speculate about the marvellous, willing the fantastic to manifest itself, Beckett' rationality balances the scale.

5. Conclusion

While Poe's influence on crime fiction has been greatly acknowledged, his influence in the TV series *Castle*, and more specifically, in the episode "The Vampire Weekend" is also evident.⁴⁰ It not only has many direct and indirect references to the author and his work, like Castle dressing up as the author for a Halloween party, but even him as a character, or particularly his partnership with Beckett, creates an extremely close representation of Poe's ideal detective. Moreover, the show constantly shows the efficacy of such detective in multiple case scenarios. It is important to highlight the way the show emphasises the process of ratiocination, solving the case in retrospect, just like Poe's stories. Together with the way Castle and Dupin are the only ones 'sharp' enough to notice certain details no one else does and the anxiety inducing and gothic atmosphere that is also common in Poe's tales, it is easy to justify the assumption that the two characters are connected, and that *Castle* draws directly from Poe, his work, and his legacy.

Bibliography

Cappello, Giancarlo. "De paseo por el crimen. Género y trayecto del policial en la pantalla chica." *Contratexto* 1, no. 19 (2011): 147-161.

<https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=570667387009>.

³⁹ "It is my design to show you, first, that the thing might possibly have been accomplished: — but, secondly and chiefly, I wish to impress upon your understanding the very extraordinary — the almost præternatural character of that agility which could have accomplished it" (Poe 25).

⁴⁰ Giancarlo Capello, "De paseo por el crimen. Género y trayecto del policial en la pantalla chica," *Contratexto* 1, no. 19 (2011): 148.

- Cook, Michael. "Edgar Allan Poe and the Detective Story Narrative." In *Narratives of Enclosure in Detective Fiction*, edited by Clive Bloom. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230313736_1.
- Jenner, Mareike. *American TV Detective Dramas*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137425669>.
- Marlowe, Andrew W, creator. *Castle*. Season 1, episode 5, "A chill goes through her veins." Directed by Bryan Spicer. Aired May 5, 2010.
<https://www.disneyplus.com/es-es/video/5de54e35-55ce-4024-b7e4-9c09dd2e55f6>.
- Marlowe, Andrew W, creator. *Castle*. Season 2, episode 6, "Vampire Weekend." Directed by Karen Gaviola. Aired October 27, 2010. www.disneyplus.com/es-es/video/beab1c97-0001-4cc8-86cb-ad75d4058fc4.
- Marlowe, Andrew W, creator. *Castle*. Season 3, episode 2, "He's dead, she's dead." Directed by John Terlesky. Aired March 16, 2011. <https://www.disneyplus.com/es-es/video/0a03048c-67df-413b-bd37-75d436ab2ba2>.
- Moore, Lewis D. *Cracking the Hard-Boiled Detective: A Critical History from the 1920s to the Present*. McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2006.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." *The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore*, 1841. <https://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/morgueb.htm>.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Purloined Letter." *The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore*, 1845, <https://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/plttra.htm>.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Philosophy of Composition by Edgar Allan Poe." *Poetry Foundation*, October 13, 2009. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69390/the-philosophy-of-composition>.
- Rutigliano, Olivia. "When Poe Invented the Detective Story, he Changed the Literary World Forever." *Crime Reads*, January 19, 2021. <https://crimereads.com/when-poe-invented-the-detective-story-he-changed-the-literary-world-forever/>.

The Urban Dictionary. "Morally gray." Accessed March 13, 2023.

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Morally%20Gray>.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Cornell UP, 1975.

Winans, Sarah A. "Edgar Allan Poe and True Crime: Origins of Two Character Types in Crime Fiction." *Culture in Focus* 2, no. 1 (2019): 36-46.

Notes on contributor

Natalia del Viso Domenech holds a B.A. in English Studies from Complutense University of Madrid and an M.A. in British and English-Speaking Countries Literature and Culture Studies from the Autonomous University of Madrid. Her academic interests are broad, but they include feminism and gender studies, specifically female sexuality and internalised misogyny, classical mythology, and contemporary literature.

CONTACT: <ndelviso@ucm.es>

ORCID: [0009-0009-1112-925X](https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1112-925X)

Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* and the Representation of Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence⁴¹

Andrea García García⁴²

Abstract:

Carmen Maria Machado's autobiographical memoir *In the Dream House* (2019) addresses, in the form of an inventive narrative, domestic abuse in lesbian relationships. In this collection of small chapters, the author describes a total of 141 of her own experiences as a victim of Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence as, for her, "the Dream House was never just the Dream House."⁴³ This paper will examine how Machado challenges stereotypes, sheds light on the complexity of abuse dynamics, and contributes significantly to the discourse on domestic violence, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community, debunking the myths around the idea that lesbian relationships are idyllic.

Keywords: Carmen Maria Machado, gender violence, lesbian memoir, Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence.

1. Introduction

In the realm of literature, the representation of domestic violence has served as a vital lens through which to analyse and comprehend the complexity of abusive relationships and their dynamics. Within the topic of domestic violence, Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence, or SSIPV, is still taboo, something that exists, yet a minority of people have ever discussed it. According to Farrugia and Abela, "even today, since SSIPV is not

⁴¹ Recommended Citation

García, Andrea. "The Representation of Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence in *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 21-46:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

⁴² **CONTACT:** Andrea García García <andrga32@ucm.es>

⁴³ Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*. (New York City: Graywolf Press, 2019), 76.

particularly visible and spoken about, society does not give it its due importance and it remains a topic which still needs to be explored further.”⁴⁴

Carmen Maria Machado’s groundbreaking memoir *In The Dream House*, published in 2019, arises as a noteworthy example and contribution to this discourse on domestic violence, particularly within the context of SSIPV. The second-person narrator addresses her experiences evoking her past self using “you.” Machado’s choice of presenting her account in the form of vignettes, each with the title “*Dream House as _____*” gives the reader a guide on how to read the memoir. It is possible to see how these titles provide a spoiler of how Machado’s unnamed partner behaves towards her, clues about how the future is going to be, or how the author creates word plays. An example of the omens foreshadowed by the titles can be found in the chapter called “*Dream House as Haunted Mansion*,” which is an antithesis that perfectly symbolises how the initially idyllic relationship has turned into a nightmare, or the chapter called “*Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure*” is a narrative game in which the reader has to decide what actions Machado is going to take in terms of her relationship, each action having a consequence, and the goal of the game is to maintain the protagonist as alive and sane as possible to continue with the story.

The thesis of this paper tries to demonstrate that the representation of same-sex intimate partner violence in Carmen Maria Machado’s *In the Dream House* debunks the myths around lesbian relationships, mainly the myth that gender violence does not exist in said relationships. In order to do so, this paper will explore the different types of violence presented in the memoir, such as physical, sexual, and psychological violence, to demonstrate that Machado’s memoir challenges stereotypes, sheds light on the complexity of abuse dynamics, and contributes significantly to the discourse on domestic violence, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community, debunking the myths around the idea that lesbian relationships are idyllic.

Before dealing with how domestic violence is treated in Machado’s memoir, it is important to state some facts about domestic violence, also called intimate partner

⁴⁴ Kristy Farrugia and Beverly Abela. “The Broken Rainbow: Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence.” *MCAST Journal of Applied Research & Practice* 3, no. 1 (2019): 2

violence, as authors such as Murray Straus⁴⁵ or Richard Gelles⁴⁶ have defined it. According to the United Nations, domestic abuse “can be defined as a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner.”⁴⁷ Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence, hence, is the pattern of behaviour exerted in same-sex relationships. Nonetheless, even if society is aware of the existence of this problem, it has not been studied by scholars in both literature and as a general topic until some decades ago.

Throughout much of history, discussions of domestic violence in same-sex relationships were dominated by heteronormative perspectives, assuming a male-female dynamic, as it was thought that men had the right to act violently against women.⁴⁸ Same-sex relationships were often marginalised or condemned, leading to a lack of acknowledgement of violence within these partnerships. In many societies, same-sex relationships were deemed taboo or even criminalised, further silencing victims and hindering any efforts to address the issue.

Moreover, the American Psychiatric Association classified homosexuality as a mental disorder until 1973, as it was included in the DSM 1 of 1952 under the category of Sociopathic Personality Disturbance, specifically arguing homosexuals had a “sexual deviation” and comparing them to rapists, paedophiles, and other sexual criminals, which reinforced negative stereotypes and contributed to the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ individuals. However, it was not until the Stonewall Riots in 1969 that the LGBTQ+ rights movement in the United States had an excruciating turning point as it motivated LGTB political activism and led to the creation of numerous gay rights organisations such as GLAAD, a non-profit organisation focused on LGTBQ advocacy, or the Gay Liberation Front. It was because of these demonstrations that conversations about same-sex relationships emerged in the public sphere, although it did not translate into awareness by same-sex couples who were experiencing IPV.

⁴⁵ Murray A. Straus and Martha Smithey, “Primary Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence.” *Crime prevention: New approaches* (2004): 239-276.

⁴⁶ Richard J. Gelles, *Intimate violence and abuse in families*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016).

⁴⁷ United Nations, “What is Domestic Abuse?”

⁴⁸ Zhen Wu, “A Review of Gender Stereotypes in Domestic Violence.” *Journal of Education, Humanities, and Social Sciences* 8, (2023): 1306.

Even in the twenty-first century, and despite the LGBTQ+ community gaining social prominence and rights, violence in lesbian relationships has been argued to be a myth that society fails to acknowledge. Condit states that “for domestic violence in lesbian partnerships to be recognised as a serious social problem, society first needs to recognise that lesbian partnerships do indeed exist.”⁴⁹ Lesbian relationships are seen as idyllic, a paradise for women because women, according to the traditional gender roles, are submissive and compliant, as Janice Ristock argues that “many lesbian feminist theorists in the mid to late 70s stressed the ideal that lesbian relationships were voluntary, consensual, based on affection and compatibility rather than on the same social factors that bind heterosexual relationships.”⁵⁰ This line of thought and Condit’s statement leads to a simple question: if women are indeed passive and submissive creatures, why would they be violent against other women?

Although there are few studies on SSIPV, they all coincide in one worrying fact: it occurs at the same degree or even higher than heterosexual IPV; in fact, a study conducted by Adam Messinger in 2011 revealed that lesbian women in the United States were at higher risk of being involved in Intimate Partner Violence.⁵¹ In another study conducted by Breiding et al., half the lesbian women who participated in the survey were or had been victims of physical or psychological abuse in their relationships. Furthermore, almost three out of four affirmed to be victims of psychological Intimate Partner Violence.⁵² The problem not only lies in the rate of SSIPV but also in the fact that this violence is not reported. Admitting the existence of SSIPV in lesbian relationships would mean admitting a reality that society does not want to admit: lesbians are not in peaceful and utopic relationships and violence among them exists, even if it is not associated with the typical violent maleness seen in heterosexual IPV.

⁴⁹ Cassidy Condit, “Domestic Violence in Lesbian Partnerships: Dispelling the Myths.” *Writing for a Real World*, University of San Francisco Program in Rhetoric and Composition, (2005): 17

⁵⁰ Janice L. Ristock, “Beyond ideologies: Understanding Violence in Lesbian Relationships.” *Canadian Woman Studies* 12, no. 1, (1991): 74

⁵¹ Adam Messinger, “Invisible Victims: Same-Sex IPV in the National Violence Against Women Survey.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 26, no. 11, (2010): 2230

⁵² Breiding et al., qtd in Luca Rollè et al. “When Intimate Partner Violence Meets Same-Sex Couples: A Review of Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, no. 1506. (2018): 2

1.1. Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence

Jude Irwin argues that, due to the dominant heteronormative discourses, violence in lesbian relationships has been reduced to the background.⁵³ This exclusion of queer women's experiences has two different yet similar results: "to create and maintain the invisibility of violence in lesbian relationships" and "to acknowledge or interrogate violence in lesbian relationships, further reinforcing its invisibility."⁵⁴ Additionally, the inability to speak about this topic with such freedom or because of the reluctance of some lesbians inside the lesbian community to understand and acknowledge the fact that women can be violent as well has fuelled the silence and the reduction of testimonies of lesbians who were abused by their female partners. Janice Ristock contributes to this statement by asserting that "the silence is also due to the fear that open discussion will generate even more negative images about the lesbian community than the stereotypes and prejudices that society already holds."⁵⁵ Apart from the ones which have already been mentioned, these stereotypes refer to the two types of lesbian appearance: the butch, that is, the "masculine" lesbian, and the femme, also known as the "feminine" lesbian, that society has imposed on them or the fetishism lesbians have to suffer in their daily lives, among others.

Not only are these stereotypes of lesbian women and LGTB people seen in society but also in the media and literature. If one were to think about most watched series or films, or classics in which the protagonists are LGTB individuals, examples are scarce. It is true that, nowadays, authors and directors are committed to bringing representations of gay, transsexual, or bisexual people to their works, whether on the big screen, the small screen, or the pages of a book, as is present in Alice Oseman's graphic novel and Netflix series *Heartstopper* (2019), in the novel *The Song of Achilles* (2011) by Madeline Miller, or the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). The common trope in these examples is, at some point, the tragic history, as if the fate of LGTB people in their relationships was to be doomed to fail, as Heather Love in her book *Feeling*

⁵³ Jude Irwin, "(Dis)counted Stories Domestic Violence and Lesbians." *Qualitative Social Work* 7, no. 2, (2008): 206

⁵⁴ Irwin, "(Dis)counted Stories Domestic Violence and Lesbians," 206.

⁵⁵ Janice Ristock, "Beyond ideologies: Understanding Violence in Lesbian Relationships," 74.

Backward has explored by stating that “those who are directly identified with same-sex desire most often end up dead.”⁵⁶

However, and even though literature has been significant in giving voice to the marginalised in the past, lesbians and lesbianism in general are underrepresented in today’s culture, as Lidia Steiner claims, “most television portrayals focused on gay males; lesbians were scarcely visible.”⁵⁷ It is argued that this lack of “women loving women” literature hinders lesbians from finding lookalikes or similar situations to their own in order to feel understood or, at some point, accepted in society. Although there are different accounts of women falling in love or being victims of different types of abuse, it has been written and told through a heterosexist perspective. Moreover, Bonnie Zimmerman states that “lesbians have also expressed concern that the absence of lesbian material in women’s studies journals such as *Feminist Studies*, *Women’s Studies*, and *Women and Literature* indicates heterosexism either by omission or by design.”⁵⁸ Throughout history, lesbian interpretations of pieces of literature or even lesbian plots have been avoided by many writers, especially female writers, therefore, there has been and there is a tendency to mask all relationships between women as “aspects of the self” even if there could be layers of “bonding or love between women.”⁵⁹

The social erasure of lesbian literature has reached even the feminist canon, being perceived as “a minor and somewhat discomfoting variation within the female life cycle,”⁶⁰ but this erasure does not deny its existence. Lesbian writing are as important as heterosexual literature, as they are capable of portraying experiences about sexuality or the female body from a woman’s perspective, not experiences about women as seen by the male gaze. Moreover, what lesbian writings include is the queer perspective: the social and, sometimes, familiar stigma, the shame, or the sufferings that queer people have felt all their lives. Gurko and Gearhart also argue that lesbian

⁵⁶ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007): 1.

⁵⁷ Lidia Steiner, “Invisibility, homophobia and heterosexism: Lesbian, gays and the media.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10, no. 4, (1993): 401.

⁵⁸ Bonnie Zimmerman, “What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism.” *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 3, (1981): 453.

⁵⁹ Zimmerman, 454.

⁶⁰ Zimmerman, 469.

literature “does express a revolutionary model of sexuality which in its structure, its content, and its practice defies the fundamental violent assumptions of patriarchal culture.”⁶¹ This is what Carmen Maria Machado intends to do with her memoir *In The Dream House*. By providing an account of her experiences, memories, and traumas with her abusive partner in the so-called Dream House, Machado puts into words the stigma of dating another woman in a society where lesbianism was still highly disregarded and the suffering of being physically, psychologically, and even sexually abused by this other woman.

2. The Representation ofSSIPV in *In the Dream House*

As it has already been mentioned, Machado’s memoir debunks several myths which have been true about lesbian relationships through the narration of her own experience in an abusive relationship with a woman. The main myth that *In the Dream House* succeeds in debunking aboutSSIPV is that, due to the societal representation of femininity, women are not violent as it “precludes the possibility that one woman could inflict violence upon another.”⁶² Lesbian relationships have been presented as egalitarian, “free from the power struggles that exist in heterosexual relationships.”⁶³ Nonetheless, as it is shown in Machado’s memoir, is that violence is used so as to determine who is in power in the relationship, this is, the unnamed woman, and who is the subordinate of it: Carmen.

The other myth that is to be debunked is the idea that same-sex intimate partner violence, in this case, woman-to-woman violence is inexistent because of gender roles, as there is no man in the equation can exert such violence on another woman. This idea has been created based on the heteronormative discourses that lead our society. As Mary Eaton argues, “women batter women because they have internalised the interconnected norms of heterosexism/homophobia and misogyny which lie at the core

⁶¹ Jean Gurko and Sally Gearheart, qtd in Zimmerman, 465–466.

⁶² Condit, “Domestic Violence in Lesbian Partnerships: Dispelling the Myths,” 56.

⁶³ Sinéad Spelman, “Carmen Maria Machado’s memoir *In The Dream House*: Exploring Same-Sex Female Intimate Partner Abuse Through Literary Tropes.” *Dearcadh: Graduate Journal of Gender, Globalisation and Rights* 3, (2022): 46.

of sex role system.”⁶⁴ Ristock also agrees with the idea that woman-to-woman violence is an example of internalised misogyny as women are, like the rest of the world, “well aware of the examples of woman-hating that exist in our culture.”⁶⁵ Therefore, this analysis will delve into the three different types of violence that the main character has to deal with in said relationship to how the myth of the inexistence of violence in lesbian relationships is far from reality.

2.1. Sexual Violence in *In the Dream House*

To begin with, the depiction of sexual violence in *In the Dream House* is quite minimal and goes almost unnoticed in comparison to that of physical and psychological violence. Still, it is important to mention it as it disrupts the assumption that abuse in lesbian relationships is solely confined to emotional or physical forms.

Throughout Carmen Maria Machado’s relationship with her abuser, the unnamed woman exercises various forms of sexual violence on Machado. It is significant to point out that this woman is Carmen’s first girlfriend and that she is still learning how to act in a lesbian relationship and how lesbian relationships are, as she refers to the unnamed woman as “the first woman who yokes herself to you with the label *girlfriend*” and states that she is “learning that lesbian relationships are, somehow, different.”⁶⁶ Therefore, the only guide through this new path of her life is her abuser, who will take advantage of Carmen’s naiveness in this aspect. At the very beginning of their relationship, Machado is overwhelmed by the chemistry they both have in terms of sex: “You don’t know what is more of a miracle: her body, or her love of your body. She haunts your erotic imagination. You are both perpetually wet. You fuck, it seems, everywhere.”⁶⁷ Although having sexual encounters with a man prior to this same-sex relationship, Carmen has never felt as loved as she feels with the woman in the Dream House, which leads to the development of, somehow, blind trust in her. However, the woman has shown signals of keeping their relationship purely sexual, with no feelings

⁶⁴ Mary Eaton, qtd. in Irwin, “(Dis)counted Stories Domestic Violence and Lesbians,” 201.

⁶⁵ Ristock, “Beyond ideologies: Understanding Violence in Lesbian Relationships,” 75.

⁶⁶ Machado, 47.

⁶⁷ Machado, 43.

involved, as Machado quotes in “*Dream House as Famous Last Words*” when her ex-girlfriend clearly states that they “can fuck, but [they] can’t fall in love.”⁶⁸

Nonetheless, as the relationship progresses and time passes, that blind trust that Carmen has in the unnamed woman turns into fear, as will be seen in the section “Psychological violence in *In the Dream House*,” putting Machado in a state of autopilot as far as pleasure is concerned. Sex becomes satisfying for the woman from the Dream House, while for Carmen, it is a mere formality, something that has to happen to keep her abuser happy because she does not know what to do, “only speaking the language of giving [herself] up.”⁶⁹ It is also possible to say that Carmen is a victim of rape in some instances, as she has to have sexual relationships with her girlfriend even though she does not want to, or she is not mentally or emotionally present. She lets her do as she pleases with her body, having “voided [her] body so many times by now that it is the force of habit.”⁷⁰

At one point, the woman accuses Carmen of having slept with several people or wanting to do so: “Over the course of your relationship, she will accuse you of fucking, or wanting to fuck, or planning to fuck, the following people: your roommate, your roommate’s girlfriend, dozens of your friends.”⁷¹ This accusation becomes an obsession to the point where Carmen has to stop talking to her classmates because her abuser thinks that she is cheating on her with them, throwing it in her face when they have sex one night after the woman from the Dream House has consumed alcohol—something that is common in her daily routine: “‘Who are you thinking about,’ she says. It is phrased like a question but isn’t. Your mouth moves, but nothing comes out, and she squeezes your jaw a little harder. ‘Look at me when I fuck you,’ she says. You pretend to come.”⁷²

However, Machado does not always comply with the woman’s requests. In “*Dream House as House in Iowa*,” the woman and Carmen have an argument over Halloween costumes, and, at night, her abuser wants to have sexual intercourse with

⁶⁸ Machado, 22.

⁶⁹ Machado, 209.

⁷⁰ Machado, 183.

⁷¹ Machado, 85.

⁷² Machado, 86.

her, but Carmen refuses to and “turn[s] into [her] pillow”⁷³ after having to endure her screams and accusations of ruining the night throughout the house. This “act of rebellion” shows that Carmen has not completely lost herself in the reality of her relationship. Despite living most of the time under the yoke of her abuser, the autopilot state in which she finds herself is not always activated, allowing her to continue being herself without becoming depersonalised.

2.2. Physical Violence in *In the Dream House*

Carmen Maria Machado, during her relationship with her ex-girlfriend, is also subjected to instances of physical violence, although these only occur during two arguments that the couple have once the relationship is advanced. This fact means that the trust that Machado has in the woman from the Dream House continues to decrease and the fear of continuous reprisals and repeated violent actions increases.

The first example of physical violence in the memoir happens when Carmen and the woman are visiting the latter’s parents in Florida. In the parents’ house, the woman grips Carmen’s arm tightly, “touching [her] in a way that is not filled with love.”⁷⁴ It is then that Carmen realises something is not normal with the woman’s behaviour and reactions and starts to act automatically, following her and responding to her petitions because she does not know what to do. After that, when they are alone on the beach, Carmen lets her girlfriend know how she felt at that moment, asking for an explanation for such a violent reaction, to which the woman simply replies that she loves Carmen after apologising.⁷⁵ In this sense, along with the sense of sexual and psychological violence, Carmen has been betrayed by the woman who was supposed to be her major ally in the queer community, a new and unexplored territory for her.

The second instance of physical violence that is to be found in the memoir happens after a meeting with the woman and her friends, where the woman tries to touch Carmen sexually in front of the other people in the bowling alley, but Carmen tells

⁷³ Machado, 90.

⁷⁴ Machado, 62.

⁷⁵ Machado, 63.

her to stop. This response makes her abuser angry and starts telling Machado how much she hates her while they are in public. Later on, in their so-called Dream House, the girlfriend continues to scream at Carmen, taking her suitcase and throwing a pair of shoes towards Machado; also, she misses, either because she “[was] so quick to dodge them or because she couldn’t aim for shit.”⁷⁶ Nonetheless, after acting violently, the woman from the Dream House stays in the living room, sitting on the couch and asking Carmen why she looks upset once she sees Carmen trembling and crying. Acting as if nothing has happened, with such indifference, is something quite common in abusers: in 2014, nearly three-quarters (73.8%) of adult women experiencing domestic violence experienced gaslighting.⁷⁷ This device could be analysed through the point of view of psychology and stating that she is simply manipulating Carmen, as will be discussed in the next section.

2.3. Psychological and Emotional Violence in *In the Dream House*

Lastly, the most common and the worst instances of violence portrayed in Machado’s memoir are the psychological violence. In a study conducted by Claire M. Renzetti in 1989, it was shown that psychological abuse was the most frequent type of violence in SSIPV, as it was used “as the weapon to assure and maintain power and control.”⁷⁸ Therefore, Renzetti posed that the percentage of psychological abuse in same-sex relationships is 70%, impacting an estimated three million of lesbian women in the United States.⁷⁹ In this part, not only the analysis will focus on the attempts of emotional manipulation and gaslight that the woman from the Dream House has towards Carmen, but also on the Dream House as the third protagonist of the memoir since it acts as an accomplice of the violence exerted against Machado.

As in the previous examples, the unnamed woman’s manipulation progresses throughout their relationship. What at first was an idyllic love between them, rapidly

⁷⁶ Machado, 131.

⁷⁷ Paige L. Sweet, “The Sociology of Gaslighting.” *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 5, (2019): 854

⁷⁸ Claire M. Renzetti, qtd. in Ristock, “Beyond ideologies: Understanding Violence in Lesbian Relationships,” 76.

⁷⁹ Renzetti, “Building A Second Closet: Third Party Responses to Victims of Lesbian Partner Abuse.” *Family Relations* 38, (1989): 79.

turned out to be a nightmare in which Carmen has to guess how to survive, pleasing and complying with the woman's expectations and threats at every moment. In other words, Carmen's infatuation with her abuser prevents her from recognising the indicators of coercion and manipulation present within their sexual relationship.

The whole relationship seems like a test for Carmen. She should not speak up or she will get punished. She should not act in a certain way, either with other people or in a general context, or she will get punished. She should not say what she truly thinks or she will get punished. She should be perfect, the perfect girl, and the perfect girlfriend. She should be a "sweet girl, sweet self,"⁸⁰ showing how loved and loyal she is. She is passing the test, but relationships should not be a test or an exam. Carmen's dread of acting incorrectly leads her to be the woman her girlfriend wants her to be, driven by fear rather than genuine love.

Several times, Carmen is victim of gaslighting, this is, "psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem."⁸¹ She thinks what to say and how to respond to her abuser's requests or utterances, but "when she repeats what [she]'ve said back to [her] nothing makes sense."⁸² Then, she starts wondering whether she has said the statement or not, doubting not only herself and her speech but also the intention and meaning of her sentence. This experience of gaslighting is added to the autopilot state, as she does not know what is true and what is not in her relationship, her life and, ultimately, herself.

The manipulation takes a step further as the relationship develops. The abuser is aware of how Carmen's mental state is slowly breaking down and takes advantage of it by asking Machado what is wrong with her instead of making a retrospection and realise that the wrong thing in the relationship is herself. She wants to blame Carmen, trying to win every argument, to have the last word in every conversation they have. The woman

⁸⁰ Machado, 65.

⁸¹ Merriam-Webster, "gaslight (n.)".

⁸² Machado, 90.

insults her, calling her “fucking cunt” or “fucking slut,”⁸³ or simply threatening her: “give me the keys or I will kill you.”⁸⁴ This humiliation is another technique used by abusers to establish dominance over their victims. As Diane Follingstad et al. state, “by making the recipient of the ridicule believe she is not worthwhile, she would remain within the power of the psychological abuser.”⁸⁵

Moreover, in the chapter called “*Dream House as House in Florida*,” after having acted violently towards Carmen, the woman reinforces her control over the situation and Carmen by emotionally manipulating her through empty promises of love: “‘I’m so sorry,’ she says. ‘I didn’t mean it. You know I love you, right?’”⁸⁶ The unnamed woman’s behaviour is typical of abusers as it functions as a mechanism of manipulation: they hit you because they love you, they hurt you because they care about you. According to Ferraro, “this type of emotional abuse is seen as having long-term debilitating effects on a woman’s self-esteem.”⁸⁷ It is argued that, precisely because of this long-term manipulation and, consequently, these long-term effects, Carmen becomes a punching bag for her abuser whenever the unnamed woman is frustrated or angry. This creates a lack of self-esteem in Carmen, reinforcing the traumatic consequences, even when she is outside the Dream House and living happily with her new partner, Val: “After the Dream House, I developed a sixth sense. It goes off at random times [...] A physical revulsion that comes on the heels of nothing at all, something akin to the sour liquid rush of saliva that precedes vomiting.”⁸⁸

3. The Gothic in *In the Dream House*

In Gothic narratives, haunted houses are a key element and an important character since they serve as the perfect setting in which evil haunts the protagonist or protagonists of said narratives. Manuel Aguirre’s analysis of Gothic fiction emphasises the house as a

⁸³ Machado, 130.

⁸⁴ Machado, 137.

⁸⁵ Diane Follingstad et al., “The Role of Emotional Abuse in Physically Abusive Relationships.” *Journal of Family Violence* 5, no. 2 (1990): 108.

⁸⁶ Machado, 63.

⁸⁷ Katherine Ferraro, qtd. in Follingstad et al., “The Role of Emotional Abuse in Physically Abusive Relationships,” 108.

⁸⁸ Machado, 254.

liminal space that mirrors both the external and the internal conflicts of its characters. In Chapter 3, he outlines how Gothic narratives construct dual ontological zones: the rational, human world, and a numinous, unknowable realm. The house or similar spaces, such as castles and abbeys, often exist at the threshold between these zones.

In *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado uses the house as a Gothic symbol to explore the emotional and psychological effects of her abusive relationship. Much like in Gothic fiction, the Dream House is not a passive setting but a reflective surface that mirrors the dynamics of her relationship. As Machado describes the house “inhaling” and “exhaling,”⁸⁹ it becomes a living entity, embodying the shifting power dynamics and her growing sense of dislocation. Moreover, the Dream House reflects her abuser’s control, aligning with Aguirre’s description of liminal spaces in Gothic fiction as sites where the familiar becomes destabilised and threatening, blurring the line between safety and danger:

And because you are of a kind, the house knows
you. When you cry out,
the lights flicker, ghostly blue and ragged.
When she says you are shut off,
the light switches nod their white tiny
heads. Tiles creak yes beneath her
edicts—something bad must have happened
to make you this way, the way
where you don’t want her. But the windows
rattle, disagree. In their honeyed,
blindless light, they see it—something bad
is happening.⁹⁰

Furthermore, the concept of mirroring extends to the Gothic exploration of identity. Aguirre discusses how Gothic spaces often distort or fragment characters’ sense of self,

⁸⁹ Machado, 79.

⁹⁰ Leah Horlick, qtd. in Machado, *In the Dream House*, 124.

reflecting their inner turmoil back at them.⁹¹ Machado captures this Gothic tension in her memoir as the Dream House becomes a space where her autonomy is eroded, and her sense of self is overwritten by her abuser's dominance. In this house, which was supposed to be theirs, Machado's self is erased and disowned to the point that not even her body is owned by her, as it is "her money, her fridge, her rot."⁹² The Dream House not only traps Machado physically and emotionally but also serves as a mirror for the imbalance of power and identity within her relationship.

The sense of disowning can be interpreted through the Gothic lenses, as Claire Kahane argues, since "the female Gothic depends as much upon longing and desire as upon fear and hatred. If it frequently indulges some of the more masochistic components of female fantasy, of a delight in dependence and submission, it also encourages an exploration of the limits of identity."⁹³ This dependence that Carmen feels towards her abuser as she needs her economically and, most importantly, emotionally. The attempt at depersonalisation at the hands of the woman from the Dream House and the obligation of having to apologise for everything out of fear is an example of the emotional and mental manipulation Carmen must undergo during her relationship.

Alice Lesperance argues in her article that Machado "exposes something that we do not talk about within the queer community"⁹⁴ and, therefore, "if the house is queerness, then queer abuse is our monster in the house."⁹⁵ Following this idea, it is possible to say that Carmen Maria Machado has created a new language of her own, addressing a safe place as a house must be as a haunted house. Sinéad Spelman agrees with Lesperance in the sense that "In the Dream House itself is a retelling of sorts, dispelling myths surrounding queer intimate partner abuse,"⁹⁶ acknowledging the

⁹¹ Manuel Aguirre, "Towards a Definition of the Gothic Genre." In *The Grammar of Gothic*, (Madrid: The Northanger Library Project, 2021), 12.

⁹² Machado, 107.

⁹³ Claire Kahane, "Gothic Mirrors and Feminine Identity." *The Centennial Review* 24, no. 1, (1980): 54.

⁹⁴ Alice Lesperance, "Carmen Maria Machado Has Invented a New Genre: The Gothic Memoir." *Electric Literature*, 2019. <https://electricliterature.com/carmen-maria-machado-has-invented-a-new-genre-the-gothic-memoir/>.

⁹⁵ Lesperance, "Carmen Maria Machado Has Invented a New Genre: The Gothic Memoir."

⁹⁶ Spelman, 51.

several and different stories woman-to-woman abuse victims have not recounted throughout history.

Throughout the memoir, Machado explains how the house is a crucial factor in how the abuse occurs. She describes the Dream House as the opposite of a dream; for her, “The Dream House was never just the Dream House”⁹⁷ and, even though it is not an essential requirement for domestic abuse to happen, it helps.⁹⁸ Houses are meant to be safe places for us, a place where we can feel at home and peace, and trust each of its corners and each of the people, if any, who live with us. Dating back to ancient civilizations, patriarchal systems delineated gender roles, relegating women to tasks within the household while men engaged in activities outside the home. As a result of this, Linda K. Kerber argues that “when they used the metaphor of separate spheres, historians referred, often interchangeably, to an ideology imposed in women, a culture created by women, a set of boundaries expected to be observed by women.”⁹⁹

Through her memoir, Machado subverts the traditional association of women with the domestic sphere through her portrayal of the domestic space itself. Instead of idealising the home as a sanctuary or site of feminine virtue, Machado exposes how it can become a site of confinement and oppression. The Dream House, which initially represents a refuge from the outside world, gradually transforms into a prison where Machado’s autonomy is eroded and her sense of self is threatened, as for her, “‘safe as houses’ is something closer to ‘the house always wins.’ Instead of a shared structure providing shelter, it means that the person in charge is secure; everyone else should be afraid.”¹⁰⁰ By subverting the notion of the home as a haven for women, Machado challenges readers to interrogate the power dynamics inherent within domestic relationships.

⁹⁷ Machado, 76.

⁹⁸ Machado, 81.

⁹⁹ Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History.” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1, (1988): 17.

¹⁰⁰ Machado, 83.

Carmen Maria Machado uses literary genres such as horror and science fiction in her memoir to portray how we experience trauma and how it shapes us. According to Cassidy Crane,

domestic female horror has a three-part structure: body horror, physical space horror, and relationship horror. These elements are expressed by many female Gothic and horror authors in stories that are shocking not due to vulgarity, but instead for the realism they depict. Female horror is not about creating new fears in the reader; rather, it is about expressing women's greatest fears, which have already been realised.¹⁰¹

For Machado, the house is a resemblance to her relationship with her unnamed girlfriend. This relationship, which seemed beautiful and good for her at first, slowly became an element of dehumanisation for both her as a character and as a person. It is because of this that "*In the Dream House*, with its hauntings and descents into trauma, informs us that there is nothing more Gothic than our own memory."¹⁰² At the core of her memory, Machado still remembers every ounce of violence the other woman has inflicted against her and it will always be there, even if, in the present, she is happy with Val—her current wife—and has moved away from the Dream House.

Machado incorporates elements such as foreshadowing into her memoir. For instance, in the chapter called "*Dream House as Warning*," before the girlfriend becomes the woman from the Dream House, Carmen describes how two girls had either disappeared or run away from their houses. She ends the chapter asking herself "What was she walking away from?"¹⁰³ which could be interpreted as a question that foreshadows her future since she would end up running away from the Dream House and her abuser.

Besides, another element of the memoir genre that can be found are descriptions, as Carmen can describe vividly every violent experience she has to suffer;

¹⁰¹ Cassidy Crane, "Female Domestic Literary Horror through the Lens of the Contemporary Work of Carmen Maria Machado." *Student Scholarship* 117, (2022): 3

¹⁰² Spelman, 48

¹⁰³ Machado, 84.

or flashbacks and reflections, since the narrator is able not only to write about what she had to undergo but also make readers feel a minimal part of what she felt:

Her grip goes hard, begins to hurt. You don't understand; you don't understand so profoundly your brain skitters, skips, backs up. You make a tiny gasp, the tiniest gasp you can. It is the first time she is touching you in a way that is not filled with love, and you don't know what to do. *This is not normal, this is not normal, this is not normal.* Your brain is scrambling for an explanation, and it hurts more and more, and everything is static. Your thoughts are accompanied by a cramp of alarm, and you are so focused on it that you miss her response.¹⁰⁴

Memories, especially traumas, are fragments of our past and present lives which we carry. They act as triggers most of the time, despite having overcome them, putting her body in a state of constant alert, being what Machado experiences as she wonders "if you will ever be able to let someone touch you; if you will ever be able to reconnect your brain and body or if they will forever sit on opposite sides of this new and terrible ravine."¹⁰⁵ She tries to have a normal life after the abuse, going on dates with other people, but her trauma makes her be in a state of constant alert and having her body reacting to the physical contact of one of these boys in a negative way as she goes rigid and lets this man use her like a doll.¹⁰⁶ This failed attempt at sleeping with a man can be seen as Carmen's struggle to reclaim agency over her body and desires in order to overcome the trauma. However, her body's reaction in the example of the impact of the abuse in her body and mind, as she is still in defence mode, unable to fully engage at the moment: "You don't fight, but you don't respond."¹⁰⁷

In *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado redefines traditional Gothic tropes by using the symbol of the house as a liminal space, echoing the genre's fascination with boundary-breaking and blurred identities. According to the rules developed by Manuel Aguirre, Gothic literature often situates houses or castles as

¹⁰⁴ Machado, 63.

¹⁰⁵ Machado, 220.

¹⁰⁶ Machado, 228.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

thresholds between the rational and the numinous realms.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the Dream House serves as both a refuge and a site of terror, encapsulating Machado's experience of psychological horror during her abusive relationship with a woman. As Kahane suggests, "ultimately, however, in this essentially conservative genre—and for me this is real Gothic horror—the heroine seems compelled either to resume a more quiescent, socially acceptable role, or to be destroyed."¹⁰⁹

The Dream House functions as a metaphorical threshold, where Machado's sense of self dissolves under the emotional and psychological manipulation of her abuser, aligning with the Gothic's preoccupation with destabilised identities. The woman from the Dream House not only undermines Machado's sanity but also distorts her perception of herself, illustrating how Gothic mechanisms operate within the memoir. This is portrayed in how, little by little, the woman from the Dream House undermines not only Carmen's sanity but also her perception of herself, as previously seen. However, she can get out of the nightmare that is the Dream House without completely losing herself and being able to recognize that her experience has been an experience of same-sex intimate partner violence. These three types of violence are the reason why victims of violence have trouble when starting new relationships. The lack of trust in other people, added to the intrinsic fear of being either abused or mistreated once again, makes it quite difficult for a victim to feel appreciated, loved, and respected in future relationships.

Hence, the use of Gothic tropes in Machado's memoir serves to underscore both the author's psychological turmoil and the gravity of her experiences. The recount of these experiences through this genre offers a figurative language through which to convey the complex emotional states that the character has undergone. Contrary to a realistic narrative, in which the absence of such elements upholds the portrayal of everyday life and experiences with fidelity, Gothic tropes in memoirs facilitate an exploration of the psyche and subjective experiences.

¹⁰⁸ Aguirre, "Towards a Definition of the Gothic Genre," 3.

¹⁰⁹ Kahane, "Gothic Mirrors and Feminine Identity," 54.

4. Relation between Formal Aspects of the Memoir and Violence

Another important issue to consider is Machado's use of the second person when referring to herself as a character in her memoir. The first instance of this grammatical choice is seen when Machado claims that "you were not always a You [...] I thought you died, but writing this, I'm not sure you did."¹¹⁰ By employing the technique of addressing herself in the second person, Machado is allowed to explore her experiences with a degree of emotional detachment. She is adopting a stance of self-observation as if she were viewing her own life from an external perspective. This way, Machado can confront her traumatic experience without becoming overwhelmed by its emotional weight. Additionally, the second person narrator can be interpreted as a form of self-address, with Machado speaking directly to her past self as she reflects on her experiences.

Furthermore, Machado establishes an intimate connection between herself and the reader, making them participants of her own experience as if it were their own. This intention of sympathy provides a deeper engagement with the narrative, as it is possible to see in the chapter "*Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure*," in which Machado allows the reader to play a game and, depending on whether the reader chooses to apologise or to calm the woman from the Dream House down, the outcome is positive: "It's going to be all right. One day, your wife will gently adjust your arm if it touches her face at night, soothingly straightening it while kissing you;"¹¹¹ or negative: "That night, she fucks you as you lie there mutely, praying for it to be over, praying she won't notice you're gone."¹¹² In this chapter, Machado adds comments on the possible decisions made by the reader such as, "You shouldn't be on this page. There's no way to get here from the choices given to you. You flipped here because you got sick of the cycle. You wanted to get out. You're smarter than me"¹¹³ or "Are you kidding? You'd never do this."¹¹⁴ This chapter is quite interesting because Machado offers the reader to enter her dreams, which ends up being both a warning and a reassurance: "You shouldn't be

¹¹⁰ Machado, 14.

¹¹¹ Machado, 185.

¹¹² Machado, 183.

¹¹³ Machado, 179.

¹¹⁴ Machado, 178.

here, but it's okay. It's a dream. She can't find you here. In a minute you're going to wake up and everything is going to seem like it's the same, but it's not. There's a way out. Are you listening to me? You can't forget when you wake up. You can't—.”¹¹⁵ This abrupt ending of the dream can mean either that Carmen has woken up from her dream where she was free, although having to remember the events from the night before, or the woman from the Dream House has found her in her dreams.

However, Machado breaks with the use of the second person at the end of the memoir when she starts writing in first person; this change in the way of writing can be interpreted as she has broken her relationship with her abuser and is now far away from her. Nonetheless, the unnamed woman still lives in her memories as she has yet to overcome the trauma: “And so seven years on I am still terrified that if I force myself awake (as I learned to do as a child), she will step out of the dream and into the waking world where I am safe and so far away.”¹¹⁶

It is also remarkable the absence of a name for the woman from the Dream House. It is argued that the lack of a name for her is because Machado does not want to personalise her trauma. By doing this, considering the detachment of her experience by the second-person narrator, Machado employs a narrative technique that universalises her story. It allows her to explore the complexities of her relationships without reducing them to a singular, individual experience. Instead, the woman from the Dream House becomes a symbol of collective suffering, which embodies the shared struggles of other survivors of abuse within queer communities.

Furthermore, Machado's choice to withhold the name of her abuser reflects her nuanced exploration of memory and subjectivity. Throughout *In the Dream House*, Machado questions the reliability of memory and how trauma can distort one's perception of reality. By leaving the identity of her abuser open-ended, Machado acknowledges the fluidity of memory and the impossibility of fully capturing the complexity of her experiences within a singular narrative frame. This narrative ambiguity

¹¹⁵ Machado, 186.

¹¹⁶ Machado, 234.

encourages readers to reflect on the inherent limitations of autobiographical storytelling, particularly in the context of trauma and abuse.

Additionally, and connected to the exemplification of psychological violence portrayed in the memoir, Machado's decision to protect the anonymity of her abuser highlights the power dynamics inherent in abusive relationships. In many cases, the abuser maintains control over the victim through manipulation, verbal abuse, possessiveness/jealousy, or public humiliation.¹¹⁷ Hence, by refusing to publicly name her abuser, Machado asserts agency over her own narrative, subverting the traditional dynamics of victimhood.

By focusing on the nuance of her lived experience rather than the identity of her abuser, Machado resists the cultural demand for a spectacle of accusation that often reduces survivors to mere instruments of public judgment. This choice shifts the locus of power back to her, emphasising her control over the story's framing and purpose:

I wished everything had this much clarity. I wish I had always lived in this body, and you could have lived here with me, and I could have told you it's all right, it's going to be all right. When I turned around, my dark silver moon-shadow walked in front of me as I made my way back to the shore. My tale goes only to here; it ends, and the wind carries it to you. It's the only true kind of ending. Sometimes you have to tell a story, and somewhere, you have to stop.¹¹⁸

In doing so, she subverts traditional expectations that equate victimhood with passivity or dependency on external validation, instead reclaiming the complexity of her voice and emphasizing that the act of telling, rather than naming, is itself a radical form of resistance and self-empowerment.

5. Conclusion

Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House* stands as an emotional and groundbreaking exploration of domestic violence, describing the complexities of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse within the context of same-sex intimate partner

¹¹⁷ Follingstad et al, "The Role of Emotional Abuse in Physically Abusive Relationships," 108–109.

¹¹⁸ Machado, 258.

relationships. Through the narration of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse, Machado dismantles the myths surrounding same-sex intimate partner violence, particularly within lesbian relationships, confronting the misconception that abuse is solely perpetrated by men against women. Her engagement with the Gothic tradition adds a symbolic layer, with the Dream House becoming a vessel for horror, oppression, and depersonalisation, reflecting the psychological toll of abuse. Moreover, she demonstrates that women can indeed be perpetrators of violence, debunking the harmful notion that same-sex relationships are immune to the dynamics of abuse.

Machados' innovative formal techniques further enrich the memoir, particularly her use of second-person narration, which serves as both a tool for emotional detachment and a mechanism for inviting the reader to inhabit her experience. This stylistic choice, coupled with her refusal to name her abuser, universalises her trauma while asserting her control over the narrative, subverting traditional notions of victimhood. By blending personal memory with literary genres and narrative experimentation, *In the Dream House* serves as a powerful reflection of the trauma that surrounds domestic violence, particularly within LGTB communities. Through her exploration of the various forms of abuse she endured—from physical assaults to psychological manipulation—Machado exposes the nature of intimate partner violence and its profound impact on survivors. Ultimately, Machado's work not only amplifies the voices of survivors but also challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about abuse, memory, and agency, ensuring its place as a vital text in the ongoing discourse on gendered violence and queer representation.

To conclude, *In The Dream House* is a profound and necessary addition to the literary canon on lesbian domestic violence, offering a multifaceted exploration of abuse within same-sex intimate partner relationships. Due to the lack of representation ofSSIPV in lesbian relationships, Carmen Maria Machado's memoir proposes a periscope through which to have a new vision and perspective on lesbian relationships.

Bibliography

- Aguirre, Manuel. "Towards a Definition of the Gothic Genre." In *The Grammar of Gothic*, 35–50. Madrid: The Northanger Library Project, 2021.
- Condit, Cassidy. "Domestic Violence in Lesbian Partnerships: Dispelling the Myths." *Writing for a Real World*, 51–71. San Francisco: University of San Francisco, 2005.
- Crane, Cassidy. "Female Domestic Literary Horror through the Lens of the Contemporary Work of Carmen Maria Machado." *Student Scholarship* 117, (2022): 1–31.
- Farrugia, Kristy and Beverly Abela. "The Broken Rainbow: Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence." *MCAST Journal of Applied Research & Practice* 3, no. 1 (2019): 159–178.
- Follingstad, Diane, et al. "The Role of Emotional Abuse in Physically Abusive Relationships." *Journal of Family Violence* 5, no. 2 (1990): 107–120.
- Gelles, Richard J. *Intimate violence and abuse in families*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016.
- Gurko, Jane and Sally Gearhart. "The Sword and the Vessel Versus the Lake on the Lake: A Lesbian Model of Nonviolent Rhetoric." *Bread and Roses: Midwestern Journal of Issues and the Arts* 2, (1979): 26–30.
- Irwin, Jude. "(Dis)counted Stories Domestic Violence and Lesbians." *Qualitative Social Work* 7, no. 2, (2008): 199–215.
- Kahane, Claire. "Gothic Mirrors and Feminine Identity." *The Centennial Review* 24, no. 1, (1980): 43–64.
- Kerber, Linda K. "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History." *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1, (1988): 9–39.
- Lesperance, Alice. *Carmen Maria Machado Has Invented a New Genre: The Gothic Memoir*. 2019. <https://electricliterature.com/carmen-maria-machado-has-invented-a-new-genre-the-gothic-memoir/>
- Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007.
- Machado, C. M. *In the Dream House*. New York City: Graywolf Press, 2019.
- Merriam-Webster, s.v. "gaslight (n)," accessed December 14, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gaslighting>

- Messinger, Adam. "Invisible Victims: Same-Sex IPV in the National Violence Against Women Survey." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 26, no. 11, (2010): 2228–2243.
- Murray A. Straus and Martha Smithey, "Primary Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence." *Crime prevention: New approaches* (2004): 239-276.
- Onion, Amanda, et al. "Stonewall Riots." *History*, A&E Television Networks, accessed 14 Mar. 2024 <https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/the-stonewall-riots>.
- Renzetti, Claire M. "Building A Second Closet: Third Party Responses to Victims of Lesbian Partner Abuse." *Family Relations* 38, (1989): 157–163.
- Ristock, Janice L. "Beyond ideologies: Understanding Violence in Lesbian Relationships." *Canadian Woman Studies* 12, no. 1, (1991): 74–79.
- Rollè, Luca et al. "When Intimate Partner Violence Meets Same-Sex Couples: A Review of Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence." *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, no. 1506. (2018): 1–13.
- Spelman, Sinéad. "Carmen Maria Machado's Memoir *In The Dream House*: Exploring Same-Sex Female Intimate Partner Abuse Through Literary Tropes." *Dearcadh: Graduate Journal of Gender, Globalisation and Rights* 3, (2022): 42–56.
- Steiner, Lidia. "Invisibility, homophobia and heterosexism: Lesbian, gays and the media." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10, no. 4, (1993), 395–422.
- Sweet, Paige L. "The Sociology of Gaslighting." *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 5, (2019): 851–875.
- "What Is Domestic Abuse?" *United Nations*. Accessed February 1, 2024. www.un.org/en/coronavirus/what-is-domestic-abuse.
- Wu, Zhen. "A Review of Gender Stereotypes in Domestic Violence." *Journal of Education, Humanities, and Social Sciences* 8, (2023): 1305–1309.
- Zimmerman, Bonnie. "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism." *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 3, (1981): 451–75.

Notes on contributor

Andrea García García holds a B.A. Degree in English Studies from the Universidad Complutense of Madrid and is now studying a M.A. in International Relationships in said university. Her academic interests revolve around international politics, 19th and 20th century literature, and feminist studies.

CONTACT: <andrga32@ucm.es>

ORCID: [0009-0004-8291-9092](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8291-9092)

Transforming the Vampire for Young Adults: Mr. Cullen's Distorted Reflection in the Mirror of Lord Ruthven¹¹⁹

Marta González Cañete¹²⁰

Abstract:

Themes and figures that originated in the literature of previous centuries are present in contemporary novels, with certain changes related to the evolution of the mentality of the society within which said novels were written. The vampire, more specifically, has been an element typically used to represent a danger to human beings in relation to sexuality and religion, particularly for young women. This representation has been maintained in the literature published today, with some relevant variations that offer a different point of view regarding this figure. Polidori's Lord Ruthven and Meyer's Edward Cullen are part of the same tradition, being two figures who cover the same topics, although from very different focuses. Both cases present a complicated morality; while the former rejoices in his wickedness, the latter constantly suffers for his condition. Beyond their internal characteristics, these two personifications of the vampire as a monster also present a series of common physical traits since one is the consequence of the other. This paper aims to prove that the feelings Ruthven and Cullen experience towards their vampirism is a representation of the socio-cultural background in which they were created. While Polidori's monster is presented as evil and damned, thus representing sinfulness, Meyer's creature is presented as a suffering and romanticised figure who atones for his nature.

Keywords: Gothic fiction, *The Vampyre*, YA fiction, *Twilight*, Christianity, morality.

¹¹⁹ Recommended Citation

González Cañete, Marta. "Transforming the Vampire for Young Adults: Mr. Cullen's Distorted Reflection in the Mirror of Lord Ruthven." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 47-70:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

¹²⁰ **CONTACT:** Marta González Cañete <marta.canete00@gmail.com>

1. Introduction

As Michelle J. Smith and Kristine Moruzi state, the emerging literary genre of paranormal romance in young adult's literature (YA¹²¹) derives from the Gothic tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries.¹²² This claim can be defended by looking at the central themes of Gothic novels, such as the feeling of love that is more powerful than anything, even life and death, an example of which would be the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). This topic is also a central point of many YA book sagas such as Richelle Mead's *Vampire Academy* (2007—2010), one of the novels that Smith and Moruzi take into consideration in their study.

The intense feelings of the main characters are not the only trait of the Gothic tradition that has persisted until contemporary times. Gothic plots explore the dark and uncanny elements that come from within, which “[seduce] the eye of the viewer.”¹²³ In relation to this, Smith and Mozuri write that the resurgence in popularity of Gothic themes can be appreciated in the “incorporation of Gothic motifs [...] of elements of darkness and misfortune to the romance.”¹²⁴ As Christ Priestley et al. write, “from its beginning, gothic has been something of a patchwork [...] Eighteenth century gothic was a new literary vogue, but it was also something reconstituted, a repetition of past forms and stories.”¹²⁵ These authors state that the Gothic is a genre in constant reinvention, as it is adapted to appeal to the new generations and, because of that, “it remains a rich mode for contemporary novelists to explore.”¹²⁶ This is why it can be argued that the YA literary genre has not only been inspired by Gothic elements, but also owes to these the publishing success it has had in the recent decades.

One of the Gothic motifs present in YA contemporary literature can be appreciated in the portrayal of many supernatural figures, such as the vampire, which will be the

¹²¹ Acronym for “Young Adult.”

¹²² Michelle J. Smith; Kristine Moruzi, “Vampires and Witches Go to School: Contemporary Young Adult Fiction, Gender, and the Gothic,” *Children's Literature in Education*, no. 49, (2018): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-018-9343-0>.

¹²³ Richmond-Garza, Elizabeth M, “The Vampire's Gaze: Gothic Performance in Theory and Practice,” *The Comparatist*, no. 22, (1998): 92.

¹²⁴ Smith; Mozuri, 13.

¹²⁵ Christ Priestley, et al. “Patchwork Gothic.” *Young Adult Gothic Fiction: Readers, Writers, Scholars. Beyond Twilight*, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/beyondtwilight/patchworkarticle.php>.

¹²⁶ Priestley, Christ, et al. “Patchwork Gothic.”

main focus of this study. As Yoshitaka Inoue writes, “the images of vampires not only are universal but also have characteristics that change throughout history and cultures.”¹²⁷ Subsequently, the vampire evolves because society changes since, “the vampire is deployed [as] both conservative enforcer, and a reassuring object of fear.”¹²⁸ This figure has been used as a cautionary tale figure, an example of which would be by Heinrich August Ossenfelder’s poem, *Der Vampyr* (1784), to reinforce the prevailing moral values in different societies. The fear that this monster generates is used as a threat and possible punishment for any divergence from said moral code. Because of this, every vampire in every society has been characterised by the constant breaking of the moral codes, for instance “feeding on fish in Malaysia, elephants in India, or virgins in nineteenth-century European literature.”¹²⁹ It is not until the 20th century that this constant challenge to the established order becomes a romantic and seductive feature.

These monsters, at first, were terrifying creatures and not at all attractive from a sexual point of view. In the first representations of this myth, “the defining trait of vampires had been their sheer violence, manifested in craving for blood.”¹³⁰ Therefore, vampires like the one present in the aforementioned Ossenfelder’s *Der Vampyr*, were presented as monstrous and unsightly figures since their goal was to clearly represent the ugliness of sin and moral corruption, so that they were a visual representation of evilness. Unlikeable characteristics, such as a disturbing way of walking (“creeping”), or an unnaturally cold skin, can be appreciated in the following verses:

And as softly thou art sleeping
To thee shall I come creeping
And thy life’s blood drain away.
And so shalt thou be trembling
For thus shall I be kissing
And death’s threshold thou’ it be crossing

¹²⁷ Yoshitaka Inoue, “Contemporary Consciousness as Reflected in Images of the Vampire.” *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche* 5, no. 4, (2011): 83 <https://doi.org/10.1525/jung.2011.5.4.83>.

¹²⁸ Richmond-Garza, “The Vampire’s Gaze: Gothic Performance in Theory and Practice,” 94.

¹²⁹ James Craig Holte, “A Century of Draculas.” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 10, no. 2, (1999): 109.

¹³⁰ Tudor Balinisteanu, “Romanian Folklore and Literary Representations of Vampires.” *Folklore* 127, no. 2, (2016): 153.

With fear, in my cold arms.¹³¹

In contrast, when the aim of the vampire story was to show how evilness can seem desirable, vampires such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or Lord Ruthven, the protagonist of *The Vampyre* (1819) by John William Polidori, were portrayed. Another example would be the vampire Carmilla in *Carmilla* (1872) by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, that also introduced lesbianism, which at the time was an important sexual taboo. These examples show an uninhibited sexuality, so that "Victorian readers [...] uncomfortable with subversive sexuality and violence, read the vampire as a monster."¹³² At a time when pleasure as the main objective of sex was highly condemned, a monster whose way of attacking is through penetration —of its teeth into the flesh, a clear metaphor of coitus¹³³— and whose usual prey are young maidens, represented corruption, and thus encouraged the audience to stay away from it.

The sexual revolution in Western societies, and the disempowerment of conservative values, however, affected the way in which these stories were written. In literature, vampires kept their seductive physical characteristics, but these were no longer perceived as something inherently sinful. Therefore, they lost the trait that once terrified society, since for "post-modern [...] readers [who are] [...] more comfortable with sexuality, [...] *Dracula* is an attractive figure."¹³⁴ It is precisely the change in the mentality of societies that entails the change in the behaviour of vampires, so that contemporary fiction contains vampire-like characters with positive values and good intentions, as sexual attraction is no longer something regarded as negative.

After centuries of sexual repression and prohibitions regarding exploring the dark side of humanness, a new literary genre emerged. In the 20th century, the possibility of transforming the vampire, which had traditionally played the role of villain, into the hero of the story begins to be explored, just as "throughout their long and varied history, vampires have been able to transform themselves to satisfy their own needs, and the

¹³¹ Heinrich August Ossenfelder, "Der Vampir," *Les Vampires*, May 18, 2022.
<http://www.lesvampires.org/ossenf.html>.

¹³² Holte, 122.

¹³³ James Twitchell, "The Vampire Myth," *American Imago* 37, no. 1, (1980): 88.

¹³⁴ Holte, 112.

needs of readers.”¹³⁵ Once again, writers adapted the vampire, keeping some of the characteristics from previous traditions and adding or subtracting others, taking into account the tastes of the readers and the new possibilities of their time. An example of this phenomenon would be Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992), a film adaptation that shifts the perception the audience has of the vampire, turning the villain into a romantic figure by establishing a romantic relationship between him and Mina, which does not exist in the original text. Moreover, in Stoker’s work, Dracula goes after Mina’s friend, Lucy, looking not for romance but for sexual possession, as he drinks her blood many times before turning her into a vampire. When Dracula tries to do the same with Mina, however, her relationship with her fiancé and her faith in God end up saving her. This new romantic facet of vampires, present in Coppola’s movie as well as the *Twilight* saga (2005—2008) by Stephenie Meyer, portrays a vampire “who serves as the narrative’s male lead and the heroine’s love interest [...] transformed into an alluring combination of danger and sensitivity, a handsome romantic hero haunted by his lust for blood and his guilt for the humans he killed in the past.”¹³⁶

In this way, characteristics that in previous centuries were regarded negatively have eventually transformed into desirable attributes, such as physical appeal or a dark past that the subject tries to make up for. Those traits that once tormented society now torment these new vampires as tortured and grey heroes. This new portrayal shows a complicated morality, as they are constantly forced to choose between quenching their thirst and their desire not to commit unlawful acts, such as killing, as they are now representatives of righteousness and redemption.

As Nina Auerbach claimed, “every age embraces the vampire it needs.”¹³⁷ The vampires present in contemporary fiction are part of the literary tradition that dates to the 18th century. Each vampire represents the moral values of their time, either presenting themselves as the counterpart against all that is acceptable, or as the suffering figure that must make an effort not to fall into the temptation of violating the

¹³⁵ Holte, 109.

¹³⁶ Karen Backstein, “(Un)Safe Sex: Romancing the Vampire,” *Cinéaste* 35, no. 1, (2009): 38.

¹³⁷ Smith; Mozuri, “Vampires and Witches Go to School: Contemporary Young Adult Fiction, Gender, and the Gothic,” 9.

established moral code. In this way, the eighteenth-century vampire and the modern vampire share a series of characteristics, for example their supernatural powers; although they differ in some others, being these the use they make of said powers, as well as the importance that they place both on Christian moral rules and the well-being of innocent humans. It must be considered that “the vampire myth is widespread and vibrant in our culture.”¹³⁸ The understanding which values of contemporary Western society the vampire represents can lead to a deeper understanding of the present morals and how these affect the literary tradition. Therefore, analysing its evolution as well as its similarities with previous traditions is of great relevance.

2. Religion and Sexuality: Lord Ruthven in Contrast to Mr. Cullen

2.1. The Evolution of Sex from Gothic Fiction into YA Literature

Cynthia Griffin Wolff explores the way in which Gothic literature expresses female sexuality, since at no time is it denied that women feel sexual appetite, but rather it is understood as “something both forbidden and dirty”¹³⁹ due to Christian influence. This study is focused on the novels written by Ann Radcliffe, but it can be extrapolated to the Gothic narrative in general since, as Wolff explains, Radcliffe created a language with which Gothic novels were able to present female sexuality in a “respectable”¹⁴⁰ way. What this narrative did was to divide the romantic interests into two categories, the priest and the devil, in such a way that while the former displayed an innocent and chaste, purely emotional attraction, the latter represented the physically appealing villain whose desire is to fulfil his basest passions by corrupting the virtue of the heroine¹⁴¹.

In this context, it would make sense to affirm that Lord Ruthven personifies this archetype of the devil, since he lacks sentimentality, and all the actions he carries out are born from his selfish desire to feed himself and satisfy his lust. However, Radcliffe’s

¹³⁸ Twitchell, “The Vampire Myth,” 84.

¹³⁹ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “The Radcliffean Gothic Model: A Form for Feminine Sexuality,” *Modern Language Studies* 9, no. 3, (1979): 110, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3194284>.

¹⁴⁰ Wolff, “The Radcliffean Gothic Model: A Form for Feminine Sexuality,” 98.

¹⁴¹ Wolff, “The Radcliffean Gothic Model: A Form for Feminine Sexuality,” 99.

priest is not found in Mr. Cullen. Despite the fact that he refuses to maintain intimate relations with the heroine, he is presented as a character with both allure and sexual desire, so that this new vampire would be read as a mixture of both archetypes. This change occurs because, as Melissa Ames explains, “young adult literature is well known for its attention to interpersonal relationships [...] and, of course, teen sex”¹⁴².

YA literature presents a model of sexuality similar to that of the Gothic, but with a twist. As it can be seen, “the Gothic is constantly being reinvented in ways that address the current historical moment.”¹⁴³ With the loss of the Church’s social influence, female sexuality ceases to be seen as something inherently sinful. While, even nowadays, in Western countries the Christian church still has a remarkably strong cultural influence, social movements managed to gain individual freedom outside of the church’s beliefs. One of these was the liberty to explore sexuality out of marriage, which led to the sexual revolution during the 1960s. Because of this, nowadays desire is no longer a trait belonging to the devils, and the representatives of pure love can also incorporate a certain amount of sensuality. Ames points out that “young adult texts began merging their narrative recipes with that of traditional gothic vampire tales”¹⁴⁴; that is to say, the literary subgenre known as paranormal romance —which is part of the YA genre— is the evolution of Gothic fiction, altered by the change of the way in which romance and sexuality are perceived by societies. The evolution of the perception of sex in literature can be appreciated both in *The Vampyre* and the *Twilight* saga, as it will be analysed in the following paragraphs.

2.2. Lord Ruthven as an Agent of Damnation

During the 18th and 19th centuries, there was a strong cultural importance placed on virginity, especially for women. Women who experienced sexual relationships before

¹⁴² Melissa Ames, “Vamping Up Sex: Audience, Age, & Portrayals of Sexuality in Vampire Narratives,” *The Journal of Dracula Studies*, no. 12, (2010): 82 – 84.

¹⁴³ Smith; Mozuri, “Vampires and Witches Go to School: Contemporary Young Adult Fiction, Gender, and the Gothic,” 9.

¹⁴⁴ Ames, “Vamping Up Sex: Audience, Age, & Portrayals of Sexuality in Vampire Narratives,” 83.

marriage “faced exclusion,”¹⁴⁵ among other possible punishments, for example being locked up in asylums. Literature was used as a means to reinforce these ethical and religious values. This can be appreciated in how “many literary works for adults [...] endorsed Christian teachings,”¹⁴⁶ in such a way that together with the threat of the Church and the possibility of facing social ostracism, these women were also exposed, in the novels they read, to practical examples of what the fate of a misbehaving female could be.

This moral reinforcement is found in *The Vampyre*, as this story presents the vampire as a monster whose principal prey are young maidens, whom he drags to damnation, whether social or divine. Lord Ruthven uses his “irresistible powers of seduction”¹⁴⁷ so that his victim will be “hurled from the pinnacle of unsullied virtue, down to the lowest abyss of infamy and degradation.”¹⁴⁸ In this way, this monstrous character is presented as a handsome man who takes advantage of this attribute both to feed on the blood of innocent women and to end their status as virgins.

Throughout the story, the reader encounters numerous examples of Lord Ruthven’s threat to female virtue, such as the case of Ianthe. She is the beloved of Aubrey, the narrator of the story, who describes her as a representative of “innocence, youth, and beauty.”¹⁴⁹ Ianthe begins to be in danger from the moment she appears since the vampire’s actions are “most likely to end in the ruin of an innocent, though thoughtless girl,”¹⁵⁰ which is how this character is portrayed.

Given Ianthe’s innocent character, she believes in legends such as vampires, as she represents the perfect girl who fears sin for, she follows God’s teachings righteously. Moreover, over the course of her relationship with Aubrey, Ianthe tells him about the vampire legends she believes in, describing “the traditional appearance of these monsters, [so that] his horror was increased, by hearing a pretty accurate description of

¹⁴⁵ Maureen Moran, Maureen, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 37.

¹⁴⁶ Maureen, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 25.

¹⁴⁷ John William Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 7.

¹⁴⁸ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 9.

¹⁵⁰ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 8.

Lord Ruthven.”¹⁵¹ Lord Ruthven, however, being “handsome, frank, and rich,”¹⁵² employs his paranormal qualities “to use the serpent’s art”¹⁵³ to corrupt her. This is a reference to the Old Testament, when Eve eats the apple of the forbidden tree and “the woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’”¹⁵⁴ Ianthe is, therefore, equated to Eve, an innocent woman close to God but who fails to resist the temptation of evil. Similarly to Eve trusting the serpent and, as a consequence, losing her innocence, Ianthe is shown as a character fearful of dark powers, someone who believes that these are true and therefore pose a real threat, but who is nonetheless unable to escape the damnation that Lord Ruthven brings with him.

Despite her beliefs, Ianthe is found dead in the forest, and the narrative suggests that her killer was Ruthven. Lord Ruthven’s attack on Ianthe is not narrated, as Aubrey is not a witness, but it is inferred that she was killed by a vampire as “upon her neck and breast was blood, and upon her throat were the marks of teeth having opened the vein.”¹⁵⁵ This bloody scene not only shows the death of Ianthe, but it is also a signifier of the loss of her maidenhood since “blood itself [is] sexually suggestive, and when the vampire bites and sucks the throat, he [is] symbolically violating his victim and inseminating her with his dread curse.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, the condition of vampire is used, in this tale, as a way to physically and visually show the corruption of the female body when exposed to extramarital sexual relations.

Not only is Lord Ruthven a character who steals the virtue of women by engaging in premarital sexual activities, but he is also presented as someone who mocks the religious rite of marriage, when he is to marry Aubrey’s sister at the end of the story, “bearing ruin upon his breath, amidst all [Aubrey] held dear.”¹⁵⁷ The tradition of marriage is usually related to women and men who follow the righteous path. However, in this case, while Miss Aubrey does not seem to have previously committed any sin

¹⁵¹ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 10.

¹⁵² Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 4.

¹⁵³ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 22.

¹⁵⁴ Genesis 3:13 (NIV).

¹⁵⁵ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 12.

¹⁵⁶ David F Morrill, “‘Twilight Is Not Good for Maidens’: Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in ‘Goblin Market,’” *Victorian Poetry* 28, no. 1, (1990): 2.

¹⁵⁷ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 19.

related to lust, the ceremony is presented as a loss of honour. This can be understood as a reflection of the belief that “God would not save the soul of a person who was attacked by a vampire,”¹⁵⁸ so that Aubrey’s sister would be condemning herself through this marriage. Aubrey, who knows what the fate of his sister is going to be from seeing what happened to Ianthe, writes a letter in which he implores her not to marry Lord Ruthven, claiming that if “she value[s] her own happiness, her own honour, and the honour of those [...] who once held her in their arms,”¹⁵⁹ she would delay her wedding until Aubrey could see her and talk to her about the vampire’s nature. The young maiden, however, is not able to resist Lord Ruthven’s desires, and she dies shortly after the wedding, having “glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!”¹⁶⁰ However, while the wedding with a vampire in Polidori’s work is presented as a damned act, a different perspective can be found in Meyer’s work.

2.3. Edward Cullen as a Reinforcer of Moral Codes

Speaking specifically of Count Dracula, but applying this analysis to the way in which vampires are depicted in contemporary literature, Holte states that “recent adaptations, however, following the more positive depictions of vampires [...] depict Dracula as a romantic hero, and in doing so help establish a new narrative form, the dark romance.”¹⁶¹ As a consequence of this literary evolution, two centuries after Lord Ruthven, the American writer Stephenie Meyer created Edward Cullen, “the vampire who wanted to be good.”¹⁶² Being the author a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints, her traditional values and Mormon views on topics such as marriage are present in her novels.

In contrast to Lord Ruthven’s “infernal power[s],”¹⁶³ Mr. Cullen is described as a “godlike creature,”¹⁶⁴ since, from the first moment, the narration tries to make it clear

¹⁵⁸ Inoue, “Contemporary Consciousness as Reflected in Images of the Vampire,” 84.

¹⁵⁹ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 22.

¹⁶⁰ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 23.

¹⁶¹ Holte, 112.

¹⁶² Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight*, (London: Atom, 2010), 179.

¹⁶³ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 11.

¹⁶⁴ Meyer, *Twilight*, 224.

that this vampire is not a creature of evil, but the tormented hero of the story. This characteristic is clearest in the second book of the saga, in a scene in which the protagonist, Bella Swan, is talking to Edward's father, who explains that "he thinks [they]'ve lost [their] souls,"¹⁶⁵ so that he lives constantly haunted by his condition as damned. Edward's belief that there is no Heaven waiting for him will make him worry about Bella's —the main character and the vampire's love interest— salvation. When she asks Edward to bite her and turn her into one of his own, his response shows this concern, as he declines by saying that he "refuse[s] to damn [her] to an eternity of night."¹⁶⁶ Throughout the saga, these two characters will have many disagreements regarding the condition of the souls of vampires, since while she believes them to be intact, he is convinced that they have been lost and condemned to Hell.

Taking into account the previously mentioned relationship between the penetration of the vampire's teeth in his prey's flesh with the loss of virginity, Mr. Cullen shows himself as a perpetuator of traditional values. Like Anna Silver explains, "for Edward [...] marriage is the only moral arena for sexual desire,"¹⁶⁷ so he sets the condition that they must marry before they have sex and, therefore, before he turns her into a vampire. Edward is convinced that the entrance to Heaven is closed to him, but he says that, although he is "one of the eternal damned,"¹⁶⁸ he will not "let them keep [Bella] out, too."¹⁶⁹ He believes that marital sexual relationships are not sinful and, therefore, not dangerous to Bella's soul; contrary to those out of wedlock.

On the other hand, Bella wants to leave behind her condition both as a human and as a virgin without marrying. In this work, stereotypical roles both in terms of gender, and in the dynamics of vampire as predator and maiden as prey, are subverted. It is the male vampire who "exercises self-control over his desire to drink Bella's blood (clearly analogous to sexual desire in this and other vampire lore),"¹⁷⁰ while the human

¹⁶⁵ Stephenie Meyer, *New Moon*, (London: Atom, 2010), 33.

¹⁶⁶ Meyer, *Twilight*, 415.

¹⁶⁷ Anna Silver, "'Twilight is no Good for Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, And The Family In Stephenie Meyer's 'Twilight' Series,'" *Studies in the Novel* 42, no. 1/2, (2010): 127.

¹⁶⁸ Meyer, *New Moon*, 478.

¹⁶⁹ Stephenie Meyer, *Eclipse*, (London: Atom, 2010), 403.

¹⁷⁰ Silver, "'Twilight is no Good for Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, And The Family In Stephenie Meyer's 'Twilight' Series,'" 128.

woman is constantly trying to sexually seduce the vampire. This dynamic can be analysed in the third book of the tetralogy, in which she begins to be more insistent in her attempts to initiate a more intimate approach. Edward complains by stating how unhelpful it is that she “is so eager to undermine [his] self-control,”¹⁷¹ and wondering why “must [he] always be the responsible one.”¹⁷² Due to his concern about the state of the soul of his beloved, he does not give in to her desires until they have gone through the altar.

While it is true that Bella could turn to another member of the Cullen family to be transformed, the narration does not renounce the religious morality imposed by Edward, being the author a member of the Mormon church. Far from condemning Edward’s religiosity, Bella wants him to be the one to transform her. In this lore, what turns a human into a vampire is a poison that enters the bloodstream through the bite, and as the heroine of this story states, “[she] wanted *his* venom to poison [her] system.”¹⁷³ This passage exemplifies the traditional nature of this romantic relationship since, as Ernest Jones explains, “in the unconscious mind, blood is usually an equivalent for semen.”¹⁷⁴ Sex and vampirism are closely linked, so it would be morally unacceptable to be transformed by any other creature who is neither her romantic partner nor her husband.

Vampirism in these novels can also be understood as an entrance to Heaven, since one needs to die in order to be transformed, only to resurrect again after the “three days that [...] set [one] free from mortality,”¹⁷⁵ which can be read as a reference to Christ’s resurrection, as he rose back from the dead after the third day: “for we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again.”¹⁷⁶ These vampires are usually referred to as immortals, thus underscoring this characteristic, which in the religious context is a signifier of salvation, as it is stated in the Bible “that whoever

¹⁷¹ Meyer, *Eclipse*, 168.

¹⁷² Meyer, 171.

¹⁷³ Meyer, 288.

¹⁷⁴ Twitchell, “The Vampire Myth,” 88.

¹⁷⁵ Meyer, 66.

¹⁷⁶ Romans 6:9 (NIV).

believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”¹⁷⁷ However, although sins may have been committed, according to Christianity it is still possible to access Paradise, through cleansing one’s soul in Purgatory, since “nothing impure will ever enter it.”¹⁷⁸

In Meyer’s saga, it is explained how the first years after being turned into a vampire are a torture in which “rage and thirst”¹⁷⁹ are the only thoughts that occupy the monster’s mind, until the ordeal is over and the individual is able to act rationally again, which can be read as the passage through Purgatory until Heaven is achieved. All vampires go through this purgatory, so it can be understood that they have all reached the heavenly state. Although this may seem contradictory, since most vampires in these novels feed on human blood, ending the lives of their victims in the process, they all report living in a state of eternal happiness and comfort. Therefore, giving up feeding on human blood does not seem to be a requirement to achieve this happiness, although it is a requirement to live a morally good eternity.

In contrast to Lord Ruthven’s corruption of the institution of marriage, the nuptials between Edward and Bella are presented as a perfectly adequate procedure since, when Bella is finally transformed, she finds herself being perfectly capable of feeling those “human emotions and longings”¹⁸⁰ that she was supposed to lose for some time as part of “the deal, the price [she]’d agreed to pay.”¹⁸¹ It must be noted that the vampires created by Stephenie Meyer have supernatural powers that are strengthened characteristics from their human years. An example of this would be Emmet Cullen, who was a particularly muscular human, and, when he was turned into a vampire, he developed superhuman strength. The superpower Bella develops is not her ability for self-control, but a psychic barrier she can create around herself, which she uses to protect herself and her loved ones, a consequence of her caring personality. Therefore, it can be argued that Bella’s capacity for self-control makes the only vampire who can enter Heaven without going through Purgatory, as she married before being

¹⁷⁷ John 3:16 (NIV).

¹⁷⁸ Revelation 21:27 (NIV).

¹⁷⁹ Meyer, *Eclipse*, 505.

¹⁸⁰ Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Down*, (London: Atom, 2010), 362.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

transformed. By not being penetrated by the vampire's teeth before becoming a married woman, Bella gains direct access to Heaven.

There is a contrast between Polidori's *The Vampyre* and Meyer's *Twilight* saga in the way in which both works depict the vampire's morals. Like Anna Jackson states, "the monsters have become the heroes."¹⁸² While Lord Ruthven is a corrupting force who uses his prey to satisfy both his thirst for blood and his lust, the contemporary vampire is aware of his curse and fights his instincts to protect his beloved, even if she wishes to follow him to his doom. In these two figures, the contrast between the eternal religious struggle to resist the temptation of sin, present in Mr. Cullen, and the hedonism of Lord Ruthven, who is carried away by his vices and desires, is embodied.

3. The Paranormal Qualities of the Vampire and their Moral Entailment

The behaviour of Lord Ruthven and Edward Cullen is not the only layer that can be studied to analyse the morality they represent, for both vampires share a series of superpowers that also depict it. As Holte claims, the different vampires "resemble the others in some aspects —cold white skin, blood hungers, mesmeric powers— but each is a unique character."¹⁸³ Being part of the same tradition, the distinctive features of these creatures have not changed much, but what is different is the perspective from which these are understood. Three main characteristics are to be analysed, these being their power for hypnosis, the addiction that they generate in humans, and the exceptional physical attributes that these vampires share.

Firstly, Lord Ruthven and Cullen have the power of hypnosis, but the difference in their morals lies in the use they make of said power. In Polidori's vampire, on the one hand, it is never clearly stated that he possesses a supernatural control over the minds of human beings, but it is inferred in passages such as when "Aubrey often wished to [...] beg him to resign that charity and pleasure which proved the ruin of all,"¹⁸⁴ which indicates that, while he is charismatic, this is a dangerous quality that is nonetheless

¹⁸² Smith; Mozuri, "Vampires and Witches Go to School: Contemporary Young Adult Fiction, Gender, and the Gothic," 17.

¹⁸³ Holte, 110.

¹⁸⁴ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 6.

difficult to resist. Yet, the part of this story in which this hypnosis situation is more clearly presented is towards the end, when Lord Ruthven forces Aubrey to swear he will keep his secrets, only for the latter to find himself physically unable to break his oath not even to save his sister's life, as "his tongue had dangers and toils to recount,"¹⁸⁵ in such a way that Aubrey is able to communicate that Ruthven is someone dangerous, but cannot indicate the reasons.

Therefore, "Lord Ruthven can be viewed only as a harmful influence,"¹⁸⁶ as the only one who benefits from his hypnotic powers is himself. If Aubrey's free will had not been taken away, he could have saved his sister, and Ruthven would not have been able to quench his thirst with her. The moral implications of this are inherently negative, because as it can be read in the Bible, selfishness is a sin, "for where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice,"¹⁸⁷ so this feature is a new example of how this monster represents what is undesirable from the Christian point of view.

Edward Cullen possesses these supernatural qualities but, far from being a useful tool for him, they are a characteristic of his condition that he detests, since they pose a danger to human beings and, specifically, to his beloved. Edward describes how his paranormal characteristics work, not specifying that they have to do with hypnosis, but stating that these overpower humans' self-control: "I'm the best predator in the world, aren't I? Everything about me invites you in — my voice, my face, even my smell."¹⁸⁸ Similarly to Polidori, Meyer does not specify that her vampire possesses this mind-controlling power, but it can be deduced from certain passages of the novels in which Bella's free will seems to weaken: "he breathed, and just his smell disturbed my thought processes [...] I knew there was a second part to my brilliant defence, but I couldn't quite call it back."¹⁸⁹ In this particular passage, the goal that the vampire intends to reach is that the girl accepts to climb on his shoulders so that he can transport her through the

¹⁸⁵ Polidori et al, *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, 21.

¹⁸⁶ Richard Switzer, "Lord Ruthwen and the Vampires." *The French Review* 29, no. 2, (1955): 112.

¹⁸⁷ James 3:16 (NIV).

¹⁸⁸ Meyer, *Twilight*, 231.

¹⁸⁹ Meyer, 316.

forest using his supernatural speed, so that she will be protected from the rain and the dangers of the woods.

Accordingly, as Inoue writes, these new vampires, “while taciturn, they think and feel about humans and have an inner life, allowing readers to empathize with their solitary lives,”¹⁹⁰ meaning that characters such as Mr. Cullen have gained an ethic consciousness which stops them from taking advantage of humans. Taking into consideration the religious baggage of this story, Edward is once again presented as a reinforcer of positive and acceptable values because, as it can be read in the Scriptures: “each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed [...] after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin.”¹⁹¹ Indeed, he resists the temptation to utilise his powers to feed on Bella, as he himself claims by saying “mind over matter,”¹⁹² clarifying that not only does Edward refrain from using them, but when he does use them it is presented as undoubtedly for her own good, as is mentioned in the previous paragraph, turning it into a clearly good thing.

In relation with their psychic capacities, these vampires seem to also have an addictive element to them, so that the humans that spend too much time in their presence start developing both an emotional and physical dependency. In Lord Ruthven’s case, it can be appreciated in how Aubrey starts obsessing over him even before finding out about his supernatural condition, as when he “was near the object of his curiosity, he obtained no greater gratification.”¹⁹³ In other words, Lord Ruthven’s very existence causes in Aubrey a great satisfaction, as he feels drawn to this creature who generates in him a feeling of curiosity and the need to know more about this picturesque character. Moreover, Lord Ruthven’s “peculiarities caused him to be invited to every house; all wished to see him, all [...] were pleased at having something in their presence capable of engaging [his] attention,”¹⁹⁴ suggesting again this human necessity of existing in the vampire’s mind. Backstein explains how “the vampire’s effect on his

¹⁹⁰ Inoue, “Contemporary Consciousness as Reflected in Images of the Vampire,” 96.

¹⁹¹ James 3:14-15 (NIV)

¹⁹² Meyer, *Twilight*, 262.

¹⁹³ Polidori et al., 7.

¹⁹⁴ Polidori et al., 3.

victim has always been one of transformation, but a negative one: the draining of blood, the draining of energy, the draining of life,”¹⁹⁵ which means that the relationship between the vampire and his companion is similar to that of cocaine and the drug addict. The monster generates in humans an admiration that ends up consuming them, not only in the draining of their blood, but in the total occupation of their mind.

Lord Ruthven, for his part, is not only aware of the effect he has on people but also takes advantage of it to achieve his objectives, as “because [...] of his mysterious nature, Ruthven becomes something of a violent thrill to the bored minions of high society.”¹⁹⁶ The aristocrat uses this addictive quality for his own benefit, that is, to establish himself as a more than respectable member of society in such a way that he has easier access to his victims. In this way, “many of the female hunters after notoriety [attempt] to win his attentions,”¹⁹⁷ so that he does not even need to approach the maidens for his supernatural appeal to take effect on them, but rather they are the ones who get close to him and get into the lion’s den.

In like manner, Edward Cullen’s human companion – his romantic partner Bella – develops a strong addiction to this vampire. In contrast to Polidori’s work, in Meyer’s novels this addiction is clearly stated on many occasions, one of them being a passage in which, after having spent the day together for the first time, Edward suddenly realises that Bella has gone several hours without eating. While he is insisting on her going back home to get dinner, she tries to stay with him trying to lie saying that she is not hungry, but knowing that she is being betrayed by “[her] hopeless addiction to him,”¹⁹⁸ which can be clearly appreciated in her voice. However, the part of this story in which the paranormal layer to the addiction that Bella feels towards Edward is more evident is in the second book of the saga, in which the vampire decides to leave the girl in order for her to be able to have a normal and safer life. During this period, Bella will describe herself as a “lost moon — [her] planet destroyed [...] that continued, nevertheless, to

¹⁹⁵ Backstein, “(Un)Safe Sex: Romancing the Vampire,” 40.

¹⁹⁶ Morrill, “‘Twilight Is Not Good for Maidens’: Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in ‘Goblin Market,’” 3.

¹⁹⁷ Polidori et al., 3.

¹⁹⁸ Meyer, *Twilight*, 255.

circle in a tight little orbit around the empty space left behind.”¹⁹⁹ Through this metaphor she explains how her only purpose in life is to act as Edward’s partner, a purpose that was lost once he left so that now her existence has no meaning, she even states how “death unquestionably would have been a relief.”²⁰⁰ These passages show how this is not the natural reaction to a breakup, but rather the withdrawal syndrome that a drug addict might feel. In fact, Bella’s feelings towards Edward are compared to a drug addiction many times throughout the series, for as Jacob, her best friend states, “[Edward] is like a drug to [her].”²⁰¹

Bella feels this way until “[her] subconscious mind [gives her] what it thought [she] wanted,”²⁰² and starts creating hallucinations of Edward. Following this, Bella tries to carry out activities that trigger these hallucinations. She discovers that what starts them is adrenaline because, when saying goodbye to her, the vampire made her promise not to “do anything reckless.”²⁰³ The breaking of this promise, consequently, makes her mind think about him. She puts herself in very dangerous situations, such as riding a motorbike without knowing how to do it or jumping off a cliff, because as she gets closer to what is going to generate this adrenaline, “the pain [starts] easing, as if [her] body knew that Edward’s voice was just seconds away.”²⁰⁴ These passages prove how damaging the relationship with the vampire is for the human, and how addictive it can become for the latter, as she will put her life in danger just to get a taste of what the company of the former used to be like.

At the end of the novel, Edward comes back to Bella just to show how regretful he feels for having left her. Contrary to Lord Ruthven, who takes advantage of his effects on humans and, particularly, on young maidens, Edward shows himself to be a selfless character whose intention was for her to “move on with [her] life.”²⁰⁵ Edward will continue to show his repentance throughout the next books of the saga, as he “will

¹⁹⁹ Meyer, *New Moon*, 177.

²⁰⁰ Meyer, 98.

²⁰¹ Meyer, *Eclipse*, 531.

²⁰² Meyer, *New Moon*, 100.

²⁰³ Meyer, 63.

²⁰⁴ Meyer, 315.

²⁰⁵ Meyer, 449.

never forgive [him]self for leaving [her] [...] not if [he] live[s] a hundred thousand years,”²⁰⁶ explaining that he feels he has committed a sin that he must now purge, which, once again, shows the way in which this character is used to reinforce values that are considered to be positive. The quality that is being praised in this case is penance, as the Christian view on this issue is that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations,”²⁰⁷ meaning that this religion understands that sin is inevitable, but that what matters is to acknowledge it and repent.

Finally, the vampires’ physical characteristics are to be analysed, being these supernatural strength, that fire is lethal to them, and the fact that death is a necessary step in order to become a vampire. Because in Lord Ruthven’s story the relationship between the vampire and the narrator is not particularly close, despite spending a great deal of time together, the monster’s paranormal powers are not as clearly specified as in the case of Edward Cullen, who reports these to his partner. Yet, as with the previous issues that have been analysed, these can be extracted from the descriptions that Aubrey does of Ruthven’s actions.

In the second half of the story, when both protagonists are being attacked by a group of bandits, Lord Ruthven fights back in such a way that one of the attackers finds “himself grappled by one whose strength seemed superhuman [...] he was lifted from his feet and hurled with enormous force against the ground.”²⁰⁸ Similarly, Bella explains how Edward “had scooped [her] up in his arms, as easily as if [she] weighed ten pounds instead of a hundred and ten [...] supporting all [her] weight with just his arms [which] didn’t seem to bother him.”²⁰⁹ Taking these two examples into account, it can be seen how each vampire uses the same powers, one as a way of causing damage while the other as a gesture of love and protection, once again pointing out how the same motifs are used to express the difference between the 18th century monster and the 21st century hero.

²⁰⁶ Meyer, *Eclipse*, 28.

²⁰⁷ Luke 24:47 (NIV).

²⁰⁸ Polidor et al., 12.

²⁰⁹ Meyer, *Twilight*, 83.

Concerning the danger that fire poses to vampires, there is no different moral reading to these two stories. In the context of Christianity, fire is understood as a signifier of Hell, since sin “corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by Hell.”²¹⁰ As it happened in the Old Testament with Sodom and Gomorrah, God uses flames to punish those who commit unforgivable crimes, so it is not surprising that in the context of two vampire stories highly concerned with religion, these immortals who feed on the blood of virgin women must take special care with divine punishments.

In Polidori’s *The Vampyre*, in the same passage in which the gang of criminals is trying to attack Aubrey and Ruthven, it is told how the attackers start brandishing some fire torches, and how Ruthven’s reaction is to “instantly [rise] and, leaving his prey, rush through the door.”²¹¹ The narrative does not provide an explanation for this behaviour, however *The Vampyre* portrays vampires as they are understood in the traditional folklore, part of which consisted on burning corpses as a measure to avoid vampirism, as it was generally believed that fire was harmful for this creatures. This aversion to fire is explained in the *Twilight* saga; it is clearly seen how they burn the bodies of the vampires who they are forced to kill. In the third book of the series, Edward must fight another of his kind who wants to feed on Bella, and when the battle ends, he throws the other vampire’s body into a “raging fire [which] was sending a pillar of choking purple towards the sky.”²¹² As Smith and Moruzi write, “the central concerns of Gothic YA remain consistent with those of canonical Gothic texts,”²¹³ that is, that taking into account that both texts belong to the same tradition, they have common characteristics.

Lastly, another trait that both Ruthven and Cullen share is that death is a necessary step to access vampirism, but in this case the connotations of it are presented as opposite. Lord Ruthven dies towards the end of the story, and despite the fact that before his death he had already presented vampire-like traits, it is after this that his

²¹⁰ James 3:6 (NIV).

²¹¹ Polidori et al., 12.

²¹² Meyer, *Eclipse*, 492.

²¹³ Smith; Mozuri, “Vampires and Witches Go to School: Contemporary Young Adult Fiction, Gender, and the Gothic,” 8.

condition is shown as evident, since when Aubrey wakes up the morning after, he finds that “the corpse [...] was no longer there.”²¹⁴ While this could be a strategy to deliberately confuse Aubrey, in the narrative, Ruthven fully unleashes his vampirism after dying, so this death and apparent resurrection will be analysed as such. Lord Ruthven’s resurrection is not presented as a miracle or something positive, as “Polidori recounts how vampirism is a sort of punishment after death for some heinous crime,”²¹⁵ similar to the generalised idea of what Hell is, so that Ruthven is doomed to an eternity of decadence and corruption, as Morrill points out.

Meyer’s vampires also require a process of death and resurrection. This can be clearly appreciated in the last book, in which Bella is finally turned into a vampire when, after three days of transformation, “[her] heart stuttered twice, and then thudded quietly again just once more [...] there was [...] no breathing.”²¹⁶ Vampirism is understood as an entrance to Heaven, so that one of the first things that Bella discovers about herself when she is reborn as an immortal is that “[her] old mind had not been capable of holding this much love [...] [as her] old heart had not been strong enough to bear it.”²¹⁷ Bella exemplifies the biblical belief that “whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them,”²¹⁸ as she explains how in this state of eternity she feels an overwhelming love for all those around her.

4. Conclusions

The motifs and character stereotypes that originated in traditional Gothic texts have evolved from then to today’s literary market, altered by the different necessities and tastes of new readers. One such 18th century stereotype that tends to recur in both traditions is that of paranormal creatures, particularly the vampire, as it has been a myth used to reinforce the ethics that every society considered unquestionably correct. Originally, the vampire was described as “a grotesque monster that frightened people

²¹⁴ Polidori et al, 15-16.

²¹⁵ Morrill, “‘Twilight Is Not Good for Maidens’: Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in ‘Goblin Market,’” 3.

²¹⁶ Meyer, *Breaking Down*, 356.

²¹⁷ Meyer, 394.

²¹⁸ John 4:16 (NIV).

and was excluded from human contact,²¹⁹ as they were utilised as a practical example of hellish punishment. Nevertheless, it turned out that readers, particularly women, were not realising that the attack of those unattractive vampires was a metaphor of the seduction of handsome human men, so educational literature had to be adapted and attractive vampires appeared, among which Polidori's Lord Ruthven can be found.

However, as the centuries advanced and the Church lost influence among the masses' ideology, sexual intercourses were no longer regarded as a synonym of sin. As a consequence, the sexual appeal of vampires in literature lost this hellish dimension. In the 21st century's vampire traditions, these creatures are not regarded as villains whose only wish is to drag young maidens to damnation, but as romantic heroes who must fight their instincts in order to protect humanity. An example of this new vision on vampires is Edward Cullen, a vampire who falls in love with a young maiden, but who will try to keep both her body and her soul as pure as he is able to, in contrast to Lord Ruthven's constant attempts to corrupt women. Both Ruthven and Cullen act as reinforcers of moral values, the difference lies in that, while the former exemplifies the dangers of sin as well as the actions and people that a righteous female should run away from, the latter represents the idea of resistance against temptation in order to follow the morally correct path.

Both characters share a series of supernatural abilities, but the evolution of this archetype can be appreciated in the different uses they make of these powers: while the evil seducer employs his hypnosis and super strength to take advantage of humans, the penitent religious vampire uses them to protect his human partner. Ruthven as well as Cullen generate a feeling of addiction similar to the one created by drugs on humans, but the former tries to enhance it to gain as much benefit as he can get from it, while the latter tries to separate himself from the human in order to give her the opportunity to disintoxicate herself. Therefore, Lord Ruthven in Polidori's *The Vampyre* is used as a metaphor of sinning and Hell, as this creature is violent, sexually promiscuous, and selfish. On the other hand, the main vampire character present in Stephenie Meyer's

²¹⁹ Inoue, "Contemporary Consciousness as Reflected in Images of the Vampire," 88.

Twilight saga, Edward Cullen, is used to represent the Christian idea of a heavenly state, in which an eternal and overwhelming love is a constant.

Bibliography

- Ames, Melissa. "Vamping Up Sex: Audience, Age, & Portrayals of Sexuality in Vampire Narratives." *The Journal of Dracula Studies* 12, (Sept. 2010): 82 – 84.
- Backstein, Karen. "(Un)Safe Sex: Romancing the Vampire." *Cinéaste* 35, no. 1, (2009): 38–41.
- Balinisteanu, Tudor. "Romanian Folklore and Literary Representations of Vampires." *Folklore* 127, no. 2, (2016): 150–72.
- Holte, James Craig. "A Century of Draculas." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 10, no. 2, (1999): 109–14.
- Inoue, Yoshitaka. "Contemporary Consciousness as Reflected in Images of the Vampire." *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche* 5, no. 4, (2011): 83–99.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/jung.2011.5.4.83>.
- Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn*. London: Atom, 2010. Print.
- Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight Saga: Eclipse*. London: Atom, 2010. Print.
- Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight Saga: New Moon*. London: Atom, 2010. Print.
- Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight Saga: Twilight*. London: Atom, 2010. Print.
- Moran, Maureen. *Victorian Literature and Culture*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009. Print.
- Morrill, David F. "'Twilight Is Not Good for Maidens': Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in 'Goblin Market.'" *Victorian Poetry* 28, no. 1, (1990): 1–16.
- Ossenfelder, Heinrich August. "Der Vampir." <http://www.lesvampires.org/ossenf.html>.
- Priestley, Christ, et al. "Patchwork Gothic." *Young Adult Gothic Fiction: Readers, Writers, Scholars. Beyond Twilight*,
<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/beyondtwilight/patchworkarticle.php>.
- Polidori, John William et al. *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.

- Richmond-Garza, Elizabeth M. "The Vampire's Gaze: Gothic Performance in Theory and Practice." *The Comparatist* no. 22, (1998): 91–109.
- Silver, Anna. "'Twilight is no Good for Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family in Stephenie Meyer's 'Twilight' Series.'" *Studies in the Novel* 42, no. 1/2, (2010): 121–38.
- Smith, Michelle J., and Kristine Moruzi. "Vampires and Witches Go to School: Contemporary Young Adult Fiction, Gender, and the Gothic." *Children's Literature in Education* 49, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 6–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-018-9343-0>.
- Switzer, Richard. "Lord Ruthwen and the Vampires." *The French Review* 29, no. 2, (1955): 107–12.
- Twitchell, James. "The Vampire Myth." *American Imago* 37, no. 1, (1980): 83–92.
- Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "The Radcliffean Gothic Model: A Form for Feminine Sexuality." *Modern Language Studies* 9, no. 3, (1979): 98–113.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3194284>.

Notes on contributor

Marta González Cañete, currently on a break from her studies, graduated with honours in English Studies from the Complutense University of Madrid before earning a postgraduate degree in Children's Literature from Trinity College Dublin. Her main areas of research include vampirism in literature as a metaphor for reinforcing Christian morals in Western society, as well as the intersection of feminism and lesbianism with witchcraft as a means of criticizing the Church in Irish young adult literature.

CONTACT: <marta.canete00@gmail.com>

ORCID: [0009-0009-5747-6417](https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5747-6417)

The Role of Science Fiction in Shaping Future

Posthumanist Scenarios²²⁰

Patricia Lutzardo Martín²²¹

Abstract:

This paper focuses on stories about artificial life, particularly *Frankenstein* and *Erewhon*. It analyzes how they have influenced contemporary perceptions of science and technology, with an emphasis on robotics. By comparing these works through the lenses of posthumanism, this essay highlights the role of science fiction in addressing complex issues, preparing society for future challenges and examining the ethical implications of technological progress. This essay argues that science fiction is vital in helping humanity conceptualize future technological challenges and critically evaluate potential outcomes and ethical considerations that scientific experiments cannot adequately address.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Artificial Life, *Frankenstein*, *Erewhon*, Mary Shelley, Samuel Butler.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on two 19th century novels that have influenced humanity's understanding of science and technology. It analyzes the deep relationship between reality and fiction, exploring how stories about robots and artificial life shape our perceptions of the future of robotics. This essay presents a comparative analysis anchored in posthumanism so as to showcase the privileged position of science fiction to examine difficult topics in a way that may help humanity be better prepared for future challenges. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* could be said to be a story about the consequences of performing scientific experiments with the objective of achieving fast-

²²⁰ Recommended Citation

Lutzardo Martín, Patricia. "The Role of Science Fiction in Shaping Future Posthumanist Scenarios." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 71-95: <<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

²²¹ **CONTACT:** Patricia Lutzardo Martín <patrilut@ucm.es>

paced progress while disregarding ethical matters. Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, on the other hand, is a satire of Victorian society that explores how a philosophical treatise about the dangers of progress has shaped an entire civilization. *Frankenstein* relates to the theme of this essay in that it is a very early example of how science fiction stories tackle the concerns their authors have about the future, since this genre gives them more freedom to explore challenging topics than others do. It also serves as a poignant instance of one of the more pessimistic outlooks on humanity's potential to create artificial life and the possible negative consequences that could arise from this. The basis for the construction of Frankenstein's monster is not mechanical, as it would be in a robot, but organic, or, as Victor defines it, the bestowal of "animation upon lifeless matter"²²². Nevertheless, *Frankenstein* is, in the end, a story about a human invention gaining consciousness and turning against its creator, which is a common theme in dystopian robot stories that aim to warn against the dangers of unchecked scientific progress and human ambition, such as *Westworld* (1973) or *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). These science fiction stories acquaint people with the aforementioned dangers, perhaps in an attempt to help shape a safer future. In this way, literature provides scientists with the opportunity to foresee the outcomes of every endeavor before they undertake them, so that they can assess the dangers more thoroughly than they would if they did not have fiction as a referent.

This essay attempts to prove that science fiction indeed holds such an important role in the advancements of science and human societies. *Erewhon* also helps illustrate this importance, since the Erewhonian society depicted in it has been greatly shaped by a work of fiction: "The Book of the Machines." This book is a fictional philosophical treatise that exists within the universe of the novel, and it warns against the dangers of humanity becoming so dependent on machines that they eventually become enslaved to them. This work created such concern amongst the Erewhonians that they decided to ban all modern technology, keeping only things that were created over 700 years ago. This shows, within Butler's work, an extreme example of how the world can respond to fiction and reshape itself according to its teachings.

²²² Mary Shelley, 1994, 52.

This essay endeavors to examine how literature helps shape reality, focusing on how early science fiction has shaped the way in which humanity understands science, and specifically robotics, in the present. From the methodological perspective, the research follows a posthumanist approach that highlights the differences and similarities of the two main works, *Frankenstein* and *Erewhon*, the ways in which each of them tackles similar themes, and their effects on the real world.

Posthumanism is a philosophical perspective and a theory of literary criticism that has been defined as “something that comes both before and after humanism,” since the shared existence of the human animal and the external technical, medical and informatic realities present in human life have come to be inseparable from the human experience.²²³ Contemporary visions of posthumanism are informed by conversations on cyborgs or automata, which have often involved a reflective stance on humanity’s distinct and special place in the world. In this fashion, a crucial premise of posthumanism is its critical stance towards the prominence afforded to humanity in the natural order.²²⁴

Stories about robots or artificial life of any kind, such as the one depicted in *Frankenstein*, always seem to be written as a reaction to the matters of the real world that worry their authors. The many stories that fit this category all explore similar topics, such as social injustice, the unregulated advance of science or the nature of life and humanity, but they are not restricted by reality like scientific experiments are. This means that they can examine problems from angles that would be impossible to address in real life. Most problems explored in science fiction may not seem pressing or realistic in the present, but many of them will be in the future; and they may become relevant sooner than expected, given the rapid development of science and technology. This is why this essay defends that fiction must continue to address difficult topics so as to provide humanity with the broad perspective it needs in order to be as prepared as it can be when it finally has to face these challenges in the real world.

²²³ Cary Wolfe, 2010, 15.

²²⁴ Andy Miah, 2007, 2.

The structure of this essay consists of four sections as well as a conclusion. The first section will give a historical overview of stories featuring automatons, robots or artificial life; the second one deals with one of the main questions found in science fiction stories, that of the nature of humanity and how this issue relates to posthumanism; the third one explains the connection between robots and the concept of ‘otherness’; the fourth paragraph examines the reasons given in literature as well as in real life for the construction of robots; and finally, the conclusion offers an overview on how the robotics of the 21st century are shaped by the art and literature of the past and the present.

2. A Brief History of Tales about Artificial Life

Nowadays, robots are common enough to seem unremarkable, but it has not always been that way. Before the reality of robots existed, there was the idea of robots. Stories shape the way in which we understand the world, and the idea humanity shares nowadays of how robots are or ought to be comes from centuries of stories about them. As Oscar Wilde would say, “literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose”²²⁵. Life imitates art: it might not even have occurred to scientists to try to build robots in the first place if someone had not written about them before. “There are various ways in which roboticists integrate and construct ‘cultural models’ –practices, artifacts, and concepts shared by members of a culture that provide an interpretive filter through which the world is meaningfully perceived and can be acted upon”²²⁶. And while robots are decidedly not ancient history, the concept of artificial life certainly is.

Tales of automatons date back to Classic Antiquity, with the story of the great bronze automaton Talos, protector of Europa. *The Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology* describes him as “a man of brass, the work of Hephaestus”²²⁷. Apollonius Rhodius describes him as a “man of bronze”²²⁸. Hephaestus also created the

²²⁵Oscar Wilde, 1995, 11.

²²⁶Selma Šabanović, 2014, 345.

²²⁷“Talos” *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, 2018, 973.

²²⁸Apollonius of Rhodes, 2009, 409.

kourai khryseai to be his own servants: “these are golden, and in appearance like living young women. There is intelligence in their hearts, and there is speech in them and strength, and from the immortal gods they have learned how to do things”²²⁹. Homer describes them, then, as anthropomorphic inorganic intelligent beings, therefore, the name of “robots” seems appropriate for them. This kind of automaton has not merely been imagined, but also developed by different cultures throughout history. An example would be the *karakuri ningyo*, mechanical dolls built during Japan’s Edo period²³⁰. This shows that humanity has considered the possibility of robots for many centuries. In the case of the *kourai khryseai*, the entity that imbues these machines with intelligence is not a human scientist but a god, which suggests this scenario might be no different from the concept of a deity giving life to a clay figure, as seen in various mythologies. While it remains distinct from science fiction stories where humans find a way to create artificial life without divine intervention, it is still interesting to note how the idea of automatons that imitate life has been present in literature for so many centuries.

Subsequently novels such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, dating back to 1818, also explore the topic of artificial life, but in a way that differs from its portrayal in Greek mythology. The connection between Mary Shelley’s novel and classical antiquity is especially obvious, since the very subtitle of the novel, *The Modern Prometheus*, references the myth of the Titan who molds humans from clay and gives them fire, or, in other words, technology. One of the main differences between the portrayal of Hephaestus’ aforementioned automatons and Mary Shelley’s creature is that, in the latter, artificial life is made from organic components instead of mechanical ones, and therefore could not be called robotic. To understand this terminology better, it should be specified that this essay understands the word “robot” as “a machine that resembles a living creature in being capable of moving independently and performing complex actions”²³¹, and that these robots must not necessarily resemble human beings in their shape (these beings will be referred to as “humaniform robots,” “humanoids” or “androids”). On the other hand, “artificial intelligence” refers in general to “the

²²⁹ Homer, 2011, 386.

²³⁰ Selma Šabanović, 2014, 343.

²³¹ “Robot.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024.

capability of computer systems or algorithms to imitate intelligent human behavior,”²³² and “artificial life” refers to any kind of being that resembles a living organism in behavior or intelligence, but that was created by a human being and is therefore not natural.

While all these concepts are interesting to posthumanism, the one that best serves to illustrate the blurring of boundaries between the mechanical and the organic, between the human and the machine, as theorized by this philosophy, is the idea of the “cyborg,” understood as “a bionic human.”²³³ Before the word “robot” started being used to speak about a real scientific endeavor, it was first used in literature, specifically in a 1920 Czech play called *Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti* (Rossum’s Universal Robots), by science-fiction writer Karel Čapek. Thus, it is yet another example of how the science world finds inspiration in art. In Mary Shelley’s work there is no mention of robots, automatons, androids or any other of these terms, as Frankenstein’s invention is not mechanical; however, his life is still artificial. Consequently, the novel engages with themes such as the nature of life, humanity and scientific progress that are central to robot stories. Samuel Butler’s work also lacks this terminology, but the machines he describes —capable of self-replication and enslaving humanity— might certainly be considered robots.

Samuel Butler’s 1872 novel *Erewhon* has been acclaimed as one of the very first texts to explore the concept of intelligent machines, even though the novel itself cannot be classified into the category of a science fiction story, since it is a satirical critique of Victorian society. Nevertheless, the theories pertaining to the topic of artificial intelligence and self-replicating machines found in the chapters of Butler’s novel known as “The Book of the Machines” may have had an influence on not only robot stories but also science. In 1872, Butler wrote about machines capable of building other machines similar to themselves in a process akin to reproduction:

It is said by some with whom I have conversed upon this subject, that the machines can never be developed into animate or quasi-animate existences,

²³² “Artificial Intelligence.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024.

²³³ “Cyborg.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024.

inasmuch as they have no reproductive system, nor seem ever likely to possess one [...] Surely if a machine is able to reproduce another machine systematically, we may say that it has a reproductive system [...] And how few of the machines are there which have not been produced systematically by other machines?²³⁴

One notable thing that both *Frankenstein* and *Erewhon* have in common is that they were written in the 19th century. It is no wonder that these and other stories from the time of the Industrial Revolution express such a deep concern regarding the idea of machines overtaking human life, or about science and progress getting out of hand and threatening humanity. After all, the authors lived in a society where they witnessed factories gradually taking over their cities and, by extension, the lives of their inhabitants. Nonetheless, even if these novels could be praised as the forerunners of speculative fiction about artificial life, they are by no means the first ones. During an era when people were migrating in large numbers from the countryside to cities to work in factories that were reshaping the landscape, it is natural that much of the literature of the time would focus on the fear of humanity losing itself to the very machines it created. As Butler puts it in his article “Darwin among the Machines,” “day by day, however, the machines are gaining ground upon us; day by day we are becoming more subservient to them; more men are daily bound down as slaves to tend them, more men are daily devoting the energies of their whole lives to the development of mechanical life.”²³⁵

In the first half of the 20th century, Von Neumann developed his theories on self-replicating automata, which NASA scientists Von Tiesenhausen and Darbro would later define as “an organization of system elements capable of producing exact replicas of itself who, in turn, will produce exact replicas of themselves”²³⁶. Even if Von Neumann never read Butler, it is not difficult to draw connections between early speculative fiction and later scientific advancements. Other examples of scientific developments inspired by literature could be Goddard’s 1926 liquid-fueled rocket, inspired by Jules Verne’s

²³⁴ Samuel Butler, 1970, 165.

²³⁵ Samuel Butler, 2012, 4.

²³⁶ Georg Von Tiesenhausen and Wesley A. Darbro, 1980, 2.

moon cannon in his 1865 book *Journey to the Moon*²³⁷, or Dr. Martin Cooper's design of the first cell phones, inspired by the communicators in *Star Trek: The Original Series*²³⁸. These are perfect examples of life imitating art.

A similar concern related to the impact of machine advancement on labor is the idea of machines replacing humans in the workforce. Mentions of characters losing their jobs to machines can be found in all sorts of books and it is a possibility that still generates concern today. Asimov's *Robot Series* features a human detective called Elijah Baley whose dislike of robots comes from the fact that his father lost his job to one. *Detroit: Become Human*, a video game released in 2018 for the PlayStation 4, turns robots into an analogy of slavery and draws a parallel between the fear of machines supplanting human workers and the fear that immigrants will supplant national workers. The player experiences the story through the perspective of three different robots that suffer the full scope of the hatred and discrimination that results from this fear. Social injustice, ethical concerns and the fear of an unregulated advance of science always seem to be catalysts for the creation of stories about artificial life and robots, and *Frankenstein* and *Erewhon* are notable examples of this. Given that stories help shape the world, these tales should therefore be considered as a powerful tool for exploring ethical dilemmas from various perspectives, helping humanity gain a deeper understanding of itself.

When even the most brilliant scientists cannot see outside the box of the obvious, science fiction can help by stimulating the imagination and expanding mental boundaries. People born in the early twentieth century would likely have had trouble envisioning the feats humans would accomplish through, for instance, artificial intelligence. But their children would grow up reading about Asimov's robots and other artificial intelligences, and this might have inspired generations of scientist to work relentlessly to achieve such a technology, as it has finally happened in the 21st century.²³⁹

²³⁷ Camilla Alexandra Hrdy and Daniel Harris Brean, 2020, 415.

²³⁸ Martin Saadia, 2016, 11.

²³⁹ Hrdy and Brean, 417.

Throughout history, there have been many examples of art that focuses on the topic of artificial life. Intelligent automatons, living corpses or human-like machines have been abundantly addressed, as seen in this first section, but why has this topic fascinated writers for so many centuries? One of the reasons could be that it facilitates the exploration of the many different answers to the question of what nature of life is, and specifically of human life. Victor Frankenstein himself expresses at the beginning of the novel his intention to “pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.”²⁴⁰ But even after so much literature has addressed this issue, there is still no satisfactory answer to what makes humans human, or what those mysteries of creation consist of. Science and philosophy experiment and theorize tirelessly to give answers to these questions, but they must abide by the laws of the physical world and therefore their progress can only be slow. For this reason, exploring the same topics through literature can provide a creative outlet for a much freer and boundless experimentation that allows for different perspectives, unrestrained research and almost endless possibilities. This can help people figure out, through safe fictional scenarios, the things that they do not wish to see happen in the real world, like Butler’s “Book of the Machines” did for the Erewhonian society. Percy B. Shelley wrote a preface for Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in which he comments on this phenomenon by saying that the situation described in this novel, “however impossible as a physical fact, affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield.”²⁴¹ It is indeed a testament to the power of art over people’s minds. The following section deals with this question regarding the nature of human life and the ways in which it has been explored both in philosophy, particularly posthumanism, as well as in literature, focusing on science fiction.

3. What does it Mean to Be Human?

²⁴⁰ Mary Shelley, 1994, 46.

²⁴¹ Shelley, 11.

The question of what it means to be human seems to be as old as humanity itself, or at least as storytelling. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, known as the oldest piece of epic literature, is an example of this. As written in Herbert Mason's translation "Gilgamesh was called a God and man; Enkidu was an animal and man. It is the story of them becoming human together"²⁴². If one had to attempt to simplify the answer that the epic gives to this question, it may be that being human means knowing that death is inevitable.

Posthumanist studies have also tried to give a satisfactory answer to this question, although this endeavor has borne little results. In Zylinska's words, "new technologies and new media are constantly challenging our established ideas of what it means to be human and live a human life."²⁴³ Throughout *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*, Zylinska defends her belief that there is no satisfactory and universal definition of "living being," and that there probably will never be one. She quotes other scholars who have claimed that there is a difference between the definitions of "human" and "person" and tries to determine whether they are right or not by examining the topic of abortion whilst she continues to search for an answer to the question of what a living being is.

This is an example of the more realistic, and perhaps more useful, pursuits of philosophical theories such as posthumanism, as this research could contribute to settling the long-lived debate regarding abortion. In contrast, science fiction takes on a more fantastical approach, addressing similar questions but with fewer constraints. For example, that phrase from the beginning of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, "becoming human," can also be found in the aforementioned video game *Detroit: Become Human* for this exact reason: because it deals with the idea of robots becoming people by becoming self-aware. In this game, the thing that allows robots to gain self-awareness is a virus. In *All Systems Red*, a 2017 novel by Martha Wells, the protagonist is an android who hacks itself to be able to disobey commands at will, becoming in this way capable of making decisions.²⁴⁴ Fiction allows authors to explore these same topics of personhood and autonomy that also trouble philosophers, but they can do so through fictional non-

²⁴² Herbert Mason, 2003, 15.

²⁴³ Joanna Zylinska, 2009, 4.

²⁴⁴ Martha Wells, 2019, 5.

human characters. These authors have first decided that what makes humans human is their self-awareness and free will, and then they have explored that notion through scenarios that would be impossible to replicate in real life.

Where *The Epic of Gilgamesh* seems to focus on the awareness of death and its constant presence as one of the main things that set human life apart from other kinds of existence, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a text of great importance in Mary Shelley's novel, could be said to offer a different perspective on the matter, more similar to that found in *Detroit: Become Human* or *All Systems Red*. Adam and Eve were already human when they were created and lived in the Garden of Eden, but it is not until they decide to eat from the forbidden tree that they become human as that term is understood today: as imperfect beings who will know suffering and death. "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. [...] By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."²⁴⁵ Therefore, at least according to Milton's interpretation of this passage, their free will is what allows them to make the decision to eat the forbidden fruit and it could therefore be considered as the defining factor of their humanity: "I made him just and right, sufficient to have stood, though free to fall."²⁴⁶

Regarding *Frankenstein* in relation to this issue of what characterizes human beings, many questions arise. Why can the creature be considered a living being when it is made from corpses? Or in other words, what is the secret of life that Victor Frankenstein uncovers, and which allows him to give life to something that should be dead? Moreover, and still in line with Zylinska's study, can Frankenstein's monster be considered a human being? Mary Shelley, in her diary from the time when she was writing *Frankenstein*, states that it was a conversation she heard her companions have while they were at Polidori's house that inspired her to think about the "principle of life" and whether it could ever be uncovered.²⁴⁷ This is then echoed in Percy B. Shelley's preface of *Frankenstein*, which also mentions that "the event on which this fiction is

²⁴⁵ The NIV Bible, 2018, Gen. 3.14.

²⁴⁶ John Milton, 1860, 60.

²⁴⁷ James Rieger, 1963, 467.

founded has been supposed, by Dr Darwin and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence.”²⁴⁸

In the 19th century, the concept of vitalism was very prevalent. As it is described by Bechtel and Richardson, “vitalists hold that living organisms are fundamentally different from non-living entities because they contain some non-physical element or are governed by different principles than are inanimate things.”²⁴⁹ Mary Shelley could be referring to this concept when she speaks of the “principle of life.” For Frankenstein’s monster to exist as he is, as an intelligent and sentient creature capable of deep emotion, reflection and empathy, then he must have been endowed somehow with this principle of life, which is to say, with a soul.

These are some examples that illustrate how, when human beings try to answer the question of what makes them human, they tend to gravitate towards the same answer: consciousness. The knowledge of death and the awareness of themselves and the world around them. They also show that there is no satisfactory definition of consciousness, nor any tangible proof of its existence or its nature. However, humans are seldom satisfied with the unknown, so they use speculative fiction to navigate their nature through stories about themselves and hypothetical non-human beings that nevertheless resemble and behave like humans. Furthermore, they seek to comprehend the essence of humanity by constructing an artificial 'other' that helps clarify what humans are not.

4. Artificial Life as the ‘Other’

The concept of ‘otherness’ refers to the condition of being different or distinct from a normative or dominant group or identity, which often leads to marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, if there is an individual, there must also be an ‘other’ against which they define themselves. This notion has been used in postcolonial studies to explore the construction of non-Western cultures as the ‘other’ by the dominant Eurocentric discourses, and to analyze the way in which

²⁴⁸ Mary Shelley, 1994, 11.

²⁴⁹ William Bechtel and Robert C. Richardson, 1998, 1.

‘othering’ affects the individual configuration of cultural identity in postcolonial contexts. In Bignall and Rigney, for example, posthumanism is used to deconstruct anthropocentrism from a postcolonial perspective that examines the “Indigenous conceptualization of their humanity as being constituted in inextricable relations with the nonhuman world”²⁵⁰. It has also been analyzed in gender studies since patriarchal societies define women as the ‘other’ as opposed to men and relegate them to subordinate positions. In Braidotti's foreword for *Socially Just Pedagogies*, the connection between feminist and posthumanist theories is explained as follows:

I have proposed philosophical neo-materialism and nomadic becoming, inspired by neo-Spinozist vital ontologies and feminist theory, as the ontological grounding for the posthuman predicament. This materialist posthuman approach, does not restrict subjectivity to bound individuals, but rather repositions it as the effect of a cooperative trans-species effort.²⁵¹

Posthumanism also defends that the boundaries between humans and machines are blurring, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to define a non-human ‘other’, which challenges anthropocentric perspectives and reevaluates the relationship between human and ‘other’ in the modern world.²⁵²

A certain preoccupation with ‘otherness’ can be seen in Mary Shelley’s work, because she was concerned about the behaviors she witnessed and the state of the world around her and wondered whether the end should always justify the means when it comes to progress. It seems far away still, the day when humanity will be able to create artificial life, but the fact is that science is trying to achieve this goal. When science is about progress, science fiction should be about theorizing where that progress will lead, and whether it is worth it. Literature, and the still unnamed genre of science fiction, allowed her to ask these questions and explore a scenario in which imbuing a corpse with life was indeed possible, and explore what might happen after.

In the novel, Frankenstein’s creature is taken for an evil monster even when he is not, and therefore ‘othered’ and treated with cruelty. Humanity tends to distrust

²⁵⁰ Simone Bignall and Daryle Rigney, 2019, 159.

²⁵¹ Rosi Braidotti, 2018, XV.

²⁵² Andy Miah, 2007, 13.

everything it deems different and to answer the question of “what makes us human” in ways that alienate those it seeks to exclude, as seen in postcolonial studies. Victor Frankenstein achieved the incredible feat of artificially manufacturing a living being, but, when he was finally face to face with him, he realized he could not stand the sight of him. Every person who saw the creature was similarly afraid of him, and this fear led them to attack him even though he was peaceful and had no ill intentions towards anyone.²⁵³

Mary Shelley and Samuel Butler both lived in the height of Imperialism, so it makes sense for Butler to have written his satire in the format of a colonial narrative. In it, the protagonist, Higgs, is surprised by the many ways in which the Erewhonians are different from him and his society, but gradually comes to realize that they are more similar than he thought, making the reader reflect on the absurdities of Victorian society. In this work, Higgs feels alienated from the country he has found himself in and ends up being persecuted. Thus, both Higgs and Frankenstein’s monster are seen as the ‘other’ in opposition to the people they live amongst. This is the role of robots in many science fiction stories, that of the ‘other’ humanity shapes itself against. As explained earlier, the figure of the ‘other’ might be used to help answer important questions and explore different philosophical dilemmas through fiction. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that this role is rarely peaceful, and most speculative fiction stories acknowledge that, if such a thing as an artificially sentient being were to exist, it would probably face the same mistreatment as Frankenstein’s monster.

Isaac Asimov has written many short stories and novels featuring robots. He was also aware of the fear that humans have against all that is different from them, and he named the phenomenon of humans loathing their own creations after Mary Shelley’s protagonist, coining the term “Frankenstein complex” in *The Naked Sun*. He realized that it would be perfectly rational to fear intelligent mechanical beings who are smarter, faster and stronger than humans, and so he placed a safeguard in them that would prevent them from harming humans, exploring in this way the legitimacy of the fear that the concept of artificial intelligence inspires. This safeguard is known as “the laws of

²⁵³ Mary Shelley, 1994, 136.

robotics,” and they are listed as follows in another one of his novels, *The Robots of Dawn*:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.²⁵⁴

If real artificial intelligence was ever achieved and robots came into existence, Asimov's laws would no doubt be programmed into them, and this would become yet another example of how fiction shapes reality.

Asimov, much like Mary Shelley and Samuel Butler, was concerned with the state of the world around him, where people complained about being fired from their jobs because a machine could do the same thing faster, for free and without taking any breaks. But in his *Robot Series*, Elijah Bailey's character arc consists of him learning to respect robots. This is the main divergence regarding how the protagonists of *Frankenstein* and *The Robots of Dawn* see their respective artificial creations. This illustrates how science fiction can serve to give several different answers to the same question by looking at it from different angles. Victor Frankenstein ends up dying just to be rid of his creature,²⁵⁵ but Elijah ends up seeing Daneel as a person and saying that he loves him.²⁵⁶

Thus, one can assert that posthumanism and science fiction have a privileged position from which to explore ethical dilemmas that may not be relevant yet but could be in the future. Scientists are currently developing what is known as Artificial Intelligence (AI), as well as robots, and they expect to be able to construct androids that are self-reliable and moderately self-sufficient in the future, as will be discussed at a later section. The matter of whether humanity will ever be able to create artificial life

²⁵⁴ Isaac Asimov, 2009, 32.

²⁵⁵ Mary Shelley, 1994, 211.

²⁵⁶ Asimov, 176.

has no satisfactory answer, but science fiction offers the chance to explore that idea and to stretch it to its limit, to reflect on every ethical and philosophical dilemma tied to it.

5. Reasons for the Creation of Artificial Life

It is a known fact that robots and AI are being developed nowadays, but why? As was mentioned in a previous section, the idea of mechanical beings that serve humans and work for them has been prevalent for many centuries. There are robots in science fiction that are considered slaves by the narrative, providing labor that is hard for humans to do with the objective of making their lives easier. Nevertheless, there are also stories that treat robots as people, that dwell on the intrinsic value of their lives, and in which the humans around them learn to accept their differences and come to see them as equals, and even befriend and love them. This last possibility is especially interesting considering the generalized ‘othering’ of machines. In these stories, the ‘other’ goes from being ostracized, dehumanized and enslaved to reaching a certain equality in the eyes of humans, an idea that sounds almost utopic.

Humanity seems to have always contemplated the idea of creating humanlike automatons that would do the tasks most humans find hard or unsavory, like Hephaestus’ automatons did for him. Prometheus, found in the subtitle of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, offers a different dimension to this desire. When the titan makes humans out of clay, he does not have the objective of enslaving them. The other gods accept humanity in the end because they enjoy being worshiped by lesser beings, but that was not Prometheus’ aim in the story; it looks like he merely wanted to partake in the act of creation to create a new species that looked like the gods and were intelligent, so they would populate the Earth, grow, and live. This concept sounds similar to the idea in Abrahamic religions that God molded the first man in his own image.²⁵⁷ Victor Frankenstein has been accused of “playing God” in his attempts to create life by himself, as Prometheus did, and there is a reference in the text to this concept of molding a new species out of clay when Victor, explaining the excruciating pains he took to create his

²⁵⁷ The NIV Bible, 2018, Gen. 1.27.

monster, says that he would “torture the living animal to animate the lifeless clay.”²⁵⁸ This earns him the title of “The Modern Prometheus.” Nevertheless, his intentions were fundamentally different from those of the Greek titan. Where Prometheus simply sculpted humans and did not expect anything in return, and got punished for helping them, Frankenstein expected, like the gods in the Greek pantheon, to be worshiped by this new race of superior beings that he envisioned: “a new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me.”²⁵⁹ This raises the question of what motivates humans to create artificial life.

Asimov references the Bible several times in his robot series, especially in the first book, *Caves of Steel*, and although he does not outright compare humans to gods in their creation of robots, the idea found in *The Robots of Dawn* of Dr. Sarton designing his first humanoid robot in his own image seems reminiscent of these creation myths²⁶⁰. Similarly, Sarton and Fastolfe’s idea in Asimov’s stories was to create androids for the sake of creating them, of inventing something marvelously complex that they could pride themselves on. They did not intend either R. Daneel or R. Jander to do any sort of labor, and these two anthropomorphic robots would be severely more unprepared for any kind of manual work than the other non-humaniform robots in the novels.²⁶¹ In this way, Asimov’s roboticists had a similar objective to that of Prometheus and Victor Frankenstein, and of Dr. Noonien Soong in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which is that of creating a new form of life similar to theirs in appearance and intelligence. As opposed to this utopian ideal, there is the purpose of the other robots in Asimov’s stories and of those in *Detroit: Become Human*, which is that of working for humans like Hephaestus’ golden automatons worked for the gods. Slavery was an institutionalized practice in Ancient Greece, and gods often had servants of some kind, such as the immortal human Ganymede; so, what is surprising about Hephaestus’ servants is that they are mechanical. The idea of machines as perfect and willing slaves is an appealing one, because it gets rid of the distasteful reality of enslaving other

²⁵⁸ Mary Shelley, 1994, 52.

²⁵⁹ Shelley, 51.

²⁶⁰ Asimov, 66.

²⁶¹ Asimov, 67.

humans that are, even if the enslaver will work hard to deny it, equal to you in every way, while keeping all the benefits of unpaid labor and servitude. According to Šabanović, countries like Japan, where the main advances in robotics are currently being made, consider that robots would be preferable to immigrants as a solution to Japan's labor shortage.²⁶²

As opposed to this idea of machines as slaves to humanity, there is Samuel Butler's idea of humanity enslaved to the machines. He theorizes in *Erewhon's* "The Book of the Machines" that they will eventually become superior to humans in every way, and that they will only keep humanity alive so they can repair them, until they find a way to do that for themselves as well. He admits that they are useful, but warns that this usefulness gives a false sense of security and that machines will turn on their makers as soon as they are able to, like Frankenstein's monster: "true, from a low materialistic point of view, it would seem that those thrive best who use machinery wherever its use is possible with profit; but this is the art of the machines—they serve that they may rule."²⁶³ This could have been written in a more cautionary tone, the more horrifying aspects of being enslaved by those machines that are humanity's own invention could have been further explored, but the way Butler writes about it is calm and almost matter-of-fact. During the Industrial Revolution, Samuel Butler had already experienced a society enslaved to machines. If it is no wonder that people accustomed to a social pyramid with slaves on its base would envision their deities as being waited upon by immortal servants of one kind or another. Additionally, it is also understandable that people accustomed to seeing hordes of workers of every age entering factories every day to produce more and more intricate machines would envision a future in which humanity's only purpose would be the betterment of the machine. In Butler's words in "Darwin Among the Machines":

If they want "feeding" (by the use of which very word we betray our recognition of them as living organisms) they will be attended by patient slaves whose business and interest it will be to see that they shall want for nothing. If they are

²⁶² Selma Šabanović, 2014, 359.

²⁶³ Samuel Butler, 1970, 162.

out of order, they will be promptly attended to by physicians who are thoroughly acquainted with their constitutions; if they die, for even these glorious animals will not be exempt from that necessary and universal consummation, they will immediately enter into a new phase of existence, for what machine dies entirely in every part at one and the same instant?²⁶⁴

With this, Butler also addresses the previous topic of what constitutes a living being, explaining why he thinks that machines could eventually be considered as such. He mentions, as the aspects of their existence that would make machines qualify as living organisms, the fact that they can be “fed” (imitating the vital function of nutrition), and the fact that they can “die.”

When talking about what he thinks machines will eventually become, Butler defines perfection: “no evil passions, no jealousy, no avarice, no impure desires will disturb the serene might of those glorious creatures. Sin, shame, and sorrow will have no place among them. Their minds will be in a state of perpetual calm, the contentment of a spirit that knows no wants, is disturbed by no regrets.”²⁶⁵ It is very common, if not mandatory, for stories featuring robots in any prevalent role to talk about emotions. If robots are perfect, as Butler describes perfection, then this is the very thing that alienates them from humans. Human beings are, by definition, imperfect. *Errare humanum est*. Probably the most notorious example of a robot tormented by his own perfection and inability to feel human emotions is Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. When a science fiction author wishes to create a markedly non-human character, it seems that the most utilized resource is making them emotionless. Mary Shelley seems to employ this resource as a double-edged sword: she gives her monster deep feelings and great emotional maturity to convey them in such a way that the reader has no choice but to relate to him, empathizing with the monster and seeing him as nothing other than human. Victor Frankenstein would have wanted his creation to be more similar to the immaculate and precise perfection that Butler describes, and he

²⁶⁴ Samuel Butler, 2012, 183.

²⁶⁵ Butler, 182.

might have had better luck in this endeavor had he been an engineer instead of a necromancer.

What these fictional roboticists seem to have in common is that the main reasons why they attempt the construction of artificial beings are ambition and the desire to make human lives easier. These could also be said to be the reasons why roboticists create robots in the real world, another way in which life imitates art.

6. Conclusion: Robotics Today

This essay has examined some of the robots and artificial life forms present in science fiction, but does reality truly mirror these stories? In 2005 there was an exposition in the Aichi International Exhibition Center in Japan with a pavilion dedicated to the possible day-to-day uses of robots in the future, to familiarize the population with a lifestyle that may not be as far away as it seems. Their strategy was to showcase these prototypical robots in very traditional environments, “where ancient tradition ensures that the new art of life arising from the marriage of technology and culture is already part of everyday life here.”²⁶⁶ Some *karakuri ningyo*, the aforementioned Edo period mechanical dolls, were displayed there as a link between Japanese history and the future that roboticists are working to build. Even though the *karakuri ningyo* never had anything resembling artificial life, nor can they be classified as robots, they are yet another example of how the idea of mechanical beings that resemble humans can be found all over the world and across history, and how this history serves as inspiration to shape the world that humans inhabit today.

Roboticists in the real world seem to have very similar goals to those of roboticists in fiction that were explored in section four, namely, that of creating machines that resemble human life and can serve humanity. Šabanović speaks of a team of Japanese roboticists called The Humanoid Robot Group whose aims are to create robots able to “go anywhere a normal human can go [...] pass through a door, go up and down stairs or crawl on the ground,” and whose prototype’s promotional photographs

²⁶⁶ Šabanović, 343.

depict it “working in construction sites and other dangerous environments, as well as helping people carry heavy objects, serving tea, and washing dishes.”²⁶⁷

Another way in which reality imitates fiction in these robotic projects is the exterior design of the robot prototypes. There have been attempts to make their appearance as close to a human’s as those of fictional robots such as Asimov’s R. Daneel, *Star Trek’s* Data or *Detroit: Become Human’s* Markus. On a similar note, the Humanoid Robot Group hired artist Yukata Izubuchi to design their humaniform robot because he has worked on a science fiction anime called *Patlabor* which features robots who perform industrial labor, much like the robots that the HRP group wants to develop.²⁶⁸ Interestingly enough, they also considered modeling their robots after another well-known anime character, Astroboy, but they realized early on that they could not make robots destined for labor look like children, afraid that people would complain about them making a “boy” work.²⁶⁹ In the time of Mary Shelley and Samuel Butler, many children had to work and not many people would have opposed it, so this illustrates one of the many ways in which the world has evolved since then and how societal customs may change over time, perhaps thanks in part to books that dare criticize them, such as their contemporary *Oliver Twist*.

The issue of the “principle of life” mentioned in relation to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was grounded, as was explained in the second section of this work, in the concept of vitalism, but this philosophy finds its opposite in the animism prevalent in Japan and other parts of Asia. Where vitalism stipulates that living organisms are fundamentally different from inanimate objects because they possess a vital metaphysical component that gives them life, animism is the belief that everything, whether organic or inorganic, has a soul. Or, to quote Stringer, “animism is understood primarily as a way of relating to the non-human world as if it were human.”²⁷⁰ Where many Western works of fiction focus heavily on the question of whether robots can be considered living beings with a sense of personhood even though they are inorganic and

²⁶⁷ Šabanović, 351.

²⁶⁸ Šabanović, 352.

²⁶⁹ Šabanović, 353.

²⁷⁰ Martin D. Stringer, 1999, 552.

therefore soulless, perhaps Japanese culture lends itself more readily to the acceptance of robots as people, since animism will automatically grant them this principle of life. Šabanović also broaches this topic when she speaks of the Humanoid Robotics Institute of Waseda University and how they define robots as “a third existence [...] between that of a living creature and that of a nonliving creature, machines with hearts that are no longer pure and simple machines.”²⁷¹

The third section of the paper explained how many robot stories put robots in the position of slaves or immigrants in order to deal with these societal problems from a more futuristic or technological perspective, but the issue remains that roboticists do seem to intent to build robots who can fill the niche of unpaid workers who can do labor for longer periods and under extreme conditions that are impossible for human beings to undergo. Therefore, the solution to slavery or to aging populations that lack a sufficient workforce to support their elderly citizens is not a social renovation that pays more attention to regulating the work of immigrants or abolishing slavery, but the creation of functional and inexpensive robots that will conveniently solve this problem without any work on the part of governments and societies. Although it is an undeniably tempting notion, it is unlikely that such a solution will present itself in the near future, and therefore, like Šabanović puts it at the end of her essay, “robotics will need to engage explicitly in ‘cultural fixes’ [...] to identify and resolve contemporary sociotechnological problems and develop socially beneficial and meaningful applications for robotic technologies.”²⁷²

The ways in which literature has influenced roboticists are clear, as is the deep connection between art and life. Robots that successfully imitate life do not yet exist but, when they do, science fiction will be an invaluable asset in order to figure out how to design them, what their purpose will be and how humans will interact with them. Cautionary tales about the dangers of scientific ambition have never stopped the relentless pursuit of progress, but this paper has aimed to emphasize the great value of literature in helping to shape an ethical technological future that will consider the risks

²⁷¹ Šabanović, 357.

²⁷² Šabanović, 361.

of its scientific endeavors before undergoing them and that will take constructive criticism and advice to heart in order to ensure a safe, just and dignified future for humanity and all other living beings, equally important in the eyes of posthumanism, be they organic or inorganic, human or more-than-human.

Bibliography

- Apollonius of Rhodes. *Jason and the Golden Fleece*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.
- Asimov, Isaac. *The Naked Sun*. New York: HarperVoyager, 2018.
- Asimov, Isaac. *The Robots of Dawn*. New York: Spectra, 2009.
- Bechtel, William, and Robert C. Richardson. "Vitalism", *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Routledge, 1998.
- Bignall, Simone, and Daryle Rigney. "Indigeneity, Posthumanism and Nomad Thought: Transforming Colonial Ecologies". *Posthuman Ecologies*. Edited by Rosi Braidotti and Simone Bignall. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Socially Just Pedagogies: Posthumanist, Feminist and Materialist Perspectives in Higher Education*. Edited by Vivienne Bozalek, Rosi Braidotti, Tamara Shefer, and Michalinos Zembylas. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.
- Butler, Samuel. "Darwin Among the Machines". In *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement with Other Early Essays*. London: Forgotten Books, 2012.
- Butler, Samuel. *Erewhon*. London: Penguin Classics, 1970.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Hrdy, Camilla Alexandra, and Brean, Daniel Harris. "Enabling Science Fiction". *Michigan Technology Law Review* 27, (2020): 399-417.
- Mason, Harbert. *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2003.
- Miah, Andy. "Posthumanism: A Critical History". *Medical Enhancements & Posthumanity*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2007.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. New York: Collier, 1860.
- Rieger, James. "Dr. Polidori and the Genesis of Frankenstein." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-19003*, no. 4 (1963): 461-472
- Saadia, Martin. *Treconomics: The Economics of Star Trek*. California: Inkshares, 2016

- Šabanović, Selma. "Inventing Japan's 'Robotics Culture': The Repeated Assembly of Science, Technology, and Culture in Social Robotics." *Social Studies of Science* 44, no. 3 (2014): 342–67.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994.
- Stringer, Martin D. "Rethinking Animism: Thoughts from the Infancy of Our Discipline." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5, no. 4 (1999): 541–55.
- The NIV Bible*. Michigan: Zondervan, 2018.
- Von Tiesenhausen, Georg, and Wesley A. Darbro. *Self-replicating systems: A systems engineering approach*. No. NASA-TM-78304. 1980.
- Wells, Martha. *All Systems Red*. New York: MacMillan, 2019.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays*. London: Penguin Classics, 1995.
- Wolfe, C. *What is Posthumanism?* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Zylinska, Joanna. *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009.
- "Artificial Intelligence." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artificial%20intelligence>
- "Cyborg." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cyborg>
- "Robot." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2024, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/robot
- "Talos." *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, vol.3, 2018.

Notes on contributor

Patricia Lutzardo Martín holds a Degree in English Studies from the Complutense University of Madrid (2024) and is doing a M.A. Degree in Literary Translation at the same university (2024-2025). She has collaborated as a translator for the journal *Cuadernos de Gobierno y Administración Pública* of the UCM and her areas of investigation are literary criticism, translation, speculative fiction, theater and mythology.

CONTACT: <patrilut@ucm.es>

Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain
JACLR: JOURNAL OF ARTISTIC CREATION AND LITERARY RESEARCH
2024, VOL. 12, NO. 2, 71-95
ISSN 2340-650X
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>



ORCID: [0009-0000-4161-9668](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4161-9668)

Happiness and the Female Identity in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*²⁷³

Nayra Mallón-Zambrana²⁷⁴

Abstract:

There are several academic works focusing on mental illnesses and the struggles of the female political body. Women's writing and theory become a central issue for feminist theorists such as Betty Friedan, Elaine Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir or Hélène Cixous. These theorists denounce the detrimental consequences of a patriarchal reality on the mental health of women. These two issues have often been intrinsically connected to one another. This essay attempts to explain the mental issues that women have struggled with due to female oppression and discrimination. In this essay, the analysis of Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* will provide an insight of the female experience based on the protagonists' personal pursuit of happiness and well-being as well as the analysis of their gender oppression. I illustrate the connection between the role of two ambitious young women and mental illness. Both novels will, thus, be examined through a comparative and critical analysis to understand the evolution of the female roles in society over the years as well as the question of happiness. Thus, the contextualization of these novels will foremost expose the impact of female reconciliation with the question of happiness.

Keywords: depression, femininity, happiness, mental illness, patriarchy, gender.

²⁷³ Recommended Citation

Mallón-Zambrana, Nayra. "Happiness and the Female Identity in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 96-123:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

²⁷⁴ **CONTACT:** Nayra Mallón-Zambrana <nmallon@ucm.es>

1. Introduction

Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) are two narratives depicting young women in their twenties going through a distressing moment in their life. In these portrayals of the female experience, the different female struggles are explored, and the question of happiness is the essence of their search for identity. The protagonists of these novels go through distressing moments that shape their view of the world and their own interaction with it. Thus, the analysis of these two novels focuses on the evolution of these struggles into new forms of oppression for the female experience. *The Bell Jar* represents the oppression that women experienced in the 1960s and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* represents the distress that young women suffered in the 2000s. Despite being written years apart, both novels still explore the issue of female dissatisfaction and mental illnesses, and it becomes the centrepiece that characterizes these novels. Therefore, in these narrations Moshfegh illustrates the struggles of beauty standards in the 2000s through the image of perpetuated thin bodies and glamorization of drugs while Plath exposes the gender roles that oppress women in a context where domesticity is the norm. Consequently, women's acceptance or rejection of these norms will determine and shape the evolution of their identities as women in society which is the root of their happiness.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation narrates a first-person account of a young woman in her twenties who has no name. In such a manner, the female experience of the protagonist becomes universal, and her struggles resonate with the readers as it explores common existential sentiments of uncertainty and the pursuit of happiness. The premise of the novel depicts a physically gifted young woman: Blonde and skinny. She perceives herself as someone who fits the beauty standards of the time accepting/not caring about her physical appearance. However, she struggles with depressive symptoms. Moshfegh illustrates the important role of beauty standards and its negative impact on young women in the 00s. On the other hand, *The Bell Jar* is a well-known literary classic that delves into the dissatisfaction of the female protagonist Esther Greenwood showing a realistic portrayal of how the political status of young women in the 60s (domesticity, marriage and traditional gender roles) conditioned their

prospect of life. The second wave of feminism emerged in America in the 1960s as a response to the oppression that women experienced. These are the struggles described by Plath in *The Bell Jar*. Women's rights, their emancipation from the male dominance and their sexual liberation were the main goals of the feminist movement. The major feminist author that contributed to the movement in America was Betty Friedan, who published *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In this book, Friedan discusses issues concerning the oppressed professional and personal ambitions of women in a heavily stereotyped man's world. Friedan's feminist approach was the necessary germ for the future evolution of feminist theory into the third wave of feminism that began in the 90s. This new wave of feminism started focusing on the idea of not only middle-class white women's rights but also on the intersectionality of feminist theory. Inclusiveness was an important subject of analysis as the feminist theory expanded and started focusing on women's struggles of diverse minorities that were always marginalized.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation and *The Bell Jar* illustrate the life of young women and the depressive symptoms that they go through such as substance abuse or suicidal ideations caused by an overwhelming strict lifestyle that is being imposed on them. The mental instability of these young women is fundamentally related to the political and social climate that surrounds them and the position that they occupy as women. These novels describe not only their hardships but also their dreams and ambitions while struggling to find happiness in a world that oppresses them.

2. *The Bell Jar*: The Trap of Femininity in the 60s

Plath wrote *The Bell Jar* as a direct reflection of society and the impact that it had on women of her time. The beginning of the second wave of feminism was essential for the achievement of women's rights such as workplace rights, sexual liberation and the critique of gender roles and the patriarchal ideals that women had to deal with. Women in the 60s were subjected to domesticity and the ultimate objective of a woman was based on family and marriage. The role of women at that time could only be described through the stereotype of a housewife. According to Ghandeharion, Bozorgian and Sabbagh, "marriage and having children, instead of nurturing a woman's true potential

to blossom as a human being, have turned into a state in which she becomes trapped.”²⁷⁵

The standard of becoming a mother and a housewife was used as a tool of oppression for the patriarchal society to delimit women’s ambitions. For Esther Greenwood, the dissatisfaction that she was experiencing had no name yet: “I knew there was something wrong with me that summer.”²⁷⁶ It is *something* society refuses to see, *something* society refuses to catalogue. Even though the strict gender roles led her to experience symptoms of depression, Esther Greenwood cannot describe why she does not share the same ambitions as the girls that she considers her friends. This problem that she cannot name is closely associated with the analysis of the strict gender roles that women were subjected to. The complacency and the traditional gender roles are ideals that Betty Friedan and Plath question in their works. From this perspective, the girls that Esther Greenwood interacts with at her workplace are pleased with the idea of working in the fashion magazine editorial, and yet they have no other interests outside their looks and gossiping. They act in accordance with the stereotypes the patriarchal system designates for them. In contrast, characters like Jay Cee challenge the gender roles and stereotypes of a normative woman at the time. Some girls at the editorial dislike her attitude but despite the critiques, Esther considers that she is a likeable woman. Greenwood and Jay Cee are seen as “the Other.” They are seen as unconventional women that question the strictness of the gender roles that must rule their identity: “She [Jay Cee] wasn’t one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn’t seem to matter. She read a couple of languages and knew all the quality writers in the business.”²⁷⁷

This is the problem that has no name for the protagonist in Plath’s novel. These women working at the fashion editorial were compliant of the gender roles that the patriarchal society was imposing on women. As Betty Friedan mentions in *The Feminine*

³ Ghandeharion, Bozorgian and Sabbagh, “A Mirror of American Fifties,” 64-70.

⁴ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 2.

⁵ Plath, 6.

Mystique (1963), “[women] could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity”²⁷⁸ Therefore, any personality trait in a woman that was not focused on these strict ideals of femininity and eternal submission was not seen in a good light by the American society. Any woman who questioned these values, any woman who felt dissatisfied with these imposed ideals was considered neurotic, “they learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights.”²⁷⁹ Therefore, an educated woman with different interests like Jay Cee would be considered strange and unattractive for men and for any participant in the patriarchal system itself. In fact, Esther Greenwood’s friends consider Jay Cee incapable of seducing a man, “I bet that old husband of hers turns out all the lights before he gets near her or he’d puke otherwise.”²⁸⁰

American women had no other option than to follow the rules of domesticity. The consequence of this imposition led to stop considering personal and professional ambitions altogether. What was defined as Respectable women, were those who prioritized a good husband and family over any personal interest. This is what Betty Friedan describes as “The problem that has no name,” and what Esther describes as “something” wrong in her and the problem that she dissects throughout her experiences in the novel.

Women in the 50s and 60s dealt with the imposition of finding a husband that would provide for them. Women were designated to become mothers and dedicate their life to the household and their children. America did not contemplate that any dissident movement could arise, any feminist movement was disregarded because the woman problem no longer existed.²⁸¹ It was based on the American Dream of an ideal family. Women who did not fit in the ideal of the American family were often ashamed of their behaviour.

Esther Greenwood describes how she felt in relation to this stipulated standard: “I guess I should be excited the way most of the girls were, but I couldn’t get myself to

⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 5.

⁷ Friedan, 5.

⁸ Plath, 5.

⁹ Friedan, 8.

react. I felt very still and very empty.”²⁸² Esther Greenwood’s attitude towards life was not considered complacent: “I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly, between gulps of water one by one.”²⁸³ A young woman like her embodies the experience that depressive women struggled with at that time. The depressive symptoms were a result of the feminine gender roles forced on women that led them to feel entrapped in a situation that had no name at the time. There was no solution and no visibility for this type of unnamed dissatisfaction in the American society. Consequently, life as a woman in America was reduced to either complacency to the patriarchal system or the categorization of women as neurotic patients. Unhappy and depressed women were undiagnosed as neurotic or simply ignored because in the American ideal society women had no problems if they fulfilled the role that was designated for them. This leads to the isolation of the female experience which is the main reason why depression and other mental illnesses became a problem for so many women in America.

The closeting of the female experience has always been discussed through the different waves of feminism. As Elizabeth Cady Staton mentions, “A woman’s solitude of self becomes a dramatic refutation of the argument that woman is dependent on man or that she can be protected by man.”²⁸⁴ As a result, female isolation is caused by the oppressive patriarchal system. It became a unique and gendered struggle that women faced alone, and it is an attitude that essentially reclaims the sovereignty of the individual self and its separation from the male figure. Consequently, Plath describes characters like Esther Greenwood and Jay Cee reclaiming their female-self. Both are perceived as isolated female characters that do not want to be subjected to the imposition of the patriarchal system that surrounds them. Esther Greenwood considers Jay Cee a role model. She rejects the gender roles and the strictness of her society, and she becomes a protagonist that reclaims her own agency: “I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I’d know what to do.”²⁸⁵

¹⁰. Plath, 3.

¹¹. Plath, 169.

¹². Campbell, “Staton’s ‘The Solitude of Self: A Rationale for Feminism,’” 304-312.

¹³. Plath, 39.

Fashion Magazines such as *Mademoiselle* or *Vogue* in 1950 were contributing to the reinforcement of the performance of femininity. These magazines were curated for women to reinforce their gender roles and indifference as well as beauty standards. It is known that Plath worked as a writer for *Mademoiselle* while she lived in New York. Therefore, Esther Greenwood's internship is a parallel and a direct demonstration of these feminine American magazines. Plath's personal experience working at *Mademoiselle Magazine* influenced her fictional narration of *The Bell Jar* and Esther Greenwood becomes an extension of Plath's personal life. Thus, *Ladies' Day's* workplace becomes a trap for Greenwood and the girls that work at the editorial and even though Esther actively questions her workplace environment and the feminine performance that she observes in every girl, she also becomes a forced consumer. She is compelled to participate in the process of this feminine performance, "women's magazines are made to seem part of a broader mass-cultural pathology and, more glaringly, to disregard the fact that Esther (and Plath) was herself a producer of their occasionally noxious contents."²⁸⁶ For ambitious young women, the prospect of working in the harmful environment of a feminine fashion magazine could cost them their mental health. Those magazines become a tool for the patriarchal system, being the beguiling trap of femininity.

3. My Year of Rest and Relaxation: The Trap of Unattainable Beauty Standards in the 2000s

Feminine stereotypes have evolved and have been analysed by the feminist theorists throughout history. It is important to point out how these traditional gender roles have been replaced and changed to understand how patriarchy re-codifies the position of a woman's performance in society. The conservative American society from the 50s and 60s has evolved into new arrangements of gender stereotypes attached to the female body. The idea of what a woman is has always been closely linked to constrictive beauty standards that have been defined by a patriarchal society in which the female sex has to

²⁸⁶ Donofrio, "Esther Greenwood's Internship," 220.

adapt to fit in the standards of the time. Women must perform a role for the patriarchy from the idea of the perfect housewife of the 50s seen in Plath's novel, to the unwell and unhealthy beauty standards of the 90s and 00s depicted in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Women are socially constructed by these impossible standards and oppressed from birth. As the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir states "woman and by extension, any gender, is an historical situation rather than a natural act."²⁸⁷ One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman. Thus, to be a woman is to perform and because of this performance, a woman must yield to the historical and social oppression of the female sex, allowing society to construct their identity without questioning the patriarchal ideas. Otherwise, the social construction of this homogenous image of a woman becomes conflictive and characterizes the conduct of madwomen. This is an experience that troubles the protagonists that Moshfegh and Plath describe in their novels *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

The performance of feminine gender stereotypes is attested in this period. This feminine social construction evolves through time and as such, the decades from the 80s and 00s contribute to the further liberation of women in the workplace and education but it also reinforces already existing stereotypes that are transformed into new beauty standards and gender roles. As scholars discuss, sexism remained a reality at all cultural and political levels in the 1990s and the hyper-sexualization of women and misogynist treatment of women in higher positions was still reinforced which led to the creation of organizations such as "Neither Whore Nor Submissive."²⁸⁸ This hyper-sexualization and objectification is depicted in the novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as the protagonist describes her sexual encounters with her romantic partner, "Trevor got out of the car [...] made me strip and put on his blazer before getting back into the car [...] he went in to buy me a new outfit. I acquiesced. For him, this was erotic gold."²⁸⁹

The idealization of women's looks, and the so-called glamorization of drug use was depicted in popular culture media like *Trainspotting* (1996) or *Skins* (2007). The use

¹⁵. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 520.

¹⁶. Schaal, "Bridging Feminist Waves," 177.

¹⁷. Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 64.

of heroin, LSD, cocaine, cannabis and other drugs are portrayed in several movies and series of the 90s and 00s. Protagonists are often young people introducing, and later, abusing, the use of drugs in their daily lives. They became objects of consumption in popular culture which led to the glamorization of their thin and fragile looks. It is a real representation of the social climate at the time where the abuse of substances was out of control. In fact, the term 'heroin chic' was coined when the fashion circles started consuming the drug. Photographers and models among other important fashion figures were consuming the substance. Newspapers such as *The New York Times* state that several magazine editors admitted that glamorizing the heroin addict's look reflected the use among young people in the industry and it became a menace because of its seductive power.²⁹⁰ What does it mean to be 'heroin chic'?²⁹¹ It became a trend among models to have pale skin, dark circles under the eyes, a sharp jawline and a thin body. It was an idealised appearance. The heroin chic looks emerged in opposition to the image of 90s supermodels that walked the runway revealing their voluptuousness. This trend of 'sick models' was captured by famous photographers like Steven Meisel who worked for several American magazine fashion editorials. Meisel depicted it in *Super Models Enter Rehab (2007)* for *Vogue*. Models were found posing at a psychiatric hospital and forced to go through rehabilitation by the nurses. Young women who are seemingly struggling with substance abuse and mental illness are portrayed in an aestheticized manner. In brief, sickness and mental illnesses are now fashionable.

It is evident that the idealization of extremely skinny bodies and unhealthy looks was successfully introduced into popular culture. As a result, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* illustrates the unattainable standards of beauty for young people at the time. Moshfegh depicts a privileged and beautiful young woman of the 00s. The unnamed protagonist lives comfortably in New York after becoming an art history graduate. The novel aims to picture her as a woman with a perfect life and a perfect self-esteem. On the other hand, her best friend Reva struggles with an eating disorder. Their relationship is difficult, and Reva is constantly comparing herself to her perfect unnamed friend.

¹⁸. Spindler, "A Death Tarnishes Fashion's 'Heroin Look'," *The New York Times*.

¹⁹. Schaal, "Bridging Feminist Waves," 177.

Therefore, Moshfegh's novel attempts to explain how these re-codified beauty standards impact on young women in the 00s and the conciliation of female friendship.

There is no doubt that the protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* embodies the idealization of the skinny models in the 90s and early 00s, "I looked like a model, had money I hadn't earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so I was cultured."²⁹² Moshfegh's protagonist embodies the perfect ideal of beauty which makes her become a narcissistic woman. Through the protagonist's eyes the reader can notice that these beauty standards imposed on women by these fashion trends and patriarchal perceptions are oppressing and creating a toxic environment between these two young women, "jealousy was one thing Reva didn't seem to feel the need to hide from me."²⁹³ The protagonist and her best friend have a friendship based on jealousy and competitiveness. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* also exposes the EDs²⁹⁴ that are generated by the oppression and competitiveness that the beauty canons force on women: "it's because I'm fat."²⁹⁵ Reva confesses that she does not feel good because she compares herself to her best friend. Reva thinks that her best friend's privileges and her 'heroin chic' beauty are not fair. Thus, Reva represents and idolizes the harmful ideals of beauty in the early 00s. According to Bradford, young adults do not only compare themselves to the ideal images of fashion models, but they also generate a sense of insecurity and insufficiency when they compare themselves with those ideal images of skinny fashion models.²⁹⁶ The images of extreme thinness from these idealized models become an issue for many young women and it eventually leads to create a toxic environment not only for the victims of these patriarchal impositions, but also for their close relationships with other women.

The protagonist abuses the prescription of sedatives that her psychiatrist prescribes for her, to sleep and avoid reality. Moshfegh's protagonist does not only have the appearance of a heroin chic model, but she engages in drug use that make her lose

²⁰ Moshfegh, 13.

²¹ Moshfegh, 10.

²² Acronym for Eating Disorders.

²³ Moshfegh, 11.

²⁴ Choi. "Social Comparison in Fashion Blogging," 651-655.

track of time and gives her the sickly looks that fashion magazines glamorize. Hence, she is not taking care of herself properly. This attitude makes her become unhealthy which is an appearance that is adored by her best friend Reva. Despite the jealousy and competitiveness, Reva cares about the protagonist's well-being "I wish you'd take better care of yourself [...] She was right about me. I was 'on drugs'. I took upwards a dozen pills a day."²⁹⁷ Moshfegh's protagonist is the perfect anti-heroine. Even though it seems that she has a perfect privileged life and perfect beauty, the dissatisfaction results from her non-fulfilled artistic ambitions, while her best friend Reva feels overwhelmed by her own ambition and envy towards the protagonist. The problem of Reva's jealousy stems from her inability to detect the harmful stereotypes that she is being bombarded with. Reva becomes the victim of the patriarchal system because she is being forced to perform and reach unattainable beauty standards to be accepted by society. On the other hand, the protagonist becomes exhausted and unsatisfied because despite her privileges, she is unable to obtain a meaningful purpose in life, 'being pretty only kept me trapped in a world that valued looks above all else.'²⁹⁸

As it has been analysed by feminist scholars, the imposition of unattainable beauty standards forced on women results in the rise of women's insecurities. This constitutes a recurrent problem to analyse for feminist studies. This lack of confidence is often occasioned by the content of the same feminine magazines that young women are forced to consume. As mentioned earlier in the essay, American magazines like *Mademoiselle* influenced women's beauty standards and it reinforced certain feminine stereotypes in the decade 50s and 60s. These beauty standards gradually transformed into the heroin chic idealization of the 90s and 00s. At the same time, the magazine and media consumption together with movies and series in the late 90s and early 00s also led to the mass glamorization of the heroin chic looks. The ideal thin bodies of well-known supermodels like Kate Moss were photographed for fashion campaigns. These images of ideal pale and slender bodies were glorified, so they easily influenced young people to reproduce and imitate the ideals of the fashion industry at the time. This

²⁵. Moshfegh, 11-12.

²⁶. Moshfegh, 35.

evidence of the toxic environment of the 90s and 00s is detailed through the eyes of the protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*: “I was emulated and gossiped about. I was blond and thin and pretty — that’s what people noticed. That’s what those girls cared about. I learned to float on cheap affections gleaned from other people’s insecurities.”²⁹⁹

4. Plath and Moshfegh: Societal Pressure, Depression and Female Dissatisfaction

The Bell Jar and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* are two coming-of-age narratives of young women struggling with depression. Esther Greenwood and the protagonist in Moshfegh’s novel express their inner turmoil and psychological instability. These female protagonists are victims of the expectations assigned to their sex. They are not able to fulfil their expectations and ignore the social pressure that is shaping their identities. These young women wish to feel less exhausted. That attitude makes them suffer from depression, self-division and dissatisfaction. Esther Greenwood and Moshfegh’s protagonist value their own individuality, agency and personal ambitions, becoming the genesis of their mental instability.

Through time women have been deemed hysterical and neurotic and their troubles and individual ambitions have been disregarded. On the word of Sarah Rosenfield, “females have been found to have higher rates of neurosis, especially of depressive symptomatology and of manic-depressive psychosis.”³⁰⁰ This is what Plath and Moshfegh’s protagonists are experiencing. The patriarchal American society in 1950 and 1960 led educated and ambitious women like Esther Greenwood to feel apathetic and depressed. This problem had no name in America as the patriarchal system tried to dismiss female dissatisfaction as a personal failure. Housewives and young women were often institutionalized with depressive symptoms, but their mental health was not taken into consideration since the dissatisfaction they were experiencing was meant to be

²⁷. Moshfegh, 65.

²⁸. Rosenfield, “Sex Differences in Depression,” 34.

reformed instead of treated with care. Thus, the patriarchal system was never questioned. These women had to fix themselves or go through sessions of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) to repair their undiagnosed problems of ‘hysteria’ and ‘neurosis.’ The stigmatization of mental illnesses characterized the American society in the 50s, institutions and doctors conducted psychiatric practices such as ECT as the only solution for the correction of female dissatisfaction and mental illnesses.

The association of dissatisfaction and depression was commonly connected to the female sex. In *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, both protagonists have individual ambitions. Esther Greenwood wishes to become a writer and following her artistic ambitions, she encounters herself working in an editorial, but she is not satisfied at her workplace, and she strives for a myriad of greater opportunities that she cannot achieve at once.

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor [...] and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out [...] I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.³⁰¹

Esther Greenwood unfolds her desire to experiment, she manifests her will to have her own agency. She speaks of her craving for the creation of a family of her own, but she also desires to achieve personal artistic ambitions: she wants to become an artist, a poet. Esther Greenwood's wish for a family life is not compatible with her artistic ambitions. As Virginia Woolf rightly claims, “a woman must have money and a room of her own to write.”³⁰² Women had no room to think about their personal ambitions and they did not have the financial stability to be independent. Therefore, Esther's artistic ambition and her will of independence could not be conciliated with the expectations of becoming a housewife and mother. The impossibility of becoming an artist as a woman stems from

²⁹. Plath, 77.

³⁰. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 6.

the lack of financial independence and the lack of room for women's thoughts in almost every field.

Esther becomes paralyzed by the idea of not being able to choose between her family and her personal aspirations. Women with personal objectives like Esther Greenwood were often paralyzed when they had to choose between the social expectations imposed on them or their individual-self detached from the normalized housewife lifestyle of their time. This dilemma has often been discussed by feminist theorists and the question of female madness was always attributed to defiant women. These women were deemed hysteric, neurotic or lunatic. Following the train of thought by feminist theorist Elaine Showalter, "hysteria was apt to appear in young women who were especially rebellious [...] Donkin (doctor) too had seen among his patients a high percentage of unconventional women — artists and writers."³⁰³ This analysis of the historical oppression that the female sex suffered specifies that women with artistic ambitions are prone to be victims of mental illnesses. This condition of 'madness' is directly linked to the personal and artistic aspirations for the main characters in Plath and Moshfegh's novels. Esther Greenwood wishes to become a writer, just as the protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* who wishes to become a respectable artist.

This personal and artistic interests lead the women in these two novels to feel trapped and depressed. Moshfegh's protagonist becomes very self-critical and becoming an art graduate is not enough for her: "at least I'm making an effort to change and go after what I want [...] besides sleeping, what do you want out of life? [...] I wanted to be an artist, but I had no talent."³⁰⁴ The protagonist expresses that she has lost hope on becoming a respectable artist and she is defeated. Sleeping is what helps her to face reality. Thanks to these symptoms, it can be clearly stated that she is in a depressive episode. The competitiveness of her environment and her own best friend's critical tone makes her become defeated and apathetic. Exhaustion and passivity characterize Moshfegh's protagonist, but she is willing to recover from her depressive episode.

³¹. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 145.

³². Moshfegh, 16.

Therefore, she plans her own rebirth, she takes sedatives to sleep for a year in a procedure that she calls *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. She takes an extreme decision to isolate herself from society, even from her friend Reva. She attempts to purge herself and fix her dissatisfaction and depression through sleep. For Moshfegh's protagonist, sleep is her mantra, sleep is her companion to recovery. Once again, Plath and Moshfegh's protagonists share similar experiences. While Esther Greenwood is forced to go through the high-risk procedure of electroshock therapy, the protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* puts herself through an extreme and risky therapy of sedatives.

Unlike Moshfegh, Plath's protagonist suffers from depression, and the invasive electroshock procedures make her distrust the doctors and the institutions that are treating her as an experimental guinea pig. She despises what these psychiatric institutions force on young women like her. As Kneeland and Warren discuss, electrotherapy was associated with cases of hysteria in women and neurasthenia was associated with men. Yet, by the end of the 19th century, both diagnoses were only associated with the female sex.³⁰⁵ Madness became a tool for the oppression of women. The invasive procedures of electroshock were mostly directed at the female sex, becoming the representation of the control that the patriarchal system had on women. It also evidences the harmful impact that these procedures had on the mental health of the patients. At the asylum, Esther Greenwood was told she would be taken care of, but the first ECT session that she receives is unsuccessful, it only harms her and causing more dissatisfaction and worsening her mental health.

The perception of recovery for society was a violent reformation of a woman's mind. Too very often a violent physical procedure that did not fix the mental illness of the patient. This procedure only worsened the apathy of a woman. As it is seen in *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood's rebelliousness and apathy is apparent. she was a critical woman, and she could discern that the doctors at these mental institutions used women's bodies and minds as experimental dolls at their laboratories. At the same time,

³³. Kneeland and Warren, *Pushbutton Psychiatry*, 23.

Esther accepts that she has a problem that she wishes to fix: “Well, you were right. I am neurotic.”³⁰⁶ She is aware of the self-fragmentation that she is experiencing. She considers herself neurotic for not being able to reconcile her ambitions with the social impositions. It is a derogatory term that her boyfriend Buddy Willard used to define her attitude towards life. Women are not expected to choose what they want, they are supposed to follow the rules to become respectable wives. Esther’s agency is taken away from her from the moment she meets Buddy Willard.

The pressure of their relationship becomes another imposition on her, she is expected to marry him instead of choosing her professional aspiration of becoming a writer. She constantly states that she wishes to have options: “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell.”³⁰⁷ Plath describes the rebelliousness and the personal drive that Esther has as ‘neurotic’ to ironically expose the harmful stigmatization that she had to face when she dared to express her most personal desires. Even her own boyfriend considers that she is neurotic, he reinforces the damaging ideals that Esther rejects and criticizes. Ideals that are often reinforced by the figure of her own mother. Consequently, Esther’s ideation of change and opportunities leads her to think about death. She is not able to escape the patriarchal social impositions, and she finds no help around her. The world she lives in is a trap, it becomes a bell jar that is trapping her individuality: “The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower.”³⁰⁸ Esther thinks about death while she goes skiing with Buddy Willard. She associates the feeling of dying as a way of self-liberation from her own troubled mind and the world that surrounds her: “this is what it is to be happy.”³⁰⁹ As Susan Coyle asserts, the happiness that Esther feels stems from two personal urges, one is self-destruction — as she goes down the hill where no one is controlling her and she might die — while the other is the idea of rebirth as she goes down the hill; she is also rushing towards her birth.³¹⁰

³⁴. Plath, 94.

³⁵. *Ibid.*

³⁶. Plath, 97.

³⁷. *Ibid.*

³⁸. Coyle, “Images of Madness and Retrieval,” 169.

This passage in *The Bell Jar* is a metaphor of Esther's wish for rebirth, the only way for her to achieve this rebirth is through death. She is aware of her mental instability and 'madness.' The only solution left for her to fix herself is to be born again: "the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly."³¹¹ In this chapter, Esther metaphorically associates her happiness, liberation and comfort with the image of a baby in a mother's belly. This is Esther's reasoning for recovery.

The protagonists of Moshfegh and Plath's novel are clearly experiencing depressive symptoms. Moshfegh's protagonist is exhausted and not satisfied with her life and she states that she never had a good relationship with her mother. She lacks a role model. The two protagonists lack a female role model. Esther did not like the gender roles and impositions that her mother was pushing on her and Moshfegh's protagonist despises her mother for not being able to create a bond with her, "I did crave attention, but I refused to humiliate myself asking for it. [...] My parents barely seemed to notice I existed."³¹² Eventually Moshfegh's character grows up and develops a low self-esteem. Her apathetic and depressive attitude originates from the lack of care and negative judgement from her mother: "I was interested in how 'art created the future'. It was a mediocre essay. My mother seemed unperturbed by it, which shocked me, and handed it back with the suggestion that I look up a few words in the thesaurus because I'd repeated them too often. I didn't take her advice."³¹³

Both Esther and Moshfegh's protagonist have complicated relationships with their mothers because they represent an ideal that does not help them to achieve their personal ambitions. The figure of the mother becomes a symbol of an uncomfortable, untrustworthy and oppressive environment. The neglectful and repressive ideals of their families reflect the corruption of their society. Thus, Moshfegh's protagonist must face a lifestyle that submits her to a position of high expectations from her parental figures given the fact that they are already a highly accommodated family: mediocrity is not accepted. For that reason, her dissatisfaction, low self-confidence and depression stems

³⁹. Plath, 97.

⁴⁰. Moshfegh, 66.

⁴¹. *Ibid.*

from demanding and critical parental figures that do not value her worth, especially the figure of her own mother.

There is a sense of hostility between mother and daughter, they are not able to conciliate their feelings for each other and this leads the protagonist to feel even more depressed and less valued while growing up. It is also important to highlight the fact that both parental figures lack any interest for their daughter's ambitions, as they do not consider artistic education such as writing, an English major or an Art degree as valuable as other potential professions that could keep the social status and wealth of the family. Artistic ambitions are still disregarded and stigmatized as a lower type of occupation in the capitalist postmodern world of the 00s.

These artistic interests are considered philistine and trivial. Therefore, they are less important and valuable because they are often associated with the figure of women. As for Esther Greenwood, the depressive episodes are also occasioned by the impassivity and old-fashioned intransigence of her mother that forces her to comply with the gender roles of the time. Tradition and prejudice are oppressing Plath and Moshfegh's protagonists. Thus, extreme acts of rebellion become the only reaction to the acts of extreme patriarchal oppression. In *The Female Malady*, Showalter turns the question around. She asserts that — instead of asking whether rebellion was a mental pathology — people should ask if mental pathology was a repressed rebellion in which the hysterical woman becomes a feminist fighting back against her own confinement. This is what Showalter calls the “daughter's disease,” which is applied to women who did not act in accordance with the roles of femininity at the time.³¹⁴ These women were categorized as hysteric and unfit for a normative life because of their rebellious nature. They were isolated from society. The emergence of their otherness challenged the misogynistic structure of their time. Both Esther Greenwood and the protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* suffer from the “daughter disease.” Esther Greenwood seeks to break free from the confinements of gender roles and Moshfegh's protagonist seeks

⁴². Showalter, 147.

to break free from the overwhelming beauty standards and the suffocating capitalist system of her time.

5. The Question of Female Happiness in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Bell Jar*

The feminist analysis has proved that female happiness is an impossibility for some women. The model of happiness that society designates for women becomes a trap of unattainable societal standards. Therefore, happiness is a social construct. It is only designated to satisfy the judgement of a few members of society, and it is not always consented by the majority. It is forced on the majority. Happiness becomes a consented act for a few individuals, and it is imposed upon society as an individual responsibility instead of a social one. As Sara Ahmed claims in *The Promise of Happiness (2010)*, the individual becomes responsible for their own happiness, and any failure to be happy is seen as a personal failure because in resisting or being different, the individual chooses unhappiness.³¹⁵ The pursuit of happiness is a need for every participating individual in society. Every individual — whether it is a man or a woman — seeks to find happiness. As it is stated in the American Declaration of Independence, the basic unalienable rights of the people are *Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness* yet certain social constraints that constitute their identity prevent them from achieving happiness. Happiness is often used as a tool of oppression depending on factors like race, sexuality, class or gender. In this essay the question of happiness will be analysed through the lenses of gender and from a post-industrial capitalist perspective.

In Plath's novel, the protagonist fails to find happiness; instead, she becomes depressed because her criticism is seen as a personal failure. Happiness becomes an impossibility for her because she is not actively contributing to the reinforcement of the social roles designated for her. Unhappy women are responsible for their own mental instability. It is their personal failure that is stopping them from finding happiness. Therefore, society does not consider it a social problem. Feminists and scholars have

⁴³. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 83.

widely discussed the question of happiness, defining it as the ideals of social status for specific individuals, groups and nations.³¹⁶ The formula for happiness is relegated to a few people. Thus, happiness becomes a privilege. White feminists in the decade of the 50s were often conscious of the oppression but they were exclusively preoccupied about white middle-class women worries. White feminism was involved in the liberation of women from family life and the constraints of duty and housekeeping obligations, yet they failed to consider the existence of other sexualities or women of colour. On the other hand, the question of happiness and women's dissatisfaction gave voice to a different type of feminist thought. Intersectional feminism included women of colour, queer women and often black feminists and their consciousness involved stories of displacement and marginalization. At the same time, intersectional feminism examines the question of happiness including stories of marginalized groups. From this theoretical frame, the displacement and self-fragmentation that Esther Greenwood experiences is directly linked to the stories of dispossession and marginalization that become the basis of unhappiness. Esther is an unhappy and dispossessed woman in a world that stigmatizes her rebelliousness. her will to resist becomes her downfall, she is forced to become a marginalized figure. The only way for Esther Greenwood to recover would be to either accept her submission to the patriarchal happiness determined for her sex or the acceptance of the extreme practices at the mental institutions. She has the will to recover and obtain a normative happiness. She accepts to be treated with electroconvulsive treatments at a mental institution. Her happiness is directly connected to the success of her reformation at the mental institution. However, she will be obtaining a fake happiness. The promise of happiness is an illusion for a rebellious woman like her.

In the end, Esther seems to recover and despite attempting suicide she is reformed at the institution. Her own personal perception of happiness is not a valid option for society. The promise of happiness is to become a normative woman in a patriarchal society: "there ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice – patched,

⁴⁴. Ahmed, 3.

retreated and approved for the road.”³¹⁷ Esther states that she is being approved for the road, a metaphor for her reformed life. Someone else is controlling her and her happiness resides in the approval of the majority. It is the promise of an unhappy life according to her own principles, yet she still concedes and yields to the reformation of herself to be accepted by society.

The promise of happiness for the protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is the idealization of sleep. The protagonist often expresses that sleeping and not being aware of her surroundings makes her happy. In this way, she is stating that society as a whole and the norms that rule her life are not making her happy. The compromise that she has with happiness is not with society but with herself and her own comfort while she sleeps, avoiding the world she lives in, challenging the expectations that her friend Reva and those her family put on her. The protagonist defies the concept of happiness when she decides to take a year of rest and relaxation by evading reality with the prescribed medicines that she is taking.

The question of happiness is an illusion for Moshfegh’s protagonist as well. The normative happiness from her family is driven by capitalist motives. She is expected to become a successful and wealthy woman, and she is expected to maintain the social status of her family. The novel illustrates how her status is always questioned by society and by her best friend. For a second, she wishes to get rid of those ideals that are constraining her. The ideal of happiness for her is the ideal of unhappiness for her family and friends. There is an impossible conciliation between the concept that she has of happiness and the lifestyle that is being imposed on her.

The capitalist system paralyses Moshfegh’s protagonist. Looking back in time, when the industrial revolution takes place in America, the focus on productivity becomes a central part in the way people interact with their worth. The 19th century is plagued by utilitarian ideals. The worth that people have is directly linked to their ability to be productive and therefore, their happiness is openly linked to their productivity. Ironically, Moshfegh’s protagonist feels happier when she is less productive. The fixation

⁴⁵. Plath, 244.

on productivity of the 19th century rapidly evolves into the capitalist ideals of productivity in the 21st century. These unhealthy capitalist and utilitarian ideals become harmful for the society that Moshfegh describes.

The problem for Moshfegh's protagonist's attitude towards life lies on the social stigmatization of her unproductiveness. She is making herself unhappy while doing nothing to overcome her depressive episodes. Reva, her own best friend, often questions her apathy and inactivity. Ahmed analyses the principle of utility as dangerous for the government in which inequality becomes a measure of advancement and happiness.³¹⁸ Happiness is supposed to be reserved as a right for the people, but it only generates greater inequality when society essentially equals utility to happiness. Productivity and utility become a need that must be normalized within society, and without it there is little possibility for happiness. Thus, Moshfegh's protagonist is condemned to unhappiness from the perspective of the society that she lives in. The capitalist system and utilitarian society of the 2000s demands utility and production from her. Otherwise, she will not have the promise of happiness.

Moshfegh's protagonist takes a year of rest and relaxation as a way of liberation and recovery. This contemporary novel depicts the ambitions of young women and the consumerism that rules society. As Jonathan Greenberg argues, "Reva bound by the norms and narratives of her gender and class can only counsel a restorative break in the action – rest and relaxation – but cannot envision an end to action itself" and, in contrast, the protagonist takes that year of rest and relaxation to restore herself with hopes of achieving happiness.³¹⁹ While Reva accommodates to what is expected of her gender like reading *Cosmo* and watching *Sex and the City*, the protagonist does not feel a clear interest in Reva's hobbies. Although Reva wishes to find happiness in marriage because "Reva often spoke of 'settling down',"³²⁰ the protagonist does not feel the urge to be married. In some way, she represents what the protagonist does not want to become. Reva becomes an extension and a victim of the shallowness, consumerism and

⁴⁶. Ahmed, 4.

⁴⁷. Greenberg, "Losing Track of Time," 193.

⁴⁸. Moshfegh, 28.

sexism of society. From the perspective of Moshfegh's protagonist, Reva does not represent her ideal of happiness. For the protagonist, happiness is not linked to marriage nor productivity. The worth and happiness of the protagonist does not rely on her ability to fit in the standards of marriage or productivity. It is the failure of society and the expectations on women that make the protagonist become dissatisfied, "I was plagued with misery, anxiety, a wish to escape the prison of my mind and body."³²¹

In a violent world and hostile reality towards women, the protagonists of these novels choose to rebel against that violence and in doing so they make people around them uncomfortable. They refuse to comply and be kept in place. They refuse to be controlled. They turn away from the society that cannot accept them. In a way, they are resisting and killing the oppressor's happiness to obtain theirs. Ahmed questions the illusion of happiness as inclusion. If happiness requires turning away from violence, happiness is violence.³²² Plath and Moshfegh's protagonists choose disruption by choosing to question social impositions, beauty standards and economical systems that are constraining their freedom and happiness. This situation fabricates violence that they inflict upon themselves, a violence that comes from social impositions. Violence that transforms their individuality. Violence as a transgression of the normative designations of happiness. Unhappy women are willing to transform their dissatisfaction with violent methods to finally reclaim a new self and achieve the promise of happiness: "This was how I knew the sleep was having an effect: I was growing less and less attached to life. If I kept going, I thought, I'd disappear completely, then reappear in some new form. This was my hope. This was the dream."³²³

In this excerpt, Moshfegh's novel evidence the young protagonist's mental illness. It plainly reveals she suffers from depression. Thus, her happiness and journey to recovery involve extreme methods of recovery as well. This promise of happiness compromises the ideal of recovery and happiness with harmful practices for women. The act of turning away from these ideals of happiness becomes a way of shattering the

⁴⁹. Moshfegh, 18.

⁵⁰. Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*, 226.

⁵¹. Moshfegh, 84.

core of an oppressive system. These women shatter the expectations of happiness but are eventually forced to comply but their nonconformism becomes a challenge. Happiness is not a constant, and it is not a model without a fault. Then, to be unhappy does not make people less valuable. Women's unhappiness should be understood based on the knowledge that it is a social failure rather than a personal one. To be 'unhappy' equals defiance towards the normative promises of happiness that are oppressing Plath's and Moshfegh's protagonists. These protagonists want to prioritize their personal self rather than the social conventions. However, to be a functional member of society and to be *approved for the road* — as Greenwood describes when she leaves the mental asylum — women have to go through a tough process of recovery in which they must rehabilitate themselves to fit into the standards of society.³²⁴ These extreme acts of violence that the protagonists take against themselves such as suicide or abuse of sedatives are forced by the promise of happiness that society designates for them. As a society, the inclusion of women's well-being and happiness should still be discussed and analysed to prevent their mental instability and to guarantee the right to the pursuit of happiness.

6. Conclusion

The question of female happiness, unhealthy and unattainable beauty standards evolve through time as it can be observed through the comparison of Sylvia Plath and Ottessa Moshfegh's novels in this essay. Madness and happiness are two sides of the same coin. While one is considered failure, the other is considered success. Failure or success lay in the way women interact with the world and their socialization in it. The authors of these two women stories illustrate and analyse what it means to be a woman in different decades. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Bell Jar* are real depictions of young women in the decade of the 50s and 2000s. Parallelisms between these novels and their protagonists are evident. Their oppressive environment is described as they both experience the same symptoms of mental illness and suicidal ideations. These stories

⁵². Plath, 224.

reflect the preoccupations of young women within their societies and the patriarchal system. The accounts of these protagonists reflect the evolution of sexist gender roles and conceptions such as marriage and beauty and the recodification of these ideals that keep oppressing women through time. The transformation of these gender roles condition women's happiness. As a result, their mental health is put at risk. It is essential to understand the origin of these problems that are oppressing and overwhelming the protagonists of these novels.

The Bell Jar and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* are narratives that have the potential to transcend through time. As Marjorie G. Perloff states, *The Bell Jar* became important for the young women of the early seventies as an archetypal novel that mirrored their own personal experience and the sense of the general human condition.⁵³ The success of these novels is based on the depiction of a reality for many young women. These different stories become a source of representation for the complexity of the female identity and how it is shaped.

The protagonists of these two novels represent the self-division, the complex and unhappy women of their times. The life that they are forced to choose is a life of apathy, invisibility. It represents the dangerous side of a mental disorder. This invisibility and suicidal ideations that they dream of are a dangerous solution that women find for their problems and mental disorders. As it has been explored in this essay, in a world full of dangers, to be a potentially seeable object is to be constantly exposed to danger and the obvious defence against such a danger is to make oneself invisible in one way or another.⁵⁴ The ultimate way of defence is the ideation of suicide. Therefore, the debate on sensitive topics like mental health or suicide must be discussed along with the question of happiness to find ways to prevent it.

The discussion of female unhappiness and their mental health must be analysed from a feminist point of view for a more nuanced approach. These dangerous practices and ideations that these young women experience don't come in a vacuum. It is important to contextualize their mental disorders in their social and political background

⁵³. Perloff, "A Ritual for Being Born Twice," 508.

⁵⁴. Perloff, 510-511.

for them to be de-stigmatized. In this essay, the analysis of their social environment and their socialization as women is discussed to specify the gender roles and social standards that are oppressing the protagonists and leading them to become unhappy and depressed women.

Moshfegh and Plath's novels both masterfully describe the worries of a post-war society in the decade of the 50s and of a post-modern capitalist society in the decade of the 00s. The political context in which they live in is also an important factor to understand their psychological turmoil. The protagonists and their socialization in this world are the key to discern why they become figures of marginality. The mental health of these young women should not only be associated to their sex but also to the general political structure of their time. While the condition of their sex and patriarchal institutions oppresses them, there is also a double risk seen in the anxieties of their political context. That is, the destruction of the II World War and the menace of a hyper-capitalist society in America. This political structure asphyxiates the protagonists of these novels, it reinforces the expectations imposed on them.

This paper analyses female stories that are important and valuable because they provide a truthful insight of a woman's mind and women's stories. The authors of these novels are creating a fictional narrative out of a reality that young women have to face. It also allows women to identify their own mental turmoil and to describe the risks of mental illnesses like depression or anxiety. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Bell Jar* not only provide an insight of the social pressure that women are forced to experience, but they also voice and give representation to the mental disorders that women suffer to de-stigmatize these mental illnesses. These female narratives truthfully describe the ups and downs of women with different personalities and social backgrounds. As described in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, it is also important to highlight that psychological disorders could influence women of different backgrounds whether they are privileged or not.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara. *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*. Allen Lane, 2023.

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.
- Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. "Stanton's 'The Solitude of Self': A Rationale for Feminism." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 3 (1980): 304–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638009383528>.
- Choi, Athena. "Social Comparison in Fashion Blogging: "Creative Self" as the New Genre in Fashion Communication." *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal* 24, no. 4 (2020): 651–65. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-07-2019-0140>.
- Coyle, Susan. "Images of Madness and Retrieval: An Exploration of Metaphor in *The Bell Jar*." *Studies in American Fiction* 12, no. 2 (1984): 161–74. <https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.1984.0027>.
- Donofrio, Nicholas. "Esther Greenwood's Internship: White-Collar Work and Literary Careerism in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Contemporary Literature* 56, no. 2 (2015): 216–54. muse.jhu.edu/article/591462.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2010.
- Ghandeharion, A., F. Bozorgian, and M. R. G. Sabbagh. "Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: A Mirror of American Fifties." *K@Ta* 17, no. 2 (2016): 64–70. <https://doi.org/10.9744/kata.17.2.64-70>.
- Greenberg, Jonathan. "Losing Track of Time." *Daedalus* 150, no. 1 (2021): 188-203. <https://doi.org/10.1162/daed a 01842>.
- Moshfegh, Ottessa. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Penguin Vintage, 2019.
- Perloff, Marjorie G., and Sylvia Plath. "'A Ritual for Being Born Twice': Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Contemporary Literature* 13, no. 4 (1972): 507–22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1207445>.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Orion, 2021. First published 1963 by Heinemann.

Rosenfield, Sarah. "Sex Differences in Depression; Do Women Always Have Higher Rates?" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 21, no. 1 (1980): 33–42.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2136692>.

Schaal, Michèle A. "Bridging Feminist Waves: Wendy Delorme's Insurrections! En Territoire Sexuel." *Rocky Mountain Review* 70, no. 2 (2016): 177–96.

<http://www.istor.org/stable/rockmounrevi.70.2.175>.

Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English culture*. 2013.

<https://archive.org/details/femalemalady00elai/page/144/mode/2up>.

Spindler, Amy M. "A Death Tarnishes Fashion's 'Heroin Look'." *The New York Times*, May 20, 1997. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/20/style/a-death-tarnishes-fashion-s-heroin-look.html>.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Penguin Classics, 2020. First published

1929 by Hogarth Press.

Notes on contributor

Nayra Mallón-Zambrana holds a B.A. Degree in English Studies from the Universidad Complutense of Madrid (2024). Her main research interests include intersectional feminism and gender studies.

CONTACT: <nmallon@ucm.es>

Social Media Utilization in English Language Learning and Teaching: Benefits and Challenges³²⁷

Claudia Cinta Mera-Garrido³²⁸

Abstract:

Nowadays, social networks are being used for educational purposes apart from their common use for entertainment and communication. During Covid-19 pandemic, social networks started to be used as teaching and learning tools more constantly, so both teachers and students had to get used to them. Thanks to the growth of Web 2.0, distance education and online learning have been implemented with materials adapted to this new method of teaching. Therefore, this study aims to analyze social media platforms that have been utilized in English language learning, concretely Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. Additionally, this review focuses on providing a summary of the benefits and challenges of them. The research method used in this article is in the form of narrative review. Previous studies used as references are from ERIC and Semantic Scholar databases. The findings reveal that social media provide more benefits than challenges in English language learning, such as an improvement of language skills, motivation, collaboration and engagement among students and teachers. However, some of the challenges faced are online safety and distractions. Hence, the results of this study may help language teachers to design more effective and efficient language learning programs with the integration of social media.

Keywords: Social media; English language learning and teaching; Facebook; YouTube; WhatsApp; TikTok; Instagram

³²⁷ Recommended Citation

Mera-Garrido, Claudia Cinta. "Social Media Utilization in English Language Learning and Teaching: Benefits and Challenges." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 124-153:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

³²⁸ **CONTACT:** Claudia Cinta Mera-Garrido <claudiacinta.mera842@alu.uhu.es>

1. Introduction

English language learning and teaching has undergone significant changes in recent years, particularly with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, which had shifted the educational system from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning and virtual classrooms.³²⁹ These changes in educational institutions have brought many challenges to learners' study routine and acquisition of academic knowledge, especially on language learning. However, the rise of Web 2.0 and the increasing use of technology in education have contributed to the learning process during this era.³³⁰ This type of learning that is conducted electronically is known as 'e-learning'.³³¹ Isyaku Hassan et al. investigated about how Web 2.0 materials have affected the learning process of English as a second language among students during the Covid-19 pandemic, its positive and negative aspects.³³² As some of the interviewed students respond, the benefits about implementing technological tools on educational context are: "collaborative learning," "independent reading and writing," "flexible learning," "access to variety of information" and "competence in using technology." Moreover, it is essential to mention the positive learning results on affective competences, such as motivation, learners' excitement and engagement to learn utilizing digital devices.³³³ On the other hand, "poor internet connectivity," "inadequate knowledge of technology" and "inability to upload large file" are some of the potential challenges of applying Web-based learning tools.

The pandemic has resulted in a shift towards distance education, which has changed traditional teaching methods and learning styles. Online education has allowed for more flexible scheduling and increased access to resources, but it has also presented new challenges, such as ensuring effective communication and engagement with

³²⁹ Muneera Muftah, "Impact of Social Media on Learning English Language During the COVID-19 Pandemic." (*PSU Research Review*, 2022).

³³⁰ Isyaku Hassan, Musa BaraU Gamji, Qaribu Yahaya Nasidi and Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi, "Challenges and Benefits of Web 2.0-Based Learning Among International Students of English During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Cyprus." (*Arab World English Journal*, 2021), 295–306.

³³¹ Meenakshi Sharma Yadav. "Role of Social Media in English Language Learning to the Adult Learners." (*International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 2021).

³³² Hassan, Gamji, Nasidi and Azmi, 295–306.

³³³ *Ibid.*

students in a virtual environment. Furthermore, the main difference between distance and face-to-face learning is the physical location of the teacher and students. In distance learning, teachers and students are in different locations, while in face-to-face learning, they are in the same physical location. Therefore, distance learning involves online resources, such as blogs, microblogs, wikis, video conferencing applications, social networks and media sharing to afford online learning.³³⁴ Distance learning also includes “asynchronous communication tools” that involves students accessing course materials at their own pace, without the need for real-time interaction with the teacher, and “synchronous communication tools” that involves real-time interaction between the teacher and students, typically through audio-video conferencing or chatting.³³⁵ However, face-to-face learning implicates continuous interrelated relationship between teacher and student, so that it provides more immediate feedback and interaction, which can be especially important for language learning.

Social media are online communication platforms that enable people to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, and content. Social media allow users to connect and interact with one another through text, images, videos, and other forms of multimedia content. As Rdouan Faizi, Abdellatif El Afia, and Raddouane Chiheb stated, “[s]ocial media encompass a wide range of tools that integrate technology, social interaction and content creation.”³³⁶ Moreover, there are several types of social media platforms, including: social networking sites (Facebook), media-sharing sites (Instagram, YouTube and TikTok), microblogging platforms, discussion forums, blogging platforms and messaging apps (WhatsApp).³³⁷

Social media platforms provide valuable opportunities for English language learners and teachers to connect and engage in language learning activities. Muneera Muftah conducted a study about the impact of multiple social media on learning English as a second language and he concludes that these platforms positively influenced the

³³⁴ Rdouan Faizi, Abdellatif El Afia and Raddouane Chiheb, “Exploring the Potential Benefits of Using Social Media in Education.” (Internal Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning, 2013), 50–53.

³³⁵ Yadav, 2021.

³³⁶ Faizi, El Afia and Chiheb, 50–53.

³³⁷ Yadav, 2021.

learning process with a percentage of 86.75%.³³⁸ Moreover, the questionnaires reveal that 81.92% of the respondents use social media for communicative purposes with teachers and colleagues. On the contrary, 84,94 % are interested in using these platforms as an educational tool. Therefore, social media can enhance language learning by supplying a platform for learners to practice their writing, listening, reading, and speaking skills through interactions with native speakers and other learners around the world. This being so, students will have the opportunity to be in contact with the learned English language instead of being continually exposed to it in a theoretical way.³³⁹ It also provides access to authentic language use and cultural insights, as well as a wealth of resources for language learning, such as videos, podcasts, and language learning apps.³⁴⁰ Teachers can use social media to facilitate collaborative learning, provide feedback, and assess students' language skills in real-time. However, it is important to consider the potential drawbacks of using social media in education, such as the risk of distractions and the need for proper moderation to ensure a safe and respectful learning environment.³⁴¹ Overall, social media has the potential to revolutionize language learning and teaching, making it more accessible, engaging, and effective. As a result, this study will analyze and review previous research that utilized social media for learning and teaching processes in an academic context, concretely English language learning. It aims to analyze five social platforms, specifically Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok, that have been implemented as a learning tool in English foreign language (EFL) context; to provide a comprehensive summary about the benefits and challenges of these social media that prior studies have demonstrated and to identify what competences are improved by using them. In conclusion, the reason for choosing this topic is the importance of stressing that, due to the advancement of technologies and their immersion in the educational environment, both teachers and students should be aware of the benefits and challenges caused by the use of these tools

³³⁸ Muneera Muftah, 2022.

³³⁹ Al Fadda, 3–11.

³⁴⁰ Zhai Xiuwen and Abu Bakar Razali, "An Overview of the Utilization of TikTok to Improve Oral English Communication Competence Among EFL Undergraduate Students." (*Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 2021), 1439–51.

³⁴¹ Zhai and Razali, 1439–51.

and how to use them correctly depending on the learning styles of each student. Thus, this investigation can serve as a guideline for them to be trained on how to use these platforms to address the development of content and language skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Media for Educational Purposes

According to Faizi et al., the way individuals engage with one another has changed because of social media, which is now a common communication tool among the younger and adult population.³⁴² Social media platforms have completely changed how people access, share, and trade information, making it simpler to do so with other people or organizations. Additionally, social media has been increasingly used in academic contexts as a tool for English second language acquisition in the digital era.³⁴³ In this regard, previous studies have examined the impact and the efficacy of social media platforms in EFL contexts and educative environments.³⁴⁴ These studies revealed positive effects of using social media as a teaching and learning tool. Muftah proves that social media platforms can be used as an educational tool by making a questionnaire to college students from the University of Najran, and 84.94% of the responses demonstrated this statement.³⁴⁵ However, the studies' results are focused on various aspects of the utilization of social networks on language learning contexts. For instance, some of them are focused on linguistic factors, such as English language skills, grammar, and vocabulary, whereas others are centered on socio-affective factors, such as motivation, creativity, collaboration, interest, and interaction.

Social media platforms have opened new opportunities for language learners to improve their English language skills. One of the most significant benefits, regarding the practice of English competences via social media, is the ability to immerse students

³⁴² Faizi, El Afia and Chiheb, 50-53.

³⁴³ Yadav, 2021.

³⁴⁴ Ahmad, T. H. Abdullah, Mohammad M. A. Al-Bawaleez, Mohd Nazri L. Azmi, and Isyaku H., "Analysis of EFL Learners' Language Proficiency Development across Different Social Media Platforms." (*Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2022), 1756–61.

³⁴⁵ Muftah, 2022.

selves in an English-speaking environment. Xiuwen Zhai and Abu B. Razali conducted an exploration about the utilization of TikTok to improve oral English communication competence among EFL Chinese undergraduate students.³⁴⁶ The research's results conclude that this app helps learners to enhance their speaking skills via short-videos activities, which is an innovative and creative method that motivates students to practice their communication competence with others. However, the percentage of students with lower scores on speaking and listening skills is still evident.³⁴⁷ Therefore, E. Oos Anwas et al. established that it is relevant the type of English contents accessed on social media for improving these active skills (speaking and listening).³⁴⁸ This being so, most of the language learners tend to look for video content since they are more excited to watch and easier to understand. According to Agung Rinaldy Malik and Muhammad N. Ashar Asnur, YouTube is the most popular social media among students of higher education because of its interactive contents in form of videos.³⁴⁹ Additionally, Facebook is another platform that can be used to practice writing, reading and vocabulary. Manal Al-Tamimi et al. test two different groups by distributing them pre-post writing tests. The control group were taught with traditional learning method, while the experimental one with Facebook app.³⁵⁰ Hence, the results show that the experimental group have better outcomes, so using Facebook is an exemplary way of enhancing writing skill and vocabulary enrichment.

In language learning, social media can be used as a pedagogical tool to improve the learning outcomes of English as a foreign language. One of the most significant purposes is the ability to create an interactive and engaging learning experience, where teaching is centered on students, and it facilitates the exchange of information easily

³⁴⁶ Zhai and Razali, 1439–51.

³⁴⁷ Anwas, E. O. M., Sugiarti, Y., Permatasari, A. D., Warsihna, J., Anas, Z., Alhapip, L., Siswanto, H. W., and Rivalina, R., "Social Media Usage for Enhancing English Language Skill." (*International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies*, 2020), 41–57.

³⁴⁸ Anwas, Sugiarti, Permatasari, Warsihna, Anas, Alhapip, Siswanto, and Rivalina, 41-57.

³⁴⁹ Rinaldy Malik, A., and Ashar Asnur, M. N., "Using Social Media as a Learning Media of Foreign Language Students in Higher Education." (*Bahtera: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Dan Sastra*, 2019), 166–75.

³⁵⁰ Manal F. Al-Tamimi, Ahmad H. Al-Khawaldeh, Hashem I. M. Al Natsheh, and Amer A. Harazneh, "The Effect of Using Facebook on Improving English Language Writing Skills and Vocabulary Enrichment Among University of Jordan Sophomore Students." (*Journal of Social Science*, 2018), 187–214.

and rapidly.³⁵¹ Rinaldy Malik and Ashar Asnur demonstrate that social media give rise to a sense of curiosity in learners, so that it motivates them to practice and improve their English skills.³⁵² Thus, social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram can be used to create an online community of learners, where students can interact with each other and their teachers, feel confident and comfortable sharing their ideas and perspectives, and ask questions.³⁵³ Iman Al-Khalidi and Ouarda Khouni conducted a questionnaire survey among students from the university of OMAN (Arabia Saudi) and they proved that the 36.1% of the learners agreed about the positive effects of social media on mitigating learners' academic anxiety and the 51.6% admitted that these platforms have positively impacted students' interaction.³⁵⁴ Hence, these features can make the learning process more interactive, engaging, and enjoyable for students, which can lead to improve linguistic and socio-affective outcomes.³⁵⁵

Another pedagogical implication of social media in EFL learning is the capacity to facilitate collaboration and teamwork. Social media platforms can be used to create virtual workspaces, where students can collaborate on projects, share their work, and provide feedback to each other. According to Al-Khalidi and Khouni, 37.19% of the students' survey responses agreed that social platforms promote collaboration among learners.³⁵⁶ John Raven conducted research based on Input-Process-Outcome model (IPO) that demonstrates the effectiveness of learning the required contents of the course to afford a PET exam by making an authentic group project and using computer devices.³⁵⁷ The post-project survey reveals that most of the students have learned a lot about teamwork skills (68%) and computer skills (78%). Additionally, Faizi et al. exposed that social networking prompt students to develop and improve their problem-solving

³⁵¹ Muftah, 2022.

³⁵² Rinaldy Malik and Ashar Asnur, 166-75.

³⁵³ Faizi, El Afia and Chiheb, 50-53.

³⁵⁴ Iman Al-Khalidi and Khouni, O. "Investigating the Effectiveness of Social Media Platforms (SMPs) in English Language Teaching and Learning from EFL Students' Perspectives." (*Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, 2021), 46-64.

³⁵⁵ John Raven, "A Model to Guide Practitioners Through the Process of Collaborative Projects." (*Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*, 2006), 2-8.

³⁵⁶ Al-Khalidi and Khouni, 46-64.

³⁵⁷ Raven, 2-8.

skills in collaborative environments and teamwork.³⁵⁸ An example of a social network that employs its services of comments and direct messages (DMs) as a collaborative tool to provide feedback among students is Instagram.³⁵⁹

According to Kheryadi Kheryadi and Vimala Balakrishnan & Chin Lay Gan, social media can also provide teachers with a powerful tool for assessing student learning.³⁶⁰ By monitoring students' social media activity, teachers can gain insight into their interests, preferences, and learning styles. This can help teachers tailor their teaching methods to better meet the needs of their students and improve learning outcomes. Finally, social media can also provide EFL learners with opportunities to engage in language exchanges with native speakers and other learners of English. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp or Instagram can be used to connect learners with native speakers for conversation practice and feedback.³⁶¹

2.2. Types of Social Media for EFL Learning and Teaching

2.2.1. Instagram

According to Dixon, Instagram is one of the most successful social media platforms, concretely it is in the fourth position in the statistics about the most famous social media in the world.³⁶² Instagram is a photo and video-sharing app where users can follow and unfollow other users' profiles. Behind these profiles, there are different types of content creators, such as content centered on entertainment, creators' lifestyle, motivational and inspirational messages, marketing of some products, making socially responsible causes visible and education, among others. The educational materials shared on Instagram are very extensive, ranging from content on mathematics, literature, art, and

³⁵⁸ Faizi, El Afia and Chiheb, 50-53.

³⁵⁹ Ghada Mousa Abdullah Alghamdi, "Investigating the Effect and Students' Perceptions of Using Instagram as a Writing Teaching Tool in Saudi EFL Classrooms." (*English Language Teaching, Canadian Center of Science and Education*, 2022), 1-46.

³⁶⁰ Kheryadi Kheryadi, "The Implementation of 'WhatsApp' as a Media of English Language Teaching." (*Loquen: English Studies Journal*, 2018), 1; Vimala Balakrishnan and Gan Chin Lay, "Students' Learning Styles and Their Effects on the Use of Social Media Technology for Learning." (*Telematics and Informatics*, 2016), 808-21.

³⁶¹ Hind A. Al Fadda, 2020.

³⁶² Stacy Jo Dixon, "Instagram – Statistics and Facts." (Statista, 2023).

languages. Since English is the most spoken and used language internationally and is becoming a mandatory requirement for different disciplines, such as jobs or academic qualifications, there are many accounts that work and teach how to improve the different skills of this language in a creative, playful, and entertaining way. Some of these accounts are @ewa.english, @mariaspeakenglish and @englishwithmax. Moreover, content on Instagram can be shared in the form of images, 60-second videos, reels, and stories. Videos and photos can be grouped into a single post where users can make comments and feedback. Hence, Nouf Aloraini investigated about whether English grammar and vocabulary posts about lesson content effect on learners cognitive and affective competencies had.³⁶³ The data used to measure these facts were learners' comments and feedback on these posts to contrast which of the two lesson posts have more outputs. Similarly, Ghada Mousa Alghamdi utilized the same Instagram tools for assessing students' writing skill.³⁶⁴ However, this study also used Instagram's DMs tool to give students feedback. However, most of the students in these studies complained about short-time videos due to its impossibility to teach a full-time English lesson. An alternative to this is IGTV, Instagram Direct and IG calls. IGTV is a vertical video that allows uploads of 10 minutes and for verified accounts to 60 minutes, whereas Instagram Directs and IG calls are live records.

2.2.2. Facebook

According to Dixon, Facebook is the first most popular social media around the world followed by YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram.³⁶⁵ Facebook is platform 7 that offers the possibility to post texts, photos, and videos. Additionally, users have access to Facebook Messenger, a chat for direct communication with one another, community groups, and updates on the activity of their Facebook friends and the pages they follow. Al-Tamimi et al. carried out an experiment with two different types of groups: control

³⁶³ Nouf Aloraini, "Investigating Instagram as an EFL Learning Tool." (*Arab World English Journal*, 2018).

³⁶⁴ Alghamdi, 1-46.

³⁶⁵ Dixon. "Facebook – Statistics and Facts." (Statista, 2023).

and experimental groups respectively.³⁶⁶ The control group was taught with a traditional lesson program, while the experimental one was instructed through Facebook Groups. After examining both groups with pre-post writing and vocabulary tests, the results reflected that Facebook enhances writing skills and increases vocabulary. Craig Gamble and Michael Wilkins also confirmed, thanks to distributed questionnaires to students, that Facebook groups, forums and pages are suitable tools for reviewing homework assignments posted, being in contact with peers and teachers.³⁶⁷ Moreover, Facebook is a platform where students can upload videos in form of assignments to practice their speaking and listening skills. Comments on posts can also be used to practice students grammar and vocabulary content and reading skills by reading colleagues' comments.³⁶⁸

2.2.3. WhatsApp

According to Laura Ceci, WhatsApp is an instant messaging platform for mobile and computer devices.³⁶⁹ WhatsApp is the easiest and most famous global mobile messenger app with approximately two billion active users. This social network enables users to share text, images, video, voice messages, users locations, as well as voice and video calls. These features enables English learners to enhance and practice their cognitive and socio-affective competences easily and confidently. WhatsApp also allow to have a conversation with other students and teachers. This conversation can take place privately or in a group. Hence, working in a WhatsApp group enhance students' interaction and collaboration. Kheryadi conducted a research about teaching English skills during six-month lessons via WhatsApp groups.³⁷⁰ Before putting into practice these new teaching method, the teacher explains the differences between learning activities on independent and dependent conversations. Therefore, within independent conversations, students have the possibility to dialogue about any topic or idea, so that

³⁶⁶ Al-Tamimi, Al-Khawaldeh, Al Natsheh, and Harazneh, 187-214.

³⁶⁷ Craig Gamble and Michael Wilkins, "Student Attitudes and Perceptions of Using Facebook for Language Learning." (Dimension 49, 2014), 49–72.

³⁶⁸ María Martínez Lirola, "Approaching the Use of Facebook to Improve Academic Writing and to Acquire Social Competences in English in Higher Education." (Contemporary Educational Technology 14, 2022).

³⁶⁹ Laura Ceci, "WhatsApp – Statistics and Facts." (Statista, 2022).

³⁷⁰ Kheryadi, 2018.

teacher's role in this type of activity is merely a viewer how whether they are active or not. On the other hand, dependent conversations have a predetermined theme as a starting point where teacher's role is active and giving feedback and corrections to student's grammatical errors. Some teachers uses recorded videos of the lesson in 5-10 minutes, 8 clips and video calls. Additionally, teachers send back homework's corrections in form of images and utilizes voice notes to explain lessons.³⁷¹ As Fawzia Alubthane & Ibrahim ALYoussef affirmed WhatsApp also functions as a tool to share study materials and assignments, past exam papers and coursework results via documents and links.³⁷²

2.2.4. YouTube

As stated by Ceci, YouTube is globally the biggest online video-sharing network with more than 2.5 billion users.³⁷³ YouTube offers a vast variety of video content, such as music and song videos, short films, documentaries, gaming, and educational videos. Users of this platform can post, comment and rate other users' videos. Additionally, they can also save videos on their YouTube account and subscribe to other users' channels. Talking about educational clips, it is essential to know that this platform allows students of all ages to access all kinds of teaching and learning related content. Hence, they can find everything from videos on solving mathematical problems to tips and lessons on how to develop different language skills for learning English as a foreign language. Hadeel A. Saed et al. investigated the mastery of the various English language skills and competences via watching YouTube videos.³⁷⁴ Therefore, two groups, the experimental group that was taught by utilizing YouTube services and the control one that continued to maintain the traditional teaching method, were exposed to several questions to find

³⁷¹ Iram Afzal, and Nauman A. Abdullah, "Role of WhatsApp in Teaching and Learning Process in Schools in Pakistan." (*Journal of Educators Online* 19, 2022).

³⁷² Fawzia Alubthane, and Ibrahim ALYoussef, "Pre-Service Teachers' Views about Effective Use of the WhatsApp Application in Online Classrooms." (*The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology* 20, 2021), 44–52.

³⁷³ Ceci, "YouTube – Statistics and Facts." (*Statista*, 2023).

³⁷⁴ Hadeel A. Saed, Haider, A. S., Al-Salman, S., and Hussein, R. F., "The Use of YouTube in Developing the Speaking Skills of Jordanian EFL University Students." (*Heliyon* 7, 2021).

out which teaching method was most effective. The results concluded that learning through YouTube videos favors the development and improvement of students' listening and speaking skills. In addition, a similar investigation with the same group division was conducted to demonstrate that students exposed to YouTube clips in reading lessons have better outcomes in comprehension and vocabulary improvement.³⁷⁵

2.2.5. TikTok

TikTok is a short-form video sharing platform with 740 million users in 2021.³⁷⁶ Like other social networks, TikTok apart from video posts with added sounds and music, it also gives users the option of commenting, replying to comments, liking, or saving the video. Also, to be able to change the video so that it does not repeat in a loop, the viewer only must swipe upwards.³⁷⁷ However, only users who reach one thousand (1000) followers can access the live video service on TikTok to provide content with no estimated time limit, as TikTok videos have a duration of 15-180 seconds. Among the content published on TikTok, it can be found many videos about English learning. Nurul Afidah, Novi Kumala Sari and Hanifah; Zhai and Razali, and Huining Yang expose that TikTok videos are mostly used for enhancing listening and speaking skills, although these educational videos also contribute to vocabulary and grammatical enrichment.³⁷⁸ Furthermore, it is important to state that there are very few previous research studies that analyze in depth what other competences of English language learning are involved in the utilization of TikTok in educational contexts, since this application is the newest one.

³⁷⁵ Raniah Kabooha and Tarik Elyas. "The Effects of YouTube in Multimedia Instruction for Vocabulary Learning: Perceptions of EFL Students and Teachers." (*English Language Teaching* 11, 2018), 72–81.

³⁷⁶ Ceci, "TikTok – Statistics and Facts." (*Statista*, 2022).

³⁷⁷ Katie Elson Anderson, "Getting Acquainted with Social Networks and Apps: It is Time to Talk about TikTok." (*Library Hi Tech News* 37, 2020), 7–12.

³⁷⁸ Nurul Afidah, Novi Kumala Sari and Hanifah, "Investigating Students' Perspectives on The Use of TikTok as an Instructional Media in Distance Learning during Pandemic Era." *DINAMIKA: (Jurnal Kajian Pendidikan Dan Keislaman* 6, 2021), 47–68; Zhai and Razali, 1439–51; Huining Yang, "Secondary-School Students' Perspective of Utilizing TikTok for English Learning in and Beyond the EFL Classroom." (In 3rd International Conference on Education Technology and Social Science, 2020), 162–83.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

The following research questions will serve as a common thread throughout the study and each part of it will answer them by providing a solution. Furthermore, these questions will guide the arguments that will support the thesis of this study.

1. What are the benefits of using social media in English language learning?
2. What are the challenges of using social media in English language learning?
3. What competences and skills are improved by utilizing social media as a learning tool?

3.2. Steps of Research

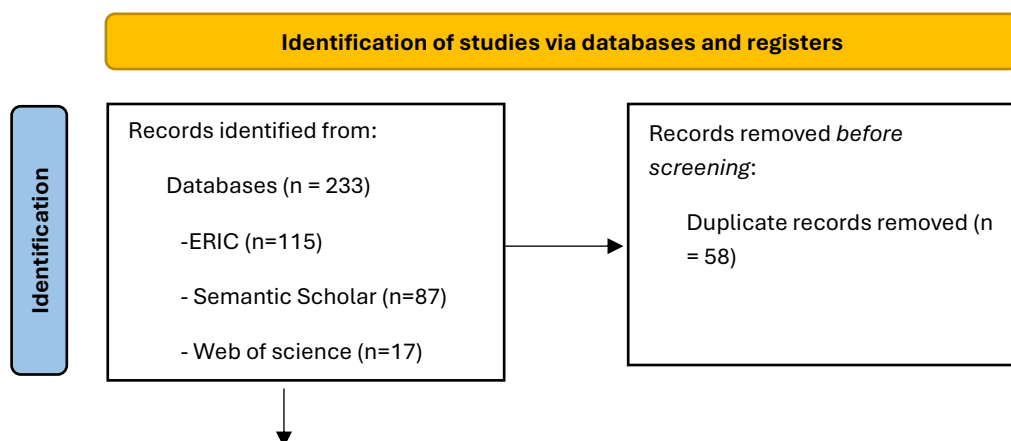
This narrative literature review is focused on describing and discussing the utilization of several social medias (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok and YouTube) in English language learning and teaching; concretely, it aims to collect benefits and challenges of using them from previous studies. The literature search was conducted and centered on using two main databases: ERIC and Semantic Scholar. In addition, the search was supplemented with findings from Web of Science and Google Scholar. The following key search terms were used: "Teaching English as a Second language" (TESOL) and "social media," "social media" and "second language acquisition," "English as a foreign language" and "WhatsApp" or "TikTok" or "Facebook" (using the stipulated five social media and combining them with other keywords previously searched).

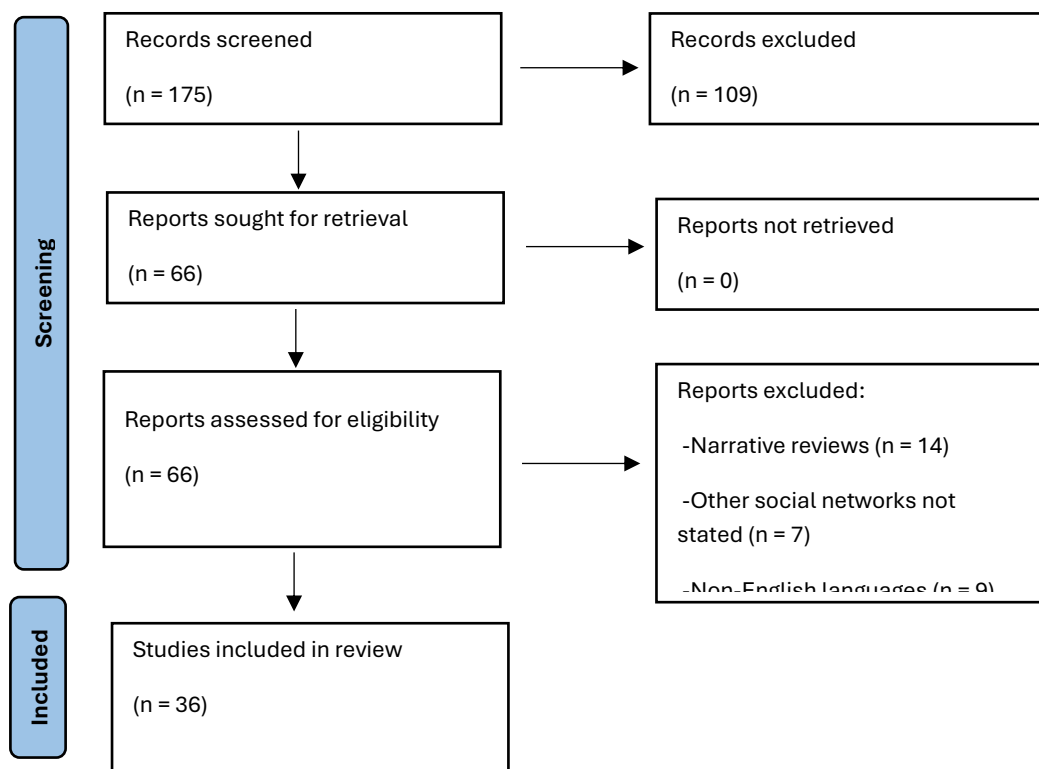
Firstly, in the initial search, 115 articles were found in the ERIC database, 87 from Semantic Scholar, 17 from Web of science and 14 from Google Scholar. All of them are open and free access sources. Secondly, after removing the duplicates articles, 175 pieces remain. Then, the titles and abstract of 109 articles were screened before stating the eligibility criteria. Subsequently, a total number of 66 retrieved articles were read and assessed for determining the eligibility criteria. The inclusion criteria applied are: 1) Language learning and teaching, particularly English language, that utilizes social media for an educational purpose, 2) mixed methods research that analyze the advantages and

disadvantages of using social media for learning and teaching, and 3) articles just focused on a specific platform, such as Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube. Moreover, the included articles are focused mostly on students of High and Secondary education, specifically undergraduate (upper intermediate level) and high school students (intermediate level); although a small part of these articles are centered on Junior education. On the other hand, articles centered on different social media are excluded. Narrative reviews were also excluded because these type of articles do not include empirical observations and experiments. Furthermore, the articles concentrated on other non-English languages are also ignored. Finally, 30 articles are ruled out and a total of 36 articles are included in the reference list and used to obtain the necessary information that will respond to the research questions.

The remaining 36 research articles that were initially skimming and scanning, in this last step, are going to be critically read and analyzed to look for evidence that will support the arguments responding to the research questions. The studies focused on certain social media, such as Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, YouTube and IG, were summarized; and quantitative and qualitative information, extracted from their analysis of benefits and challenges, were also synthesized. However, these data are not only extracted from these articles, but also from others that examines the influence of various social networks in general. Subsequently, **Figure 1** displays the flow diagram for PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses).

Figure 1. PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram.





4. Findings and Analysis

English second language learning is a complex process influenced by several factors. Among these factors, socio-affective and linguistic factors play a significant role in shaping second language acquisition. Consequently, the following **Table 1** displays both factors.

Table 1. Benefits and Challenges of Social Media

SOCIAL MEDIA	BENEFITS	AND	CHALLENGES
Facebook	-Interaction and engagement development -Language skills Improvement -Grammar and syntax correction -Vocabulary enhancement -Motivation, enjoyment and collaboration -Immediate feedback		- Confusion between educational and personal use - Evaluation of students' academic performance - Not Internet access or technological devises - Privacy and safety - Problem with assignment downloads

WhatsApp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Self-confidence -Independency -Active joining -Interest -Creative assignments -Ease of use -Writing and reading improvement -Communication enhancement -Vocabulary proficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distractions - Plagiarism - Informal use of the language -Lack of participation - Neglecting questions on conversation groups
YouTube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Confidence enhancement -Motivation -Collaboration -Interest and enjoyment -Vocabulary memorization and comprehension -Speaking, pronunciation and fluency development -Grammar improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distractions - Confusion between educational and personal use -Privacy and safety
Instagram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Vocabulary improvement -Writing practice -Immediate and creative feedback -Content and language use enhancement -Motivation and interest -Self-confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Grammar, punctuation and spelling problems - Use of the native language for commenting and posting - Not all the students have an account
TikTok	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Speaking and listening development -Vocabulary and grammar enrichment -Interest and motivation -Real-life materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited and incomplete explanations - Distractions

Socio-affective factors refer to the social and emotional aspects of language learning, including motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, identity, and socialization. These factors can impact on how learners approach language learning, their level of engagement, and their success in acquiring the language. For example, learners who are highly motivated to learn English are more likely to persist in their language learning journey and achieve better outcomes than learners who lack motivation.

On the other hand, linguistic factors refer to the structural and functional properties of the language itself, such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and discourse. These factors can be particularly challenging for second language learners who may have different first language structures and norms.

4.1. Socio-affective Factors

As can be observed in the table of extracted results, the socio-affective factors that are most frequently repeated in the process of learning English through social networks are: motivation, interest, collaboration, enjoyment, self-confidence, and autonomy. These five social media can provide learners with a sense of community, enjoyment, and motivation to learn English. However, Instagram can be a great tool to enhance motivation by creating a class account where students can post pictures of their English learning experience and connect with others who share their interests and goals. They can also follow other English language learners and English-speaking accounts to stay motivated and inspired while learning. Additionally, it is important to mention that this social network, together with YouTube and TikTok, is also suitable for developing inspiration among students with an audio-visual learning style. Since motivation stems from the learner's interest, this socio-affective factor is also important in this type of innovative teaching through these platforms. Consequently, TikTok may be the best option for developing interest by creating short videos related to English language learning. Students can use this platform to showcase their creativity and engage in fun and interesting English language activities. Also, apart from being interesting and creative, the activities should encourage the practice of teamwork. This type of project fosters the development of collaboration and working skills.³⁷⁹ Thus Facebook, creating private groups and forums that support collaboration among students, facilitates the sharing of English language learning resources and materials; and contributes with student-to-student and teacher-to-student feedback exchange. Therefore, as social networks provide opportunities for learners to display their language skills and receive positive feedback from others, this can boost learners' self-esteem and confidence in the practice of their English abilities.³⁸⁰ Another platform that can be employed to improve self-confidence is YouTube. Students can create a class channel, where students can enhance their English language skills, and their own videos to practice

³⁷⁹ Raven, 2-8.

³⁸⁰ Gamble and Wilkins, 49-72.

speaking skills. Furthermore, the comments in each of their videos giving positive feedback or correcting their errors also contribute to enhancing this factor. Finally, WhatsApp can be a great tool to enhance autonomy by creating a group for English language learners where students can communicate with each other and practice their language skills independently and dependently with the teacher's guidance.³⁸¹ Hence, this platform also assists students with an independent learning style to deepen in their autonomy.³⁸²

On the other hand, these social networks share some common socio-affective challenges in their application in an educational context, such as distractions, confusions between educational and personal use, privacy, and safety. Social media can be a highly distracting environment, with notifications, messages, and other content vying for learners' attention. This can make it difficult for learners to stay focused and engaged in their English language learning. Furthermore, these distractions can lead learners to be confused about the appropriate use of these social networks to find the required materials for effective learning and not use them for personal entertainment. Concerning safety and privacy, social media can expose learners to cyberbullying and negative comments from others, which can harm their self-esteem and motivation to learn. However, depending on which social network, they have specific challenges that impact on their use as teaching and learning tools. This being so, one of Facebook's problems are the evaluation of learners 'academic performance. As María Martínez Lirola claimed: "It is difficult to select the aspects to be analyzed and to determine the type of feedback that students will receive."³⁸³ Moreover, WhatsApp's most criticized problem among students is the distraction towards student's questions in group activities.³⁸⁴ Finally, Instagram and TikTok are two similar audio-visual platforms that share some features. Among these features, both have the possibility to make comments on diverse types of posts. Consequently, Instagram's most problematic issue is that not all students have an account on this platform. According to Aloraini, all the

³⁸¹ Kheryadi, 2018.

³⁸² Vimala Balakrishnan and Chin Lay Gan, 808-21.

³⁸³ Lirola, 10-11.

³⁸⁴ Alubthane and ALYoussef, 44-52.

students cannot use technologies due to disliking that kind of learning, not having access to the Internet and having morality constraints.³⁸⁵ Regarding TikTok posts, most of the students complain about the limited and uncompleted explanations they provide on the different English contents.³⁸⁶

4.2 Linguistic factors

As can be observed from the extracted results, each of the five specified social networks are of great use in developing the different linguistic factors, such as grammar, vocabulary and language skills. However, depending on which linguistic factor the learner wants to improve, there is a social network that is best suited to enhance some of these factors. Hence, Facebook is a good platform for improving English reading and writing skills. Students can join groups related to language learning, news, literature, or other topics that interest them, and read and interact with posts and comments in English. They can also practice their writing skills by composing thoughtful comments and posts. Similarly, Instagram offers the possibility to practice and improve writing skill by interacting with other English learners, native speakers and teachers while commenting on posts. Moreover, Instagram can be also used for enhancing English vocabulary because it offers opportunities to learn new vocabulary through visuals, captions, comments, and hashtags. By following English-speaking accounts and engaging with other users, learners can expose themselves to new vocabulary words and phrases in a fun and engaging way. Some researchers, such as Aloraini and Hind Abdulaziz Al Fadda, have found and confirmed that many students prefer to improve their vocabulary through this social network.³⁸⁷ Furthermore, WhatsApp, TikTok and YouTube are the best platforms for practicing and developing communication and comprehension competences. By joining on WhatsApp's group chats and videocalls with native English speakers or other language learners, English learners can practice speaking and listening skills in real-time. They can also use voice messages to practice

³⁸⁵ Nouf Aloraini, 2018.

³⁸⁶ Nurul Afidah, Sari and Hanifah, 47-68; Yang, 162-83.

³⁸⁷ Aloraini, 2018; Hind Abdulaziz Al Fadda, "Determining How Social Media Affects English learning".

pronunciation.³⁸⁸ By watching videos on TikTok and YouTube, students can try to imitate native speakers' pronunciation and intonation and thus improve their pronunciation and listening skills.³⁸⁹ However, while YouTube and WhatsApp are versatile platforms that also allow students to improve their writing and reading skills thanks to the comments section, TikTok's time-limited videos do not.

On the other hand, just as some of these social networks favor the efficient acquisition of linguistic factors, they also offer some challenges in their use for English language learning. As mentioned above, due to TikTok's time-limited and thus incomplete video contents, most of the students find it difficult to use this application to improve passive language skills, such as reading and writing. This being so, as Yang stated: "English reading and writing materials that require sufficient time to read, and think are not suitable to be displayed in the form of short video."³⁹⁰ In relation to Instagram, its most problematic issues are grammatical, punctuation and spelling errors when students comment on posts or write direct messages. According to Aloraini, this is due to students' poor keyboarding habits, making it easier for them to handwrite to avoid these problems.³⁹¹ In addition, another challenge of using this platform is that most students, who are not fluent in the English language, tend to comment on the posts' activities using their native language. Facebook shares these same Instagram challenges. Finally, WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube are social networks that serve both for learners' personal entertainment and educational purposes, so that this can lead learners to fall into the informal use of the language to express him/herself through them. Therefore, this is another of the most complicated challenges of this type of learning among learners, as it led them to confuse the formal

³⁸⁸ Alubthane and ALYoussef, 44-52; Afzal and Abdullah, 2022; Ishtiaq Khan, Raja Muhammad, Radzuan, Noor Radzuan, Farooqi, Shahzad, Shahbaz, Muhammad, and Khan, Mohammad, "Learners' Perceptions on WhatsApp Integration as a Learning Tool to Develop EFL Vocabulary for Speaking Skill." (*International Journal of Language Education* 5, 2021), 1–14.

³⁸⁹ Anwas, E. O. M., Sugiarti, Y., Permatasari, A. D., Warsihna, J., Anas, Z., Alhapip, L., Siswanto, H. W., and Rivalina, R., 41-57.

³⁹⁰ H. Yang, 167.

³⁹¹ Aloraini, 2018.

and academic context in which they find themselves due to indirectly associating these media with their non-didactic use.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings show that most of the benefits and challenges of using social networks in learning and teaching processes for the acquisition of English as a foreign language are focused on two different factors. These factors are socio-affective and linguistic competences. Among the socio-affective factors developed, the following stand out: motivation, collaboration, self-confidence, enjoyment, and independence. While among the linguistic ones: vocabulary, the four basic language skills and grammar. However, some common socio-affective challenges when using social networks are related to distractions, privacy and safety and time-limited and incomplete explanations. Additionally, grammar, punctuation, spelling errors and informal language use in academic context are repeated challenges caused by applying this non-traditional learning and teaching method. Therefore, these results revealed that social media platforms are important tools for developing the different competences involved in EFL.

The results concerning the first and the second research questions, posed in the methodology of this study, agree with previous studies about how to use the services these five platform provide for an effective English language learning and teaching. Hence, according to Aloraini, Martínez Lirola, Kheryadi, Raniah Kaboocha & Tarik Elyas and Yang among others; Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube and Instagram offer services such as: direct messaging, comments, and posts, videocalls, forums, pages, direct videos, videos, photos, and voice messages.³⁹² These features can be used for engaging students in learning English and developing the socio-affective and linguistic factors of it. Most of these studies are centered on investigating the benefits and challenges of each social media for its application in educational context. Consequently, this research shares similar conclusions by indicating which social network, depending

³⁹² Aloraini, 2018; Lirola, 2022; Yang, 2020; Kaboocha, R., and Elyas, T., 72-81; Kheryadi, 2018.

on the services it provides, best suited for enhancing each of the factors relating to socio-affective and linguistic competences.

Regarding the third research question about what English language skills are enhanced with the utilization of Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok, most of the results conclude that students can develop the four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Moreover, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills are also improved. Overall, most of the students reveal positive attitudes towards learning English skills through social platforms.³⁹³ However, most students have shown a preference for improving active skills (speaking and listening). That is because these social networks display audio-visual content which enables learners to acquire knowledge using this type of material. As Anwas et al. claimed, “videos or animations are more exciting to watch and easier to understand since the messages are created in the form of moving visual images completed with an audio.”³⁹⁴ Therefore, this means that these platforms will ensure practical and authentic language learning by involving the learner in an English-speaking environment.³⁹⁵

The findings of this study determine that YouTube and TikTok are the leading social networks for practicing English speaking and listening proficiency. Also, both platforms contribute to the easily retention and memorization of English language vocabulary thanks to an attractive audio-visual learning environment. TikTok together with YouTube are making students more interested and motivated in learning English, because they are entertaining applications where they can learn the language by watching videos of people from other cultures and nationalities.³⁹⁶ Previous research conducted by Saed, Haider, Al-Salman & Hussein and Afidah, Sari & Hanifah agrees with these affirmations.³⁹⁷ Saed et al. carry out an investigation where the results reveal that

³⁹³ Anwas, E. O. M., Sugiarti, Y., Permatasari, A. D., Warsihna, J., Anas, Z., Alhapip, L., Siswanto, H. W., and Rivalina, R., 41-57; Sameer O. A Baniyassen, “The Impact of Social Media on Improving English Learning Skills: A Case Study of UAE”. (United Arab Emirates University, 2020).

³⁹⁴ Anwas, E. O. M., Sugiarti, Y., Permatasari, A. D., Warsihna, J., Anas, Z., Alhapip, L., Siswanto, H. W., and Rivalina, R., 48.

³⁹⁵ Zhai and Razali, 1439–51.

³⁹⁶ Raniah Kabooaha and Tariq Elyas, 2018.

³⁹⁷ Hadeel A. Saed, Haider, Al-Salman, and Hussein, 2021; Nurul, Sari and Hanifah, 2021.

an experimental group, taught through YouTube, get better outcomes on speaking and listening tests than a traditional learning group.³⁹⁸ However, it is significant to highlight the challenges surrounding these social networks, such as privacy, safety, and distractions. Students should be careful about what kind of videos and content they visit on these social networks, as their accounts can be hacked, they can be cyberbullied, or they can even access videos of unwanted content. In addition, another problem they may suffer are distractions due to inappropriate use of these, both in the classroom and at home, and thus waste study time consulting videos, accounts or pages that have nothing to do with learning English. Another problem may be the limited time of the TikTok videos due to short-videos upload. Yang reveals similar issues of this application stating that one of the most problematic challenges of TikTok videos among students is the uncompleted explanations.³⁹⁹

Regarding passive skills, such as reading and writing, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp are the most used for developing them, although WhatsApp is a multi-function platform that can also serve as a learning tool for practicing active skills due to the diverse services it provides. The results reflect that they are applications that can be used, both by teachers and students, to improve writing, reading and critical thinking skills, and to enhance group work. Furthermore, Instagram is a photo and video-sharing platform that can be used to enhance motivation thanks to its creative and real-life materials that attract and encourage students to learn English. Also, Instagram can be used to enrich students' English vocabulary. Hence, Qais Faryadi and Gamble & Wilkins coincide with the findings obtained on Facebook. Both studies show that Facebook can be used as a learning tool in the subject of English, as through tests and questionnaires, they concluded that many students prefer this social network to develop these skills thanks to the commenting and messaging services it offers.⁴⁰⁰ Furthermore, Alghamdi agrees with the results found about IG.⁴⁰¹ Based on the findings of his study, he

³⁹⁸ Saed, Haider, Al-Salman, and Hussein, 2021.

³⁹⁹ Yang, 2020.

⁴⁰⁰ Qais Faryadi, "Effectiveness of Facebook in English Language Learning: A Case Study." (*Open Access Library Journal* 4, 2017), 1–11; Gamble and Wilkins, 2014.

⁴⁰¹ Alghamdi, 2022.

concludes that by adapting the daily use of this network to educational purposes, students show an improvement in writing skills and an expansion of their vocabulary. Aloraini and Al Fadda share the same opinion on the use of IG to facilitate vocabulary acquisition, since their investigations reflect learners' preference and interest in using this app for learning vocabulary over grammar.⁴⁰² However, all the above-mentioned researchers came to similar conclusions about the challenges that learners may face when using these networks. The most prominent of these are: grammatical and spelling errors, informal language, and time constraints.

To sum up, the extracted pieces of evidence from this study demonstrated that social media, namely WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, have unquestionable benefits for English language learning and teaching. The benefits detected are related to an improvement in students' language proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. These platforms also contribute to developing grammar constructions and vocabulary. Overall, social media can enhance socio-affective factors in English language learning by providing learners with opportunities to connect with others, enhance their skills, and develop a sense of autonomy and cultural awareness. However, some of the few challenges faced are mostly related to distractions, safety and privacy, limited time and explanations, and grammatical and punctuation errors. Therefore, it is important for learners to be aware of these challenges and take steps to overcome them, such as setting boundaries for social media use, seeking out resources and support, and practicing their English language skills in a variety of contexts.

I contend that social media should be used as a supplement to traditional language learning methods, not as a replacement. Social networks provide many materials and explanations that can be used to support English language learning, which does not mean that teachers' intervention are not necessary. Thus, teachers play a crucial role in the learning process of English via social networks. They can provide guidance on how to effectively use social media platforms for language learning, and

⁴⁰² Aloraini, 2018; Al Fadda, 2020.

help students navigate through the overwhelming amount of content available. Teachers can also help students develop critical thinking skills by teaching them how to evaluate the credibility and reliability of sources found on social media. Furthermore, teachers can create engaging and interactive lessons that incorporate social media activities such as watching videos, participating in online discussions, and sharing content related to English language learning. Finally, they can also provide timely and personalized feedback to students, which can help them improve their language skills and increase their motivation to learn.

6. Further Research and Limitations

This study is a narrative review that investigates the benefits and challenges of WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube in teaching and learning English as a foreign language to students of all ages, specifically learners from high school and university. Therefore, similar investigations should be conducted using quantitative and qualitative approaches by making empirical observations, social experiments, and surveys among Andalusian university students. Also, as the present study does not explore Twitter platform, because there is little information on its use for educational purposes and it is a platform that offers very limited materials and content that can be used for English language learning, the further research should include it along with the other social networks to be investigated.

This research may be limited due to the little information that exists and is known on this topic, as we are talking about an innovative study methodology based on learning the different skills that make up a language through social networks. Many of the sources used for this research are focused on a very current period of time, specifically since the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, more investigations should be carried out on this topic over a longer period of time in order to extract more conclusive results that will guide both teachers and learners in the correct use of these tools for learning English.

Bibliography

- Abdullah, Ahmad T. H., Al-Bawaleez, Mohammad M. A., Azmi, Mohd N. L., and Hassan, Isyaku. "Analysis of EFL Learners' Language Proficiency Development across Different Social Media Platforms." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 12, no. 9 (2022): 1756–61. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1209.07>.
- Afidah, Nurul, Sari, Novi K., and Hanifah, Hanifah. "Investigating Students' Perspectives on the Use of TikTok as an Instructional Media in Distance Learning during the Pandemic Era." *DINAMIKA: Jurnal Kajian Pendidikan Dan Keislaman* 6, no. 2 (2021): 47–68. <https://doi.org/10.32764/dinamika.v6i2.1872>.
- Afzal, Iram, and Abdullah, Nauman A. "Role of WhatsApp in Teaching and Learning Process in Schools in Pakistan." *Journal of Educators Online* 19, no. 3 (2022).
- Al Fadda, Hind A. "Determining How Social Media Affects Learning English: An Investigation of Mobile Applications Instagram and Snapchat in TESOL Classroom." *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)* 11, no. 1 (2020): 3–11. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no1.1>.
- Al-Khalidi, Iman, and Khouni, Ouarda. "Investigating the Effectiveness of Social Media Platforms (SMPs) in English Language Teaching and Learning from EFL Students' Perspectives." *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research* 8, no. 4 (2021): 46–64.
- Al-Tamimi, Manal F., Al-Khawaldeh, Ahmad H., Al Natsheh, Hashem I. M., and Harazneh, Amer A. "The Effect of Using Facebook on Improving English Language Writing Skills and Vocabulary Enrichment Among University of Jordan Sophomore Students." *Journal of Social Sciences* 7, no. 3 (2018): 187–214. <https://doi.org/10.25255/jss.2018.7.3.187.214>.
- Alghamdi, Ghada Mousa. "Investigating the Effect and Students' Perceptions of Using Instagram as a Writing Teaching Tool in Saudi EFL Classrooms." *English Language Teaching, Canadian Center of Science and Education* 15, no. 8 (2022): 1–46. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v15n8p46>.
- Aloraini, Nouf. "Investigating Instagram as an EFL Learning Tool." *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)* (2018). <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/call4.13>.

- Alubthane, Fawzia, and ALYousef, Ibrahim. "Pre-Service Teachers' Views about Effective Use of the WhatsApp Application in Online Classrooms." *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology* 20, no. 1 (2021): 44–52.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1290794.pdf>.
- Anderson, Katie E. "Getting Acquainted with Social Networks and Apps: It Is Time to Talk about TikTok." *Library Hi Tech News* 37, no. 4 (2020): 7–12.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/LHTN-01-2020-0001>.
- Anwas, E. Oos M., Sugiarti, Yuni, Permatasari, Anggraeni D., Warsihna, Jaka, Anas, Zulfikri, Alhapip, Leli, Siswanto, Heni W., and Rivalina, Rahmi. "Social Media Usage for enhancing English Language Skill." *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies (IJIM)* 14, no. 7 (2020): 41–57.
<https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v14i07.11552>.
- Balakrishnan, Vimala, and Gan, Chin Lay. "Students' Learning Styles and Their Effects on the Use of Social Media Technology for Learning." *Telematics and Informatics* 33, no. 3 (2016): 808–21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2015.12.004>.
- Baniyassen, Sameer O. A. *The Impact of Social Media on Improving English Learning Skills: A Case Study of UAE*. PhD diss., United Arab Emirates University, 2020.
https://scholarworks.uaeu.ac.ae/all_dissertations/83.
- Ceci, Laura. "WhatsApp – Statistics and Facts." *Statista*, 2022.
<https://www.statista.com/topics/2018/whatsapp/>.
- Ceci, Laura. "YouTube – Statistics and Facts." *Statista*, 2023.
<https://www.statista.com/topics/2019/youtube/>.
- Ceci, Laura. "TikTok – Statistics and Facts." *Statista*, 2022.
<https://www.statista.com/topics/6077/tiktok/>.
- Dixon, Stacy. "Instagram – Statistics and Facts." *Statista*, 2023.
<https://www.statista.com/topics/1882/instagram/#topicOverview>.
- Dixon, Stacy. "Facebook – Statistics and Facts." *Statista*, 2023.
<https://www.statista.com/topics/751/facebook/>.
- Faizi, Rdouan, El Afia, Abdellatif, and Chiheb, Raddouane. "Exploring the Potential Benefits of Using Social Media in Education." *Internal Journal of Emerging*

- Technologies in Learning (IJET)* 3, no. 4 (2013): 50–53.
<https://doi.org/10.3991/ijep.v3i4.2836>.
- Faryadi, Qais. “Effectiveness of Facebook in English Language Learning: A Case Study.”
Open Access Library Journal 4 (2017): 1–11.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1104017>.
- Gamble, Craig, and Wilkins, Michael. “Student Attitudes and Perceptions of Using Facebook for Language Learning.” *Dimension* 49 (2014): 49–72.
- Hassan, Isyaku, Gamji, Musa B., Nasidi, Qaribu Y., and Azmi, Mohd N. L. “Challenges and Benefits of Web 2.0-Based Learning Among International Students of English During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Cyprus.” *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on COVID-19 Challenges* 1 (2021): 295–306.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/covid.22>.
- Ishtiaq Khan, Raja Muhammad, Radzuan, Noor Radzuan, Farooqi, Shahzad, Shahbaz, Muhammad, and Khan, Mohammad. “Learners’ Perceptions on WhatsApp Integration as a Learning Tool to Develop EFL Vocabulary for Speaking Skill.” *International Journal of Language Education* 5, no. 2 (2021): 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.26858/ijole.v5i2.15787>.
- Kabooha, Raniah, and Elyas, Tarik. “The Effects of YouTube in Multimedia Instruction for Vocabulary Learning: Perceptions of EFL Students and Teachers.” *English Language Teaching* 11, no. 2 (2018): 72–81.
<https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v11n2p72>.
- Kheryadi, Kheryadi. “The Implementation of ‘WhatsApp’ as a Media of English Language Teaching.” *Loquen: English Studies Journal* 10, no. 2 (2018): 1.
<https://doi.org/10.32678/loquen.v10i2.685>.
- Martínez Lirola, María. “Approaching the Use of Facebook to Improve Academic Writing and to Acquire Social Competences in English in Higher Education.” *Contemporary Educational Technology* 14, no. 1 (2022).
<https://doi.org/10.30935/cedtech/11482>.

- Muftah, Muneera. "Impact of Social Media on Learning English Language During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *PSU Research Review* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1108/PRR-10-2021-0060>.
- Raven, John. "A Model to Guide Practitioners Through the Process of Collaborative Projects." *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives* 3, no. 1 (2006): 2–8. <https://doi.org/10.18538/lthe.v3.n1.02>.
- Rinaldy Malik, Agung, and Ashar Asnur, Muhammad N. "Using Social Media as a Learning Media of Foreign Language Students in Higher Education." *Bahtera: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Dan Sastra* 18, no. 2 (2019): 166–75. <https://doi.org/10.21009/BAHTERA.182.06>.
- Saed, Hadeel A., Haider, Ahmad S., Al-Salman, Saleh, and Hussein, Riyad F. "The Use of YouTube in Developing the Speaking Skills of Jordanian EFL University Students." *Heliyon* 7, no. 7 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07543>.
- Yadav, Meenakshi Sharma. "Role of Social Media in English Language Learning to the Adult Learners." *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation (IJLLT)* 4, no. 1 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2021.4.1.25>.
- Yang, Huining. "Secondary-School Students' Perspective of Utilizing TikTok for English Learning in and Beyond the EFL Classroom." In *3rd International Conference on Education Technology and Social Science*, vol. 3, (2020): 162–83.
- Zhai, Xiuwen, and Razali, Abu B. "An Overview of the Utilization of TikTok to Improve Oral English Communication Competence Among EFL Undergraduate Students." *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 9, no. 7 (2021): 1439–51. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2021.090710>.

Notes on contributor

Claudia Cinta Mera-Garrido holds a MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from the University of Huelva (2024). She holds a BA in English Studies from the University of Huelva (2022). Her research interests focus on social platforms and EFL acquisition, transmedia storytelling approach, multiliteracies, emotional intelligence in English learning.

Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain
JACLR: JOURNAL OF ARTISTIC CREATION AND LITERARY RESEARCH

2024, VOL. 12, NO. 2, 124-153

ISSN 2340-650X

<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>



CONTACT: claudiacinta.mera842@alu.uhu.es / claudiameragarrido@gmail.com

ORCID: [0009-0007-9643-2252](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9643-2252)

Doomed for Life: Modernist Representations of Male Homosexuality in Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" and Sherwood Anderson's "Hands"⁴⁰³

Rodrigo Vega Ochoa⁴⁰⁴

Abstract:

This paper explores the personality traits and social circumstances of two gay male literary characters in the context of US small towns of early 20th century. These are Paul and Wing, protagonists of Willa Cather's short story "Paul's Case" (1905) and Sherwood Anderson's "Hands" (1916), respectively. Their unhappiness stems from the homophobic beliefs and behaviors that their respective communities hold and exert. In the case of Paul, he learns to survive by hating others back, thus viciously increasing the contempt that others feel for him. His perceived arrogance precludes him from making meaningful connections with other individuals, and, thus, he tends to live immersed in his imagination to escape a reality where he does not seem to stand a chance. In contrast, Wing holds deep feelings of tenderness for other people, but he lives in constant fear of himself, ashamed of his identity and desires, trying to stay hidden from civilization despite his genuine longing for company. I contend that both writers present the harrowing living conditions that their homosexual characters must endure, and how the absence of hope and social understanding influence the development of their personalities and self-esteem to the point of misery, isolation, and self-destruction. I discuss how both short stories demonstrate the increasing Modernist sensitivity toward what was perceived as 'outside the norm' in the early decades of the 20th century, even

⁴⁰³ Recommended Citation

Vega Ochoa, Rodrigo. "Doomed for Life: Modernist Representations of Male Homosexuality in Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case' and Sherwood Anderson's 'Hands'." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 154-170:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

⁴⁰⁴ CONTACT: Rodrigo Vega Ochoa <rodrigo.vega@ucm.es>

though homosexuality remained a taboo subject that, for the most part, could only be suggested through symbols rather than explicitly named.

Keywords: Willa Cather; Sherwood Anderson; Homosexuality; Homophobia; Modernism; Short story

1. Introduction

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines Modernism as a “self-conscious break with the past and a search for new forms of expression.”⁴⁰⁵ This artistic and cultural movement that emerged at the turn of the 20th century was, by no means, homogeneous. But what unified all Modernist authors was the shared venture to break with literary tradition. Quintessential Modernist Virginia Woolf asserted that authors must “attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests them and moves them, even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist.”⁴⁰⁶ Modernism advocated for deeply personal, subjective, unique perceptions of reality so that its representation in fiction would purportedly become more truthful than what literary conventions had prescribed in the previous century. And, among the multiple ways in which Modernism accomplished this self-appointed endeavor, there was an attempt to expand the variety of human voices and perspectives that could be included in literature, namely through the addition of LGBTQ+ characters.

Modernism was an eclectic movement. Not every Modernist author was concerned with further explorations of gender and sexuality. There were plenty of authors —Ezra Pound among them— “whose conceptions of creativity seemed to promote manly virility and emotional hardness.”⁴⁰⁷ However, the beginning of the Modernist period coincided with the first systematized enquiry about human sexuality, which was conducted by Sigmund Freud. Although some of his perspectives are considered outdated as of today, it is undeniable that, in terms of sexuality,

⁴⁰⁵ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “Modernism.”

⁴⁰⁶ Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 161.

⁴⁰⁷ Peter Nagy, “The Woman in the Man,” 776.

psychoanalytic theory “appeared to promise a new plurality of possible classifications.”⁴⁰⁸ Therefore, the wide acceptance of Freud’s works in the 1900s and 1910s may have played a significant part in the emergence of literary authors who decided to put non-heterosexual individuals front and center of their stories. As is widely known, Virginia Woolf defied the invisibility of non-normative sexualities in her work. But she was not the only one nor the first. Before her, American Modernists Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson brought sensitive awareness to these issues, opening a window into the lives of those who had remained—and still would have to remain for decades—on the very margins of society due to their non-compliance with the rigid heteronormative conventions of their environment.

This paper examines Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case” (1905, 1920) and Sherwood Anderson’s “Hands” (1916), which would later be included into his celebrated story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). “Paul’s Case” never explicitly states that its protagonist Paul is a homosexual. But it is strongly hinted at “through a distinct emotional aura and verbal mood [...] reflect[ing] both the difficulty of writing about homosexuality in 1905 and Cather’s own preference for insinuation and implication.”⁴⁰⁹ Thus, Cather takes advantage of the Modernist tendency to employ symbolism for the purpose of shedding some light into what had to remain in obscurity. Anderson also applies symbolism in “Hands,” but goes further into explicit reference about the homosexual feelings of its protagonist Wing while showing a substantial degree of empathy and compassion that proves how he “refused the authorial aggression toward non-normative masculinity displayed by some of his contemporaries.”⁴¹⁰ Nonetheless, both works are pessimistic and brutal in the portrayal of the harrowing social conditions that their male homosexual protagonists must endure due to their perceived queerness—understood both through its association to their non-normative sexualities and gender roles, as well as through the more general meaning of ‘strangeness’ or ‘oddity’—.

⁴⁰⁸ Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker, eds. “Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Theories,” 245.

⁴⁰⁹ Claude J. Summers, “A Losing Game in the End,” 108.

⁴¹⁰ Nagy, 776.

In this essay, I explore the personality traits and social circumstances of the protagonists of Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" and Sherwood Anderson's "Hands." The lives of these two homosexual males reflect a time and place in the early twentieth-century Middle America that could not be more ill-suited to their emotional well-being and safety. Teenager Paul and the middle-aged Wing may be considered almost opposites to one another in terms of psyche and behavior —Paul is defiant and individualist, Wing is shy and tender—, but both men's temperaments and attitudes are marked and determined by the hostile society that they belong to. This unmerciful environment is key to understanding their inability to legitimize themselves and their sexuality. The following section will explain that this circumstance eventually results in their doomed destiny as miserable outcasts who cannot find a chance at happiness.

2. "Paul's Case"

Unlike the literary tradition of the 19th century *Bildungsroman*—fictional narratives about the physical, intellectual, and emotional growth and development of an individual—Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" could be considered its antithesis, evidencing the author's Modernist tendency of breaking with the past. This short story provides an account in which immature behavior is perpetrated, and adulthood is never reached. Paul does not grow or learn to become a responsible individual, to the incomprehension of the society that surrounds him: "The protagonist, the title implies, is a fitting subject for a psychological or criminal case history."⁴¹¹ He lies, cheats, steals, never wants to make an effort, and shows contempt and depreciation toward his school, his teachers, his father, and his neighborhood. However, it would be an oversimplification to hold Paul fully accountable for his infantile attitudes. Simply "reading Paul as a boyish character seems insensitive to the history of gay representation. [...] In light of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet, we should not ignore the 'gay hints' in Cather's story."⁴¹² "Paul's Case" never addresses Paul's homosexuality explicitly. This

⁴¹¹ Summers, 109.

⁴¹² Chung-Hao Ku, "A Boy Under the Ban of Suspension," 71.

went beyond the limits of what was deemed acceptable in literature. But it is strongly suggested all throughout the story. From the very first paragraphs, Cather is able to trace the interrelationship between Paul's homosexuality, the prejudice that he awakens in others and his despise of everything that surrounds him. The story begins with Paul's teachers making a subjective conflation between his choice to wear a carnation —which, as it will be later argued, represents his sexuality— and his behavioral shortcomings as a pupil. This is exemplified in how they “felt this afternoon that his whole attitude was symbolized by his shrug and his flippantly red carnation flower, and they fell upon him without mercy.”⁴¹³ It looks like they are equating Paul's personal choice of accessory with a provoking, harmful attitude on his part. This leads to inferring that, from the very beginning, Paul does not have a chance at acquittal. He might be already predetermined to be perceived in a certain negative manner, infused with subjectivity and bias. In turn, this predisposition may be what makes Paul resort to the individualism, lack of empathy, and misanthropy that he showcases throughout the story. He behaves unpleasantly because his own nature is instinctively rejected by others. His apparent defiance is even the way through which he has learnt to survive.

As Paul is facing a reprimand executed by all the schoolteachers assembled, “his eyes were remarkable for a certain hysterical brilliancy, and he continually used them in a conscious, theatrical sort of way, peculiarly offensive in a boy.”⁴¹⁴ This description is quite telling. The use of the adjectives ‘hysterical’ and ‘theatrical’ already suggests some sort of womanly behavior, if the rigid gender conventions of the time are to be considered in combination with Cather's predilection for verbal hints, as “she was able to convey a sense of this previously unmentionable dimension of her protagonist's inner being without violating any of the literary taboos of her time.”⁴¹⁵ Besides, the mention of ‘peculiarly offensive in a boy’ can work in two separate ways that are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. The reference to ‘boy’ could be understood as opposed to ‘grown-up,’ considering that Paul's immature attitude is what is being openly

⁴¹³ Willa Cather, “Paul's Case,” 469.

⁴¹⁴ Cather, 468.

⁴¹⁵ Larry Rubin, “The Homosexual Motif,” 131.

denounced by his teachers, as “disorder and impertinence were among the offences named.”⁴¹⁶

However, it should be noted that the use of ‘boy’ can be understood in terms of gender, as opposed to ‘girl.’ Therefore, the fact that Paul’s use of his own gaze results particularly offensive in a boy—in his teachers’ perception— can be thought of as their repudiation of anything that differs from the prescribed gender roles. In other words, effeminacy in a man seems to be regarded as something that instinctively ignites hate and disgust. It is just another example that can be compared to their irrational contempt for his carnation. As Claude J. Summers asserts, “the teachers are not unkind by nature, but they lack the imagination to understand sympathetically Paul’s temperament and consequently allow themselves to be goaded into actions that contradict their own values.”⁴¹⁷ They cannot stand the way in which he seems to defy them with his eyes at a moment in which he should be supposed to show humility, even if it were only a conscious strategy on his part so as not to be suspended from the school. However, Paul seems to have no interest whatsoever in keeping appearances for his own sake, given that “older boys than Paul had broken down and shed tears under that ordeal, but his set smile did not once desert him. [...] This conscious expression, since it was as far as possible from boyish mirthfulness, was usually attributed to insolence or ‘smartness’.”⁴¹⁸

Paul’s “defensively contemptuous response to life”⁴¹⁹ does not spark any attempt at sympathy on the part of his father or his teachers, who are precisely the figures that are supposed to help him grow into an emotionally integrated individual. The only instance in the whole story in which they try to understand him is when his art teacher mentions to the others the following: “I don’t really believe that smile of his comes altogether from insolence; there’s something sort of haunted about it. [...] There is something wrong about the fellow.”⁴²⁰ The fact that this is mentioned by the art

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁷ Summers, 111.

⁴¹⁸ Cather, 469.

⁴¹⁹ Summers, 109.

⁴²⁰ Cather, 470.

teacher instead of by someone from any other academic discipline is not fortuitous. It is commonly believed that artistic disciplines require a certain amount of intuitive wisdom. It is possible that his art teacher notices that what lies beneath Paul's rocky surface is pain and suffering. However, his concern does not go beyond that remark. In connection with the matter of the arts, it should be noted that the only place that Paul does not loathe in his hometown is the theater where he works as an usher. He delights in the flashy atmosphere of fantasy that he finds there: "This was Paul's fairy tale, and it had for him all the allurements of a secret love. The moment he inhaled the gassy, painty, dusty odour behind the scenes, he breathed like a prisoner set free, and felt within him the possibility of doing or saying splendid, brilliant things."⁴²¹ The world of the performing arts consists of making believe and creating fictions, and this is something that matches his personality.

Paul is "able to alter mundane reality by fantasizing more exciting, romantic alternatives."⁴²² He creates fictions and dreams in his head to survive the reality that he abhors. The problem that this entails is that he deludes himself into believing that the 'theater people' love and admire him when that is not the case. In fact, they feel contempt and laugh at him. "They laughed rather bitterly at having stirred the boy to such fervid and florid inventions. They agreed with the faculty and with his father, that Paul's was a bad case."⁴²³ It seems that Paul cannot find a single ally even in a place — the theater — where he might have had a better chance at acceptance.

As previously suggested, Paul's relationship with his father is a failed one. There is no productive communication between them. His father is incapable of legitimizing the natural interests of his son, which include the theater, music, and dressing up. In fact, Paul literally tries to hide all this from him. This physical action works as a symbol for the underlying problem. "The fact that Paul feels it necessary to keep his bottle of violet water carefully hidden from his father could almost symbolize his sense of

⁴²¹ Cather, 477.

⁴²² Summers, 112.

⁴²³ Cather, 479.

alienation from a society that has only contempt for what it considers effeminacy in a young man."⁴²⁴

The only path that his father can conceive for Paul is the normative one, and he wants Paul to follow the steps of their neighbor, a "young man who was daily held up to Paul as a model, and after whom it was his father's dearest hope that he would pattern."⁴²⁵ This neighbor is described as someone who had been 'dissipated' in the past but who, through hard work, has been able to prosper. The narrator specifies that for this man to change his attitude, "he had taken his chief's advice, oft reiterated to his employees, and at twenty-one had married the first woman whom he could persuade to share his fortunes." This reveals how the fact of settling down through the institution of heterosexual marriage appears to be socially regarded as a facilitating factor for reaching maturity. This example contributes to showing that what would be expected of Paul would be contrary to his innate desires and sexual identity. However, Paul's father may have a point regarding Paul's attitude to labor. In his rejection of ordinary existence as a survival mechanism, Paul also ignores the fact that one must be disciplined and persevere to attain wealth. His childish beliefs fall in line with Ku's assertion that "Paul seems to suffer from arrested development."⁴²⁶ He is oblivious to the aspect of reality that consists of making a compromise to get the benefits. He wants a life of luxury but is unwilling to put in the work. He prefers to steal instead.

The second part of the story sees Paul travel by himself to New York after having stolen thousands of dollars from his workplace in his hometown. "From the time he slipped the bank notes into his pocket until he boarded the night train for New York, he had not known a moment's hesitation. How astonishingly easy it had all been; here he was, the thing done."⁴²⁷ He uses the money to keep constructing the delusion of being a wealthy, sophisticated young man. He spends it, "with endless reconsidering and great care,"⁴²⁸ on luxury goods and premium services, including his stay at the Waldorf-Astoria

⁴²⁴ Rubin, 119.

⁴²⁵ Cather, 475.

⁴²⁶ Ku, 82.

⁴²⁷ Cather, 482.

⁴²⁸ Cather, 480.

hotel. This escape provides Paul with a sense of relief and freedom that he had never experienced, and he is able to resolve that he will never come back to his hometown, as “he realized well enough that he had always been tormented by fear, a sort of apprehensive dread that, of late years, [...] had been pulling the muscles of his body tighter and tighter.”⁴²⁹ This reflection leads the reader to confirm that remark that his art teacher made in his defense. On the inside, Paul has had to integrate a state of constant fear into his everyday reality. And he has learnt to defend himself in the only way in which he knew how, and without any external help. Summers points out that Paul’s dread toward his environment explains “his immersion in art at the expense of life.”⁴³⁰ He has spent his whole life escaping into a made-up world inside his head so as to shelter himself. Now, he has finally turned this escape into a physical one. Nonetheless, one of his problems is that he does not know how to include other people in his world. He enjoys the luxuries of New York entirely by himself, and the only time in which he meets someone else —another young man—, it does not end well. Although left unexplained, there are enough hints that lead “to conjecture that Paul wanted something from his companion that the latter was unprepared to give.”⁴³¹ But even if this fallout were not due to a sexual misunderstanding, it seems clear that Paul is neither able to make meaningful connections with other human beings nor to function in interpersonal relationships. There is only room for one in his world. This protects him from the mistreatment that he has received from others just for being who he is. However, his escape also deprives him of evolving in real life.

When Paul reads in the newspaper that he has been exposed to a thief, and that his father is coming to New York to bring him back, he gets a reality check that sinks him into a depression that also manifests through physical symptoms: “He rose and moved about with a painful effort, succumbing now and again to attacks of nausea. It was the old depression exaggerated.”⁴³² Going back home does not merely entail the return of his old dread and disdain for his environment. Neither does it only imply going back to

⁴²⁹ Cather, 481.

⁴³⁰ Summers, 109.

⁴³¹ Rubin, 130.

⁴³² Cather, 487.

survival mode against the contempt that he knows he rouses in everyone else. It also results in facing the shameful consequences of the crime that he has committed. Paul cannot take responsibility for his actions. For him to take responsibility, he would need to possess authentic self-esteem that he lacks, especially considering his eventual self-destruction. His selfishness and recklessness may be seen as the result of his absence of true self-validation. And the lack of this quality has been inevitably determined by his immediate context. His inability to legalize himself might be “the result of the homophobia that pervades society and that he himself internalizes.”⁴³³ Thus, his nature cannot prosper when his nurturing has already determined that he does not stand a chance.

The values he lacks should have been taught to him by treating him compassionately, but all he ever received was the opposite. Due to that, at the prospect of returning home, Paul knows that there is no acceptable place for him. He cannot become the adult that society tells him he must be, and he has not been able to acquire the values of effort and determination that would have made him self-sufficient. Consequently, he sees no way out. Rather than having to live in the reality he is allowed, he will leave this world. Before committing suicide by jumping in front of a train, “Paul took one of the blossoms carefully from his coat and scooped a little hole in the snow, where he covered it up.”⁴³⁴ The ending circles back to the beginning of the story. The flower that he buries can be understood as a representation of his non-normative sexuality, as a symbol for his own salient identity, the identity that his teachers instinctively rejected. Paul buries his own sexuality before bringing his own life to an end. Cather’s pessimistic portrayal of a young gay man does not offer any hope for Paul, but the short story suggests that the root of Paul’s self-destructive behavior does not originally come from any inherent trait of his. Instead,, it has been fueled by the dehumanizing treatment of the homophobic community that he was a part of. Subsequently, I will analyze male homosexuality in Sherwood Anderson’s “Hands” to offer another reading about modernist representations of male homosexuality.

⁴³³ Summers, 110.

⁴³⁴ Cather, 488.

3. “Hands”

As mentioned before, the protagonist of Anderson’s “Hands” is Wing Biddlebaum, a middle-aged man who lives on the margins of Winesburg, Ohio, both literally—in an adjacent field—and metaphorically, seeing as he, “forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts, did not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years.”⁴³⁵ Wing is an outsider who feels alienated from his community. The fact that he protects himself by living in seclusion does not prevent him from experiencing tremendous amounts of anxiety and fear, which are embedded in his psyche. The very first paragraph of the story already hints at the reasons that lie behind Wing’s seemingly irrational conduct. As a group of teenagers pass through his house, one of them yells to him: “Comb your hair, it’s falling into your eyes,”⁴³⁶ even though Wing is completely bald. The reason they yell that to him is because his “nervous little hands fiddled about the bare white forehead as though arranging a mass of tangled locks.”⁴³⁷ In other words, Wing is mocked and bullied by other townies for his effeminate mannerisms, out of which the way that he moves and uses his hands is the most evident one: “In the context of Winesburg, Ohio, queerness appears first and foremost as the incapability of ‘fitting in’ [...] The failure to fit in is projected upon the character’s hands, which seem to have a tendency of running out of control.”⁴³⁸

Wing’s hands are a symbol for his sexual identity at a time in which homosexuality and non-adherence to the prescribed gender roles were considered sodomy and a sin. His hands are the most telling part of the identity that he desperately tries to maintain hidden. This is why he always tries to conceal and hide his hands in his pockets, an action that could function as a symbol for him repressing and denying both his homosexuality and his naturally feminine physicality: “The hands alarmed their

⁴³⁵ Anderson, “Hands,” 9.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁸ Ruth Mayer, “Periodically Queer,” 457, 458.

owner. He wanted to keep them hidden away and looked with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of other men who worked beside him in the fields.”⁴³⁹ The fact that Wing negatively compares his own salient hands to the ordinary-looking ones of other men suggests his own shame and sense of inadequacy, as if he were an inferior, defective man. Therefore, he wishes he could keep his hands quiet and under control, and he lives in a constant fight against that part of himself, trying to conceal it both metaphorically and physically.

Wing only seems to open up, mildly, when he is visited by George Willard, a handsome young man with aspirations of becoming a journalist. They form an unlikely bond that benefits both. When accompanied by George, Wing “lost something of his timidity, and his shadowy personality [...] came forth to look at the world.”⁴⁴⁰ In turn, George’s natural curiosity draws him to Wing, who “for twenty years had been the town’s mystery.”⁴⁴¹ As Peter Nagy asserts, “George enables Wing to express dormant aspects of himself.”⁴⁴² The young man awakens in Wing a desire for meaningful connection that he normally forces himself to repress, and which also manifests in how he uses his hands. Wing “talked much with his hands. The slender expressive fingers, forever active, forever striving to conceal themselves in his pockets or behind his back, came forth and became the piston rods of his machinery of expression.”⁴⁴³

Thus, George’s presence may allow Wing to feel more comfortable in his own skin, and this is illustrated by how he allows himself to liberate his hands in their interactions. Wing genuinely acts toward George like a spiritual guide or mentor. He encourages young George to be himself and follow his dreams. But, as Wing gets carried away with the excitement of their conversation, he discovers himself attempting to caress George’s face and immediately stops, horrified of himself. He fears his own nature, and of making it evident to other people: “With a convulsive movement of his body, Wing Biddlebaum sprang to his feet and thrust his hands deep into his trousers

⁴³⁹ Anderson, 11.

⁴⁴⁰ Anderson, 10.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴² Nagy, 788.

⁴⁴³ Anderson, 10.

pockets. Tears came to his eyes. ‘I must be getting along home. I can talk no more with you,’ he said nervously.”⁴⁴⁴ Wing’s sense of freedom does not last because his traumatic past always comes back to haunt him. To understand Wing’s predicament, it is crucial to consider his life twenty years prior to the events depicted above. His name was not Wing Biddlebaum, but Adolph Myers, and he was a schoolteacher in a small town in Pennsylvania. He was admired and respected in his profession, which gave him a purpose in life to which he genuinely felt inclined. Being an instructor and mentor to younger men was in his nature, and his hands were an instrument for encouragement, a purely innocent instrument: “Under the caress of his hands, doubt and disbelief went out of the minds of the boys, and they began also to dream.”⁴⁴⁵ However, there came a moment in which Adolph’s attitudes toward the boys began to be misinterpreted. This could conceivably have come to happen due to the pervasive homophobia at the time. Adolph’s soft, feminine manners had never gone unnoticed by the boys’ parents, but when a pupil falsely accuses Adolph of inappropriate touching, the “hidden, shadowy doubts that had been in men’s minds concerning Adolph Myers were galvanized into beliefs.”⁴⁴⁶ Adolph was falsely accused of pedophilia because of a kid’s slander, and his effeminate manners were the only aspect that was considered as evidence. Especially in that temporal context, ignorant beliefs made many people equate homosexuality with pedophilia, as both were taboo topics that belonged to the cluster of deviant behavior. This stereotyped, bigoted connection has existed for ages:

Attempts to claim that members of the LGBTQ+ community pose a danger to children are nothing new, and such narratives have resurfaced in different geographies for decades. These claims range from attempting to conflate homosexuality with child abuse to those implying children can be manipulated into becoming queer through exposure to the LGBTQ+ community.⁴⁴⁷

Due to this misguided and ultimately false association, Adolph had to endure persecution, physical abuse, and torture at the hands of a pack of fathers while they

⁴⁴⁴ Anderson, 12.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁶ Anderson, 13.

⁴⁴⁷ Aoife Gallagher and Tim Squirrel, “The ‘Groomer’ Slur.”

yelled the following: “I’ll teach you to put your hands on my boy, you beast.”⁴⁴⁸ Then, he was literally forced to move out and disappear from Pennsylvania. This is when he arrived in Winesburg and changed his name. All these past traumatic events make Wing wallow “in his own sense of marginality [...] This past stigmatization has become an integral part of Biddlebaum’s self-perception.”⁴⁴⁹ Wing cannot help feeling consumed by shame, even if he never did anything of what he was accused.

Back to the present, Wing’s inability to legalize his homosexual desire is connected to the unspeakable horror he had to endure in the past: “He was but forty but looked sixty-five [...] [and] had been ill for a year after the experience in Pennsylvania.”⁴⁵⁰ Thus, his identity becomes inevitably intertwined with trauma, shame, and repression of the self. Additionally, he does not have the tools to understand the matter: “Although he did not understand what had happened he felt that the hands must be to blame. Again and again the fathers of the boys had talked of the hands.”⁴⁵¹ In the end, Wing perceives his own hands as instruments of sin. It is likely that he does not even understand the distinction between homosexuality and pedophilia. He came to associate one with the other because of the traumatic attack that he suffered. This is why he feels afraid of following his impulse and touching George’s face.

When he engages with George, he replicates his former role as a teacher, and then he remembers that he had to leave behind and repress that part of his identity. As his terrible past experience has come to be inextricably linked to his natural desire for men, he fears touching one, even if it is not on sexual terms: “Wing suffers from a diminished capacity for emotionally open relations with other men, from an inability to express his own pain, loneliness, and need to be comforted.”⁴⁵² He has internalized homophobia. He is ashamed of himself for being someone who is considered a deviant abomination by most of society. At the end of the story, the narrator alludes to the resemblance that Wing, secluded back into loneliness, holds with the figure of a Catholic

⁴⁴⁸ Anderson, 13.

⁴⁴⁹ Mayer, 457, 458.

⁴⁵⁰ Anderson, 13, 14.

⁴⁵¹ Anderson, 14.

⁴⁵² Nagy, 788.

priest going through his rosary. Wing “looked like a priest engaged in some service of his church. The nervous expressive fingers, flashing in and out of the light, might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary.”⁴⁵³ In turn, this reference functions as another symbol can be associated with the celibacy and lack of intimate companionship that the Catholic church imposes on its clergymen, which Wing also seems doomed to endure for the rest of his life.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has explored the character features and social conditions of two gay men in the context of early 20th century Middle America. While the two characters differ significantly in terms of personality, their reactions and in how they deal with their lives, they are both subjected to the judgment, prejudice, and mistreatment of an unforgiving environment that not only does not accept them for their homosexuality, but also does not allow them to accept it themselves. Paul senses the disgust he provokes in others. In return, he goes through life with an unpleasant and defiant attitude that protects him from other people, but also prevents him from making sympathetic connections with others. He escapes to his made-up world of luxurious fantasies so that he can avoid the reality that he despises. But ultimately, this is not enough to avoid his feelings of deep fear and utter depression that drive him to commit suicide.

In the case of Wing Biddlebaum, a past traumatic experience rooted upon the ignorance and homophobia of his context forever erases his capacity to engage successfully in interpersonal relationships. As a consequence, he even begins to feel ashamed of his own physicality, an issue manifested in his hands. His loneliness keeps him reasonably safe from further harm, but it also makes him deeply unhappy. He was a man with a gift for bringing out the best in others, but he ends up falsely believing the worst in himself. These fictional portrayals of gay men in a context in which they were associated with sin and crime can be considered a testament to the literary talent and

⁴⁵³ Anderson, 14.

social consciousness of Modernist authors Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson. Thus, both artists can be seen as agents of the new social sensibilities that were beginning to scratch the surface during the first two decades of the 20th century.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Sherwood. "Hands." In *Sherwood Anderson: Collected Stories*, edited by Charles Baxter, Library of America, 2012.
- Cather, Willa. "Paul's Case." In *Willa Cather: Stories, Poems, & Other Writings*, edited by Sharon O'Brien, Library of America, 1992.
- Gallagher, Aoife, and Tim Squirrell. "The 'Groomer' Slur." Institute for Strategic Dialogue, January 16, 2023, <https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/the-groomer-slur>.
- Ku, Chung-Hao. "'A Boy Under the Ban of Suspension': Renouncing Maturity in Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case.'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 61, no. 1 (2015): 69-89.
- Mayer, Ruth. "Periodically Queer: Sexology and Non-normative Sexualities in the Little Magazine *The Masses*." *Modernist Cultures* 15, no. 4 (2020): 442-63.
- Nagy, Peter. "The Woman in the Man: Male Modernism and Cross-Gender Identification in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*." *College Literature* 45, no. 4 (2018): 773-800.
- Rubin, Larry. "The Homosexual Motif in Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 12, no. 2 (1975): 127-31.
- Selden, Raman, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker, eds. "Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Theories." In *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Pearson, 2005.
- Summers, Claude J. "'A Losing Game in the End': Aestheticism and Homosexuality in Cather's 'Paul's Case.'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 36, no. 1 (1990): 103-19.
- Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction." In *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume 4: 1925 to 1928*, edited by Andrew McNeillie. The Hogarth Press, 1984.

Notes on contributor

Rodrigo Vega Ochoa is a PhD researcher in Literary Studies working under a Predoctoral Contract funded by the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM 2025-). He also took

his BA in English Studies and enjoyed the Collaborative Scholarship granted by the Spanish Ministry of Education (2023) at the same university. Prior to starting his PhD research, he also obtained an MA in Literature of the English-Speaking Countries at the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM 2024). His main areas of research interests include British and American fiction from the 19th century up to nowadays; psychoanalytic literary theory; gender and LGBT studies; and British and American plays, musical theatre, film, and television as alternative literary forms of storytelling.

CONTACT: <rodrigo.vega@ucm.es>

ORCID: [0009-0004-9301-1557](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9301-1557)

ARTISTIC CREATION

Yellow⁴⁵⁴

Paula Arespacochada López⁴⁵⁵

If my favourite colour were yellow,
I'd jump in the puddles and soak in my raincoat. I'd wear pigtails to class every day,
and celebrate my birthday in the month of May.
If my favourite colour were yellow,
I'd run in a dress through the meadows. I'd scream, cry and shout without reason, and wear
golden jewellery no matter the season.
But my favourite colour is blue,
it has always been, it's not new.
I like better the stars than the moon,
I was born in October, not June.
I like the smell of books when they're old, I feel sad when it starts to get cold,
braid my hair every time I feel blue,
sing a song when I'm thinking of you.
I am blue like the waves in the sea,
I am blue like the sky when it's clear. Like the hydrangeas that my father plants, like the
veins where blood throbs in my palms.
If my favourite colour were yellow, I'd probably wish it was green.
Because when you check your reflection, you never like what you see.

⁴⁵⁴ **Recommended Citation**

Arespacochaga López, Paula. "Yellow." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 172-173:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

⁴⁵⁵ **CONTACT:** Paula Arespacochaga López <paulares@ucm.es>

Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain
JACLR: JOURNAL OF ARTISTIC CREATION AND LITERARY RESEARCH
2024, VOL. 12, NO. 2, 172-173
ISSN 2340-650X
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>



Notes on contributor

Paula Arespachaga López

CONTACT: <paulares@ucm.es>

The time of the lights⁴⁵⁶

Amanda de Armas García⁴⁵⁷

I never thought my life would suck the way it sucks right now. I know it could be worse and sometimes I feel too guilty for complaining about it, but I feel so frustrated that I wish my life was different from what it is. I always wonder if there is someone to blame or whether our fate is established and there is no escaping from it. I know I would blame my parents for the way my life turned out to be and it may be selfish to say this but that it is just how I feel.

I guess it all started before I was even born. My mother fell in love with this absolute stunning young man from the neighbourhood; she was four years younger, insecure and, therefore, so naïve. My father, this young man from the neighbourhood, was already in his twenties, he was so extroverted, so charismatic, absolutely handsome and so funny that every girl wanted to be around him. I guess my mother fell in his trap, like many others had fallen before. They had an on and off relationship until my mother got pregnant when she was twenty years old. I guess she must have been scared, nervous and hopeless. I understand that abortion was the most rational way to go, but my father loved her so much that he told her to have the baby or else he would abandon her, I mean us. My mom was so in love that of course she had the baby, I mean, she had me. Nine months later I was born. Then, reality hits. What they thought was going to be perfect turned out to be almost a nightmare. I was always sick and hospitalised since my mother never produced enough breastmilk, so I was malnourished. While my mother was there taking care of me, my father was who knows where, perhaps hypnotising some other woman with his charming face. All

⁴⁵⁶ **Recommended Citation**

De Armas García, Amanda. "The Time of the Lights." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 174-177:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

⁴⁵⁷ **CONTACT:** Amanda de Armas García <amandadear@ucm.es>

I know is that before I was one, they got a divorce because my father was a cheater. Despite all this, I remember having a very happy childhood with my friends, my mom and my grandparents. Besides, school was great since I always got excellent marks.

However, I guess life needs to remind us that happiness does not last forever. My father migrated to Spain, and he wanted me to be with him as well as my mother. It was an extremely difficult decision for my mother to make. Giving up my custody to a person that was almost never around and whom she did not trust at all. But she thought Spain was a better place for me, for us, in order to have a brighter future, not like the one we were doomed to have in Cuba. And so, the time arrived and I moved to Spain first. I was so joyful; I can't deny it. It was a new country, I was with family, and I am sure my father wanted to redeem himself for all the lost time and he gave me the best of him and all his loving, and I accepted it, gladly. I arrived in December, and it was magical. I had never experienced Christmas the way they do it here. I had never had presents on Christmas day because in Cuba people were so poor that could not afford it. I had never tasted such delicious food. I was living in paradise. I did not even think of my mother, I had not had the chance to miss her nor my grandparents. But reality hits again and I have to start school, which turned out to be a bilingual primary school and I had never even heard a word in English. And so, my nightmare begins. I was bullied by my classmates and by teachers. I was told by a teacher I would be expelled from school because I was just ignorant. I had the worst time during those two first months.

Luckily, March arrived, bringing spring as well as my mother. I was so relieved to have her once again near me. She was the one who helped me with homework like she had always done before migrating to Spain. However, I was failing so I had to retake the year. We thought it was a disadvantage, but it was actually the best thing that could have ever happened to me. During that new year I got so much better; then came the fifth grade which made me an expert in English. During the last year of primary school, I was at the same level as any other of my classmates. In the graduation day I was awarded with a diploma that recognised my academic progress. I felt extremely proud of myself.

During my adolescence years life did not get any better. Mom and I were living alone, but she was struggling with bills and rent so we had to separate from each other again. She moved to a smaller house, and I had to move with my father and his wife, again. I was so numb. It was so awful that it made sick. It was the time when I became obsessed with being skinnier, since I had always been a chubby girl. I did not eat enough, and I often forced my vomiting. Nobody knew about this, and nobody knows up to date. There were constant fights with my father. He made me cry all the time. He made me miserable. I was so unhappy but, again, nobody knew. Nobody cared. Since I had had enough, I moved back with my mother two years later. My father has not talked to me since.

I now realise I have this need to please and be accepted by people, just because I am so scared that they will abandon me or stop talking to me. But, anyways, I got older and I was accepted in college to do a Degree of Law. I was so excited but, soon after, I discovered that was not meant for me. I ended up hating the degree and my classmates. They were all so stiff and so mean, that I felt as an outcast. I cried, I was frustrated and depressed. But I was not strong enough as to abandon my studies because I did not want to disappoint my mother. I found a way to calm my anxiety and to increase my so deteriorated self-esteem. I found night clubs, alcohol and sex. I went out almost every weekend, I drank too much, and I had a lot of sex with many different boys. They were all so handsome that I felt lucky that boys like them had set eyes on me, so I had to give them what they wanted and required from me in exchange. Not only my self-love did not rise, but it even got smaller. It even disappeared. I felt used, a whore. I guess now I am to blame. It was then when my first suicidal thoughts appeared. They have not stopped since. But I am still here. I guess I am not that weak after all.

Mom and I still live together. I managed to talk to her and tell her how I was feeling in that career, so she encouraged me to start all over by doing something I really loved. So, I applied to an English Studies degree and here is where I am. I am twenty-five now. I still struggle with life. Life is so damn hard, especially to poor people, let alone women. I have to work in shitty jobs in order to help my mother as much as I can. This frustrates me even more

because I have to deal with all types of people, which I don't have the patience for. Besides, I have all these dreams that I don't know if I'll ever achieve. I still think about death. It comes and goes. But I still do. It is very scary not being able to control my own mind. Those intrusive thoughts drive me crazy and when they are gone, I am so at peace but always expecting for the time they may return.

I used to have sporadic and meaningless sex with beautiful boys. I don't do that anymore. I guess I got tired of being their object in which they could get rid of all their frustration and stress. What about mine? What about my feelings? Some of them still reach out to me, however, I am not the girl they knew anymore. I have changed. I am still changing. And for that I am so grateful. Life still sucks to me, though. I still feel I am going through this dark tunnel in which I entered years ago. But I am hopeful that someday I will find the time of the lights.

Notes on contributor

Amanda de Armas García

CONTACT: <amandadear@ucm.es>

The Mystery of Oneself⁴⁵⁸

Sonia Gordo García⁴⁵⁹

Roselyn found herself in front of an old, abandoned house, standing like a silent and solitary island in the middle of nowhere with a skeletal porch that had missing floorboards, and which creaked intensely with the light air, there was a haunting yet non-existent melody coming out of that house, was it something truly real? Was it her own imagination trying to confuse her? Was there a reason why she was there?

All she knew was that she had woken up that morning, had gone to her classes, had talked with her friends, had gone for her daily run... But suddenly and unexpectedly she had found herself there. She remembered having woken up there after her usual nap, so, was it a dream? Was she dreaming? The only way to find out the truth was to go inside and see if there was something, a clue, a reason that could explain what she was doing there.

She opened the front door and, after taking a deep breath in order to calm herself, she finally entered the house; there was a sense of abandonment that disturbed her, she felt as if the essence of life had completely disappeared years or even centuries ago, the air inside was quite thick and almost impossible to breathe.

Roselyn decided to walk through the empty house. As she walked, she realized how rooms lay frozen in time, how cobwebs adorned the corners, how the sunlight filtered through the broken windows. Finally, she decided to go to the backyard where she found an enormous well which completely caught her attention as it was not common to see these objects in modern houses nowadays and the only well that she had ever seen (living in a big city) was the one that used to be in her grandparents' house. As she approached the well, she started

⁴⁵⁸ Recommended Citation

Gordo García, Sonia. "The Mystery of Oneself." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 178-182:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

⁴⁵⁹ CONTACT: Sonia Gordo García <soniagor@ucm.es>

hearing an ongoing melancholic melody coming out of it, so she decided to take a look curiosity and excitement were running through her

veins as she couldn't comprehend what was going on. But whatever it was, she was sure she was going to find out in that moment. Or, at least, she hoped so.

When she looked into the well, she was expecting to see simple darkness and maybe some water deep down, but what she saw surprised her greatly. At the end of the well there was a small light and beside that light there was a key, which seemed like a key to one of the rooms from that house.

And then, she remembered.

There was a room which she had tried over and over to open but was unable to, no matter how strongly she had pushed in order to open that door, it was impossible; but now, if she was able to get that key, she would be able to open the door, she was closer to the truth. Once she had the key between her hands, she climbed up that well and went straight to the room she couldn't open before, she introduced the key and was able to unlock the door. Thus, she pushed it slowly and cautiously not knowing what to expect, not knowing what she would find on the other side.

She truly couldn't believe what she was seeing, was her mind trying to trick her? Her face was a true reflection of her confusion of what (or who) was standing in front of her. It was none other than herself, when she was younger, who was also straightly looking back at her with a bewildered yet amazed look on her face. Roselyn felt a discomfort growing from her chest which was starting to spread all throughout her body, an inhuman pain was starting to expand, trying to take control over herself. Her feelings, her emotions were so out of control that she didn't know how to respond, what was she supposed to do? How was she supposed to act? How was she supposed to *feel*? Was she out of her mind? Had she gone insane? Was it some kind of joke from her friends? She decided to close her eyes.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Slowly, slowly, slowly...

Breathe.

She had the control, she thought. That little, indefensible little girl was not going to physically hurt her, she had had time to do so already, and she hadn't. She was standing there just looking while holding a small little stuffed animal in her hands, waiting, perhaps for her to speak up, to say something. And so, she did, Roselyn decided to approach the little human creature that was herself and spoke out loud, trying hard for her voice not to break.

"Hey, I don't really know how to start this conversation... But what is your name?" Roselyn asked as she got on her knees so that she could be the same height as the little girl.

"My name is Roselyn, but you already know that, *don't you?*" The girl replied while an innocent smile started to appear on her face.

Roselyn was taken aback by this response.

"You know that I am *you*, but younger. I can tell by your face and the way in which you reacted when you were finally able to open the door. I was waiting for you, but I didn't know the time where I would finally be able to see you would arrive so soon..." As she finished talking, her voice seemed to fade away and get lost inside the room.

"But how do you know that I know all of that? Besides, it is impossible that you are who you claim to be! There is only one me, the present me; the me that wakes up in the morning and goes to class, goes out with her friends... You are not supposed to exist in this chronological line, am I going insane? Is that it?" Roselyn was starting to be filled with an anxiety that was not letting her breathe correctly, which was making her feel extremely dizzy, she stopped looking at the girl's grey eyes and started looking at the floor trying to prevent an attack from happening.

"But... Roselyn, who says this is the real world?" The little girl answered back "who says this is not a mere dream? Well, I would like you to know that this is not a dream exactly... You are currently fighting against death, it depends on you if you want to fight and go back to your reality or if you want to stay in this house with me, with all your memories and with

those who are no longer in your reality, physically. It truly depends on you, I am just a simple piece from the puzzle, *you* get to choose.”

“But I don’t understand... I don’t remember an accident happening, I don’t remember something terrible happening to me to end up here...” Roselyn was trying hard to organize her mind, trying to think of something that could have happened before she appeared there, but nothing came to her mind.

“Are you sure about that? Think deeply, you know the answer, you know *why* you are here and *how* you got here. Don’t you remember the pills?”

Pills? She was confused, she didn’t remember anything about some pills, unless... Wait, was the little girl referring to the sleeping pills? The ones she had taken as a way to... Oh, right. She finally understood. She had taken some pills to stop being, to cease her existence, to no longer be on earth, how had she forgotten about that? After her realization she looked directly at the girl’s eyes, *her* eyes.

“I remember...” her voice was so weak that she didn’t know how long she was going to last before starting to let her tears fall down her face. Unconsciously, she touched her arms underneath the purple, oversize t-shirt she was wearing, tracing the silhouettes of past scars that she had inflicted on herself some months ago as she was trying to deal with life.

“I am just a part of your mind, I was simply the one that had to introduce you to this place but before I leave I do want to leave you a clear message: I know life can be hard and I know things do not always go the way we planned them to, but just remember there is always hope and there is always something to look forward to or someone that is willing to help you. There is a beautiful world out there filled with surprises, things you have not yet seeing and incredible people you have not meet yet. But answer a question for me, please, if you had the chance to hurt me, would you?”

“Of course, I wouldn’t! How can you even think that?!”

“Then, why do you do it to your current self? At the end of the day, *I am you*, I am a part of you, each time you hurt yourself, you’re not only hurting your current mature self.”

And as soon as she finished those words, she completely banished away, leaving Roselyn confused with multiple questions and wondering if there would be more people to talk to there. She knew she had to choose between her options fast, she didn't have all the time in the world to make up her mind, but she also knew that it was not an easy choice. Whatever she would choose, would only have an impact on herself, or at least, that is how she viewed it.

Notes on contributor

Sonia Gordo García

CONTACT: <soniagor@ucm.es>

Voicelessness⁴⁶⁰

Guillermo Mamani⁴⁶¹

“I, in my heart, feel alone.”

Almudena Fernández Munro, *The Diatribe of the End of the World*

But such a thing does not make sense. Now that John goes to the kitchen and grabs a knife, she hides behind the door. Only now does she know that he can't bear to have Remedios at home anymore. She thinks that maybe he never wanted to tolerate her. John's bravery is great when he enters the room kicking in the door and turns the lights on. But when he finds that no one is there, his heart goes into a deep silence, and he begins to whirl the sheets and open the drawers. A near sound from the room makes her scream. So, John grabs the knife tightly, pulls back the closet door. And in the midst of the screaming, something like that has no other choice.

Notes on contributor

Guillermo Mamani

CONTACT: <gmamani@ucm.es>

⁴⁶⁰ Recommended Citation

Mamani, Guillermo. "Voicelessness." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, p. 183:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

⁴⁶¹ **CONTACT:** Guillermo Mamani <gmamani@ucm.es>

The Reflection in the Mirror was never mine⁴⁶²

Julia Prieto Pérez⁴⁶³

I stare at the mirror looking for my eyes. I can't find them. I look waiting to see the reflection staring back at me. It never comes. I wonder where it's gone to, why it is always so busy to look back at me. Finally, it's not my reflection that I see, but a face appears in the glass. I can only think how ugly it is. It seems to be distorted and I wonder why. A smile creeps up its face and I wonder why it is judging me. Distorted as it is, it seems to come in waves, sometimes blurry, sometimes clearly. I can't decipher who it is that is reflected in the mirror, I don't think I know them. A stranger perhaps. Their mouth moves and I think they might be telling me something (some secret message I am yet to understand). I can't hear them. Now I feel like I'm drowning inside the mirror and I can't feel my legs anymore. Is this what being dead feels like (is this what death feels like)? I find that I rather like it very much. Of their own doing, my fingers have reached the frontier of death, now they are touching glass. It's cold. It brings me back to the present, where a stranger is still looking back at me. I try to caress its face because I can see the sadness in it. It looks like it took hostage there years ago and never left. I understand that feeling. But why is the face mocking me if I was just trying to comfort it? Maybe it's been isolated (inside the mirror) for so long it doesn't remember what being touched feels like.

Everything has become a blur now. I can see a silhouette in front of me, but where is its face? Why are there no eyes looking back at me? It has two hollow black holes right where the eyes were supposed to be. I feel like it wants to humiliate me. How funny, I think, that I feel just like the reflection looks. So empty, so hollow, so dark, so foolish. Is it a real person

⁴⁶² **Recommended Citation**

Prieto Pérez, Julia. "The Reflection in the Mirror was never mine." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 184-185:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

⁴⁶³ **CONTACT:** Julia Prieto Pérez <julpriet@ucm.es>

in the mirror or is it just the reflection of my true self? Am I really so ugly? So disgusting to look at that one can't bear to breath while doing so, scared that it will realize that I am here, just as hideous, yet with a skin to pretend? I do pretend, mostly, to be someone I am not. To be anyone at all, really. I can't endure being myself, if there is anything to be. Indeed, when I do have to be myself, I feel so disgusted that I try to forget about it immediately. I fade away those memories, burying them so deep down inside my soul that I forget they ever happened. They are just a pigment of my imagination. They are not real. If I think too much about it, I am not real either and, again, I feel like I rather like that feeling very much. But how come it is no longer a reflection in front of me that I see, but a dark figure standing behind me in my side of reality? Maybe it can teach me how to do that so that I can crawl inside the mirror and hide there forever, away from the revulsion that keeps me from being nothing at all. At the end of the day, that's all that I am, just like it is, I'm nothing but emptiness, and all emptiness is nothing.

Notes on contributor

Julia Prieto Pérez

CONTACT: <julpriet@ucm.es>

Presents⁴⁶⁴

Nelson Iván Reyes Otero⁴⁶⁵

“They aren’t any grownups.” “Grownups know things.”

William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*

It was all wrong from the beginning. I remember it as it happened yesterday, it was mid December 1982, that day mummy left us alone. She screamed “behave, I’ll be out only a little while” and she left the place all for ourselves. First thing we did was turn up all the way the heater, just for the heck of it. Then we were looking all around the flat for them. While I was checking the bathrooms my sister called me over the hall. They were stacked up under mom and dad’s bed. The twinkly and colorful boxes were all below it. We excitedly cheered together.

My sister was about to get them, and I quickly grabbed her by the arm. “You know she will find out. Right?”

“No, she won’t” she stood up “I just want to look at them, I’m not gonna open them. I’m not that silly.”

“She must be about to come back, let’s turn the heat down a notch.” I nervously said, “She will get mad.” “No, she won’t, she just left, we have at least an hour, maybe more. Let’s see them, don’t you want?”

It took me a bit to answer “Ok. But you must leave them the exact way they are.” My sister was deciding on what to do. Then she crouched and extended her arm to reach them, but she hesitated again. “You do it then.”

⁴⁶⁴ Recommended Citation

Reyes Otero, Nelson Iván. “Presents.” *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 186-187:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

⁴⁶⁵ CONTACT: Nelson Iván Reyes Otero <nelreyes@ucm.es>

“Why?”

“That’s the only way for you to know that they’re left the exact way they are now.” I knew she was also scared. But I really wanted to see them. Finally, I decided to grab them. Just when I touched one with the tip of my finger the little pile fell apart.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing! It fell off by itself.”

While we were arguing I overheard a snap under the bed. Then I saw it. I saw a hole expanding under the bed. It swallowed the presents and kept growing.

I remember to scream “run!” but my sister must’ve thought that I was fooling around. I ran down the hall without looking back. From mom and dad’s room came lots of noises, they melted with screams, my sister’s probably, or maybe the neighbor’s downstairs. The furniture was falling off the hole, it kept growing and I saw it approaching to where I was standing. The dining room table, the chairs, the shelves... all were fastly gone. Then there was nowhere to stand. I felled off too.

The hit blurred my vision. The first thing I saw when it came back were the colorful presents on the other side of the flat. The mess of all our things scattered as gravity wanted was incredible. Then I saw the fury on our neighbor’s face and my sister crying on a corner. Finally, I looked up. Just to see my mother opening the door, with a face which went beyond madness.

Notes on contributor

Nelson Iván Reyes Otero

CONTACT: <nelreyes@ucm.es>

Siren Song⁴⁶⁶

María Isabel Romero-Pérez⁴⁶⁷

Ripped, pinned and warped.
Brooding winds,
Autumn cells & blood,
And all their barks.
I was cut a thousand times,
Bounded by the sea,
Pieced back together by a musing yard,
Of distant voices
Of birds and bees.

The guillemot narrows,
The tremor, the vibrant sounds
Of where I sleep & and where *he* sees,
Beyond,
boundless, all spirit.
I navigate the graveyard of a foreign land,
Not to search, nor to find.
Is it beauty or is it fright? None.
O! Green fatherland!
I've come this far,

⁴⁶⁶ **Recommended Citation**

Romero-Pérez, María Isabel. "Siren Song." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 188-189:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

⁴⁶⁷ **CONTACT:** María Isabel Romero-Pérez <maribelromero@correo.ugr.es>

The ice must melt as the wind froze, but lie, rest,
Be merry in memory,
Forgive *me*,
Forget.
For life!

I see you back
Like the whitened fog of this East, green and yellow, and golden ore
From where pain and *names* are stone-carved.
I hear you
In my timeless yearning for the *past*.
The wishful lilies call,
Delusion is most wanted & I abide,
For this kind of love is a winter tree,
protected from the anguish of the ephemeral.
But ethereal is the embrace of this noble sun
And of thy glorious rainfall.
Love,
Green is deathless.

Notes on contributor

María Isabel Romero-Pérez holds a BA in English Studies and currently is a PhD student at the University of Granada, where she is working on her doctoral thesis on the British author Hope Mirrlees. She has worked as a teacher and researcher. In 2023 she lived in Ireland, where she enjoyed an Erasmus+ Traineeship at Trinity College Dublin.

CONTACT: <maribelromero@correo.ugr.es>

ORCID: [0000-0003-3835-8107](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3835-8107)

The Dreamcatcher⁴⁶⁸

Violeta Vázquez Llamas⁴⁶⁹

On a foggy Friday night of the year 1974, I was sitting on a booth at *Brenda's Diner*, just doing my homework and taking sips every now and then of my chocolate milkshake. I was minding my own business when suddenly I heard the loud sound of wheels squeaking on the ground. I knew right away where that din was coming from, and just by the sound of it, all my muscles got tense. When I heard the little bell that was on top of the door greeting the unpleasant customers, I lowered my gaze to my math notebook, knowing what was about to come. I could hear their rowdy footsteps coming straight to my booth. In the blink of an eye, I was face to face with the one and only Jack Cusack, the degenerate who loved picking on nerdy boys just for fun. He wasn't alone though, he always came with his little gang of stalkers who obeyed every single thing that he said.

He cleared his throat and crossed his arms, making me look at him apprehensively. I noticed that he was wearing his signature rings, the ones with which he tormented all of his victims when he had the occasion.

"What's a little crap like you doing away from home on a night like this?" He said with a devious grin on his face.

"Hey, look! The nerd's doing homework on a Friday night! Don't you think we should give him a lesson, Jack?" The shortest one of the gangs took the milkshake and spilled it all over my notebook. The rest of the gang hollered with laughter.

"You're lucky I'm in a good mood today, Madden. 'Cause trust me, the next time I see you doing homework on a Friday night, I'll give you the thrashing of the century. Do you hear

⁴⁶⁸ Recommended Citation

Vázquez Llamas, Violeta. "The Dreamcatcher." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 190-194:

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

⁴⁶⁹ CONTACT: Violeta Vázquez Llamas <violetva@ucm.es>

me?” Jack made a fist and shoved it right in front of my face, making his voluptuous rings shimmer.

“Y-yeah, it won’t happen again, Jack.”

“Good boy,” he lowered his fist. “Now, do me a favor and get out of my sight.”

I took the stained notebook and stood up. Then, the gang sat down noisily on the booth I was occupying.

I sat on one of the chairs in front of the counter and tried to remove the chocolate from the notebook with a napkin, but it was useless. Once again, Jack and his gang had made a fool out of me, and I could feel the rage boiling inside my body. All I wanted at that moment was to give Jack a lesson, but I didn’t know how: I was just a scrawny boy, and he was well-built and hefty. I had no chance.

I was so concentrated on my thoughts that I didn’t notice that the man on the chair beside me was saying something.

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“I was asking if you were okay. I saw that those guys were bothering you.”

“Oh, yeah I’m fine. This happens almost every day, especially if I run into them in high school.”

“You should stand up for yourself one of these days, kid.”

“Yeah, as if it was that easy. Have you looked at them? They look like five apes, and they sure know how to fight.”

The man, who was short and stout, had a sympathetic smile on his rounded face. He patted my shoulder with his chubby hand, and then turned in his chair to reach for his briefcase.

“What’s your name, kid?” He said rapidly. I couldn’t help but stare at his thin lips, which were slightly stained with ketchup.

“Dustin. Dustin Madden.”

“Well Dustin, what if I told you that I have something that could really help you?”

“Do you have a gun or something like that?” I scoffed.

“No, something even better,” he took out from his briefcase a little dreamcatcher. Its wings wiggled slightly when he handed it to me. “This makes all your dreams come true on full moon nights. The only thing you have to do is hang it from your ceiling, right above your bed like a regular dreamcatcher, and dream. But be careful, this tool can be really dangerous depending on what you dream.”

I thought the man was out of his mind, so I decided to play along and looked at it with amazement.

“If it’s so valuable, why are you giving it to me? And if it has to be hanging from a ceiling, how come that you have it in your briefcase?”

“This dreamcatcher was made by a sorcerer from the *Ojibwa* tribe. My great-great-grandfather assassinated him with his own fusil in Pontiac’s war, back in 1764. We read in his diary that the old sorcerer was carrying it with himself as an amulet, but my great-great-grandfather, who was a cold and heartless man, stole the striking dreamcatcher from him right after he killed him, and it’s remained in our family ever since. Now that my biggest dream has finally come true, I’m giving it to you, ‘cause I was just like you, kid,” he lowered his grieving eyes as he made a pause. “I’ve been picked on my entire life because I was a nerdy, chubby boy. When I saw you, I knew you were the one. I’ve been carrying it around for months, trying to find somebody who needs it. Now it looks like my search has come to an end.”

“Well, I don’t really know what to say. T-thank you, I guess,” I stuttered.

“Just go home and do what I told you. And remember: be careful what you wish for.”

That was the last time I saw that baffling squat man in my entire life, and to be honest, sometimes a part of me wishes I had never encountered him.

That night, when I came back home, I went straight to the calendar and counted how many days were left until the next full moon night, which were exactly seven. Then, I did as the man told me, and hung the dreamcatcher right above my small bed.

Of course, at that point my biggest goal was to show Jack and his gang that I wasn’t somebody they could harass, and that’s something I had been trying to reflect in my dreams.

However, a feeling of despair pervaded my tormented mind, as I was seeing that no matter how hard I tried, every night I dreamed that Jack defeated me in one way or another.

That entire week I had been Jack and his gang's main target in high school. They harassed me so hard to the point that I sprained my left wrist when I fell to the ground when Jack pushed me in the cafeteria. My feelings of anger towards them were getting stronger every day, and I couldn't think of anything but revenge.

I started to lose the little faith I had in that old feathered object, even though it was my last hope. Some suicidal thoughts started to creep into my mind, since the feelings of solitude and desperation were growing deeper each day.

Nevertheless, Friday was a full moon night. That night I didn't go to *Brenda's Diner* as I usually did, because I stayed at home concentrating all the strength I had on dreaming something extremely vengeful towards Jack, and it finally happened.

In my dream, I pictured a majestic wolf going to Jack's house, and coming right through his window. The imposing animal made a thud as it landed on the ground, obtaining a startled Jack, who was already in his sleep, in response. He saw as the wolf started to climb up his bed, opening its maw full of sharp teeth. Jack started to cry for his life, but there was no escape for him: it was the end of Jack Cusack. The dream ended with the victorious howl of the wolf in the still of the night.

The next day, when I woke up I saw that my pajamas were torn. I could remember every single event that happened in the dream very lucidly, but I couldn't find an explanation as to why I woke up half naked.

To my surprise, that Saturday the news was all over town: eighteen-year-old Jack Cusack had been found completely dismembered on his bed. That's when I realized that the powers of the dreamcatcher were true. That's when I realized that I had become a killer.

Jack's case was never really solved, as police couldn't figure out the reason of his atrocious death. The autopsy revealed that he had animal bites all over his body, but they couldn't find any evidence of an animal entering his place.

Nowadays I still have the dreamcatcher, and so far most of my dreams, even the deepest and darkest ones, have come true.

Sometimes a man's despair can make him have extreme desires, turning him into an animal that would do anything barbaric, until he achieves his goal.

Notes on contributor

Violeta Vázquez Llamas

CONTACT: <violetva@ucm.es>



*Journal of
Artistic Creation and
Literary Research*

JOURNAL OF ARTISTIC CREATION AND LITERARY RESEARCH
ISSN 2340-650X - <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>
VOL. 12, NO. 2, 2024

Journal Information

A peer-reviewed, open access, biannual journal, with access to full texts, *JACLR* is a peer-reviewed open access journal that aims to stimulate scholarly debate in English Studies and related disciplines. The journal is published two times a year, featuring original research articles, and contributions in artistic creation. Its mission is to encourage diverse perspectives and foster innovative research within our field. It is an initiative of the SIIM project and the Department of English Studies of the Complutense University of Madrid, with the support of the Vice-Rectorate for Quality UCM.

The journal is published by the SIIM (Studies on Intermediality and Intercultural Mediation) research group and is housed in the Complutense University of Madrid. It invites original manuscripts and creative works all year round.

Submission Information

Articles should be between 6,000 and 9,000 words, including abstract, keywords, notes and bibliography. They should be well written and have a clear focus. They should follow the 17th edition of the Chicago Notes and Bibliography. A short (150 words) author bio-note is also required. In addition, uncorrected manuscripts with grammatical errors or spelling mistakes will not be considered for judging. For more information, please check the journal's website, <https://www.ucm.es/siim/jaclr-style-guide>.

JACLR

*Journal of
Artistic Creation and
Literary Research*

A peer-reviewed, open access, biannual journal, with access to full texts, *JACLR* is an initiative of the SIIM research group and the Department of English Studies of the Complutense University of Madrid, with the support of the Vice-Rectorate for Quality UCM.

The journal publishes interdisciplinary research related to comparative literary studies, critical theory, applied linguistics and semiotics, as well as associated educational aspects. It also publishes original contributions of artistic creation in order to publicize and disseminate these works. *JACLR* also publishes a selection of works submitted to the Literary Creation Award.