Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro

Centro de Educação e Humanidades

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Of Angels and Demons:

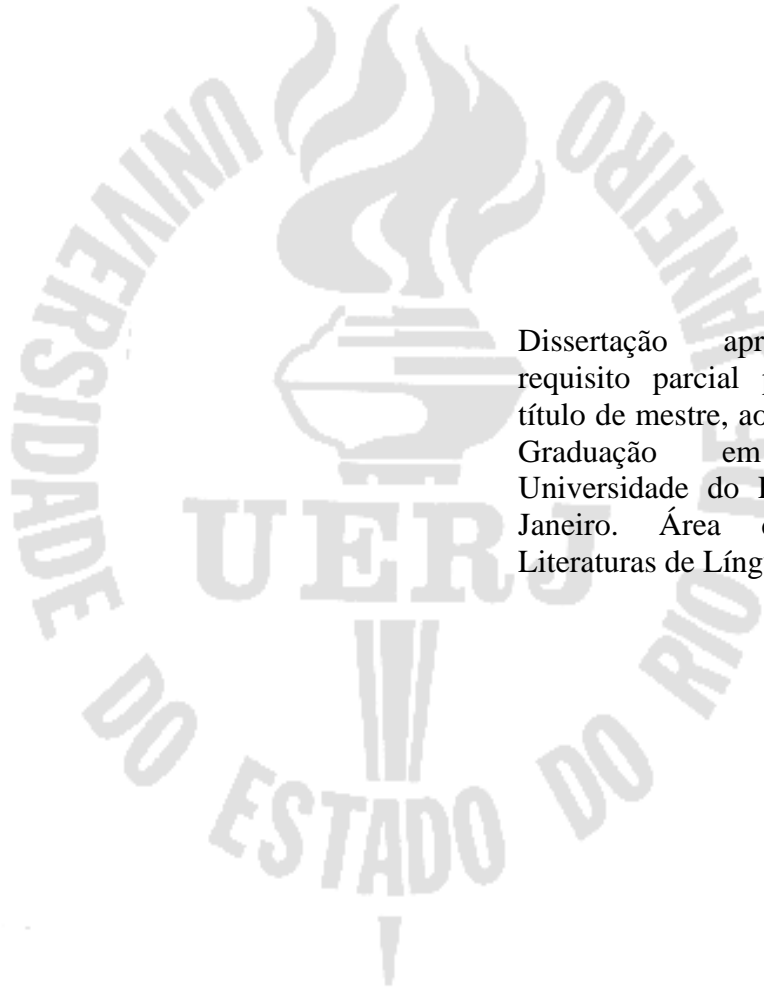**Virginia Woolf's Homicidal Legacy in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar***

Rio de Janeiro

2011

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Of Angels and Demons:

Virginia Woolf's Homicidal Legacy in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

> Dissertação apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora: Profª. Dra. Maria Conceição Monteiro

Rio de Janeiro

2011

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Rio de Janeiro

2011

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I would also like to thank my friends who appallingly still care for me after an absolutely silent hiatus of two dreadfully long years. Yes, I shall resume my social life now. Thank you for waiting.

Mas não haveria obrigado se não houvesse família. Agradeço ao acaso por me agraciar com a melhor que conheço.

Dedico este trabalho à matriarca poeta que se foi, Neuza de Carvalho Ferreira: você vive nesse trabalho.

Minha irmã Danielli Pinho, que com sua alegria traz leveza em meio a tanto pesar.

Minha Baby Sis Isabela Pinho, que leu minuciosamente cada pedacinho desse trabalho, emprestando a ele um pouco de si mesma. Filosofia e Literatura em um encontro primoroso.

E aos amores da minha vida: Isabel e Reginaldo Alves, que me fazem pensar que tudo vale a pena todo dia. Para eles a palavra "obrigado" não cabe – o significante escapa ao significado. Preciso de algo maior. Digo que amo, intensamente, e cesso.

I meant to write about **death,** only **life** came breaking in as usual.

Virginia Woolf, Diary, 17 February 1922

RESUMO

Esta dissertação é um estudo comparativo do legado vitoriano deixado para as escritoras do século XX, Virginia Woolf e Sylvia Plath. Primeiro discutem-se as agências controladoras do corpo feminino na era vitoriana e a formação de um ideal de feminilidade que chamamos de Anjo do Lar. Em seguida, discute-se como Virginia Woolf apreende essa imagem e a subverte, criando seu duplo, que chamamos de Demônio do Lar. Por fim, promovemos o diálogo entre Sylvia Plath e Virginia Woolf. Plath parece escrever aos moldes de Woolf, criando uma literatura de morte, feita para assassinar o Anjo do Lar. Usamos para tal estudo o conceito de *écriture féminine*, criado pelas francófonas Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, e Julia Kristeva, entre outras, para traçar os paralelos entre um lugar para o feminino na escrita e a busca de uma tradição por Woolf. A abjeção de Kristeva, a dinâmica de poder entre alma e corpo de Foucault e o conceito de duplo de Otto Rank nos ajudarão, por fim, a entender como se dá a morte do Anjo na literatura, especificamente no romance *A redoma de vidro* (1963) de Sylvia Plath.

Palavras-chave: Anjo do lar. Demônio do lar. Morte.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a comparative study of the legacy left behind by the Victorians to the twentieth-century woman writers Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. Firstly, we shall discuss the controlling agencies governing the female body in the Victorian Era and the rise of an ideal, the Angel in the House. Secondly, we expose how Virginia Woolf apprehends and subverts this Victorian ideal, duplicating it into what we call the Demon in the House. At last we encourage the dialogue between Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf. Plath seems to write in accordance with Woolf's parameters, creating a literature of death, a literature that is the killer of the Angel. We use the concept of *écriture féminine* promoted by the French critics Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, among others, to parallel a feminine space for writing to Woolf's search for a feminine literary tradition. Kristeva's abjection, Foucault's power dynamics between the soul and the body, and Otto Rank's work on the double, shall foster our discussion on the death of the Angel in literature, especially in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963).

Keywords: Angel in the house. Demon in the house. Death.

SUMMARY

FIRST WORDS

The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence.

Sylvia Plath

FIRST WORDS

> *If one calls such terms into question, does that mean that they cannot be used anymore?*
>
> Judith Butler[1]

Once one has read a great deal of feminist criticism, one begins to speculate whether our practice of singling out stages within feminism helps us amalgamate or detach and nullify all the partisans of the movement scattered from the nineteenth century, or eighteenth if we think of the brilliant Mary Wollstonecraft, to the twenty-first century and our postmodern discourses. Canonical researchers of the movement tend to point out that while first-wave feminism focused on *de juris* inequalities, such as the right to vote, second-wave focused on *de facto* hindrances, such as the lack of control over their own bodies and limited professional ground.

Third-wave feminism, nonetheless, stems from the need to accentuate the multiple oppressions suffered by women. It is here that women of "many colours, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds" have the chance to speak for the first time (TONG, 2009, p.284), thus shedding light on other facets of oppression, those not imposed upon the white, western, and/or heterosexual woman. From the late seventies on, the concept of multiple oppression occupies the core of feminist debates.

Virginia Woolf has been commonly placed, and hence studied, as part of first-wave feminism, since she published her works mainly from 1915 to 1941, her most productive years being those between 1925 and 1941. Woolf was directly a part of the movement when she worked for women's suffrage between January and August of 1910.

On the other side of the Atlantic, in the United States of America, Sylvia Plath's work as a poet and novelist could easily be seen as part of second-wave feminism. Plath's most influential publications date between 1960 and 1963, and she argues in favour of a space for women in the arts.

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[1] All the epigraphs in this study have been meticulously chosen in order to foster the comparative character of the present research. Each chapter is headed by its own epigraph, taken from either Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* or Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Likewise, each section within each chapter also contains its own epigraph. In the present chapter, chapters one and two, the epigraphs are various, either taken from the critical material used in our research or from other literary sources. Chapter three and the conclusive chapter, however, encourage primarily the dialogue between Virginia Woolf's essays and Sylvia Plath's novel.

Such positions that both writers hold in the critical and literary scene have been under constant debunk since the advent of the third wave. Feminist critics such as Judith Butler, Audre Lorde, and Moira Gatens, among others, tend to occasionally present these earlier feminists as working for the Empire, still propagating the discourse of the winners. Some of the remarks seem resentful, or somewhat absurd, such as Audre Lord's:

> Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing. By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore the differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretence to a homogeneity of experience by the word "sisterhood" that does not in fact exist. [...] A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time. (LORDE, 1984, p.375)

Lorde is absolutely correct to assert that now is high time women's multifaceted oppression be exposed and discussed, no one shall contest the above. However, instead of separating the effort of past generations from those of our contemporaries, a generous reading would underscore the advances one may profit from now that there is a critical tradition of feminism. Had it not been for Mary Woolstonecraft and her vindication, or Virginia Woolf and her room, Audre Lorde would have never been known.

One could easily make these infinitesimal distinctions in order to separate and label authors from the early twentieth century, when women had no legal right whatsoever, and those writing nowadays, when women have profited enormously from the effort of those now seen as colonisers, or nonchalant towards difference. Nevertheless, one often wonders whether the blurring of all these waves would not result in a more interesting perspective on the feminist movement. One in which the succession of continuous efforts gaining ground for all women, one step at a time, would be exalted. The latter position seems to intensify the unity of the movement, the "sisterhood", and shall therefore be adopted in the present work

It was bearing this in mind that my research on Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath started in 2007. It was at the University of Winnipeg, attending a course on Women and Fiction, that the thought of Virginia Woolf being a writer pursuing a literature of every woman's own, or better, writing as a space for the feminine, started to formulate itself. To locate Woolf among those who give voice to the *ex*centrics, as Linda Hutcheon suggests, those at the margins of history, regardless of class and nationality, may sound anachronous to some third-wave critics. Though very simple and feasible, the idea that Woolf's room represents too a space for the black lesbian, for example, is constantly, however implicitly, discredited by such remarks as those made by Lorde.

Woolf is one of those writers who follow you for life - one is questioned by her novels, stripped by her intimacy, intrigued by her use of the stream of consciousness which simultaneously sheds light and casts dark shadows on her characters. Her novels demand unhampered exposure from both readers and characters. And like many other literature students, I had long had a very complex relationship with the novel writer Virginia Woolf.

In 2007, however, I came across a compilation of her essays published by the Hogarth Press, that same publishing house that had once been her occupational therapy, her reason to endure life and its incongruence. As I read through her works, the idea of isolating Woolf as an outdated object of critical study began to seem more and more absurd. One could argue, though certainly not without objection, that only the life of the British bourgeoisie matter in her novels. Nevertheless, once the essayist is exposed there is no such division: the issue is how to transcend the cage of femininity, regardless of one's colour, age, ethnicity and/or sexual orientation. Virginia Woolf ponders upon the feminine and its space. It is a colourless research.

Virginia Woolf, the essayist, destabilises the foundation of colonisation: she questions the discourse that validates the power of one body over another. Woolf the essayist is thus what I intend to unveil. It is her search for a tradition of woman writers that most entices this study. It is the writer who said that the cheapness of paper made writing so feasible for women in her essay "Professions for Women", the same one who also alleged that only in a room furnished with five hundred pounds a year could women soar above dependence in *A Room of One's own*, that this study intends to bring to light, not the one believed to pay no heed to difference.

It is precise to say that to make such a distinction between an essay and a novel, as different genres, may be an obsolete view of these prose styles. Researchers and literary critics, such as Woolf herself in "The Modern Essay" (1925), have commented on the concoction of both genres. It is true that, with the advent of the modernist movement, both genres have bartered with one another. Nevertheless, the essay still holds, as Woolf expounds, a desire to disclose the truth of some matter, be it about a historical period or person. There is a point of view explicitly working behind the text.

This does not mean that essayists should limit themselves to "literal truth-telling and finding fault with a culprit for his good"; on the contrary, these "are out of place in an essay" (WOOLF, 1984, p. 212). There is an exchange of technique now: the essay borrows imagination from the novel and reinvents itself as a metaphor for truth-telling, with the purpose of bringing the reader closer to the text. It now includes readers in its state of truth,

unlike the old habit of writing meticulous descriptions about an apparently stable concept of truth. Woolf concludes that "vague as all definitions are, a good essay must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out" (WOOLF, 1984, p. 223). Therefore, it is upon such a different position undertaken by Woolf as an essayist that this work shall centre its basis.

Virginia Woolf identifies the Victorian Era as the root of something that hindered the new twentieth-century writer's subject position, something that cast a shadow upon her ability to claim a room for herself in literature. Three essays have been chosen in order to exemplify her research on the space designated for women in history and literature.

The first one is rather a compilation of essays published in 1929, *A Room of One's Own*. This book is the masterpiece of Woolf's journey as a researcher. It describes her incessant search for women in history and in literature. Her scope is indeed quite ambitious, and although she centres her writing on the period between the late sixteenth and the early twentieth centuries, she comments mainly on the Victorian writer and her place in society. The Victorian woman is at the heart of Woolf's investigation towards understanding women's silences.

Secondly, the essay "Women and Fiction", also published in 1929 in the *Forum*, shows furthermore her depth as a researcher. It tackles the same issues that *A Room of One's Own* does, but here Woolf focuses on the differences between a masculine and feminine tradition, organising the structure of feminine writing as the space for creativity.

Thirdly, and lastly, the essay "Professions for Women" closes our selection. It first appeared in 1942 as a paper read to the Women's Service League at their graduation night. The essay is chronologically at the end of Woolf's most productive years and it represents, as a whole, the end of Woolf's expedition as an essay writer. Here Virginia Woolf announces the death of the Angel in the House, that Victorian ghost that had haunted all woman writers. Woolf as a researcher focused mainly on the nineteenth century and its Angel, a cage for her contemporaries.

Thus, the first chapter of this study replicates Woolf's impulse and attempts to frame the life of those Victorian Angels. It is here that we understand the regulating agencies working to castrate women's transcendence in the nineteenth-century public world, creating an angelical image that would empower and weaken this woman at the same time.

Chapter one observes the discourses working to relegate women to the house, caging them in their own bodies. At the same time, it also discusses how this repression made room for some of the most ingenious woman writers to find a way of writing novels that somehow

started exposing the cracks in this nineteenth-century foundation. Here we shall discuss the importance of the Victorian writer as a queer figure, one that questions the role of gender performativity.

Chapter two goes a century forwards and observes Virginia Woolf, the essayist, and her struggle against this silent legacy. Here we see the Victorian Era through Woolf's eyes and understand what it meant to be a woman writer in the early twentieth century. All three essays selected work together in order to exemplify (1) Woolf's research on the Victorian writer, her limitations and accomplishments, and (2) the mission she establishes for the new woman writers who are now part of a tradition: that of killing the Angel in the House.

Once this Angel is killed, Virginia Woolf and her cohort of modern woman writers become Demons in the House, a term I borrowed, with a few appropriations, from Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon* (1982). While Auerbach's demon exists in the broadest sense – as a "disruptive spiritual energy that also engorges the divine" (1982, p.1), i.e. a facet of the Angel when confronted by spinsterhood or prostitution – the Demon in my title represents the double of this Angel.

The Demon personifies, here in the present work, the duplication of the woman writer's body, detaching herself from the Angel that demands that she be silent. It is the creation of a new material unity that fosters her liberty of creativity. Otto Rank classifies the duplication of oneself as a projection of the bad deeds of an individual to a separate illusory body (*The Double*, 1979). Thus one can carry out the suicide of one's bad self in this other fictional body. What I propose here is an inversion of this projection: Woolf urges the death of the good, of the behaving self. What lives is the bad, the deviant, the Demon in the House.

Though wordlessly, chapter two also aims at merging all the waves of feminism by bringing out the parity between Woolf's mission statement as a writer and the advocating of an *écriture féminine* by the purported third-wave feminists. By proposing that Virginia Woolf mothered the movement that would become *écriture féminine* one sees the continuity of the movement, and not its disintegration.

Chapter two is also the bridge connecting the Victorian Angel to *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath's only novel published in London in 1963, the same year that saw Plath's suicide. Plath's novel, as we shall discuss further in chapter three, has been read by many, especially by the scholar Caroline King Barnard, as a confessional novel, for it depicts the journey of a young student who descends into madness and attempts suicide.

Both Sylvia Plath and her heroine, Esther Greenwood, were overachievers. Plath entered Smith College on two scholarships, began publishing her poems as early as 1950,

when she was only eighteen years old, and, like her heroine, she was invited by *Mademoiselle* magazine to work as a guest editor in New York in the summer of 1953, at the end of which she almost succeeded in committing suicide. Both Plath and Esther were institutionalised and recovered. Esther's journey ends there, affirming life; we say goodbye to the heroine as she steps out of the mental institution, ready to assert her newfound space in the world. Plath too gets out, finishes her degree and moves to England, for an M.A. in literature, where she meets and marries the English poet Ted Hughes.

It is undeniable that Sylvia Plath indeed used her own life as inspiration for her novel, but this shall not classify our reading of *The Bell Jar*. Whether the novel is a *bildungsroman* based on Plath's own life, as widely alleged by scholars, does not fit the purpose of this comparative study. Quite the opposite, we shall overlook any counterparts found in her life in order to focus on her adherence to Virginia Woolf's mission of writing in order to kill an oppressive past within her character's own body, the Angel.

In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath depicts the struggle between The Angel in the House and the *femme fatale* still present in the modern woman's unconsciousness. Chapter three systematically discusses the mechanisms Plath uses in order to portray her heroine's inability to perform as either role, showing her subsequent journey into Kristeva's abjection, which involves hallucination and longing for death.

Chapter three shall resolutely foster the dialogues between Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath in the light of Foucault's dynamics of power between the body and the soul, and Kristeva's abjection. This chapter investigates the ways in which Woolf's homicidal legacy of killing the Angel in the House, fundamental for women to take on a subject position according to the writer, permeates Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*. It aims at underscoring the path towards subjection established by Woolf – and depicted by Plath – through women's freedom of speech, and death as a metaphor for the birth of a new identity for women. It is here that we fully understand the burden of being and Angel and the doubling of one's own self into the Demon of the House.

In short, this is a study of Angels and Demons, of sameness and difference. Its main goal is to call femininity into question, without relegating the feminine. As Judith Butler brilliantly expounds in the epigraph heading this chapter, calling a term into question does not necessarily mean to debunk it forever. Quite the reverse, the word "feminine" is expanded throughout the history of feminism, being now the place where writing becomes nurturable, as in *écriture féminine*.

Here we see Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath writing collectively to purge their bodies of femininity, but finding a space that entwines the feminine as a metaphor for creativity. The Demon becomes One, and the Other is killed by this deviant sameness – a slaveless world, and in their case, it is not an oxymoron.

ONE

For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.

Virginia Woolf

1. A NINETEENTH-CENTURY METAMORPHOSIS: THE BIRTH OF THE VICTORIAN ANGEL

> *In marrying, woman gets some share in the world as her own; legal guarantees protect her against capricious actions by man; but she becomes his vassal. He is the economic head of the joint enterprise, and hence he represents it in view of society. She takes his name; she belongs to his religion, his class, his circle; she joins his family, she becomes his 'half'. [...] Since the husband is the productive worker, he is the one who goes beyond family interest to that of society, opening up a future for himself through co-operation in the building of the collective future; he incarnates transcendence. Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and of the home – that is to say, to immanence.*
>
> Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir summarises the century preceding the publication of *The Second Sex* in the lines above. The issue of transcendence versus immanence traces back to all the Victorian mechanisms created to castrate women socially, mentally and economically at the same time. The most notable of these mechanisms was the medical argument that a woman's nature was biologically weaker: she was caged by biology.

Jill Conway explores the evolution of theories on women's supposedly natural feebleness and frail biology in his article "Stereotypes of femininity in a Theory of Evolution". He goes through Spencer, Darwin, Geddes and Hobhouse in order to underscore that women's cage had always been biology itself: in a nutshell, their cells were built to store energy while men's were engineered to dissipate it, therefore women had an "anabolic habit of body" while men's was catabolic (1973, p. 143).

Conway emphasises that this biological dichotomy works quintessentially as a social justification for locking women in the private sphere. There should be, after all, a guardian of the Victorian family while men were in charge of corroborating and, through their "active nature", taking part in the industrial and imperial *zeitgeist* of the nineteenth century. Conway exposes us to the idea that all the medical/biological breakthrough of the nineteenth century was indeed a new discourse that validated the needs of the State for having a woman trapped in the house while the man, her active half, fought in the outside world. Had it not been for this social dynamics, what we now know as progress would not have existed. Once again we see in the history of society the unreasonable bias that power operates towards individuals in

order for the capitalist machine to thrive. Progress seems to be inextricably intertwined with subjugation.

Industrialisation brought ugliness and baseness to the lowest classes in England, as the historian Simon Schama expounds in the documentary *A History of Britain: Victoria and all her Sisters* (2000). It was a time of malice and viciousness; therefore, there should be more than ever a guardian of the English home. This guardian should maintain innocence alive. Biology argued that women were naturally weaker, *anabolic* as a metaphor to their social function as mothers. Thus, Victorians had to feel no guilt in having their women locked up at home, themselves innocent of the outside world, much like their own children. At the same time these new discourses validated the State, it also justified the existence of a public and a private sphere, and, by all means, that they should not be inhabited by everybody: only the fittest.

As Peter T. Cominos construes in "Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict", women were ignorant of their own sexuality – they were supposed to perform solely as *femina domestica*, unconsciously repressing *femina sensualis*. This unconscious repression of their sexual instincts led to the belief that love of home, children and their domestic lives were the only things a woman was able to feel. "Innocence was a key device", concludes Cominos, "for forming feminine character upon the model of the womanly woman" (1973, p. 161).

At the same time theories such as Darwin's evolutionism flourished restraining women as those who are sustained by the fittest, it questioned the existence of God, for there was no room for the biblical version of the origin of the world alongside the idea that everything, and everybody, had derived from infinitesimal microorganisms. Darwin and his followers were foreshadowing the death of God that would be enunciated still in the nineteenth century by Friedrich Nietzsche. Hence, England had never been shaken to its core as much as now in the nineteenth century: first there was the threat of losing the good familial feelings to the baseness of the poor in the process of industrialisation; and then there was the threat of a mayhem established by the loss of the old Christian values.

Therefore, together with the repulsiveness of the industrial working class, the death of God propelled the Victorians to create a new figure in order to embody the divine. What would substantiate the ideal of femininity more than an idealised woman-angel who stood for the sacredness of the house? Whose body could bear a more pervading significance when it comes to religious and political security than that of the innocent anabolic-natured childlike Victorian woman?

1.1 The Rise of the Angel

> *These episodes seem to bring to surface an extraordinary imperative that underlay much of the nineteenth-century ideology of femininity: in one way or another, woman must be "killed" into passivity for her to acquiesce in what Rousseau and others considered her duty of self-abnegation "relative to men".*
>
> Gilbert and Gubar

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar highlight that these newborn Angels would have to kill their inner voices, their singularity of thought, in order to shield the bleakness of the outside world, i.e. industrial England, and build a sacred environment for the "real English feelings" to thrive. They had to incorporate innocence to the point of passivity of thought, action and duty.

In order to succeed in fully elevating England to the highest rank of industrialisation but still keep the image of the poor, starved and debauched working class invisible, the nineteenth-century society had to invest in a body which would erase these deviances. In other words, the working-class man and woman had to physically devote themselves to England, working more than eighteen hours a day and starving to death, while the middle-class woman had to filter their image so as to immortalise England as the tea-drinking society we now know.

Many denounced the invisibility of the working class and their neediness, most notably among them would be Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell; yet, the image that still lingers in our twenty-first-century social *imaginarium* is that of the five-o'clock-tea England. Hence, there are still quite pervasive traces in today's society of that Angel that arose almost two centuries ago.

Maria Conceição Monteiro highlights that this Angel emerges as a supply for the demand of a point of equilibrium between the private and the public spheres; the English home should still stand for sturdiness and stability, while the factories stood for poverty and ignobleness (2000, p. 20). Eric Hobsbawn adds that the Industrial Revolution tended most surely to expel women, or the married woman from the middle and upper classes, from the

public sphere and trap them into a life of meaninglessness – for they were cast in the margins of economy (2003, p. 281).

What both researchers point to is that being a woman in the nineteenth century meant being an outcast. On the one hand, if you were from the lower classes you would find work as a servant, or at the factories, but you would be the utmost Other as a member of the other class and the other sex. On the other hand, if you were a member of the middle classes you would always have to comply with the duties of a Lady, which meant being an ornament and never setting hand at work, for that was the most degrading thing for a woman of high rank.

Martha Vicinus brings to light this turning point in the nineteenth century from the "Perfect Wife" to the "Perfect Lady":

> The perfect wife was an active participant in the family, fulfilling a number of vital tasks, the first of which was childbearing. She was expected in the lower classes to contribute to the family income. In the middle classes she provided indirect economic support through the care of her children, the purchasing and preparation of food and the making of clothes. This model gave way to an ideal which had little connection with any functional and responsible role in society. (1973, p. 9)

Vicinus points to the fact that then, in the nineteenth century, women had to be absolutely ostracised from action. On no account could they even be mothers in the sense of looking after their own children. This new Lady had to engage in no activity that implied the execution of a certain work; she could have no occupation. Not long before Queen Victoria was crowned, these same women could foster their own children; they could buy their own food, or even clean and cook in their own houses. As limiting as this role of the perfect wife may sound, it was an easier role to perform than this new Angel-lady ideal. Their only escape from the house was taking up charity work, but this too should never be taken too seriously, otherwise they would taint their lady status.

Thus, women were to be educated in order to please men – as Rousseau, as influential as he was on movements that fostered human liberty, had asserted earlier in *Émile* (1762) – and to conform to their needs. It was through this training that perfect ladies would arise. Vicinus concludes that "in her most perfect form, the lady combined total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption and the worship of the family hearth" (1973, p. 9).

This self-effacing ideal of femininity was widespread through literature, most remarkably through the very popular Victorian poet Coventry Patmore, who in 1854 published the following poem, entitled "The Angel in the House". He dedicated it to his wife, who in his opinion was the paramount example of a woman:

> Man must be pleased; but him to please
> Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
> Of his condoled necessities
> She casts her best, she flings herself.

> How often flings for nought, and yokes
> Her heart to an icicle or whim,
> Whose each impatient word provokes
> Another, not from her, but him;
> While she, too gentle even to force
> His penitence by kind replies,
> Waits by, expecting his remorse,
> With pardon in her pitying eyes;
> And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
> A comfortable word confers,
> She leans and weeps against his breast,
> And seems to think the sin was hers;
> Or any eye to see her charms,
> At any time, she's still his wife,
> Dearly devoted to his arms;
> She loves with love that cannot tire;
> And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
> Through passionate duty love springs higher,
> As grass grows taller round a stone.
> (PATMORE, 2009)[2]

The poem served somewhat as a manual for young women. It was a lesson of what was called "love" at their time. It was believed that through self-sacrifice and even self-immolation, "real love" could emerge. This ideal of love was personified in the body of their queen, Victoria. She herself maintained her lady status even though she was entitled for the most prominent occupation in England: that of a monarch. She abdicated her position in order to become a mother and a wife, and kept to her domestic-sphere duty until she died, still mourning after her long deceased king.

It is, indeed, rather interesting to scrutinise the image of Queen Victoria in contrast with the image of other queens. By analysing Victoria's pictures in comparison to the picture of other monarchs preceding her, it is intriguing that the ones immortalised by the former carry the underlying message of total immanence women were doomed to in the Victorian Era. Briefly, we could contrast two pictures of Victoria to two of Elizabeth. In order to characterise popularity, the method used to select the pictures was to choose the first two images that appear when we google both monarchs.

Victoria's first picture to appear[3] depicts her holding a flower and wearing regular attire. This could be any Victorian girl, not necessarily a queen, or a queen to be. Her eyes gaze into ours with no sign of austerity; instead, she drafts a submissive look. This is the picture of immanence; a picture of *domestica sexualis*. Victoria here personifies the Victorian Angel as an institution, an ideal. Here we notice that not even a queen can escape the authority of the Angel. She too is trapped in her own body: here we see the feminine body as a cage.

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[2] The excerpt above was taken from the long Victorian poem "The Angel in the House", which is found in its entirety at http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4099/pg4099.html.
[3] Turn to ANNEX A, page 72, illustration number one.

Following this picture from her juvenilia, we find an austere queen[4], but still her depiction is very peculiar. Now Queen Victoria does not look straight into our eyes anymore. Her look has been tainted: innocence has been replaced by mourning. Now she governs England alone, Prince Albert is dead, but the image is that of a widow seating in an isolated room with a fan on her hands, not of a monarch holding her sceptre.

The subtext of both depictions is clear. This is a lady who deals with monarchy as her contemporaries dealt with charity work: superficial pastimes which could not taint their Angel status. She is either a wife mourning after her King, or an innocent girl ready to marry a good man; never the monarch who ruled industrial England. Not even through monarchy does Victoria transcend: she embodies the role of woman. Her body becomes the mirror for the other ladies in her kingdom.

It is important to underscore that my point is simply to scrutinise the ethos constructed by the image of Victoria, and not the political aspect of her government. One may misconstrue the monarch by saying that she was, inwardly, oblivious to her Kingdom, or that she overlooked the administration of her empire. However, the image she aimed at outwardly was that of a woman of her time – by no means does she wish to convey the image of a ruler. To put it unmistakably, the object of my analysis is the public image of both Victoria and Elizabeth. In the case of Victoria, the public image that still lingers is that of the woman locked in the private sphere, filtering the ugliness of industrialisation. What we see is a submissive and self-effacing wife in a monarch's attire.

It is important to note that this image of the compliant queen is going to work alongside controlling agencies such as the church, biology and the medical discourse, the law, education, and the family in order to force women into the mould of the Angel. When Victoria gave the famous "close your eyes and think of England" advice to her daughter upon the latter's wedding day, she was advising an entire century of women to follow in the footsteps of her image. The image that these Victorian women had to proliferate painfully is allegorically the image of England itself.

Elizabeth I has an extremely different ethos constructed by the images that still linger in our society. The first two pictures that appear when one googles her name are appallingly different from those of Victoria[5]. While Victoria's image is that of the totally destitute of power, Elizabeth is depicted as the head of the State. All the pompousness of monarchy is imprinted in her portrayal, from her royal attire to extravagant jewellery, and even a royal

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[4] Turn to ANNEX B, page 73, illustration number two.
[5] Turn to ANNEXES C and D, pages 74 and 75, illustrations three and four, respectively.

cosset with a gold collar. Objects signifying power are plentiful: sceptres, orbs, rings, and massive crowns.

These depictions hint at the third meaning of these pictures, as Roland Barthes would put it, the meaning that "has something to do with disguise" (1993, p.323). In contrast with the first meaning, that of communication, and the second, that of signification, the third meaning is at the level of significance: it "is not in the language system" (1993, p.325), therefore, it is an implicit suggestion or an inferred indication that escapes the author, one that can only be grasped through the recipient of the work.

We could say that what is at the level of significance in the above depictions is the power dynamics they impose on women. While Elizabeth subverts the role of a woman in the sixteenth century with her image, Victoria implicitly urges her contemporaries to be still and comply with the role of Angel. The body of the queen becomes an institution that would govern other domesticated bodies. Victoria donates her own figure to the State; through her shape, the Angel in the House and her duties grow strong.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that never before had artists in general "employed a rhetoric drawn from religion to characterize the good mother as a sort of Madonna and the dutiful maiden as a virginal angel" so much (2007, p. 414). The researchers also emphasise that it was "only in the nineteenth century that painters began regularly portraying angels as female" (*ibid*, p. 415). Therefore, the arts in general depicted the metamorphosis of the Victorian woman's body into an overtly idealised angel figure; unsurprisingly, confronting the death of God and the hazard presented by the lower classes and their immoral life, the Angel in the House was born and instantly incorporated to the basic Victorian code of decorum, a code imprinted in the queen's body.

But how did this Angel live? Have all the Victorian ladies experienced this Angel position as successfully as their queen?

1.2 Living Corsets: The Rights and Duties of a Victorian Angel

> *There must be an angel in the house busy with her brood of children ready to turn the commercial world of everyday economic laws into something finer. It was upon this kind of cooperation between the sexes that "all progress past or future must depend" (p.259).*
>
> Jill Conway

Maria Conceição Monteiro starts her *Sombra Errante* by defining the new nineteenth-century gentleman and lady: now with a self-made middle class, these lexical terms did not point restrictively to superiority of birth. A gentleman could be any man who strived his way up the social ladder. Nonetheless, a gentle*woman*, that is a lady, could never ascend by the same means, for she would become a working woman, the basest of beings. The only gentle position for a woman was that of the Angel (MONTEIRO: 2000, p.19).

It is true that with the advent of industrialisation women were starting to find work outside their houses. There were only a few options, though: being a servant, a factory worker, a governess, or a prostitute. Factory workers would be paid less than the outrageous salary a man would at the factories and live in complete paucity. Being a servant meant having only half a day a week for your own thoughts and complete abandonment of your family. Governessing – a profession that was on the increase since there were many unmarried educated women emerging from this new middle class – was much similar to being a servant but with the drawback of lacking co-workers to whom one could talk, so one would live in utmost isolation.

Even if one chose to follow any of these paths, which would never be chosen but follow the failure to find a husband, one could lose one's position at any time, for the law did not support these women until very late in the Victorian period (cf. GILBERT ; GUBAR, 2007, p. 413-432). At the sight of starvation, women would resort to one of the only real professions in nineteenth-century England at hand: prostitution.

Michel Foucault indeed points out that modern people and the Victorians are deeply connected by their interest in sexuality. He emphasises that repression played an important role in the awakening of sexual attention among Victorians, who would never be able to comply with their own sexual demands at home – with their divine Angels – and would recur to prostitutes (1990, p.4).

Their Angels, as asserted, were kept ignorant of such instincts, performing as *femina domestica*, while men repressed their sexual impetus rather consciously. Thus, it is quite apparent that conscience was denied to women – they were the bodies of silence. "Repression operated as a sentence to disappear," Foucault continues, "as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, nothing to know" (1990, p.4). Therefore, Victorian men had

to find places where their sexuality could overflow; a place where the language of silence could be spoken:

> The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance: the prostitute, the client, and the pimp, together with the psychiatrist and his hysteric – those "Other Victorians," as Steven Marcus would say – seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted. (FOUCAULT, 1990, p. 4)

Consequently, once expatriated from official England – that of the Angel and the married woman – women would endorse the statistics that showed an unbelievable increase in prostitution during Victoria's reign, as Foucault elucidates (1990, p. 47). It is not appalling that many women struggled to find a husband, and many mothers openly marketed their daughters, as Jane Austen depicts rather bluntly in her novels. Being an Angel was the only way a woman could retain some sort of dignity.

Here, however, one should be very careful when discoursing on the Victorian Era. It is rather evident that if something has got to be repressed, it is because it exists in the first place. Nevertheless, we cannot place the subculture, i.e. of prostitution and sex, that surfaces in some departments of nineteenth-century England as what drove that society. If one does so, one implies that an entire society was forging a prescribed behaviour, which was not the case. Sex was indeed something that aroused Victorians, but the official culture, the culture of the masses, was that of the Angel and the Lord.

In order to fully assemble this national feeling of prudishness, Victorians had to revise the sexual vocabulary they inherited from previous centuries; therefore, power created gaps of silence with the aim of restraining the unspeakable:

> Without a question, new rules of propriety screened out some words: there was a policing of statements. A control over enunciations as well: where and when it was not possible to talk about such things became much more strictly defined; in which circumstances, among which speakers, and within which social relationships. Areas were thus established, if not of utter silence, at least of tact and discretion: between parents and children, for instance, or teachers and pupils, or masters and domestic servants. This almost certainly constituted a whole restrictive economy [...]. (FOUCAULT, 1990, p.18)

Victorians as a people lived under an insidious regime of silence. They lived under constant investiture of fear when it came to sex and sexuality. Sexual indulgence was inextricably interwoven with disease in the mind of the Victorian citizen. The measures generated by the medical discourse, combined with the ignorance produced through silence, led parents to incorporate the fear of their own sexuality and reproduce it in their domestic education.

Parents, for instance, would buy cages for their young boys; cages that would be fitted over their young men's genitals so as to prevent masturbation, for it would lead to perversion

or death of consumption. Some of these cages had spikes; others rang a bell in the parents' room whenever the boy had an erection (cf. GOLDFARB, 1970, p.35). These actions lie beneath the dynamics of power that shaped the Victorian man into the normative fear.

Parents, on the other hand, did not take any actions in order to castrate women's sexuality, for as we have already asserted, girls were believed to be naturally destitute of any sexual drive. There is no record of any medical writings against girls' masturbation, for instance, probably because, as Russel Goldfarb stresses, "Victorians would not have admitted even to themselves that girls or women had the desire to masturbate" (1970, p.36). Women were, therefore, trained from birth to nurture what was believed to be their natural inclination to remain housebound and sexually devoid.

Succinctly, there was no room for women in the public sphere. Their duty, or in other words their social function, was intertwined with the maintenance of the English order; the English home. Eric Hobsbawn concludes that:

> ... não existiam ocupações puramente femininas (exceto talvez prostituição e os divertimentos públicos, a ela assimilados) que não fossem, normalmente, levadas a efeito, a maior parte do tempo, dentro de uma casa; pois mesmo mulheres e homens solteiros que se empregavam como criados e trabalhadores agrícolas "moravam na casa". [...] Elas não estavam fora da história, mas estavam fora da história da sociedade do século XIX. (HOBSBAWN, 2003, p. 276)

A woman had the duty, as we have already discoursed, to immortalise England through the performance of her body, and this is how she participated in the history of her time. One could go further and say that she was even the most important participant in this sense, although she was locked in the private sphere, literally inside the house, away from the history of society, as Hobsbawn proposes. It is not surprising that the madhouses flourished in England, firstly because those who decided who was mad were men concerned with the order of the family and State; secondly because women in the Victorian Age had their bodies invested with one of the heaviest loads in history, which was carrying England on their backs every day maintaining the order through their own images while their country was taken by the upheaval of industrialisation.

We have so far delineated the duties of a typical middle and upper class Victorian woman: she was supposed to behave restrictively as crutches for her husband who struggled in the outside world, in order to balance the private and the public spheres. Hence, Hobsbawn underlines that they were part of the history of the time, but only marginally. They were located outside the history of society. When it comes to the rights of women, one might easily suppose that they were rather meagre, since their whole being was erased after marriage. Gilbert and Gubar emphasise that:

> On her marriage, she, like her ancestresses from the Middle Ages on, became what the eighteenth-century English jurist Sir William Blackstone described as *femme covert* (a "covered" woman, in Anglo-Norman), a phrase also used by earlier legal commentators. "By marriage," Blackstone declared in a magisterial passage that was repeatedly cited throughout the nineteenth century, "the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended, or at least it is incorporated or consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection, and cover she performs everything, and she is therefore called in our law a civil covert." (GILBERT ; GUBAR, 2007, p. 417)

This civil death in marriage implied the loss of all legal rights, which were already scarce when single for everything would be willed to or naturally inherited by their brothers. Women could neither sue nor be sued in courts, for their husbands had total responsibility over them, which meant that they were as legally capable as their own children.

Women could not vote until the end of the First World War; they could not file for divorce (only if their husbands claimed they no longer wanted them); they could not keep their children if for some reason their marriage broke off. Husbands could even will away from them what had once been theirs and joined through marriage. There was a law that endorsed husbands to beat up their wives as long as the stick was as big as or smaller than the husband's thumb. Furthermore, they even had the right to literally lock their wives up whenever necessary – this was not questioned before 1891 (cf. GILBERT ; GUBAR, 2007, p. 418).

Thus, it is especially intricate to list the rights of a woman in the nineteenth century, for the law also sanctioned the power dynamics that drove that society. Therefore, the legal discourse does not produce rights, but other mechanisms to frame these individuals. Women were legally commanded to fulfil their duties; for the only effect the law produced was fear, much like the medical discourse. They were safer when guarded by their husbands than when protected by law, and this incentivised their adopting the Angel position willingly.

Women's attire, mainly the tight corseted waist disabling their movements, is allegorically connected to their rights and duties in the nineteenth-century society. They were literally and metaphorically immobile beings, trapped in the art of silence. As a teenager, Jane Austen used to ridicule the femininity women had to rehearse in order to maintain their Angel status and show their fragility. In her epistolary novel *Love and Freindship* [sic], part of what critics call her juvenilia, she ironically warns women:

> Beware of fainting fits… though at the time they may be refreshing & agreeable yet believe me they will in the end, if too often repeated & at improper reasons, prove destructive to your constitution … Run mad as often as you chuse [sic]; but do not faint. (2007, p. 477)

Such ironic undertones would pervade Austen's novels, though some would claim that her later heroines are not so assertive about this ideal of femininity. On the contrary, for

some critics and students of literature, Austen's characters appear to somehow comply with this ideal through marriage, even after long struggles against the norm. Nevertheless, one can see riot in such complacency, for Austen's portrayals indeed infer the painful life a Victorian woman led. It is important to highlight that we are ideologically using Austen in order to describe the birth of this Victorian myth of womanhood, for although Austen died two years before Victoria's coronation, it is in the former's literary body that we see the foundations of this Angel in the House.

Hobsbawn brings this matter of female complacency to light when he says that, although throughout the century there were riots and revolts against oppression, most women chose to conform to the system and use it to their own benefit (2003, p. 294). They knew the consequences of living outside what was planned. Nonetheless, what may be taken as complacency might be some subterranean rebellion that takes advantage of the norm in order to question it. Some writers, in fact a modest minority, found a way to juggle with this Angel position, sometimes smartly subverting femininity, much like Miss Austen did.

There were cracks in this Victorian foundation. There were still untrained Angels in England.

1.3 Queering the Victorian Age: Writing off the System

> *The intention of the contract is good, and right for many, no doubt; but in our case it may defeat its own ends because we are the queer sort of people we are – folk in whom domestic ties of a forced kind snuff out cordiality and spontaneousness [...].*
> *Everybody is getting to feel as we do. We are a little beforehand, that's all.*
>
> *Jude the Obscure*

Jane Austen is a daughter of the eighteenth century, a century that fought against established power and confirmed the potent voice of certain minorities. It was an age of social change and rebellion against established hierarchy. The American Revolution (1776), and subsequently The French Revolution (1789) educated different peoples that power dynamics could be reversed. I do not intend to place feminism within the political agenda that would

stem from such movements, or to say that it is only possible to think the woman question within a certain political regime.

On the contrary, what is of utmost importance in mentioning these revolutions is their inability to recognise Otherness outside the norm – for these peoples may have fought against oppression, but women and other minorities were never in the scope of their battle. What is striking, however, is that whenever any questioning of power occurs, different people realise that dynamics can be challenged through discursive practices – be it for good or bad.

The French Revolution as a movement brought fear to England; fear that such social upheaval would get to their home. And indeed it did. Mary Wollstonecraft, who was a close observer of what was happening in France, wondered when women would be inserted in the ideal of liberty they preached. She wrote and published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) arguing most humbly that women should be educated at least to teach their children well, and be good companions. She was, therefore, the first one to underscore women's Otherness in relation to men and to raise the question of equality, so propagated by her century in an at least biased way, in relation to her own sex.

The matter of girls' education would henceforth pervade English journals, newspapers and such. Nevertheless, after William Godwin, who had married Wollstonecraft in 1796, published her love letters following her death in 1797, she was dismissed as a "hyena in petticoats and a philosophical wanton" (GILBERT ; GUBAR, 2007, p. 372). In such terms, Wollstonecraft's pleas for attention were discharged; but her voice had been heard and would still haunt the upcoming nineteenth century.

Wollstonecraft had started to queer long-established social dynamics. I am using the verb "to queer" as it was defined by Eliane Borges Berutti in "Queer Studies: Some Ideas and an Analysis": to question dominant paradigms, mainly when it comes to sex and sexuality (1997, p. 179). Therefore, Wollstonecraft is queering an entire legacy of submission when she finds the accent to state what in her view was wrong with society. By arguing against women's oppression in a philosophical treatise, publishing it, and wildly defending her ideas in public, Wollstonecraft questioned the role of her gender. That a woman would stand in the position of the philosopher is striking most hardly at the foundations of heterocentricity. Thus, Wollstonecraft queers an entire tradition of submission in the arts.

One could easily say, along these lines, that Jane Austen is also queering her Age. In a world where women were supposed to get married and live off their husbands, Austen depended on her pen – if not entirely economically, at least existentially, as she puts forth most honestly in a letter to the prince regent, after being asked to write a historical romance:

"I could not sit down seriously to write a serious romance under any motive than to save my life" (GILBERT ; GUBAR, 2007, p. 461).

Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter, Mary Shelley, is another example of a woman who questioned the role of her gender in the nineteenth century. Her gothic-romantic novel *Frankenstein* (1818) is an example of how ingenious a woman could be. By questioning society and its monsters, Shelley proved that women had a voice; that they had an untrained opinion of their own, and could most surely argue on an equal basis with men.

Elizabeth Barret Browning, Margaret Fuller, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Jacobs, Florence Nightingale, George Eliot and the remarkable Brontë sisters all questioned most fundamentally their gender: an Angel should never work. These women made writing an occupation. Whether they lived solely off its profits does not primarily matter. What is of paramount importance is that they participated in the public world. Most of these women's works were published and widely-read across England, which made them part of the public sphere. They had started a silent, and still modest, revolution.

The nineteenth century was, therefore, simultaneously a time of oppression and liberation. It was a time when women's language was silence; but a time when women's writings had never been so deafening. It is true that most of these women's heroines, such as Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, seem to be framed into compliance through marital submission – their heroines seem to reinforce the Angel ideal through marriage.

However, this submission is always challenged: in *Jane Eyre*, for instance, the title heroine can only marry Rochester after he has become a blind disabled man and Jane a wealthy woman. Charlotte Brontë beautifully, and most playfully, inverts the power dynamics that demanded women depend on men; now Rochester would depend both social and economically upon his wife. Additionally, the mere fact that these woman writers existed twist the division between public and private spheres. They were rebels writing from the inside to the outside world, and thus taking part in the history of society, unlike the other women described by Hobsbawn.

Austen, Eliot and the Brontës, among others, left the space of immanence, elicited by Beauvoir, and transcended through their writing process. Their characters were still somehow locked in the Angel ideal, or hidden behind it, as Thomas Hardy's Sue in *Jude the Obscure* ends up proving to be the weaker sex by giving in to religious penitence and marital duty.

Nevertheless, their writers, including men such as Hardy and his attack on marriage, were queer figures, for they decentred power and questioned its nature, writing off the system that prescribed complacency. They broke new ground for their new twentieth-century

descendants. Literary transcendence and the death of the Angel were an issue now; an issue that would stir upcoming modern women to their core.

TWO

*But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction –
what has that got to do with a room of one's own?
I will try to explain.*

Virginia Woolf

2.   A LITERATURE OF HER OWN: VIRGINIA WOOLF, THE ESSAYIST

Where is she, where is woman in all the spaces he surveys, in all the scenes he stages within the literary enclosure?
We know the answer and there are plenty: she is in the shadow. In the shadow he throws on her; the shadow she is.

Hélène Cixous

Where is she? Hélène Cixous's question echoes Virginia Stephen's suffocating inquiry. Where is she? Where has she been all these years? Where was she when Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear*? Where is she?

Virginia Stephen was born in 1882 into a wealthy family in London. She was a direct descendent of the Angel in the House, that being who was supposed to give herself away in order for her family, the microcosm of industrial England, to find peace and incorruptibility in her own body of beautiful silences. She was the picture of ignorance and loveliness.

From a very young age, Miss Stephen found it appallingly curious that women had always been in the margin of history. She would go through her father's library at 22 Hyde Park Gate and look for women among the collections of history and poetry books, only to find nothing. Miss Stephen, then, made a point of "reconstructing a uniquely female aesthetic heritage that she simply opposed to the dominantly male tradition represented by her father's *Dictionary of National Biography*, and that she was eventually to define as, at least in its inceptions, one of marginality" (GILBERT ; GUBAR, 2007, p. 215).

She moved to Bloomsbury after her father's demise in 1904 – her mother had passed away in 1895 – where she started the famous Bloomsbury Group alongside Vanessa, Thoby and Adrian – the other Stephens – and prominent Cambridge figures, such as Lytton Strachey, Saxon Sydney-Turner, John Maynard Keynes, Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, E. M. Forster, and Leonard Woolf. Among these fellow thinkers, she started experimenting with her sexuality and her writing.

All this was happening in the early twentieth century, in the gap between Miss Stephen's growing years and her marriage to Leonard, her Bloomsbury group collaborator, becoming the famous novelist Virginia Woolf.

However, Virginia's endeavour for organising the canon of woman writers up until the twentieth century amounted to a series of essays which pose the question of women's silences

in literature and history. Three essays seem to utterly demarcate the scope of her critical research on the subject of women and writing, and its conclusions, which are: "Women and Fiction", published in 1929; *A Room of One's own*, published the same year, which one might call the extended, or complete version of the aforementioned, or even a compilation of several essays which would later be published separately; and the paper which she read to the Women's Service League in 1942, "Professions for Women." Thus, these works shall be referred to recurrently all through the length of this study.

It is rather interesting that still in 1986 we find another woman asking herself: where is she? Hélène Cixous seems to address the same issue Virginia Woolf addresses.

So, where was she?

2.1 *A Room of One's Own* and *Écriture Féminine*

> *Now, this domination of the philosophic logos stems in large part from its power to reduce all others to the economy of the Same. The teleologically constructive project it takes on is always also a project of diversion, deflection, reduction of the other in the Same. And, in its greatest generality perhaps, from its power to eradicate the difference between the sexes in systems that are self-representative of a masculine subject.*
>
> Luce Irigaray

Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, among others, are some of the theorists that started the movement now known as *écriture féminine* in the early 1970's. They sought ways of inscribing the female body into language, ways of questioning logocentrism for it would be pervaded by phallocentrism and its somatophobia, hatred of the body[6]. Therefore, women had to find new paths of entering language. Irigaray explains that:

> Whence the necessity of "reopening" the figures of philosophical discourse – idea, substance, subject, transcendental subjectivity, absolute knowledge – in order to pry out of them what they borrowed that is feminine, from the feminine, to make them "render up" and give back what they owe the feminine. (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 74)

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[6] "Somatophobia" is a term used by the feminist scholar Elizabeth Spelman in her article "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views" in order to point out the origin of the pervasive degradation of femininity and the female body. The term translates to "hatred of the body". Briefly, Spelman asserts that, in ancient Greece, the nature of the relationship nurtured among men was considered sheerly philosophical, for it led to knowledge: knowledge was its aim; whereas the relationship between man and woman was debauched, for it tainted men's elevated ideals with the corruption of the flesh: sex, marriage, the house, et. al. (cf. SPELMAN, 1999).

The Empire of the Selfsame would be the eternal return to the male demand. Women would be products of this masculine *logos*, finding no way of expressing themselves within the field established by and for men. They would be forever grounded and riveted to their bodies, their material functions, turned aside at times as base beings at others as untouchable objects of the divine.

The result of this masculine realm of the intellect would be a perpetual imprisonment of women in the house, within the domestic sphere. Women would forever be the asset of and exchange currency to men. The only exit women had found up until that moment was mimicry, as Irigaray puts forth:

> Women's social inferiority is reinforced and complicated by the fact that woman does not have access to language, except through recourse to "masculine" systems of representation which disappropriate her from her relation to herself and to other women. The "feminine" is never to be identified except by and for the masculine, the reciprocal proposition not being "true". (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 74)

It is thus that these French theorists urge women to find their own grammar, their own accent:

> What is called for instead is an examination of the *operation of the "grammar"* of each figure of discourse, its syntactic laws or requirements, its imaginary configurations, its metaphoric networks, and also, of course, what it does not articulate at the level of utterance: *its silences.* (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 74)

Understanding the silences was exactly what drove Virginia Stephen to look for women throughout history. This search culminated in her extended essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), in which she ponders the same issues. She too finds out that the first thing a woman discovered when writing was that there was no sentence for her: "it was a sentence that was unsuited for a woman's use" (WOOLF, 1997, p. 84). Hence, Woolf started looking for the space for inscription of the female body within history around forty years before the French still recognised this as a challenge for woman writers.

Roughly, *A Room of One's Own* is written as journal entries of her research to write another essay, "Women and Fiction". This latter essay was published still in 1929, and she repeats herself in the assertion that women had no sentence of her own:

> But it is true that before a woman can write exactly as she wishes to write, she has many difficulties to face. To begin with, there is the technical difficulty – so simple, apparently; in reality, so baffling – that the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use. (WOOLF, 2009, p.32)

Where does the accent fall? Woolf asks herself. How can women seize what is to be focalised in women's writing? How can they initiate their own sentences? All these questions are hard to answer since women have always been the commodity that makes our capitalist society work, as Irigaray would later theorise. It was to soothe the exchange among men, so

explicitly performed in ancient times, that women's body became marketable: it is with his wife's father that a husband does business; the recipients of his deepest conversations are the husbands of his woman's friends, and thus the cycle goes still in many circles of our society. While it was openly practised and professed in ancient times, somatophobia[7] hides itself in the exchange of women in a capitalist society.

For a woman to start recognising her own position within logocentrism means that she will disrupt the hom(m)o-sexual monopoly that governs society, as Irigaray defines it:

> The law that orders our society is the exclusive valorization of men's needs/ desires, of exchanges among men. [...] The use of and traffic in women subtend and uphold the reign of masculine hom(m)o-sexuality, even while they maintain that hom(m)o-sexuality in speculations, with mirror games, identifications, and more or less rivalrous appropriations, which defer its real practice. (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 172)

Thus, patriarchal societies function in the mode of semblance, for exchanging women smoothes their own exchange; the exchange of each other with one another. Woman's body serves the State and perpetuates the somatophobia implictly depicted in man's return to himself. Without woman as commodity, had women not been marketed, we would fall into the "randomness of the animal kingdom", for any*body* would be marketable; including men's (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 170). Logically men's language superimposes women as marketable objects, leaving no space for their own language to arise. They are held outside the subject position, caught up in mirror games, always reflecting men's best Self.

Woolf identifies this game of semblance in *A Room*:

> Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. [...] Whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would seize to enlarge. That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so often are to men. And it serves to explain how restless they are under her criticism; how impossible it is for her to say to them this book is bad, this picture is feeble, or whatever it may be, without giving far more pain and rousing far more anger than a man would who gave the same criticism. For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgement, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is? (WOOLF, 1997, p. 41)

For a woman to enter language in the twentieth century, an entire system of social dynamics would have to be revised. Virginia Woolf identifies in both *A Room* and "Women and Fiction" that finding her own sentence is one of the challenges a woman would inevitably face when attempting to use her pen. She would have to manage her way out of the commodity status imposed upon her and uncover a space liable for the surfacing of her own voice.

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[7] See footnote number 6, p. 35.

Now it was high time that this woman demanded her position in society. Now she had left her house and worked for her country while men were in the Great War. Now they depended on her. But it is always hard to break new ground, mainly when this same ground has remained as solid as steel for thousands of years. In Cixous's words, "now it has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logocentrism and phallocentrism – bringing to light the fate dealt to woman, her burial" (CIXOUS, 1996, p. 65).

But had this been the first time women had ever tried to discontinue the old system? Had there not been any predecessors of this modern writer? Where had women been in the previous centuries?

2.2 Judith's Journey: the Elizabethan Woman

We are still living under the Empire of the Selfsame. The same masters dominate history from the beginning, inscribing on it the marks of their appropriating economy: history, as a sort of phallocentrism, hasn't moved except to repeat itself. "With a difference," as Joyce says. Always the same, with other clothes.

Hélène Cixous

Why have there been, historically, so few woman writers? Why were women not supposed to have the genius of Shakespeare in Elizabethan society when apparently every man who had a pen became a poet? Woolf wanders through her library picking up any book on women. She finds several references to wife-beating, arranged betrothals, imprisoning daughters, and the like. History, thus, helps her discharge the historian's claim that a woman is intellectually inferior to a man. Had he been "beaten and flung about the room" he would have certainly been as silent as she was (WOOLF, 1997, p. 48).

Woolf is intrigued, however, that women have "burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time" (WOOLF, 1997, p. 48), which means that they did not lack personality in fiction; hence, inspiration must have come from an elsewhere that is not exposed in the history books, we hear Woolf's thoughts:

> Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater (WOOLF, 1997, p. 49).

Nonetheless, reality imposes a much harder actuality than that of fiction on women, she continues, "she dominates the life of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger" (WOOLF, 1997, p. 49).

It is under such speculations that Woolf invites us to imagine what would have happened to a gifted girl, say Shakespeare's sister Judith, Woolf concocts, "since facts are so hard to come by" (WOOLF, 1997, p. 52). In a nutshell, she would not have learnt the classics as her brother did, but would smuggle some of his books and be scolded by her parents, who only wished her better, for they knew the conditions of women. She would be told to do household chores, and would burn whatever she wrote, for she could not be caught. Soon after she became a teenager she would be forcibly betrothed to a local boy. Since she abhorred marriage, she would cry out she would rather die. Judith would be beaten up by her crying father, who could not understand his daughter. Her poet's heart would drive her away to London, where she would never be admitted at the theatre:

> Men laughed in her face. The manager - a fat, loose-lipped man - guffawed. He bellowed something about poodles dancing and women acting - no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress. He hinted - you can imagine what. She could get no training in her craft. Could she even seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? Yet her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways. At last - for she was very young, oddly like Shakespeare the poet in her face, with the same grey eyes and rounded brows - at last Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so - who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body? - killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some crossroads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle. (WOOLF, 1997, p. 54)

It is thus in such beautiful imagery that Woolf approaches the core of her criticism: there can be no poetry, no literature, if there is no financial freedom. No girl in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could have managed to write for they were not allowed to have that which makes a poet's mind: freedom.

There are still many Judiths nowadays, Woolf would say, for as long as women depend on somebody's income, her mind is guided by that enslavement. Woolf was thus highly influenced by Marxism: an intellectual structure could only be built within an economic one. Without a room for herself and five hundred pounds a year, Judith had no chance but to succumb to her fate as woman by prescription: she would either serve the mainstream culture of betrothal or that subculture of prostitution.

Nevertheless, there is the poet. She existed. But she was forced into silence, for

> Genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people. It was not born in England among the Saxons and the Britons. It is not born today among the working classes. How, then, could it have been born among women whose work began, according to Professor Trevelyan, almost before they were out of the nursery, who were forced to it by their parents and held to it by all the power of law and custom? (WOOLF, 1997, p. 55)

But they did exist. Woolf goes even further to assert that whenever we hear of witches being set on fire, of those medieval ballads whose author is never to be discovered, or even of a mother, an important sister, we hear of woman poets or suppressed novelists (cf. Ibid.). They had always been there, ultimately silenced by our phallocentric history.

The solution is quite straightforward: take her away from the drawing room, give her a room of her own and five hundred pounds a year and Judith Shakespeare will come to life. Even for a twentieth-century woman such as Mrs. Woolf herself, who had to accept all kinds of minor occupations until she inherited five hundred a year, it was obvious that had it not been for that money, she would have been a new Judith, but one that served the post-war machine by taking up the jobs that men could not.

By having time to idle in comfort, which means time to think for themselves in their own rooms, women could shirk away the fear of questioning the predominant language. The bitterness and anger that a woman felt against the other sex, when performing as an outcast within that post-war society, would go away and she should start understanding the machine for what it is. As Woolf explains:

> Indeed, I thought, slipping the silver into my purse, it is remarkable, remembering the bitterness of those days, what a change of temper a fixed income will bring about. No force in the world can take from me my five hundred pounds. Food, house and clothing are mine for ever. Therefore not merely do effort and labour cease, but also hatred and bitterness. I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me. So imperceptibly I found myself adopting a new attitude towards the other half of the human race. (WOOLF, 1997, p. 44)

Now Woolf was ready to stare Judith in the face holding no grudge against men. She identifies history and literature as the machine which should be questioned. She starts grasping how to probe logocentrism, how to frame her own sentence, that sentence that was not allowed to Judith.

It was easier for Mrs. Woolf to fathom at the depth of women's silence. Now she was part of a tradition, of a body of woman writers, for if Judith could not find the accent to even attempt at breaking the silence, some of her successors did. They made room for their voice in literature.

2.3 And Room She Makes: The Victorian Writer

> *Masterpieces are not single and solitary births... Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done*

> *homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter – the valiant old woman who tied a bell to her bedstead in order that she might wake early and learn Greek. All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn [...] for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. It is she – shady and amorous as she was – who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you to-night: Earn five hundred a year by your wits.*
>
> Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's mission of unveiling the feminine canon in British literature finally gains some ground when she approaches the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Now women had found a space within literature for themselves. Basically, she concludes, it was the cheapness of paper that made it viable for them to start setting hand at work; Woolf again pays close attention to women's financial situation (WOOLF, 2007, p. 244).

But how did this woman write? How did she relate to literature and her circumstances? In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf is going to scrutinise these women's writings, mainly those of Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot: the four great novelists.

That all of them were *novelists* already tells us a lot of their reality: "less concentration is required" when writing a novel (WOOLF, 1997, p. 73). These women did not have a room of their own. They wrote among interruptions, while taking care of sick relatives, or teaching at low-paying returns. In fact, Woolf remarks that "Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting-paper" while writing in the common sitting room (WOOLF, 1997, p. 73). Therefore, woman had not been able to inhabit the body of the poet for she did not have the circumstances to engage her time in doing so.

These women wrote with no experience, for they could and would not be allowed to travel by themselves, to sit outside a cafe at night and observe pedestrians. They wrote from the inside, trying to frame the subject of their writing. Most of these women wrote in fear, or anger, for they could not take part in the outside world, as Charlotte Brontë's title heroine Jane Eyre complains:

> I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it and framed a humbler supplication; for change, stimulus: that petition, too, seemed swept off into vague space: "Then," I cried, half desperate, "grant me at least a new servitude!" (BRONTE, 2007, p. 693)

Although Charlotte Brontë may have been one of the most brilliant writers of the nineteenth century, Woolf asserts that this anger is precisely what hinders her writing. A good writer should write "without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching" (WOOLF, 1997, p. 74). Woolf asserts that one can only be wholly expressed if

one does not advocate one's own cause, if one nurtures the other, as Hélène Cixous puts forth while describing *écriture fémine*:

> Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me – the other that I am and am not, that don't know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me alive – that tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me, who? (CIXOUS, 1996, p.86)

Écriture féminine, then, is recognising the ability to nurture, to let the Other stem from one's mind as if it were a womb. This way, you write advocating for all and for none, for yourself and for whomever you are not. Those who let Others pervade their literature and suffuse their literary bodies will be those who will be wholly expressed through their work, both Woolf and Cixous seem to imply.

This ability is what makes William Shakespeare the Bard of so many generations past and many to come in both critics' opinions as well:

> There was that being-of-a-thousand-beings called Shakespeare. I lived all the characters of his worlds: because they are always either alive or dead, because life and death are not separated by any pretense, because all is stunningly joined to nothing, affirmation to no, because, from one to the next, there is only one kiss, one phrase of bliss or tragedy, because every place is either abyss or summit, with nothing flat, soft, temperate. There man turns into woman, woman into man – a slaveless world: there are villains, powers of death. All the living are great, more than human. (CIXOUS, 1996, p. 98)

> For though we say that we know nothing about Shakespeare's state of mind, even as we say that, we are saying something about Shakespeare's state of mind. The reason perhaps that we know so little about Shakespeare [...] is that his grudges and spites and antipathies are hidden from us. [...] All desire to protest, to preach, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some hardship and grievance was fired out of him and consumed. Therefore, his poetry flows from him free, unimpeded. If ever a human being got his work expressed completely, it was Shakespeare. If ever a mind was incandescent, unimpeded, [...] it was Shakespeare's mind. (WOOLF, 1997, p. 63)
> One must turn to Shakespeare then, for Shakespeare was androgynous. (ibid., p. 112)

Écriture feminine is thus a metaphor for great literature; a space that nurtures otherness, that promotes difference. There is no male or female demand upon this space: writers suffuse their literary bodies with the imaginary bodies of others. It is a slaveless and androgynous world indeed.

However, how could a woman frame something writable from her routine without letting anger, bitterness, and revolt surface in her work? For a woman in the nineteenth century did not have the incentives to write, and the authority to do so, that playwrights did in the Elizabethan society. Those women had to fight for their space in literature, they had to impose their presence in the literary scenario and, for writing solely novels, they were deemed inferior. They were forcing their way into the profession of a writer, and still they had to do it showing no fear, no anger, no hatred?

Virginia Woolf reckoned so. And so she asserts that the only way out was by exercising their ability to laugh. There was no way of coping with the masculine sentence, the

masculine *logos*, without experiencing laughter, for Woolf. So did Austen, and so she found her sentence:

> Jane Austen looked at it and laughed at it and devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it. Thus, with less genius for writing than Charlotte Brontë, she got infinitely more said. Indeed, since freedom and fullness of expression are of the essence of art, such a lack of tradition, such scarcity and inadequacy of tools, must have told enormously upon the writing of women. (WOOLF, 1997, p. 84)

These women had thus to recur to laughter in order to get expressed through their art, for people to grasp the whole of their work as artists. As Woolf elucidates, these women had no firm tradition of woman writers, they did not get a proper education, they could and would not write philosophical treatises, poetry, and critical essays. Woolf's predecessors had to own the novel, conquer their space, so Mrs. Woolf herself could write what she came to write.

Laughter made Austen evade the fear of her patriarchal society. She did not write in hatred, or in pain, or resentful of the other sex and her condition. Unlike Austen, Charlotte Brontë, in Woolf's opinion, held and exposed her grudge against all the adversities in the way of a woman writer. Such disparity of perspectives on the masculine *logos* made the former transcend as a writer and the latter stain her work with her private sorrows, Woolf argues.

In fact, when discussing the origins of the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin clarifies that it was precisely the novel's ability to laugh at the epic that had it establish itself as a major genre in literature. In better words, it is by laughing at its own subject matter, what Bakhtin calls "reality", instead of heightening it to an elevated status which detaches it from the mundane, that the novel finds its own place within the literary *topos*, a space of its own:

> It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. [...] Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Familiarization of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and indispensible step in making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilization. (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 23)

And laugh into literature did Jane Austen. Her depiction of women's race for marriage, family ties, and the functioning of a house decentred literature from the male realm. To quote Bakhtin, her experience as a writer demolished "fear and piety". It is in this sense that Woolf appoints Austen as that who got "more said". Once one does not aim at debunking or heightening anything, one finds it easier to cope with one's own reality; one laughs. By not preaching in favour of herself, Austen preached against the established literary sentence and claimed a space in which writing about the routine of a woman, her sorrows and joys, was too the subject matter of a good novel. Thus she inaugurates, still under Woolf's perspective, a space for the feminine.

However, neither Brontë nor Austen consolidated their work when it comes to the progression of literature. They did not find the means to move on to poetry or criticism, for something still held them in the position of the other writer: the Angel in the House. These first forerunners could not escape their reality of woman as body. They were caught in the eye of the hurricane, living along the controlling image – or should we call it controlling agency – of the queen.

Woolf notes in *A Room* that still in her time, the twentieth century, few women had been able to escape that celestial ghost. How is woman to write poetic novels, critical essays, or finally own the body of the poet when her main function is to please?

2.4 Mad Writers: The Demons in the House

> *Neurotics are that class of people, naturally rebellious, with whom the pressure of cultural demands succeeds only in an apparent suppression of their instincts, one which becomes ever less and less effective. Consequently their co-operation in civilized life is maintained only by means of great expenditure of energy, combined with inner impoverishment, and at times it has to be suspended altogether during periods of illness. I have, however, described the neuroses as the "negative" of the perversions, because in the neuroses the perverse tendencies come to expression from the unconscious part of the mind, after the repression, and because they contain the same tendencies in a state of repression that manifest perverts exhibit.*
>
> Sigmund Freud

Women's sexuality was a buzzword in the twentieth century, and now Woolf's journey should inevitably tackle her own time, for her heritage had been thoroughly researched and scrutinised in both *A Room* and "Women and Fiction". Now she had a tradition to fall back on. Now progress was to be sought.

One might consider Freudian ideas of what "instincts", or more correctly pulsations/ impulses, constitute in a human being rather empowering towards women, since he establishes a general truth for every single human being: be it a man or a woman, if one lives he or she is driven by their "instincts", he or she is a neurotic (FREUD, 1997, p. 14).

The word neurotic, however, has left the space of psychoanalysis and roams through the collective *imaginarium* of our society. It has become a synonym to madness in most cases, regardless of its supposedly methodical origin. Perhaps, and this statement might be a highly

controversial one, we already foresee in Freud's following excerpt from *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* a hint of how culturally tainted this lexical term would become;

> Quite often in one family the brother will be sexually perverted, while the sister, who as a woman is endowed with a weaker sexual instinct, becomes a neurotic – one whose symptoms, however, express the same tendencies as the perversion of the brother, who has a more active sexual impulse. (FREUD, 1997, p. 16)

A great deal of issues might be discussed as to why Freud chooses the categories men and women would develop from then on. Nevertheless, my intention is not to discuss the apparently physical/mental – as opposed to cultural – mechanism that leads to such predicaments. It is, however, minimally to highlight how discrepant the words have become when it comes to political correctness and social acceptance, and how women to come would be forever haunted by the image of the neurotic – here used as laymen do – or of the madwoman as soon as they expressed an opinion of their own. Here we clearly notice logocentrism and phallocentrism side by side, reinforcing one another in the maintenance of the masculine language.

All women who did not comply with the rigid boundaries drawn by society were mad – the witches; the rest-cure patients; the prisoners in the attic; and evidently, their modern substitutes: woman writers. These women represented the Demon in the house, for they did not follow Coventry Patmore's definition of the self-effacing femininity established through his already mentioned poem "Angel in the House"[8] as the archetypical identity for a Victorian woman.

The madwoman or, colloquially, the neurotic woman, has been established, hence, as the double of the "Angel in The House;" this selfless, ever pleasing, compliant and voiceless woman. She is the duplicated image of this Angel, one in which all the opposite behaviours are deposited – thus a self-seeking, ever upsetting, riotous and loud woman. While the Angel worships her husband and trusts him to guide her blindly into the future, the Demon longs for lusty encounters with the unknown, as Madame Bovary. The Demon plots against marriage and profits from its silences, such as the famous Victorian anti-heroine Lady Audley in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's very popular *Lady Audley's Secret*. She dances the tarantella and discovers her own flesh, as the infamous Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House*.

She was the one who haunted these Angels throughout the Victorian Age, and doubtlessly much longer than that, as the guaranteed reminder of what a fallen woman could, and would, become. Victorian women had an abundance of examples in fiction to underscore the threat that once mad, or once you gave voice to your instincts and fulfilled your sexuality

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[8] See footnote number 2, p. 22.

by not repeating the same pattern of the silent Angel, you would either die or be locked in an institution, if not in your own attic – the same course of the aforementioned literary women, from Ophelia to Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*.

Paradoxically, these women lived, or else experienced life, through these deviant heroines. They betrayed their husbands alongside Emma Bovary, abhorring and relishing her transgressions. Thus, one could argue that Virginia Woolf's mission statement of grabbing the angel "by the throat," as she puts it, and killing it, in her essay "Profession for Women", is the result of an entire century of veiled transgression (WOOLF, 2007, p. 245). One might also conclude that, since women's discourse had always been silence itself, an element that worked "alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies" (FOUCAULT, 1970, p. 27), Woolf starts the twentieth century with a jolt on the door long left ajar: women now most definitely had a voice. They were killers.

It is upon this silenced legacy left by her self-effacing Victorian foremothers, Patmore's Angels and the four great novelists, that Woolf builds the foundation of the new successful woman writer: the Angel must be killed in order for her to exist, all writers should become its double, the Demon. Hence, being a woman writer for Virginia Woolf – a writer haunted by the ghost of an Angel – meant being a professional transgressor, a deliberate madwoman and accurate killer of an oppressive past, as she explicitly puts forth in "Professions for Women":

> It was she [the Angel in the House] who used to come between me and my pen when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. (…) She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draft she sat in it – in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with minds and wishes of others. (WOOLF, 2007, p. 245)

How could she, that woman who "preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others", have seized poetry? Or Criticism, for that sake? There was no room for Angels anymore; only for murderers – for Demons. These Demons, as negative projections of the Angel, have an intrinsic drive for death, contrasted to the life-affirming position of the Angel. It is not surprising, in a few lines, that Ophelia commits suicide, that Bertha Mason burns the house down, or that Emma Bovary and even Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* die such ambivalent deaths, leaving large leeway for discussions on whether their illnesses represent their will for something else that would not be permitted in the world of the living.

By transforming transgression into the basis of "normal" writing, Woolf twists – or laughs – madness into the cornerstone of her new outspoken self as a writer. She deliberately

chooses the freed state of mind and unchained speech pertaining to hysteric patients: woman writers must kill in order to become independent subjects; they must not be constituted; they must not sacrifice themselves daily – all in opposition to that woman in the poem. Rebellion and, consequently, madness grow to be mandatory in order for the individual to subjectify as a woman writer.

In fact, in a letter to composer Ethel Smyth, Virginia hints directly at this state of mind of the madwoman: "As an experience, madness is terrific I can assure you... [I]n its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere driblets as sanity does" (GILBERT ; GUBAR, 2007, p. 213).

These new Demons in the House, as I chose to call them, should adhere to the role of the once locked Madwoman in the Attic. They should inhabit the body of Bertha Mason, the Other woman in *Jane Eyre*. They should enter the literary *logos* as those who are alienated from the real world of masculine language, nurturing an elsewhere. They should find a way to laugh at it; only this time laughter should be serious. Laughter should now lead to poetry, to criticism, and to everything that was once deemed impossible for a woman.

Although Woolf condemned Charlotte Brontë for her aggressiveness, for her violent language towards her own emotional scars, now in "Profession for Women", thirteen years after the publication of *A Room,* she urges her fellow writers to murder this Angel, to jump at their throats: "I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me" (WOOLF, 2007, p. 245).

I am quite certain that along these lines Woolf disclaims any charge against Charlotte Brontë, for anger is a space of nurturing when one is fighting a battle that involves so many lives – when so much lies dependent on this anger. This bitterness laughs, for it questions the fear inscribed in the female body. It bathes these bodies with power. It gives women whole bodies. Both writers prove that criticism may revel in art, or that art may revel in criticism, as long as imagination pervades the critical scene.

Virginia Woolf discloses a new mirror for new runners, the Demons in the House. She does not speak only to British women in the early twentieth century, but to every woman coming afterwards, everywhere around the world, of any colour, religion, sexual orientation and/or ethnicity. Killing the Angel is a cornerstone to the decentring of power, without which the feminine as the space for creation, as the nurturing of the Other, a metaphor for this sexless space that is great literature, comes to a halt. She traces the homicidal track woman

writers must tread in order to have a mind and a body of their own, their life depending upon this Angel's death.

On no account can a woman writer ever again let herself hear the Angel say:

> My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure. (WOOLF, 2007, p. 245)

Not anymore. Now she has got to kill in order to find a place of her own; a voice of her own; a literature that allows a mind of her own.

But has Virginia Woolf's pledge of survival been heard? Has her cohort in the battle against this Angel succeeded in, or even made an attempt at, killing this long established superego? Have the new woman writers, elsewhere, accepted their place in society as the Demons and fought the battle for blood?

THREE

I pulled up a chair opposite her at the table and unfolded a napkin. We didn't speak, but sat there, in a close, sisterly silence, until the gong for supper sounded down the hall.

Sylvia Plath

3. *THE BELL JAR*: SYLVIA PLATH, THE KILLER

'Neurotic, ha!' I let out a scornful laugh. 'If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth from one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days.'

Sylvia Plath

Twenty-two years after Woolf's death, in 1963, a novel called *The Bell Jar* was published by a new-fangled woman writer whose name was rather paradoxical in relation to the cynical content of her book: Victoria.

It turns out "Victoria Lucas" was Sylvia Plath's pseudonym for this exceedingly contentious story. As Caroline King Barnard points out, she might have used such approach in order to conceal her identity, given the highly personal material she uses (1978, p. 24).

Barnard classifies the book as a confessional novel, for most of the characters and situations have counterparts in Plath's life, who was going through a very turbulent period and wanted to revisit her youth in an attempt "to connect knowledge with experience, past with present and future, and desire with reality" (1978, p. 24).

Such process led to Plath's seminal poetry collection *Ariel*, her only novel *The Bell Jar*, and her premature death still in 1963.

Whether her life did inspire her art – an undeniable trait after the publication of her journals – shall not play an important role in our reading of *The Bell Jar*. What is of utmost importance, however, is how Plath accepts the role of the neurotic Demon in the House and writes a book in order to undermine social expectations, portraying the descent of a "normal" young woman into illuminating madness.

It is her response to the mission established by Virginia Woolf for the modern woman writer that intrigues this study. Sylvia Plath writes to kill.

3.1 Longing for Deviance: The Angel and the *Femme Fatale*

> *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.... I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and as 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.*
>
> Sylvia Plath

We meet Esther Greenwood, Plath's heroine, right after she has been awarded a scholarship to work as a temporary editor apprentice for a famous magazine in New York. What would be the most rewarding period of any girl's life in 1950's America becomes a rather disturbing period for Miss Greenwood, for she finds herself unable to identify her own space along the paths exposed to her. She sees the ripe figs of success hitting the ground while she is unable to seize them. The poet, the editor, the wife, and the mother, all seem to crumble before her. Esther fails to assert her position.

In *The Bell Jar*, it becomes clear that there are two major roles always crashing against each other, hindering Esther Greenwood's subjection. The same roles that haunted the essayist Virginia Woolf.

The first one is the Angel-in-the-House ideal, inherited from the Victorian Period and depicted in Mrs. Greenwood, Mrs. Willard and primarily in Betsy – her scholarship friend who always seems willing to rescue her from Doreen's influence. Nonetheless, these angels in *The Bell Jar* are not restricted to the family sphere, as they were in the nineteenth century; they study, travel, and work. Has the Angel died?

As Foucault underscores, power works by making concessions and generating new rules in order to standardise even transgression. Thus, it keeps on profiting from social dynamics. This "mechanics of power," as he names such a mechanism, disciplines bodies by always turning them into profitable objects for the State. Hence, he concludes that our bodies have always been under constant disciplinary actions. These actions form "a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour" (FOUCAULT, 1984a, p. 182). Henceforth, docile bodies are produced and what had once been considered deviance – such as women at work – is legitimated.

It is not surprising that in the novel Esther is constantly reminded by her mother, whom she loathes clearly due to her compliance with and ignorance of such rules, of how unstable it is to be a poet. Mrs. Greenwood incentivises her to learn shorthand in order to become a secretary. Esther soon realises that she is indeed allowed to have a profession, but not any. She must always remain the Other sex subjugated to men's intellectual superiority in the outside world.

These new twentieth-century Angels in the novel are also very concerned about fashion and style. Esther seems appalled when she learns that universities encouraged students to wear dresses which matched their pocket books. Fashion-awareness, then, works as another way of depriving these Angels: one might go to school, as long as one has the right clothes (PLATH, 1999, p. 5).

It is precisely at the dawn of the nineteenth century that Foucault sees the transition from a physics of power – in which the old dichotomy of the body of the condemned *versus* the body of the monarch regulated the revenge of a Unitarian power over an individual body – to a microphysics of power – in which each social body serves both as object and subject of surveillance. This new mechanism, this microphysics, is a structure of panoptic regulation that continually restrains bodies and forces them to restrain others. As Foucault asserts, these regulations form "homogeneous circuits that can be carried everywhere, and continuously, until the finer grain of the social body" (2005a, p. 68).[9] Therefore, these modern Angels force newcomers to bow to their legitimacy. Esther Greenwood feels forced into a model when confronted with her own Otherness.

Another important trait of this new Angel is that she is still to remain a virgin until her wedding night. Esther seems to desire sexual freedom, or else, sexual control over her life. Nevertheless, she is relentlessly recalled to the importance of virginity, mainly through her mother's pamphlets on the subject.

Foucault portrays power as always alluring. It generates a desire to reproduce the discourse of the winners, the colonisers (FOUCAULT, 1984b, p. 183). It is this desire that hitherto has Esther see herself among these girls and be both attracted to and repelled by their Oneness. On the one hand, she realises it would be copiously easier if she could just play the game and let herself be trained and disciplined. On the other, as she confesses quite early in the novel, she feels instantly drawn by another paramount character. This latter character is the one that represents our second major role: Doreen, the *femme fatale*.

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[9] My translation.

"Doreen singled me out right away. She made me feel I was that much sharper than the others," she says (PLATH, 1999, p. 5). Doreen represents the deviant young girl archetype. She does not bother about deadlines, is sexually active and is always mocking Betsy, whom she calls "Pollyana Cowgirl," as though she were aware of Esther's internal conflict and wanted to ridicule her opponent.

Esther identifies with the image of the eroticised *femme fatale*. She did not believe she would be able to wait around for a man, such as Buddy Willard, who pretended to comply with the rules when he had already been sexually initiated, and remain a virgin. She grasps the dynamics involving premarital sex and concludes marriage is not for her:

> That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket. (PLATH, 1999, p. 88)

She could not be the inexperienced Other subjected to a man's knowledge. Bearing this in mind, she makes a decision and traces a fulfilling life of transgression for herself: "I decided I would put off the novel until I had gone to Europe and had a lover, and that I would never learn a word of shorthand. If I never learned shorthand I would never have to use it" (PLATH, 1999, p. 129).

However incisive this new resolution may sound, readers are still haunted by the image of a more innocent Esther at the beginning of the novel, who introduced herself by stating her inability to fulfil either role. Being an Angel was not feasible, for she could not bear the hypocrisy of the double standard regarding men's and women's sexuality.

At the same time, she finds herself restrained by her background and unable to cross the line drawn a century before her:

> … I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should anymore. This made me feel sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired. (PLATH, 1999, p. 31)

Esther defines this oppression clearly when she finds herself unable to pick an item that represented who she was, or would like to be in the future, for a photo shoot, one of her last assignments working for the fashion magazine in New York. She states that she feels as if she were trapped by a bell jar, one that never stopped following her: "wherever I sat – on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok – I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (PLATH, 1999, p. 195).

It is rather interesting to read this bell jar as a representation of the set of regulations governing our social bodies exposed by Foucault, and the Angel that continuously haunted

Virginia Woolf. Sylvia Plath's bell jar parallels those millenary rules under disguise that model us into compliance and sameness. These rules were so internalised that Esther stood no chance against them. She could perform neither as One nor as Other; neither as Angel nor as Demon. Foucault puts forth quite an interesting clarification of these power relations:

> […] the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; […]
> [The soul] is born rather out of methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint. This real, noncorporal soul is not a substance; it is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of knowledge, the machinery by which the power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge, and knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of this power. (…) The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body. (FOUCAULT, 1984a, p. 173, 177)

Esther discovers this prison floating aloft her head everywhere she goes, working its power on her docile body, caging her in the shape of an overachieving student whose intellectual success should be immediately dropped as soon as she graduated, either to follow in the footsteps of her mother, becoming the perfect mother/wife stereotype, or to work for a man as a secretary, since writing was too difficult for a woman to depend on. Thus, the bell jar represents "the effect and instrument of a political anatomy" that Foucault refers to; it is this social soul imprisoning her body; it is precisely what protects her ornamental features and assures her Angel status.

The soul is the space where the regulations of power are inscribed. Virginia Woolf identifies this soul as the Angel, and Sylvia Plath's metaphor gives depth to this Angel: it is a bell jar, i.e. a concave container made of glass, usually used for experimental purposes, whose shape and transparency allow constant observance on the experimenter's part, or, in Foucault's words, they allow surveillance. Hence, the bell-jar image deftly parallels the constant work power operates upon our bodies. It is precisely this panoptic power that pervades society floating unseen above Esther, demarcating its territory.

How is a young woman supposed to fall into being when she cannot choose a path for herself? Esther refuses to be modelled into the mass; even so, she cannot live a life of transgression either. She is constantly trying to cleanse herself of her "dirty thoughts," as she tirelessly repeats when confronted by her restless nature.

It is at this moment that Sylvia Plath's heroine seems to subconsciously determine that the only way out of the bell jar is through death of something. Her first attempt to kill the ideal, the Angel, is performed on her sexuality: she must kill virginity. However, she constantly fails, for her disciplined body cannot go through with it: it runs. One evening, after

another unsuccessful attempt at killing the Angel by killing her virginity, she goes back to the hotel in New York and gets rid of her past, plunging into a journey out of her-*self*. She starts feeding her wardrobe to the wind, piece by piece, describing her slow descent into the real world of Woolfian madness.

Esther realises that madness is liberating. It is not attributed by the other any further; this madness comes from within. Here she embraces her position in Woolf's cohort and starts going against society's regulative soul. But how can one obliterate the bell jar when it constitutes one's own soul?

3.2 Tearing at the Body: The Power of Death

To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.

Sylvia Plath

Esther Greenwood, henceforth, represents the fallen Angel in search of a new identity of her own. She establishes herself as an outsider from the moment she decides to inhabit the battlefield between the Angel and the *femme fatale*, as if it were the only way of escaping from the bell jar.

Esther shows an inability to situate herself, to desire, to belong; or even to refuse. It is this lack of possibility in the world experienced as a bad dream that drives her into the space of hallucinations of the abject body, as Julia Kristeva underscores:

> Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 2)

This reading of abjection invites a sociopolitical merger of Foucault's power relations and Freud's inner divisions of the self, which Kristeva explores. The abject body becomes a certain ego unable to comply with its superego; a certain body unable to reside within the limited borders of the soul.

What happens to this body that fails to shift from the imaginary to the symbolic? How is this being, defined neither as an object nor as a subject, to enter language and achieve bodily integrity?

From the moment Esther arrives back from New York, after having faced her possibilities of selves portrayed in Doreen and Betsy, she starts a journey aiming at such answers. Up until this point, nothing had ever made her feel as if she were a human being besides the numbness of a hot bath. Her identity had been under a negative construction: nothing she absorbed had ever come from pleasure, but from pain. This is quite clear when she is food poisoned and, after surviving what might be called a semi-coma, feels "purged and ready for a new life" (PLATH, 1999, p. 50).

As Esther sinks into madness, which in her case arises from knowledge of her abject state, she starts, rather paradoxically, giving up her plans of transgression. She feels unable to be the person she wants to be. She gives up the novel she wanted to write, the summer courses she wanted to attend, the lover she would take on and Europe. She becomes nothing and is still trapped in the space of hallucinations.

It is under this negative construction of her identity that, having been invited to an afternoon at the beach, Esther swims far out into deep waters and seems unable to return. In desperation for an answer, feeling she is about to succumb, she hears her heart thumping like a secret voice: "I am, I am, I am" (PLATH, 1999, p. 166).

Her heart thus elucidates her line of attack: she *was* when she *was not*; she could only be a subject when she was on the verge of dying. The heroine understands the space in which being nothing was acceptable: death. She lands at the heart of the Demon and identifies with its drive for killing. In an attempt to fathom at the depth of her discovery, she experiments death upon arriving home:

> I crawled between the mattress and the padded bedstead and let the mattress fall across me like a tombstone. It felt dark and safe under there, but the mattress was not heavy enough. I needed about a ton more weight to make me sleep. (PLATH, 1999, p. 130 – 131)

It is at the zenith of her madness, or awareness of no fulfilling roles for herself, that Esther decides to go against her body. She cannot see the border between body and soul anymore; the Angel is so ingrained that it becomes matter. Esther seems to find room for her own voice in the role of the murderer of this Angel – even if that meant going against her own body.

Esther starts masking her madness while she architectures the perfect way of killing her body. While on the outside she wittingly plays the part of a young ingenious woman who is just weary of being constantly studying, and thus taking a break at home, she starts fighting her own material existence in order to achieve subjection, only to find that this embodied soul is not passive whatsoever: "[...] I saw that my body had all sorts of little tricks, such as

making my hands go limp at the crucial second, which would save it, time and again, whereas if I had the whole say, I would be dead in a flash" (PLATH, 1999, p. 167).

By this time, Esther has completely dissociated her-*self* from her body. She is not the matter she dwells in, for if she were, that matter would not exist; it would have fallen into nonexistence by her own hands had she not been trapped into a docile body, escaping any sublimating discourse.

Death of the body becomes central to Esther's rehabilitation process, and this is what we shall discuss further, dialoguing with Julia Kristeva. Her going against her body, culminating in her double, Joan, and her unresolved sexuality will constitute a pristine way out of passiveness and into life itself.

Thus, death becomes life. Should a "mad" writer, a Demon in the House, not conclude so?

3.3 Denying the Cadaver: the deformed Body

> *The first – killing the Angel in the House – I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has ever solved it yet.*
> Virginia Woolf

Esther seems to have won the battle against this time-honoured Angel as soon as she accepts her place as a madwoman, or a Demon in the House, machinating her way out of the bell jar through death.

Nonetheless, a new ordeal presents itself before her, notwithstanding her acute awareness of her goal. She is neither able to experience life through her body, for it is docile, as we have already elucidated; nor is she able to kill it. It is hoping that she might win this battle that Esther finally tricks her body into ingesting a bottle of sleeping pills, crawls into a hole in the basement and buries her old self to fall into the shadow of being: death.

Even in the darkness of this hiatus between her-*self* and the world, her body still finds ways of showing its superiority. It awakens her unconsciousness to taunt her temporary sightlessness: "you'll marry a nice blind man some day," she hears it say (PLATH, 1999, p.

180). After a week looking for her, Esther's mother brings her back to life. She brings her back into the bell jar as she was having the most important battle of her existence. Esther had spent a week buried in her own basement when her mother discovers her half-dead decayed body.

Esther revives but still desires death. However, it is her deformed body that produces the first step into subjection in the world of the living, by provoking what Kristeva defines as the basis of existence: fear. Esther fears the reflection of her shaved, stitched, swollen body in the mirror. Kristeva highlights that the corpse, not death, is the first repression on which being is based. One must refuse the dead body violently, as if by vomiting at the sight of excrement, in order to be. Thus, it is the fear of becoming that dead body that propels human beings towards subjection (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 6).

Esther had hitherto based her existence on refusing life; suicide had been her *jouissance* up until that point. By confronting her own corpse – here present in the reflection of her deformed body in the mirror, after she is taken to the hospital for trying to kill herself – Esther dislocates her "I", as Kristeva expounds:

> A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death – a flat encephalograph for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. (KRISTEVA, 1982, p.3)

Kristeva situates the cadaver as what living beings must constantly deny in order to live since it signifies the border of existence, the place where I cease to be and which allows me to be what I despise: dung, excrement, filth. Therefore, she concludes that it is not "I" who expels, but "'I' is expelled." The corpse invades the world of the self, displacing "I", since the image reinforces the idea that one cannot *be* and *not be* at the same time.

Esther Greenwood had based her subjection on the death of her own body, but now, confronted by her own corpse, she cannot accept the inevitable connection between death and the cadaver – the dematerialization of her-*self*, transforming thought into nothingness. Being nothing here seems to strike the heroine as the permanent inexistence of *jouissance*, for there is not an "I" that rejoices in the absence anymore: she had planned to boast over the death of the Angel but now realises there will not be a subject that boasts after her body becomes filth.

It is precisely this forceful invasion of the utmost form of abjection that thrusts her into a journey of self-discovery.

Esther agrees to be institutionalised, and from the moment she enters the asylum she is to spend time until her recovery, her goal of reaching subjection through death starts to alter within itself to other possibilities. She starts analysing her fellow patients in "sisterly silence," introspectively, pondering unconsciously on the steps that would lead to subjection without having to face her own cadaver again.

She grasps what ought to be killed; the only remaining query is how.

3.4 Rising to Death: Esther's Double

> *It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at.*
> Sylvia Plath

On the day Esther is being moved to a better house at the asylum, which meant recovery was imminent, she is surprised to find "an old friend" living in the room next to hers: Joan. Esther's first remark on Joan, as she enters her friend's room to find her happily waiting for her, is that "she sounded out of breath, as if she had been running a long, long distance and only just come to a halt" (PLATH, 1999, p. 204).

This comment sounds misallocated since readers are acknowledged of Joan's waiting peacefully in the room for Esther to go in beforehand. What seems to be the running here is the race from abstract to concrete, towards materialising; towards rising to death as Esther's double on the feasible grounds of madness – a greatly expected halt.

Joan, a character that seems to be wittily conceived in the hubbub of Esther's mind, presents herself as an exact copy of Esther. Readers are intrigued when they discover that Joan has even dated Buddy Willard, the same boy Esther left due to his hypocritical belief in a double sexual standard regarding men and women. In brief, Joan embodies Esther's regulative soul, as we shall bring to light. She is the constituted old self that has now been cut away from the heroine's body, allowing her to experience rehabilitation wholly; but still under close surveillance.

In his psychoanalytical study *The Double* (1979), Otto Rank describes duplication as an attempt to understand the relationship between oneself and their shadow. It is in the double that "man's relation to himself – and the fateful disturbance of this relation – [find an]

imaginative representation" (RANK, 1979, p. 7). Rank asserts that duplication usually occurs when one is possessed by an acute awareness of guilt, and, for love of oneself, personifies this guilt in the form of a double that represents his bad self. Thus, duplication is inextricably intertwined with narcissism, with one's love for oneself. The double is, briefly, a projection of despised characteristics, which usually promote contempt for oneself, to another fictional body. By doing so, one can maintain one's love of oneself untainted. Whatever is bad is of the double's responsibility.

Esther Greenwood, however, seems to exclude the good. While Rank argues that the double serves his projector in his endeavour for Oneness, Plath uses the double to exonerate her heroine from what was supposedly good behaviour for a young woman in the 50's. Here we see the same movement as that of the Angel and the Demon: the former represents what is good, while the latter personifies evil, the bad. Nonetheless, here it is precisely deviance that is aimed at. The bad projects the good outwards – the Demon urges the body to duplicate so that the Angel be killed.

As Esther duplicates herself, she is sanctioned the opportunity to start understanding her own role. She observes Joan's successful journey in the asylum, soaring by means of complying with the rules; mingling with the upper class girls from the best houses; haunting her with the image of a once compliant Esther herself. Joan is the one who is going to struggle to maintain the sanctity of the Angel ideal while Esther is going to plunge into worldliness.

Therefore, we see in Sylvia Plath's use of the double an inversion of Rank's definition. Esther does not transfer to Joan the responsibility of bad deeds. Quite the reverse, she transfers compliance so she can at last transgress and profane the Angel in the House ideal. By producing a different body to personify her oppressive past, Esther can finally occupy a space in the world. The Demon stays within and the Angel is expelled, thus the death of her soul is now completely detached from her own body.

When Esther gets upgraded to Belsize, the last house before going home, she once again finds herself face to face with her double. Hence, she starts comprehending the verve of fear transferring her oppressive soul into Joan's body. As she ponders upon the dynamics involving both of them, she hints directly at what is being discussed:

> Joan had walk privileges. Joan had shopping privileges. Joan had town privileges. I gathered all my news of Joan into a little, bitter heap, though I received it with surface gladness. Joan was the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me. Perhaps Joan would be gone when I got to Belsize. (PLATH, 1999, p. 216)

While Joan thrives among these new women at Belsize, Esther feels dislocated. She is not one of them. She does not belong, and neither does she want to. However, it is this surface gladness mentioned above that moves her onwards, going past the shock treatments and finding her true self among those trapped in the bell jar. Esther realises Joan has come up for a reason:

> Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own. Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose. (PLATH, 1999, p. 231)

Joan represented her past, everything she wanted to kill; the embodied Foucaultian soul; Virginia Woolf's Angel. Joan was part of the foundation composing the bell jar. By tearing Joan away from her own body and materialising her wry existence on the outside, Esther finally starts seeing the cracks on the bell jar. Now she can be the killer of her-*self* and still live.

3.5 Shattering the Bell Jar - the Body Lives, the Soul Dies

> *It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had dispatched her.*
>
> Virginia Woolf

Esther had been right when she supposed Joan would have already been gone by the time she got to Belsize. It was not long after she moved in for Joan to announce her moving out. It is while she lacks Joan's constant reflection that Esther attempts at killing the first hindrance in her way towards becoming an independent subject: her virginity.

Esther could not transgress to this extent while the bell jar was coming from within; however, now that it had been projected outside through Joan's materialisation, she could find a suitable man to help her kill this first characteristic of the Angel. Since she dated Buddy Willard she had been waiting for the chance to fulfil this first murder: "Ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck," she bitterly declares (PLATH, 1999, p. 240).

Esther knows that this step will place her among those she finally feels free to identify with. Her inner self urged she do it in order to survive. Therefore, upon finding Irwin, a young professor who fulfilled all the criteria she had envisaged to screen men, she plunges into this first transgression.

It is right after having transgressed that Esther finally designates borders, placing herself in the world: "I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition" (PLATH, 1999, p. 242). Esther finally fits the army of transgressors; she becomes One through her Otherness. Here we see that Plath places her heroine in the cohort that had been plotted by her predecessor, Virginia Woolf: Esther is now a Demon in the House, she will grab the Angel by the throat and kill it.

In spite of her delight by having finally got her bearings, Esther starts haemorrhaging right after intercourse. It is as if her soul were punishing her body for having transgressed. Therefore, Esther seeks Joan's help and both of them go to the hospital together: body and soul are again reunited equally metaphorically and physically.

Immediately after Esther's first accomplishment as a new independent being, Joan reverts to her old dwelling; she goes back to the asylum. Nevertheless, Esther is stronger this time, for she is now part of a tradition, she is not a dislocated, disciplined body anymore.

It is in the light of this new belonging self that Esther finally terminates the second, and last, most important impediment to her experience as a body: Joan. As Joan hangs herself, Esther dissociates society and its wry influence upon her body from her subjection. Through Joan she hangs her old best self.

Otto Rank indeed points out that suicide in the double is a rather recurrent image in literature, for it is the only way of isolating the unwanted everlastingly:

> The frequent slaying of the double, through which the hero seeks to protect himself permanently from the pursuits of his self, is really a suicidal act. It is, to be sure, in the painless form of slaying a different ego: an unconscious illusion of the splitting-off of a bad, culpable ego – a separation which, moreover, appears to be the precondition for every suicide. The suicidal person is unable to eliminate by direct self-destruction the fear of death resulting from the threat to his narcissism. To be sure, he seizes upon the only possible way out, suicide, but he is incapable of carrying it out other than by way of the phantom of a feared and hated double, because he loves and esteems his ego too highly to give it pain or transform the idea of his destruction into the deed. (RANK, 1979, p. 79)

Esther Greenwood does perform the suicide on her double for love of her-*self*, or for fear of the utmost form of abjection, her own cadaver. She indeed finds a way of expurgating the unwanted. But here it is not a bad deed that is extracted from one's self; much on the contrary, Esther kills the Angel, the ideal of good, in order to be able to tread the path outside the norm. Esther represents the victory of the body over the soul.

As Esther sees Joan's body descend into the ground, she hears a familiar thumping of an even more familiar heart: "during the simple funeral service I wondered what I thought I was burying. [...] I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my own heart. I am, I am, I am" (PLATH, 1999, p. 256). The heart that once demanded she killed her body now marks her successful journey. It now boasts over its existence. It now is.

After the death of her soul, depicted in Joan's suicide, Esther leaves the asylum as if she were a newborn: "all I could see were question marks" (PLATH, 1999, p. 257). She is ready to find her own identity; now the Angel was dead; now she would be able to fall into a path.

By no means could Esther have killed this Angel by merely reflecting herself on paper with her novel about Elaine – an intentional six-letter name to match hers in the confessional novel she intended to write. It is only by attending her double's funeral, reversing the Foucaultian controller vs. controlled dynamics between soul and body, that Esther asserts her way out of passiveness.

The bell jar is broken; the Angel is dead – the body is soulless.

intermission

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call.

Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus", in *Ariel*.

4. INTERMISSION

Throughout the course of this study many words, such as "Angel", "Demon", and "death", or its variant "killer", have been used in order to discuss how odd living was for two of the most remarkable writers of the twentieth century: Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. I have invited you to plunge into a journey that starts basically in the nineteenth century, in which we observed all the mechanisms used to castrate women's never-occupied position in the public sphere.

Here the word Angel gained meaning. Jill Conway and his research on the biological discourses that relegated and classified women as anabolic-natured beings, built to store energy, as opposed to men's need to dissipate it, has helped us understand some of the justifications given for trapping women in the private sphere, i.e. the house. We have also learned about women's self-repression, though unconsciously, of *femina sensualis*.

Most importantly, we have discovered, mainly through the work of Maria Conceição Monteiro and Eric Hobsbawn, that this Angel in the House, expression borrowed by Virginia Woolf from Coventry Patmore's poem, has appeared as a filter of the public in the private sphere. It is the Angel that is responsible for the image of the Empire as a healthy and clean industrial power, while the truth of industrialisation lay unseen among the starved working classes. It is the Victorian woman who allows progress. Her body perpetuates the image of the divine.

Such a limiting role hindered women's place in the history of society. It is in the nineteenth century that we see the first signs of rebellion, and here we took a look at the work of those I have called queer writers – those who question heterocentricity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The word Demon appears in this study as the double of this Angel in the House. It is the projection of all the antonymic attributes of the Angel, widely identifiable in the literature of all times and adopted by Virginia Woolf as the precise behaviour of the modern writer. Woolf, the essayist, declares war against this Angel. After centuries of finding their deaths in literature, these Demons now have found a *topos* in which deviance becomes compulsory.

Woolf highlights that it is laughter that makes writers, such as Jane Austen, find a sentence of their own in literature. Mikhail Bakhtin helps us understand that to laugh means to bring one's subject matter closer, to the actual world, thus it is a celebration of the mundane. And Woolf celebrates it by stating that all woman writers from her time on should join her cohort and act ceaselessly to reverse the relationship b*e*tween Angels and Demons in

literature: now they must kill the Angels. It is high time that Emma Bovary elopes with her lover to a faraway land and lives happily ever after, in sheer transgression.

Here the word death strikes us as the only way towards subjection that this new woman writer finds at the dawn of the twentieth century. And here too we discover that Sylvia Plath has placed dying at the core of her art.

We read Sylvia Plath's novel and meet a young woman, Esther Greenwood, who cannot cope with all the discourses inherited from the previous centuries. She plunges into the space of hallucination of the abject body and finds a bell jar hovering above her head, shaping her into an ideal that limits her space in the public sphere. Esther Greenwood has to find a way of killing the Angel in the House without committing suicide, for once "I" is dead there is no *jouissance*. Here we see that Sylvia Plath, like Virginia Woolf, had meant to write about death, but life came breaking in.

Esther discovers that this Foucaultian soul is so ingrained in her own body that, after being confronted by the utmost from of abjection, the cadaver, as Kristeva elucidates, she duplicates herself. It is by projecting the Angel away from her own body that Esther finds a way of killing the Angel in the House and still affirms life.

This has been the voyage we have undertaken over the course of two years of passionate research.

It is rather interesting to remark that, in *The Bell Jar*, before Esther Greenwood thrusts herself into a journey of self-discovery, she tries to project on to paper the heavy burden that weighed upon her. It would help her expurgate the Angel, transpose it on to paper, and shut it in a book.

As we have already briefly commented on, Esther Greenwood intends to write a novel about Elaine: six letters as in her own name. And for Sylvia, there was Esther: six letters.

Nevertheless, Esther can only kill this oppressive ideal of femininity by attending the funeral of her own docile body represented by her double, Joan. The novel does not work for her, for the bell jar would forever float above her head.

She manages to subvert the power dynamics between body and soul when she duplicates herself and casts upon her double not the bad, but the good, the regulations, and kills it. Not only does she kill her own submissive self, but also subverts the role of women in her society: immanence is killed and transcendence is in order. Esther kills in the real world of her mind, but not on paper.

Sylvia, just as Virginia, her predecessor, made dying the only way out of silence. It is indeed hardly possible to ignore these writers' life in an analysis of their works. They too have chosen to tread the intricate path towards subjection through creativity, death of the body, and the freed speech of the madwoman.

Sylvia adhered to Woolf's cause. In the real world, they were Esthers without Joans, bodies that had to silence something further within – bodies that throve in death.

Still, both Sylvia and Virginia shall forever live as representatives of a great tradition: they are the revolutionary bodies fighting their souls, the Demons in the House – those who tore at the body of the Angel, sacrificing their own.

And for all the above we come to an intermission. For a conclusion is far out of sight.

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What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination. [...] If I sit still and don't do anything, the world goes on beating like a slack drum, without meaning, We must be moving, working, making dreams to run toward; the poverty of life without dreams is too horrible to imagine.

Sylvia Plath, Notebooks, February 1956.

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ANNEX A – Illustration number 1

Disponível em: <http://www.general-anaesthesia.com/images/queen-victoria.html>. Acesso em: 7 de outubro de 2009.

ANNEX B – Illustration # 2

Disponível em: <http://the100.ru/en/womens/queen-victoria.html>. Acesso em: 7 de outubro de 2009.

ANNEX C – Illustration number 3.

Disponível em: <http://englishhistory.net/tudor/beeslychapterone.html>. Acesso em: 7 de outubro de 2009.

ANNEX D – Illustration number 4.

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