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Major: *Journalism*

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The Dark Side of Domesticity: Tracking the Evolution of the Female Gothic in Victorian Literature

ABSTRACT

This project traces the recurring theme of female imprisonment in Victorian literature and the evolution of female Gothic modes as an authorial strategy that reflects the dark side of domesticity. The research will analyze novels and short stories by women writers such as Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Elizabeth Gaskell, and fin-de-siècle short story writers who all portray forms of female incarceration in Gothic plots, though they wrote at different periods of the Victorian era. With the application of both feminist and New Historical lenses, this inquiry will create a dialogue between literary and primary texts to ask what legal, economic, political, and social structures influenced the use of the female Gothic mode as a medium for feminist advocacy. My research contributes to the ongoing definition of the female Gothic and to the feminist literary conversation about female imprisonment in both canonical and marginalized works from the Victorian era.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Living as an expat throughout my childhood in Mexico, Nicaragua, and Hong Kong, home was never a physical place. When I was younger, I resented each plane ride I took that moved me to an unfamiliar country or city – one that I knew I would only live in for a matter of years, and would never truly earn the title of being my home. I realize now, however, that I was never lacking one. It just wasn't a physical or corporeal space: my home and my safe haven has always been within literature.

Out of all the words in the English language, there are none that can properly describe the feeling I had when I finished my first real book – *Fantastic Mr. Fox* by Roald Dahl – all on my own. From that moment on, I never felt more comforted or complete than I did when I had an open book in front of me. While I have had the invaluable opportunity to travel the world with my family, it is in my travels as a reader that I truly found a home, a teacher, and a means of expressing my innermost emotions and beliefs.

Reading has been an indispensable part of my identity and my life, but it wasn't until my senior year of high school that I discovered a particular interest in feminist literature. My best friend had recently become an outspoken feminist, and I had engaged in several conversations with her about gender inequality and modern feminist movements, but I never found myself holding any strong opinions or positions on the matter. One sentence, however, changed this indefinitely: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will" (Brontë, 293). This is my favorite quote from the first novel I ever studied through a feminist lens: *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. At the time, this

was merely an assignment that I needed to complete for my AP Literature class, but now this book has become the centerpiece of my identity as a feminist, my interest in Victorian literature, and my course of study at Elon. Brontë's advocacy for women's rights and profound insights into the inherent oppression that women face in a patriarchal society inspired me, and her masterful novel allowed me to fully recognize the power of feminist literature.

When I began my journey at Elon and became an English literature major, I craved to read more works from British women novelists – I devoured novels by Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, and Virginia Woolf. And as I studied more Victorian and Gothic novels, I realized that it wasn't romance or complex plots that drew me to these novels, but instead the foundational feminist messages that female authors embedded into their work to advocate for independence and equality for women. I believe that literature reflects society, and studying the way in which female Victorian authors were able to criticize the world they lived in while advocating for their own rights through their literature has become not just an interest but a love of mine. Becoming a Lumen scholar would be invaluable to me as an academic, feminist, and a lover of literature, as it would enable me to share my love of feminist novels on a wider scale and provide the resources I would need to transform my passion and excitement on this topic into a valuable and holistic academic pursuit. Literature, just like feminism, is constantly evolving, and I want to have a voice in the feminist discourse that will surely shape our society in the future.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Focus: This project tracks the evolution of the Victorian female Gothic genre and examines the theme of female imprisonment in the works of British women writers to comprehend how literature became a form of advocacy which reflected the oppressive gender roles forced on women in the patriarchal domestic sphere. I will analyze a wide range of Victorian literature in dialogue with primary texts from the period to answer the following questions: How does the use of the Gothic mode in feminist texts serve as an authorial strategy to reflect cultural anxieties surrounding gender roles and female imprisonment in the domestic sphere, and what historical contexts influenced these literary depictions? How did the use of the female Gothic change and evolve across the Victorian period?

My research will focus on novels and short stories by women writing in different decades who use Gothic modes to feature both explicit and implicit forms of female imprisonment. The Gothic genre rose to prominence in the 1790s, influenced mainstream texts in the mid-19th century, and re-emerged in the 1880s. Diana Wallace, in her book *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (2009) argues that the female Gothic plot “centralized the imprisoned and pursued heroine threatened by a tyrannical male figure” (3). To study the evolution of this genre and its specific implications in texts by women writers, I will analyze *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, sensation novels by Mary Elizabeth Braddon including *Lady Audley's Secret*, and Gothic short stories by Elizabeth Gaskell and other women writers in the 1880s and 1890s.

Ellen Moers first defined “the Female Gothic” in *Literary Women* (1976), identifying the use of Gothic elements in feminist literature as its own genre where “fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite authorial intent: to scare” (Moers 90). Her seminal text distinguishes the characteristics that are prominent in female Gothic works

such as *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, and “Goblin Market” by Christina Rossetti. Another influential work is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s analysis of female entrapment and insanity in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), which revolutionized feminist interpretations of 19th century literature by arguing that Victorian patriarchal society influenced female authors to depict themes of imprisonment and madness in their texts.

Branching from these pivotal works, scholars have examined the depiction of domestic incarceration in Brontë novels. Drew Lamonica emphasizes that “feelings of containment in domestic spaces correspond to the characters’ limiting roles as wards, wives, and daughters” (3) in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, while Susan Lydon adds that the domestic home itself is inherently dangerous, as female characters are forced to either “suffer abuse or leave home” (23). Laura Berry takes a more historical and legal approach to the themes of imprisonment in *Wuthering Heights* when analyzing custody and property laws and discussing “the conjunction between bonds and bondage... through which these fictions grapple with enclosure” (1). Analyzing the same text, Jamie Crouse identified how the female protagonist Catherine Earnshaw’s “imprisonment in her own room, and her delirium conveys the powerlessness and emotional confinement of her life” (186).

While I plan to examine Brontë novels to understand foundational texts in the study of the female Gothic, my research will expand to texts by women writers that have received less critical attention, including sensation novels and Gothic short stories. Scholars Emily Auger and Emma Dominguez-Rue acknowledge the existence of a merging of “popular genres of gothic and detective fiction to represent the socially accepted dynamics of power in relation to gender” (Auger 3), as well as the use of female Gothic conventions in Elizabeth Gaskell’s works to portray a moral message (Dominguez-Rue 126). Still, Gaskell’s Gothic stories have received limited attention, and there are an abundance of women writers of Gothic short stories from the end of the Victorian era that even today are still “either neglected or known for work other than their Gothic fictions” (Margee and Randall). The reintroduction of historically marginalized female authors is an integral part of the feminist literary movement, and this project’s importance will lie in its inclusion of previously overlooked works into this ongoing feminist conversation. By following the progression of the female Gothic throughout the Victorian era and creating a dialogue between fictional and primary texts, I will show how this mode became a medium for expression and emancipation and a fierce form of feminist advocacy.

Scholarly Process: My project will rely on two methodological frameworks: feminist literary theory and New Historicism. The former consists of analyzing texts with the intent of examining representations of women in literature, revaluing women’s experiences, and “rethink[ing] the canon, aiming at the rediscovery of texts written by women” (Barry 128). It also concerns the cultural mechanisms that are represented as suppressing women and the strategies women writers use to challenge gender stereotypes and sexist assumptions, which I will apply to how Victorian female authors used literary strategies to advocate for freedom from limitations.

I will also use a New Historicist approach, “a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period... which constantly inform or interrogate each other” (Barry 166). I will analyze different types of primary, non-literary texts from the Victorian era ranging from domestic manuals to texts discussing marriage law to advertisements and news articles that appeared

alongside Gothic short stories in periodical magazines. Putting Victorian novels and short stories in dialogue with these co-texts will allow me to embody the approach of a New Historicist by detaching canonical literary texts from “the accumulated weight of previous scholarship and see it as if new” (Barry 173).

To successfully achieve my research goal of understanding how the female Gothic transformed throughout the Victorian period, I will use a three-step process: study the literature, study related primary texts, and complete a comparative analysis between the two. This will consist of consuming Gothic literature in all its forms and identifying the characteristics that distinguish and bind them together. I will examine Victorian feminist history and the non-literary texts relating to law, publishing, and general conduct to detect how they reflect the oppressive nature of gender roles and dominated the lives of women in Victorian society. My research will culminate in a comparative analysis of depictions of female imprisonment in fiction and other primary texts that illuminate the oppressive legal and social structures that shaped women’s lives, which will allow me to show how female authors used literature as a means of social commentary, subverted conventional values, and critiqued the oppression of women in the domestic sphere.

In preparation for this research, I have taken courses such as Literary Studies: Theories and Methods (ENG220) and British Literature After 1800 (ENG 2220), where I learned how to apply a feminist critical lens to novels and increased my knowledge of Victorian and Gothic literature through texts including “Goblin Market” by Christina Rossetti, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, and “Old Nurse’s Story” by Elizabeth Gaskell. Additionally, I completed an intensive research study into *Wuthering Heights* through my study abroad course, England: Literary Landscapes (GBL 1570), which focused on Emily Brontë’s biography and the theme of female imprisonment. I am also currently enrolled in research hours and have been meeting weekly with Dr. Myers to discuss five novels written by female authors in the Gothic style: *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë, *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen, and *Lady Audley’s Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. I have also been accepted into SURE to pursue work on the Brontë novels.

For Lumen, I plan to complete archival research in the UK, visiting the Gaskell Collection in Manchester, where her personal writings and original manuscripts are held, and possibly other archives related to fin-de-siècle short story writers. I will also take a private tour of the Brontë Parsonage Museum to see original manuscripts, letters, and other archival treasures that are not digitized or open to the public.

At the culmination of my project, I will enroll in a Teaching and Learning Apprenticeship (TLA) with Dr. Myers in my final semester to design a course focused on British women novelists writing in the female Gothic mode, create a syllabus, and build lessons based on authors such as Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and the Brontës. This will allow me to share my research with the Elon community and sharpen my skills as a researcher and tutor.

Proposed Products: This project will result in a four-chapter thesis: one analyzing Brontë novels and domestic manuals from the 1840s; one focusing on female Gothic modes in Elizabeth Gaskell’s short stories compared with other texts published in periodicals like *Household Words* in the 1850s-1860s; one examining Gothic tendencies related to marriage and bigamy in sensation fiction novels in conjunction

with oppressive marriage laws; and one analyzing the reappearance of the female Gothic and the recurrence of the ghost story at the fin-de-siècle. I will share my findings at several academic conferences beginning with my SURE research at SURF in my junior year, and the British Women Writers Conference and NCUR in my senior year.

FEASIBILITY

In addition to purchasing hard copies of the novels that I will be analyzing, I will also obtain scholarly books on the female Gothic and Victorian history and literature - including the two seminal texts mentioned: Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and more recent contributions published in the 2000s such as *The Female Gothic: New Directions* by Diana Wallace. These books are all available to purchase through platforms such as Amazon or bookstores. In order to complete the New Historical aspect, I will access primary texts using digital libraries and collections. The Haithi Trust Digital Library, for example, holds online versions of the *Household Words* periodical, which is where many Elizabeth Gaskell short stories were published in serial. I will also use online libraries to search for domestic manuals and marriage law records, including the British Library archives. While studying abroad in England, I will expand this facet of my research by actively searching for non-literary texts that may not be available online, and therefore adding an additional layer to my primary resources.

Finally, Dr. Janet Myers fits incredibly well as a mentor on my project, as her primary area of expertise is studying Victorian literature through both a New Historical and feminist critical lens. She has extensively studied some of the works that I will include in my research, especially Bronte texts, sensation novels, and fin-de-siècle women writers, and her guidance and knowledge will be invaluable to helping me effectively and holistically study these novels by applying both critical lenses.

TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE US

PROPOSED TRAVEL: United Kingdom

My planned travel would consist of going to England for the entirety of next Winter Term (my junior year). I would likely be spending the majority of my time in London studying archives and searching for primary resources that would contribute to my resea

GEC PREASSESSMENT: GREEN

Winter term courses are highly structured and packed with activity day and night. I'm not sure if there is adequate time to be in the archives in the way the student depicts this in the description.

Assessed by: Rhonda Waller

BUDGET

Books: \$650

- Hard copies of each novel: \$100

- Scholarly books on Victorian feminist history and the Female Gothic: \$500

- Photocopying articles and book chapters: \$50

Membership to Bronte Society: \$15

British Women Writers Association annual conference (Spring 2024): \$1,075

- Registration fee: \$75

- Travel: \$500

- Accommodations and meals: \$500

SURF poster: \$30

National Conference of Undergraduate Research deposit: \$100

Research trip to England: \$5,060

- Round trip plane ticket: \$1,300

- Britrail pass for research sites: \$650

- Accommodations and meals: \$2,060

----- Accommodations: \$1,400 (\$100/day for 14 days)

----- Meals: \$560 (\$40/day for 14 days)

- Weekend trip to Bronte Monuments in York: \$1,050

----- Cab fares from train station and back: \$100

----- Accommodations and meals: \$400

----- Private, specialized tour of Haworth Parsonage: \$100

----- Personalized Bronte day tour in York: \$450

Total: \$6,930

Tuition: \$13,070

- Junior year: \$7,500

- Senior year: \$5,570

Grand total: \$20,000

PROPOSED EXPERIENCES and PRODUCTS

	Experiences	Products
Summer 2022	- SURE 2022 research with Dr. Myers on the female Gothic in Brontë novels	- SURE 2022 research poster - Draft of Brontë chapter (Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre)
Fall 2022	- Take 2 LUM 4998 hours - Study Elizabeth Gaskell's short stories and the texts accompanying them in Household Words	- Draft of Gaskell chapter
Winter 2023	- Research trip in England - Travel to Brontë parsonage and Gaskell collection	- Extended draft of Brontë chapter with archival research included

	- Conduct archival research in the British Library or the Women's Library in London	- Completed notes on archival research for Gaskell and fin-de-siècle chapters
Spring 2023	- SURF presentation from SURE research -Take 2 LUM 4998 hours -Study Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novels and texts related to Victorian marriage law	- SURF poster - Draft of sensation fiction chapter
Summer 2023	- Communications Fellows Internship -Work with Dr. Myers to plan for the TLA	- Draft syllabus and assignments for female Gothic course
Fall 2023	- Take 2 LUM 4998 hours -Study fin-de-siècle short stories and texts related to the New Woman - English Literature Senior Seminar	- Completed NCUR application - Draft of fin-de-siècle chapter
Winter 2024	- Begin revising chapters	- Completed analysis of all chapters
Spring 2024	- Take 2 LUM 4998 hours - Teaching and Learning Apprenticeship for female Gothic course with Dr. Myers - Present on sensation fiction at NCUR - Present on Elizabeth Gaskell at the British Women Writers Conference (BWWC) - Prepare an article from the	- Revised thesis - Completed lesson plans for female Gothic course - Conference presentations for NCUR and BWWC

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