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— A PROPOSAL—
**From the Attic to a Room of One's Own:
Architecture as Metaphor in the Evolution of Women and
Their Literature in the Nineteenth Century**

Located between the top floor and the roof, the attic is usually half-finished and undecorated. Because attics are common and traditionally not the focus of residents, they are not important enough to attract the attention of architects, for they are used basically for storage, to keep “things” out of the way. The absence of attention to the attic reveals a significant point: the attic becomes an unimportant, hidden, and often forgotten part of the house. The frequent appearance of the attic in women’s writing is not accidental. Victorian architectural structure offers an iconic picture of the ideological structure in the patriarchal society of the nineteenth century. In this male-dominant society, man possessed political, economic, and social power whereas a woman’s position was very limited. Her first duty was to be a submissive wife who loved and obeyed her husband, managed the house, and raised the children. Her roles of wife and mother almost excluded a woman from activities in the outside world. This ideology was and is also reflected in literature. Women writers have a marginal position because the literary realm has been traditionally occupied by male writers, i.e. the male-dominant literary canon. A woman’s limited position in society and literature forces her to seek space, a place where she can be herself, a place for imagination and creation. Thus, the attic becomes significant to women authors in the nineteenth century. The neglected women and the limited space of the attic symbolize the confinement of women and women writers. Yet, the attic, in spite of, or because of, its neglected

and isolated characteristics, provides these women with the space which generates the female imagination. Exemplified by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Charlotte Brontë in their works “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and Jane Eyre, respectively, the attic is used as a paradoxical image of women’s confinement as well as their own poetic space for freedom and imagination. To retreat into the attic is to escape from the oppression of the patriarchal society, to seek social identity, and, later as expressed in Chopin’s The Awakening and the works of Virginia Woolf, to struggle towards “a room of one’s own.”

In this lies my thesis and central problem. In primarily examining selected works of Gilman, Brontë, Chopin, and Woolf, I plan to highlight a common interdisciplinary metaphor found in their literature, a comparison of the literary canon to that of the patriarchal architecture of the nineteenth century, both being male dominated and suppressive of women in their literature as in their homes. Once that foundation has been established, I will expound upon that rationale and show a connection between the representations of space (i.e. an attic, a closet, a garden, etc.) in the four women’s literature and a desire to claim “space” in the male-dominant literary canon. Beyond this metaphor, I also intend to show an evolution in women’s literary ideology—metaphorically, an evolution that takes them from the “attic” to that illustrious “room of one’s own”—literally, an evolution that takes them from the margins of the literary canon to self-determination and recognition. (Let it be noted that while I will explore this evolution, it will not be my primary focus. Only in the later section of my research paper will I breach the topic and then only enough to have the idea resonate. Sandra Cisneros in her House on Mango Street and a related article by Jacqueline Doyle will be employed to make this jump and relate my piece to its broader function in the ongoing discussion of women’s literature.)

Among my readings of the primary texts, Awakening and “Wallpaper,” I also plan to intersperse excerpts and research gathered from scholars concerned with the architecture of the

period: Sherry Ahrentzen, Carol Davison, Marian Moffet, and Hermann Muthesius. Originally published in German, Muthesius' text goes the furthest in purporting the side of the debate which casts Victorian architecture among its patriarchal tradition. Despite the breadth of Muthesius' and Moffet's texts, in an attempt to further focus my approach, I will concentrate on Gothic and Victorian styles, the most common forms of residential properties in the mid to late nineteenth century as well as the types of architecture found in the above mentioned works of literature.

My paper will begin by citing the literary critic Jane Tompkins as she targets the "male-dominated scholarly tradition that controls both the canon of literature and the critical perspective that interprets the canon for society" (502). She goes on to explore the canonical exclusion of Chopin's The Awakening, written in 1899, and Gilman's 1892 short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper." Yet, while Tompkins' argument is directed toward that omnipresent canon, she focuses on tradition as the keystone to its presence and maintenance. I, on the other hand, while I take my cue from Tompkins, will strive to understand the individual plights of Gilman and Chopin, quickly turning away from a discussion of the much broader subject of the entire canon. Taking a formalist approach to their texts, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and The Awakening, respectively, my paper will explore their treatments of "space."

The following is an example of my formalist explication of the two writers.

The restraining as well as creative function of the attic is seen in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." In Gilman's short story, the attic to the narrator becomes a space of her own in which she produces a text of her own. From reading and writing amidst the yellow wallpaper of the attic, the narrator identifies her position as a woman and as a woman writer confined by the patriarchal society. Despite its significance in women's literature, "The Yellow Wallpaper" has a simple plot—a woman who suffers from a nervous breakdown is supposed to recover through a rest cure in an old house. At the beginning of the story, the narrator does not give us a physical description

of the house; instead, we are simply told that it is “a colonial mansion,” “a heredity estate,” and “a haunted house” with its “ancestral halls” (Gilman 1133). Here, I will supplement my reading with evidence from Davison’s “Haunted House/Haunted Heroine,” supporting the symbolic atmosphere among which the narrator finds herself surrounded. The piling up of the ancient emblems of the house gives a sense of male-dominated history, which is followed by the introduction of the narrator’s husband, a physician who insists that they use the garret/attic rather than a room on the lower floor as the narrator first wanted. We see the two-fold dominant/subordinate relationships as mirrored in the architectural relationship of the house to the attic. Being a husband and physician places John on the top of their hierarchal system while the narrator, who is wife and patient, is only subordinate to her husband as the attic is subordinate to the mansion. According to Cohen’s Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel, a woman’s position is determined by the culture and ideology of the period: once a woman enters into a marriage, she is taken care of by her husband but at the cost of her freedom. Looking at Cohen’s argument, I would show that between wife and husband an obligation—a domestic contract—is established: she has the right to be provided with food, clothing, and shelter, but she must accept domestic confinement, which is illustrated rather dramatically when the narrator in the story is physically forced to stay in the attic. Continuing with the text, the attic is

a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was a nursery first and then a playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls. (1134)

While I will show that this attic seems to be the nicest of all the “spaces” discussed, big and airy, with windows letting in the sunshine, the “barred windows,” rings in the walls, and the “gate at the head of the stairs,” I will make the point that the image begins to immediately overwhelm,

suggesting a sense of imprisonment (1135). But the confinement is not only architectural; it is textual as well. If the narrator in the story represents women writers who embody the power of imagination and artistic creation, John becomes the symbol of a male-dominant literary tradition that suppresses female writers.

Later in the story, I will explore how the attic loses its negative function of imprisonment, replaced by the positive function of allowing artistic creation and imagination to flourish. Here, I will briefly introduce a comparison between Gilman's narrator to Jo in Alcott's Little Women. Much like Jo, in her finding the attic to be a refuge of solitude where she can pursue her art, the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" seeks for her identity in spite of male domination, both in society and in literature. The physician-husband dominant in all senses—social, economic, and intellectual—forces the narrator to stop writing. The narrator reveals how John prevents her from writing:

He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try.

I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me. (1136)

Through the illustrated search for self-identity, this will be a necessary excerpt in arguing for the denial of the "male text" in making room for a female text. The argument will be furthered by citing Helena Bergmann's Between Obedience and Freedom. Because the male-dominant ideology cripples and injures women's creative power, women have to, first of all, escape the male texts in order to obtain the pen and the power to write. In short, the attic stands for the paradoxical image which spontaneously confines/stimulates the narrator's artistic imagination and literary creation. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the attic that confines the narrator while

simultaneously awakening her self-identity inspires her to produce her own story. Thus, will I show that to Gilman's narrator, the attic becomes an indispensable space.

After establishing the metaphor of architectural space and recognition in the canon, I will move on to Brontë's Jane Eyre, showing the first correlation in the establishment of an evolving female text. In Jane Eyre, as elsewhere, the rich use space to oppress the poor; similarly, a man uses the attic to enclose a woman. In either case, I will show how in Brontë's gothic novel the powerful use space as physical and mental prisons for the powerless. Using the architectural space to imprison women is first shown when Jane lives with her aunt's family, the Reeds at Gateshead. As an outsider, Jane has no space of her own except a small hiding place behind the curtain where she tries to escape the harsh treatment of John Reed. This window seat becomes Jane's hiding place as well as a small space of her own.

I mounted into the window seat: gathering up my feet, I sat cross-legged. . . . I was shrined in double retirement. . . . Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day. (Brontë 472)

The window-seat behind the curtain not only protects Jane from John's blows and Mrs. Reed's scolding, but also becomes Jane's place where she reads books and enjoys seeing nature outside the window. Moreover, this enclosure, though small, provides Jane with a little comfortable space that she needs to be herself and cultivate her rich imagination.

Here, I will demonstrate how Brontë has evolved from Gilman's portrayal of space; no longer must the space confine before it protects and inspires. However, I plan to show how Brontë is careful not to fully allow Jane her freedom as of yet. Further in the novel, we find Jane locked away in the red-room:

The red-room was a spare chamber, very seldom slept in. . . . The carpet was red; the table at the foot of the bed was covered with a crimson cloth. . . . This room was chill, because it seldom had a fire; it was silent, because remote from the nursery and kitchens; solemn because it was known to be so seldom entered. (476)

Brontë's emphasis on the absence of human contact leaves the red-room cold, dark, and lifeless. Actually it is also a death chamber since Mr. Reed, Jane's uncle, "breathed his last breath" in this room (477). Being locked in the red-room deprives Jane of her right to move around other spaces in the house and excludes her from the family. The room suggests nothing but a jail-like enclosure filled with deadly and bloody images.

In a social context, I will show how the room symbolizes the patriarchal system in which the male controls and confines the female. The red-room image foreshadows the attic in which Jane's mad double, Bertha, has been confined for ten years. This particular attic is located at the top of the Thornfield mansion. As Jane, now governess, enters Thornfield, she surveys the front of the mansion:

It was three stories high, of proportions not vast, though considerable; a gentleman's manor-house, not a nobleman's seat: battlements round the top gave it a picturesque look. (537)

Her description coupled with the article, "Jane Eyre's Attic," which focuses on the actual home used by Brontë in her writings, the attic of Norton Conyers, a 16th century squire's home in North Yorkshire, England, will show that the mansion was intentionally given masculine characteristics, highlighting the fact that it is described as a "gentleman's" dwelling place. A close look at the attic of the mansion and the madwoman kept within it is needed to see how the building represents the social structure, thus epitomizing the economic and social positions of men and women in the Victorian period.

Later, Bertha, the madwoman in the attic (according to Gilbert and Gubar) is revealed destroying the attic, Rochester, and the patriarchal mansion. Bertha's destruction of Thornfield fulfills Jane's desire to escape from the male-dominant society which confined her as well as her desire to destroy the physical and psychological power that Rochester, as a rich man and master, once held over Jane.

I will conjecture that if the space represented by Thornfield mansion is a man's paradise and a woman's prison, Jane Eyre's search for her social recognition is eventually completed when she achieves independence by owning her own space. Throughout the novel, Jane moves from one place to another, each move represents a step further towards her fulfillment in defining her place in society. (This argument is also made by Daphne Spain in her Gendered Spaces.) In the process of seeking her own position in society, she has to confront and overcome the difficulties for women in a patriarchal society. For Jane, Gateshead symbolizes male oppression imposed upon the female by imprisoning her in an enclosed space. In Lowood, the oppression is presented in the form of a spare amount of food and limited space for the girls. At Thornfield, the oppression reaches its highest point. Again according to Gilbert and Gubar, madness, which signifies female passion and anger, is confined in the attic. Space is used only as a means for men to oppress women. To obtain her own space, Jane Eyre has to fight against patriarchal authority, and Bertha has to destroy the attic which imprisons the woman. In so doing, she destroys the hierarchical system the patriarchal mansion represents. Moreover, I will show how her action paved the way for women's transition from the nineteenth-century attic to the main part of the house in the twentieth century, i.e., "a room of one's own."

Yet, with the attic destroyed, my next question becomes, "Where do women go?"

My hypothesis to that question lies in Virginia Woolf's in A Room of One's Own—"a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). Woolf points out two interrelated conditions for women writers—money and space. A woman has to be economically independent, but that is not enough; she also has to have her own space. And if her space is the attic in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century woman's space extends from the attic to a room, a main part of the house. This movement from the attic to a room represents the improvement of women's economic and social status. In the nineteenth century, men held the space in the house, and women had only the attic; now women are beginning to enter into space that formerly belonged only to men.

At the turn of the century women's literature makes a move from the idea of the attic to images of larger spaces—of rooms and houses. In this section of the research paper, I plan to show how The Awakening by Chopin overflows with spatial images of houses, rooms, meadow, and sea, from which Edna Pontellier's independence and self-recognition can be measured. (Here, I will interject Jennifer Gray's article, "The Escape of the 'Sea': Ideology and The Awakening." While her focus is mainly on the images of the sea, Gray also deals with several metaphors of captivity and freedom ranging from the images listed above to the Pigeon-House which is discussed later.) From the first sentiment in Chopin's novel where we find an engaged bird, The Awakening portrays a woman who tries to break the bonds of marriage by living in a house of her own.

In this society the condition of women within marriage can be compared to the image of the cage, a confined space that keeps them at home and prevents them from going beyond the limit of that space. In Edna's case, that cage is replaced by her husband's house, but its function remains. Mr. Pontellier, a middle-class businessman, represents the nineteenth-century ideology—a man supporting the family economy and a woman maintaining the house and caring for the children. He plays his role as the family's economic pillar while Edna is expected to fulfill her domestic duties. But Edna also realizes the difficulties that women have to face. Aided by Tim Dolin's Mistress of the House and Judith Fryer's The Faces of Eve, I will show that in this age, women are defined in relation to men and therefore exist for men.

Later, moving from her husband's house to a house of her own signifies a decisive step for Edna in the realization of self-fulfillment. Chopin describes Edna's little house and her feelings toward it:

The pigeon-house pleased her and assumed the intimate home. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to "feed upon opinion" when her own soul had invited her. (1084)

Like the caged bird that has its first taste of the free air, Edna, for the first time in her life, enjoys the space of her own house, where she is free from family obligations and society's other various confinements.

If Edna seeks a house of her own at the end of the nineteenth century, in the early

twentieth century, Virginia Woolf stresses the need for money and a room of one's own because "intellectual freedom depends upon material things" (Woolf, *Room* 108).

Material things, or women's economic conditions, are measured in terms of money and space. But gaining money and space is not enough. In the lecture "Professions for Women," Woolf will provide my paper the solution for women writers to overcome another major obstacle to writing: "killing the Angel in the House"(1347). Woolf defines the Angel in the House as follows:

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. . . . She never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.

(1346)

This woman, acting like a phantom, keeps bothering the female writer by constantly reminding her that "you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man" (1346). So Virginia Woolf takes action and kills the angel in "self defense" (1346). "Had I not killed her," Woolf states, "she would have killed me" (1346). Woolf's killing the angel clears the way for women writers, but there are other obstacles. Women writers have to think for themselves rather than follow male writers; in short, they must create a "literature of their own." (This is where I will insert an argument by Elaine Showalter in her text, A Literature of Their Own.) Besides, being economically independent and having a room of one's own are only the first steps for a woman writer; there are other things she needs to do. Woolf points out,

The room is your own, but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to

be decorated; it has to be shared. How are you going to furnish it, how are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms? (1348)

Thus, with the move from attic to a room of one's own, women have been presented with the responsibility to define their spaces.

This leads me to the brief discussion of Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street. Fully realizing that the text comes much later in the time line and falls nowhere near the nineteenth century, I will use Cisneros' quaint self-owned and self-realized house as a supplement to my concluding point. It may be argued that with the inclusion of Cisneros, I have lost some focus and should return to earlier examples. I insist that the evolution of the literary canon and the recognition of the female author must be referenced in a broader, more contemporary light, not to turn our attention away from the nineteenth century writers but to broaden and reinforce their strides.

For the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," Jane, Bertha, and Edna, space becomes more than economy and property, space becomes oxygen, a necessity for life, a measure to prevent suffocation. Taking liberty, space to a woman is a little garden that totally belongs to her, a small sanctuary that is free of all outside interruptions and interference. In this space, she can think what she wants and do as she pleases. To hide in her space is not to escape passively from the outside world, but a strategy of retreat, to rest, so she can charge into the external world again energized and vibrant. This space for the nineteenth century woman is an attic, a room, a garden, a sea, a meadow, or any other space into which her imagination can carry her. In the twentieth century it becomes her own room, a house, and a street of houses, which extend to a career and a tangible

social status. To have space is to be free; to be free is to be human; and to be human is to realize that women are an equal part of that humanity as well as that oh so male, white, illustrious, and illusive literary canon.

Men in the main room/salon, while while had separate rooms for entertaining which where often hidden. These hidden rooms had corridors that often surrounded the Men's salon. Because they shared walls, women would be granted "peek holes" so that they might peer into the men's room. While these nooks allowed women to be privy to the "men's world," they served as tangible reminders that women didn't belong in that male world and forced them into hiding in their own homes reduced to spy-like maneuvers to even hear the conversations of the house.

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