

Akademia Bialska im. Jana Pawła II

**Reviving the Myth:
The Wild Woman Archetype
in the Works of American Women Writers**

Marta Popławska



Biała Podlaska 2024

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For books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately. And I must also consider her – this unknown woman – as the descendant of all those other women whose circumstances I have been glancing at and see what she inherits of their characteristics and restrictions.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 59

If there is any single genre that has captured the imagination of people in all walks of life throughout the world, it is the fairy tale, and yet we still have great difficulty in explaining its historical origins, how it evolved and spread, and why we cannot resist its appeal, no matter what form it takes.

Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* xi

List of abbreviated titles:

<i>Awakening</i>	- Kate Chopin, <i>The Awakening</i>
<i>Bell Jar</i>	- Sylvia Plath, <i>The Bell Jar</i>
<i>Bluest</i>	- Toni Morrison, <i>The Bluest Eye</i>
"Dr. Clair's"	- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Dr. Clair's Place"
<i>Hollering Creek</i>	- Sandra Cisneros, <i>Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories</i>
"Hour"	- Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour"
<i>House</i>	- Sandra Cisneros, <i>The House on Mango Street</i>
<i>Morgesons</i>	- Elizabeth Stoddard, <i>The Morgesons</i>
"Mrs. Beazley's"	- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Mrs. Beazley's Deeds"
<i>Sapphira</i>	- Willa Cather, <i>Sapphira and the Slave Girl</i>
"Silk Stockings"	- Kate Chopin, "A Pair of Silk Stockings"
<i>Song</i>	- Willa Cather, <i>The Song of the Lark</i>
<i>Their Eyes</i>	- Zora Neale Hurston, <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>
"Wall-Paper"	- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wall-Paper"
"Where"	- Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

INTRODUCTION

The following book aims to explore the connection between Jungian theory of archetypes used by Clarissa Pinkola Estés in her work entitled *Women Who Run With the Wolves* and the literary work of American women writers. It seeks to investigate how the archetype of the wild woman taken from psychological studies manifests itself in the literary, and how female experience expressed in the literary form might be interpreted through the lens of fairy tales and fairy-tale motifs. In fact, women and female experience have long been associated with fairy tales and folk culture. Stereotypically, it is women who have been seen as responsible for passing folk traditions from generation to generation, one aspect of it being by sharing stories with the community, or telling all types of tales to children. The stereotype that the fairy tale belongs to the nursery room has developed over time and is now imprinted in the minds of most people who grew up in the Eurocentric cultures. The fact that fairy tales are conventionally associated with children should not, however, be treated as detracting from the significance of fairy tales and their influence on readers and literature in general. Adopting such an attitude, I attempt to show how literary works written by American female writers revive the archetype of the wild woman, which can be also found in fairy tales, bringing back to life what was there for ages but might have been forgotten or trivialized due to civilizational changes such as urbanization, industrialization, scientific and technological advancement and ensuing trivialization of folk culture and folk oral tradition. The book is also an attempt to prove that archetypal images appearing in folk stories, fairy tales and legends can be found in contemporary literature and can serve contemporary readers just as folk narratives might have served people of previous ages.

The starting point for all the analyses included in this book is the discussion of Clarissa Pinkola Estés's work entitled *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (1992), whose major

aim seems to be to inspire, guide and empower women regardless of their social or cultural background, economic status, education, age, class or race. The author can be credited with popularizing the term *wild woman* as well as *wild woman archetype*, and her work can be seen as an attempt at introducing it into broader cultural consciousness. Moreover, as Elizabeth Eowyn Nelson asserts in her study, Estés's work "rehabilitated the word 'wild' that has typically been used pejoratively when describing a woman's behavior" (113). In her foreword to *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, Estés writes that "[w]e are all filled with longing for the wild" (xvii) and she fills the remaining pages of her work with stories, tales and analyses which show what it means to be a wild woman in the contemporary world. The author compares the wild woman to the wild nature of the world, claiming that they "are both endangered species" (1) that have been mistreated, misunderstood and devalued through history. As a Jungian psychoanalyst, Estés refers to the feminine instinctive nature, which is often hidden in the unconscious, and which women can try to discover and learn to appreciate. In her work, Estés uses stories and fairy tales to uncover this hidden archetype and indicate its relevance for contemporary women:

Fairy tales, myths, and stories provide understandings which sharpen our sight so that we can pick out and pick up the path left by the wildish nature. The instruction found in story reassures us that the path has not run out, but still leads women deeper, and more deeply still, into their knowing. The tracks we all are following are those of the wild and innate instinctual Self. (4)

Using metaphorical language, Estés points to the importance of uncovering or regaining one's relationship with the wild instinctual and intuitive nature within, one that is not "out of control" but one that "has innate integrity and healthy boundaries" (7).

The conception of archetype that Estés works with is derived from Jungian analytic psychology and it refers to a construct that is strictly connected to human psyche. Estés continues the work of Jung, who saw the mind as consisting of three tiers, that is consciousness, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. Jung developed the concept of archetypes as belonging to the collective unconscious, the part of psyche whose "presence and function is universal, preceding and underlying all individual qualities" (Glen Robert Gill 397). He defined them as "deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity" (Jung, *Collected Works, Volume 7* par. 109), as innate hereditary structures that stay in the unconscious but are revealed to the conscious mind through images. Jung was also interested in how these archetypal images are manifested in myths and fairy tales and believed that motifs recurring in

myths worldwide can be seen as proving the existence of archetypes in our unconscious. It is also important to note that, as Susan Sellers argues, Jungian “archetypes are not determined in terms of their content but in terms of their form (...). They provide an empty structure, the content of which is filled with the material of conscious experience and which consequently changes in each new manifestation” (5). They form transhistorical and transcultural frames that are filled with content relevant to particular cultures and in particular times, which seems to be crucial when considering the archetypal images appearing in tales, stories or literature in general. One of the points of criticism of Jungian theories of archetypes as being manifested in myths and stories is that they tend to universalize the content and meaning, which might result in disregard for cultural and historical specificities. However, when viewed as ‘empty’ frames with variable content, archetypes do not necessarily lead to essentialism or reductive thinking, but can open up an interesting field of literary research.

Estés’s vision of the wild woman archetype seems to embrace the way Jung perceived archetypes. Estés sees women as having inherited the archetypal structures that are, nevertheless, filled with variable images, ideas and other contents, which is why she tries to trace some common patterns of behavior among women of different backgrounds. Fairy tales become then useful cultural input that makes it possible to show how these archetypal forms and patterns work, how seemingly different experiences can be tracked down to certain shared features and aspects of womanhood, or more precisely something that Estés refers to as wildish female self. Estés also uses fairy tales to make women understand how these archetypal patterns influence their experiences and how they can organize their own experiences or change their reactions and emotions if they gain awareness and knowledge of these patterns. Jung connected archetypes to instincts and instinctual behavior, which seems to lie at the foundation of Estés’s vision of the wild woman archetype. Jung gives the following explanation:

the instincts form very close analogues to the archetypes – so close, in fact, that there is good reason for supposing that the archetypes are the unconscious images of the instincts themselves; in other words they are patterns of instinctive behaviour. The hypothesis of the collective unconscious is, therefore, no more daring than to assume that there are instincts. (*Collected Works, Volume 9* par. 91)

People’s behavior, though understandably changeable and culture-specific, is to some extent also instinctive and certain behavior patterns are shared by people regardless of their origin, status and other variables. When discussing the wild woman archetype, Estés often refers to instincts and instinctive nature

as something natural and connected with our reactions that are not learned or culture-driven. She believes that it is crucial for women to have awareness and understanding of their own instinctive part of psyche as otherwise their development is suppressed, they are “sanitized, (...) subsumed by the culture, or by the intellect or the ego – one’s own or those belonging to others” (Estés 8).

Individuation is another term used in Jungian psychology that seems of special importance in Estés’s exploration of feminine psychology and the wild woman archetype. It signifies the process of becoming an individual, or one’s own self, “the development of balanced, mature personhood” (Glen Robert Gill 398), which usually involves some sort of rite of passage and ensuing transformation, or rather deepening self-awareness and self-realization. Jung believed that individuation is achieved through acknowledging various archetypes and integrating them into our consciousness (see Glen Robert Gill 398), and that it is essential “to bring unconscious contents into consciousness” (Hockley 8) so as to avoid repression. Exploring Jung’s idea of individuation, Andrew Samuels observes that

[t]he essence of individuation is the achievement of a personal blend between the collective and universal on the one hand, and, on the other, the unique and individual. (...) The form the individuation process takes, its style and the regularity or fitfulness of it, depends on the individual. Nevertheless, certain images express the kernel of the individuation process; for example, a journey, death and rebirth, and symbols of initiation. (81)

In a similar way, Estés explains the way women go through this process, discovering the unconscious archetype, that is the wild woman within them, and their relationship to it. When their awareness grows they are ready to develop their own mature selves. Estés also underlines that the moment of realization or the moment the process begins is spurred by individual factors, such as various crucial events in their lives, or even strong sensations experienced through the sense of sight, touch or sound. These “tastes of the wild,” as Estés calls such moments (6), might come through music, a poem, a story, a written or spoken word that resonates with the archetype hidden within and pushes the woman to explore her own sense of self. This is also why Estés believes that stories, fairy tales and legends are important and valuable tools in the process of self-development and self-knowing.

Exploring Estés’s considerations on the female self, I decided to study the works of American female writers to see if the wild woman archetype can be found there, to see how it is manifested in these works via archetypal images, which are subject to historical, cultural and personal influences. Such analyses seem to be embedded in archetypal criticism, which, as Glen Robert Gill puts it,

was “integral to the development of literary theory in the twentieth century, and (...) [remains] so in the twenty-first” (396). Archetypal criticism, as Gill defines, “theorizes the existence of discrete and interrelated symbols, including narrative forms and character types, in ancient and traditional myths, and examines their recurrence in and uses them to critically interpret later literatures and cultures” (396). Through the study of archetypes and archetypal images reappearing in fairy tales and folklore, it is possible to analyze and interpret critically works of different literary and historical periods and show certain similarities, without diminishing their unique character. It is also important to note that Jungian psychological theories as well as literary theory derived from Jung’s analytical psychology, though criticized for ignoring cultural and historical influences in favor of hereditary determinism, are still in use and appreciated. They seem to offer an alternative to postmodernism with its skepticism, irony, relativism, and its rejection of “the notion of a singular, unified, authentic ‘self’ in favor of a kaleidoscopic, constantly shifting set of identities that are always in the process of being constructed” (Schanoes 5). The presence of Jungian psychology as well as archetypal literary criticism in the twenty-first century points to people’s need to look for frames and structures, to compare experiences and narratives to discover interrelated, cross-cultural symbols or even cultural universals, to search for and develop one’s identity, one’s *self*. If we acknowledge historical, cultural, racial, or gender differences and variables, it is possible to avoid the dangers of essentialism connected with the theory of archetypes. As Glen Robert Gill concludes his discussion of archetypal criticism, whatever is going to follow postmodernism it will make use of modernist methods, including archetypal theories, which is why “archetypal criticism should not be seen as a closed chapter in the history of literary criticism, but a participant in its revisionary enterprise” (405).

One of the directions that archetypal literary criticism took in the twentieth century, and which seems especially relevant for the following study, is feminist archetypal criticism. It considers key aspects of Jung’s theory of archetypes to be “useful in furthering the feminist project of reappraising both women writers’ work and male authors’ representations of women and ‘the feminine’” (Wallace 31). Feminist literary critics “see archetypes as changeable cultural constructs rather than genetically programmed absolutes, and view women writers as reflecting and contributing to the development of new archetypes” (Wallace 31). When perceived as fluid and dynamic constructs, archetypes can become

a useful tool for literary analysis that explores the synthesis of the universal and the particular, seeks to define the parameters of social construction of gender, and attempts to construct theories of language, of the imaginal, and of meaning that take gender into account. (Rupprecht 39)

In her introduction to *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, one of the key works introducing feminist archetypal criticism in the 1980s, Annis Pratt explains the need for such field of research by pointing to the differences between male and female experiences as depicted in literature:

considering men's and women's experience essentially similar, I expected to find definite analogues between patterns in women's novels and configurations described by previous archetypal thinkers as typical of human beings in general. When I compared quest patterns described by Jung, Campbell, and Frye to plot structures of women's novels, however, I found more than surface variations in image and plot. After close readings of more than three hundred women's novels I discovered, quite contrary to what I had expected, that even the most conservative women authors create narratives manifesting an acute tension between what any normal human being might desire and what a woman must become. Women's fiction reflects an experience radically different from men's because our drive towards growth as persons is thwarted by our society's prescriptions concerning gender. (6)

Pratt notices that because of women's status as "the other" in society, their quests for identity and personhood are constantly hindered or spoiled. Unlike men, whose quests for identity are perceived as heroic and authentic, "a woman aspiring to selfhood is by definition selfish, deviating from norms of subservience to the dominant gender" (Pratt 6). Further, she argues that

[a]lthough Jung discovered many archetypes suggesting feminine power in ancient and non-Western cultures and recognized such figures as Mary and other feminine divinities as of value to his society, only rarely did he describe feminine archetypes as repositories of power useful to women. (8)

Thus, recognizing the gap in this field of research, feminist archetypal critics draw on archetypal theory with the aim of showing the female experience and analyzing women's archetypes, which is also the aim of this book.

In her discussion of the wild woman archetype, Estés uses stories, legends and fairy tales coming from different cultural backgrounds to show how certain motifs appearing there might reflect the archetype. It might be useful thus to take a closer look at the genre. Whether called fairy tales, folktales or wonder tales, they all stem from oral tradition and have commonly been passed on from generation to generation for years, decades or ages. The history of the genre is long and ambiguous, with the term itself causing confusion among scholars. Zipes comments that

[f]olklorists generally make a distinction between wonder folk tales, which originated in oral traditions throughout the world and still exist, and literary fairy tales, which emanated from the oral traditions through the mediation of manuscripts and print, and continue to be created today in various mediated forms around the world. (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 2)

The scholar also points to the fact that “together, oral and literary tales form one immense and complex genre because they are inextricably dependent on one another” (Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 2). Stereotypically, fairy tales are perceived as simple bedtime stories for children but, in fact, originally they were told by adult speakers for adult listeners. Zipes traces the origins of the genre to the beginnings of human communication pointing to people’s universal need and disposition to share knowledge and experiences as well as their struggle to adapt to changing realities or explain the unexplained. In time, the stories told and retold naturally gained new features and were constantly remodeled so as to suit new conditions and contexts. Zipes summarizes the process as follows:

the fairy tale was first a simple, imaginative oral tale containing magical and miraculous elements and was related to the belief systems, values, rites, and experiences of pagan peoples. Also known as the wonder or magic tale, the fairy tale underwent numerous transformations before the innovation of print led to the production of fixed texts and conventions of telling and reading. But even then, the fairy tale refused to be dominated by print and continued to be altered and diffused around the world by word of mouth up to the present. That is, it shaped and was shaped by the interaction of orality and print as well as other technological mediations and innovations, such as painting, photography, radio, and film. (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 21)

This is what Zipes means by saying that fairy tales “breathe and are vigorous,” that they “assume a life of their own” (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 17), and “become a living memetic force in cultural evolution” (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 22). When exploring the genre, it becomes clear that tales when retold are constantly changed and transformed. The changes appeared not only when oral tales underwent the process of transcription and so the language of common people was transformed and appropriated to the language used by literate upper-classes, but also when the printed versions began to be retold in various contexts. The interaction of the tale with the storyteller or the writer and the tale’s ensuing evolution and development seem to be the core of the genre. This multi-dimensional and fluid character of the genre is what makes the fairy tale a rich and exciting but at the same time challenging material for analysis.

When discussing the history of the fairy tale, Zipes underscores the fact that tales first existed in the oral tradition and they did not become an established literary genre until the seventeenth century, though there were other text types that had influence on the fairy tale:

fairy-tale motifs can be found in ancient Indian, Chinese, and Arabic scripts, the Bible, and Greek and Roman literature, and there are numerous fairy-tale features and themes in medieval literature, especially in the Latin poems and stories, courtly romances, *lais*, legends, *fabliaux*, primers, and exempla. However, there was no distinct and distinguishable genre in literature called the fairy tale until the seventeenth century, first in Italy and more importantly in France, because there was no *textual community* to cultivate and institutionalize it and because the vernacular languages had not yet fully developed into literary languages. (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 21)

Zipes mentions the Middle Ages in the Western European tradition as the time when oral storytelling tradition started to be appropriated, many wonder tales being transcribed in Latin and vernacular languages, and “writers began establishing [the genre’s] particular conventions, motifs, topoi, characters, and plots, based to a large extent on those developed in the oral tradition but altered to address a reading public formed largely by the clergy, aristocracy, and the middle classes” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 45). What Zipes seems to emphasize is the fact that though there was a strong tendency at that time, especially on the part of organized religions, to feminize the tradition of oral storytelling and thus marginalize its relevance, “everyone told tales during the medieval and Renaissance periods, and the tales were the property of everyone and anyone” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 54) since most people were illiterate and everyone could participate in the oral tradition. It was only when the literary genre began to take shape that it was almost completely “in the hands of men” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 55), to be more precise, in the hands of educated men. When tracing the literary roots of the genre, Zipes underscores the influence of various medieval marvelous tales and fables such as anonymous *Il Novellino*, Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*, or Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (see Zipes, “Introduction” xxi). The early fairy-tale collections include Giovanni Francesco Straparola’s *The Pleasant Nights* (1551-53) and Giambattista Basile’s *The Tale of Tales* (1634-36). Later, in the 1690s in France the fairy tale was introduced into literary salons as a genre suitable for the upper classes, with writers such as Madame d’Aulnoy, the author of *Les Contes des Fées* (1697), who is credited with originating the very term of fairy tales, and Charles Perrault, the author of *Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals* (1697), whose tales are said to have influenced the works of the Brothers Grimm (see Zipes, “Introduction” xxii).

When analyzing folktales or fairy tales, one is bound to notice that the stories share several characteristic features. It would be impossible to give a complete description of the genre due to existing cultural varieties and its general tendency to change and transform, but there are certain commonly occurring elements that could be specified here. As Zipes explains in the introduction to *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, they usually start with a conflict, when the protagonist is “confronted with an interdiction or prohibition which he or she violates in some way” (xvi). The protagonist is typically an easily identifiable character, who is usually good-natured and naïve and needs to fulfill some tasks, embark on a quest, or face some danger in order to overcome the arising conflict. The quest often involves meeting other characters of different kind, including villains and people with magical abilities or artefacts. In fact, miraculous objects or events are an essential element of the genre and they usually lead to miraculous change of the protagonist or their life. As Zipes comments,

[t]he characters, settings, and motifs are combined and varied according to specific functions to induce wonder. It is this sense of wondrous change that distinguished the wonder tales from other oral tales as the chronicle, the legend, the fable, the anecdote, and the myth; it is clearly the sense of wondrous change that distinguishes the literary fairy tale from the moral story, novella, sentimental tale, and other modern short literary genres. (“Introduction” xviii)

Zipes underscores the fact that the protagonist is to undergo some kind of transformation and often it is a prerequisite to the happy ending of the tale, which usually involves becoming rich, getting married or acquiring essential knowledge. As the scholar aptly observes, “[i]f there is one ‘constant’ in the structure and theme of the wonder tale that was also passed on to the literary fairy tale, it is *transformation* – to be sure, miraculous transformation. Everybody and everything can be transformed in a wonder tale” (Zipes, “Introduction” xvii). Zipes also points to simple morality as a solution to the arising conflict, which actually enables the miraculous transformation:

those who are naïve and simple are able to succeed because they are untainted and can recognize the wondrous signs. They have retained their belief in the miraculous condition of nature and revere nature in all its aspects. They have not been spoiled by conventionalism, power, or rationalism. (“Introduction” xviii)

Following their natural instincts and folk wisdom but also being supported by magical elements and taking advantage of arising opportunities, the protagonist overcomes the obstacles, thus shows their openness to the natural process of change.

Another important characteristic of fairy tales is their implied timelessness and indefinite setting, which seems to add to their “cross-cultural” character that Zipes mentions. Although told by people of different origins, cultures, or times, tales are said to contain recurring motifs, characters or themes that could be understood by and become relevant to the storyteller’s and listeners’ reality. Zipes comments that

the tales have a great cross-cultural appeal that transcends their particularity: they contain “universal” motifs and experiences that writers borrow consciously and unconsciously from other cultures in an endeavor to imbue their symbolical stories with very specific commentaries on the mores and manners of their times. They also address common instinctual drives and social problems that arise from the human attempts to “civilize” these drives. (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 42)

The widespread appeal of the fairy tale seems to be connected with its memetic character. Tales and stories become or contain memes, that is units of cultural transmission that can take different forms but are widely understood and easily gain popularity¹. Apart from this cross-cultural character of the tales, Zipes points to another characteristic feature of the genre, that is their socializing and educational character. Tales, as the scholar observes,

have always played some role in the socialization and acculturation of listeners. Certainly, the narratives were intended to acquaint people with learning experiences so that they would know how to comport themselves or take advantage of unexpected opportunities. The knowledge imparted by the oral wonder tales involves a learning process through which protagonist and listener are enriched by encounters with extraordinary characters and situations. (Zipes, “Introduction” xix)

Additionally, both the protagonist and the listener/reader learn about alternative realities, “a more ideal setting in which the hero can fulfil his or her potential” (Zipes, “Introduction” xix), an alternative world which unlocks new possibilities, new lifestyles, new solutions and a new future. Thus, the knowledge gained helps the protagonist handle the conflict that initiated the story and, simultaneously, equips the listener/reader with certain behavior patterns to be used in the future.

It can be concluded that, though it is impossible to trace the exact history of the genre, the fairy tale had a tremendous influence on European and North

¹ For more on fairy tales and memetics see Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 1-20, and *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 2-16.

American cultures, it captured the imagination of generations regardless of their background and is sure to stir the imagination of generations to come. With its growing popularity, the genre also became the focus of scholarly interest in the nineteenth century and has since inspired numerous studies and generated multiple approaches. As enumerated in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, the most crucial approaches that appeared in the twentieth century include folkloricist, structuralist, literary, psychoanalytic, socio-historicist, and feminist approaches (see McCallum 17-21). The folkloricist method, also called historical-geographic, was started by Julius Krohn, a Finnish folklorist, and continued by Antti Aarne, who developed the early version of what later became known as the Aarne–Thompson classification system of folktales. Stith Thompson was the American folklorist who continued the work of the Finnish scholars of indexing folk tales by type and expanded the classification. The method is based on an assumption that “folk tales have their origins in oral traditions; and that a single definitive version of a particular tale type as it may have existed in the oral tradition might be reconstructed from its variants” (McCallum 17). Its aim was to collect, index and analyze the appearing variants of different tale types. Apart from indexing tale types, Thompson worked on motifs appearing in the tales, which were finally indexed in *The Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1932-36).

Another important method in the study of tales was employed by Vladimir Propp, a Russian scholar, the author of *Morphology of the Folktale* (published in Russian in 1928). Propp used the structuralist approach in his study of Russian folk tales, though, as Zipes observes, “he wrote *Morphology* long before structuralism became popular in the West” (“Toward Understanding the Complete Vladimir Propp” x). In his analysis, Propp focuses on the smallest narrative units, that is motifs, and how they can be defined with reference to their function. His method is based on the following principles:

functions are stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled, so they constitute the fundamental components of a tale; the number of functions known to fairy tale is limited; the sequence of functions is always identical; and all fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure. (McCallum 18)

Assuming that the number of functions is very small while the number of characters almost infinite, Propp points to the two seemingly contradictory aspects of the fairy tale, that is “its amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and color, and on the other hand, its no less striking uniformity, its repetition” (21). Critics of his studies note that Propp focuses on the structural elements of wonder tales that are stable, yet he ignores the meaning, he “excludes social and

historical aspects and variations of form and content from his analysis,” which is, as a result, “reduced to empirical description and observation of manifest content of tales” (McCallum 18). A similar point of criticism is actually made in reference to the folkloricist method, which concentrates on the structure of tales mainly. The work of Max Lüthi, who represents the literary approach, seems to address this issue, as it analyzes both the form and meaning of the tales. With the underlying assumption that meaning is manifested in the style of the tales, Lüthi “analyses the stylistic features and thematic significance of the fairy-tale genre and its historical development” (McCallum 18).

Psychoanalytic approaches, with Freudian and Jungian methods, also contributed to the development of the study of fairy tales. They predominantly focus on the symbolism of the tales, assuming that they contain motifs and symbolic images that reflect the processes taking place within the inner self, processes that shape individual as well as collective human psychology. Among scholars using Freudian psychoanalysis, one can find for example Bruno Bettelheim, the author of *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), in which he examines the importance of fairy tales for children and their proper development. Marie-Louise von Franz, the author of *Archetypal Patterns in Fairy Tales* (1997), represents the Jungian approach, which sees fairy tales as containing archetypes, that is universal symbols and images that come from the collective unconscious and have influence on the process of individuation. Apart from similar methodologies, psychoanalytic approaches “share key assumptions about language, narrative, and the universality of meaning” (McCallum 18). They underline the relevance of folk and fairy tales for human beings with reference to their universal character, tending to ignore, however, their specificity and differences ensuing from categories like class, gender, race, age, or education.

Another group of theorists studying fairy tales is actually the one that, unlike psychoanalytical theorists, focuses on social and historical background. One of these theorists is August Nitschke. Zipes summarizes Nitschke’s approach as follows:

the tales are reflections of the social order in a given historical epoch, and, as such, they symbolize the aspirations, needs, dreams and wishes of common people in a tribe, community, or society, either affirming the dominant social values and norms or revealing the necessity to change them. (*Breaking the Magic Spell* 7)

Nitschke and Gerhard Kahlo, another theorist of the historical and sociological approaches, “trace many folk-tale motifs back to rituals, habits, customs, and laws of pre-capitalist societies and thus see the folk tales as reflecting the social order of a given historical epoch” (McCallum 19). Jack Zipes is another

prominent scholar employing the socio-historical approach in his study of fairy tales. Zipes examines the historical origins of the genre as well as the cultural and historical contexts which have reshaped the meanings of fairy tales through centuries. Furthermore, Zipes argues that due to the fact that folk and fairy tales

have tended to project other and better worlds, they have often been considered subversive, or, to put it more positively, they have provided the critical measure of how far we are from taking history into our own hands and creating more just societies. Folk and fairy tales have always spread word through their fantastic images about the feasibility of utopian alternatives, and this is exactly why the dominant social classes have been vexed by them, or have tried to dismiss them. (*Breaking the Magic Spell* 3)

Apart from historical and cultural factors, Zipes points to ideological and institutional influences on the development of the genre. Ruth Botttingheimer, another scholar concerned with the cultural and historical contexts reflected in fairy tales, explains her method as follows:

tales inevitably leave blank spaces in the text, precisely because certain explanations were unnecessary for the original audiences, who lived in the same historical and geographical spaces and had been exposed to the same socio-cultural values, tropes, and expectations. Those blanks, however, remain in place for modern readers, who must somehow fill them in to understand the stories that contain them. (...) My own strategy for filling in the psycho-social blanks of tales from a distant past is to assemble multiple points of confirmation before speculating about the content that historical tellers/writers and listeners/readers shared. (5)

In general, though culturally oriented approaches are accused of being ignorant of the stylistic and textual side of the tales, they show the richness of the genre with its diversified cultural and historical backgrounds.

Feminist approaches, which have been employed since 1960s, reexamine fairy tales focusing on gender issues, often showing how traditional gender roles are enforced and reproduced in them. Fairy tales are seen by feminist critics as supporting sexist bias by perpetuating negative stereotypes about women, portraying them as either evil characters or naïve and obedient victims. As Karen E. Rowe argues, fairy tales

which glorify passivity, dependence, and self-sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues suggest that culture's very survival depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity. (...) Fairytale, therefore, no longer provide mythic validations of desirable

female behavior; instead, they seem more purely escapist or nostalgic, having lost their potency because of the widening gap between social practice and romantic idealization. (210-211)

Andrea Dworkin, one of the radical feminists, is the author of *Woman Hating* (1974), in which she severely criticizes fairy tales for reinforcing patriarchal attitude to gender roles and power relations, that is male dominance and female subordination. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), which is now seen as one of the key texts of the second-wave feminism, discuss, among other issues, how fairy tales reinforce the negative stereotypes of women. As they argue in their analysis of "Snow White," fairy-tale female characters are shown as either young, naïve and passive angels or old, active yet wicked witches (Gilbert, Gubar 36-44). Apart from criticism, feminist approaches have also produced multiple retellings and adaptations of fairy tales rewritten from the feminist perspective. The retold stories are often modernized, portray empowered independent heroines, promote sisterhood and female bonding, or can include so-called adult content (see for example Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, Tanith Lee's *Red as Blood, or Tales from the Sisters Grimmer*, or Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*).

Many of these approaches are still in use and contemporary critics often mix them and take advantage of their interdisciplinary character. Clarissa Pinkola Estés appears to be one of such scholars. Though predominantly concentrated on Jungian approach to fairy tales, Estés seems to be also influenced by what could be generally called women-oriented approaches. She explains that apart from her interest in fairy tales primarily as a psychoanalyst, there is another aspect of her scholarly work that stems from her personal experiences:

Viscerally, however, I come to stories as a *cantadora*, keeper of old stories. I come from a long line of tellers: *mesemondók*, old Hungarian women who might as easily tell while sitting on wooden chairs with their plastic pocketbooks on their laps, their knees apart, their skirts touching the ground, or while wringing the neck of a chicken ... and *cuentistas*, old Latina women who stand, robust of breast, hips wide, and cry out the story *ranchera* style. Both clans storytell in the plain voice of women who have lived blood and babies, bread and bones. For us, story is a medicine which strengthens and arights the individual and the community. (19)

Her personal experiences as a woman of Latino origin who as a child was adopted and raised in a refugee Hungarian family and community have had a decisive influence on her professional life. As she explains, she has always been interested in stories, tales and legends, which is a consequence of being

surrounded by female storytellers and being immersed in the ethnic oral tradition. Estés seems to feel responsible for keeping the tradition of storytelling coming from the generations of women before her, and *Women Who Run With the Wolves* could be seen an attempt at popularizing the tradition and showing its significance for women in the contemporary world. Estés's explorations of female psychology and the wild woman archetype indicate the scholar's interest in and concern for women in general as well as her affinity for certain ideas and concepts put forward by feminist movements, though she does not identify herself or her work as representing feminism at any point in the book. For example, when exploring the connection between women and the natural world as well as pointing to the parallels between the oppression of women and the oppression of wild nature by patriarchal power structures, Estés shows affinity for ecofeminist ideas. She is aware of the constraining influence that culture and society can have on women as well as the importance of making female voices heard. However, instead of discussing the layers of oppression such as gender, race or class and their influence on the lives of women, Estés attempts to empower women through focus on their individual experiences and their personal connection with the archetype. She does not ignore the differences between women that could stem from their economic status, origin, ethnicity or other variables, but points to certain common aspects of female psyche realization of which could help overcome the constraints and pressures that women are often forced to experience. She seeks to empower women by inspiring them to be creative, to voice their needs and desires, to develop their own sense of self within the social, cultural or historical contexts they live in and to set their selves free from inner and outer foes. More importantly still, she instructs women how to celebrate their femininity and whatever it is that the female identity comprises. Estés's work clearly belongs to the late twentieth century it was written in, yet her approach to fairy tales could be successfully used to analyze the literary output of contemporary female writers as well as those representing previous epochs, which the following book attempts to show. Estés's concept of the wild woman allows one to trace this archetypal pattern in literary works regardless of the times they belong to.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter discusses Estés's vision and understanding of the wild woman archetype as shown through her analyses of selected fairy tales and the archetypal images they contain. To present the author's idea I have chosen six tales that she recounts and interprets in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, that is the tale of Bluebeard, the story of Vasilisa the Wise, "The Ugly Duckling," "The Red Shoes," the tale of La Llorona, and "The Little Match-Girl." The chapter under discussion offers a summary of Estés's analyses, which are also compared to and contrasted with

other existing interpretations of these tales representing a variety of approaches to the genre. Each tale that Estés examines contains archetypal representations of different aspects of female psychology and together the tales give a vivid and comprehensive picture of the wild woman archetype. For example, the tale of Bluebeard is a tale of initiation and it represents the predatory force that tries to constrain the woman and inhibit her identity development. As Estés emphasizes, the monstrous husband can epitomize an external force such as an oppressive culture that controls the woman's behavior completely without letting her decide about her own self, or an internal force such as inner complexes that also distort the process of identity formation. However, by depicting Bluebeard's young wife, who transgresses the restrictions imposed on her and defeats the monster, the tale showcases the archetypal image of a heroine who manages to free herself from the role of a victim. The tale of Bluebeard as well as the story of Vasilisa the Wise and "The Ugly Duckling" are tales of initiation that contain the motif of the rite of passage and illustrate the process of identity formation following the protagonist's successful quest or transformation. On the other hand, "The Red Shoes," the tale of La Llorona, and "The Little Match-Girl" are tales that might be interpreted as containing warning against destructive patterns of behavior that impede, distort or prevent the development of an autonomous female self. "The Little Match-Girl," for example, portrays a heroine who loses self-preservation instincts, who wallows in idle fantasies instead of taking action to change her unfavorable situation. Taking into account all the above-mentioned tales, I conclude the first chapter with an attempt at presenting the essential characteristics of the wild woman archetype as imagined by Estés.

The remaining three chapters of the book are organized in a chronological order and discuss the works of American women writers, starting from the nineteenth century and finishing with the late twentieth century. Most of the works I have chosen to examine were written by well-known authors, widely appreciated by readers and critics alike, and all of them have women as central characters. The selection of writers is not accidental as it includes representatives of major literary trends and movements which arose in specific historical and cultural contexts including, among others, Romanticism, regionalism, realism, modernism, Harlem Renaissance as well as representatives of contemporary literature including African American and Chicano authors. The authors' works, nevertheless, often cross the boundaries of single trends or genres and defy simple classification. My choice of the critically acclaimed female authors of different literary periods was also based on an assumption that the wild woman archetype is not just a niche psychological construct but a potent yet possibly unrealized and unappreciated literary theme. Comparing the works of

American women writers, their characters, themes and motifs to the fairy tales discussed in the first chapter allows to trace the archetypal images they contain and offers a picture of the wild woman archetype as applied in American fiction.

The second chapter is an attempt at tracing the wild woman archetype in the works of the nineteenth-century and the turn-of-the-century American women writers. The first part is devoted to Elizabeth Stoddard (1823-1902) and it examines her first novel *The Morgesons*. In her work, Stoddard challenges the nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood with its sentimental implications and portrays a heroine who refuses to suppress her own desires and instincts in order to become a respectable, virtuous woman. Cassandra Morgeson, the novel's protagonist, represents an archetypal female heroine whose individuation process leading to self-awareness and independence resembles that of Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling." The second part of the chapter focuses on the works of Kate Chopin (1850-1904), a local color writer, who is nowadays appreciated for her representations of Victorian women who strove for independence and freedom to decide about themselves. Owing to her explorations of the nineteenth-century womanhood, including issues related to female sexuality, Chopin is considered a precursor to contemporary feminist writers. Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Chopin's *The Awakening*, could be seen as an archetypal heroine who undergoes a rite of passage that leads to her awakening – she gains awareness of her own situation as a woman in a traditional nineteenth-century community. Due to the ambiguity of the novel's ending, Edna could be compared to heroines who succeed in developing an autonomous self, like the young wife of Bluebeard or the ugly duckling, or to those who fail to grow independent as they get overwhelmed with their desires, like the girl of "The Red Shoes" tale. Additionally, the second part of the chapter includes analyses of Chopin's two short stories, that is "A Pair of Silk Stockings" and "The Story of an Hour," which also contain archetypal images of female quest for knowledge and personal freedom. The third part of this chapter is devoted to Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), another important female voice in American literature. Gilman's short stories analyzed in this chapter depict women who need to fight the oppressive environment in order to regain control of their life and develop an autonomous self. The narrator of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" or Mrs. Beazley of "Mrs. Beazley's Deeds" epitomize the archetypal heroines whose defiance and disobedience become prerequisites to self-awareness and autonomy. The works of Stoddard, Chopin and Gilman discussed in this chapter show considerable similarities as the female characters portrayed in them are often forced to face some sort of oppression, which actually spurs their development. The authors manage to show certain alternatives to the possibilities that the nineteenth-century American society

offered women while pointing to some inevitable dangers connected with such defiant and unconventional behavior.

The third chapter uncovers the wild woman archetype in the works of the early- and mid-twentieth-century American women writers. Willa Cather (1873-1947) is the first author discussed in this chapter. I have chosen Cather's earliest novel, that is *The Song of the Lark*, and her last one, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, in which the author offers a portrayal of two contrasting archetypal heroines. One of them resembles Vasilisa the Wise, who succeeds on her path to independence and becomes a self-aware woman artist, and the other resembles the protagonist of "The Red Shoes," who loses independence and gets trapped in a life which she cannot control. Both stories, however, illustrate the effect of passion, desires and instincts on a woman's life, one by pointing to their role in the process of artistic awakening and developing an autonomous self, the other by portraying the decline of a woman who loses her natural instincts and follows destructive behavior patterns. The second part of this chapter focuses on Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), the central figure of Harlem Renaissance, and examines her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. By depicting a culturally disempowered, yet unconventional, female character Hurston points to the problems that racial, economic and gender inequalities cause in American society as well as their influence on individuals and their personal experiences. Looking from the perspective of archetypal criticism, the novel can be compared to "The Ugly Duckling" and the tale of Bluebeard as it is a story of self-discovery, a struggle to gain voice and a quest for happiness, passion and independent womanhood. The third part of the chapter is devoted to Sylvia Plath (1932-63) and her only novel *The Bell Jar*, which is another account of a young woman's struggle to define her identity. In her search for an autonomous self, during which she gets utterly confused and her mental state worsens leading to a suicide attempt, Esther Greenwood, Plath's heroine, resembles the Little Match Girl who, being devoid of true support and care, chooses to stray from real life and its difficulties into an imagined world, where she finds only illusory relief leading directly to death. The analyses included in this chapter point to gradual changes that occurred in America in the first half of the twentieth century regarding the position of women, who became more conscious of their unequal status as well as the relevance of their own needs and desires. Yet, the heroines still have to fight various forms of oppression, their possibilities, though bigger, are still limited and they are often restrained from developing an autonomous identity.

The fourth chapter focuses on American female writers of the second half of the twentieth century. The first part of this chapter traces archetypal images in the works of Joyce Carol Oates (1938-). Connie of "Where Are

You Going, Where Have You Been?” and Kelly of *Black Water* can be seen as archetypal representations of young inexperienced girls who have not learned yet to recognize and resist destructive influences and, as a result, they are forced to go through brutal rites of passage. Though they lose their childish innocence, they are not given a chance to develop their autonomous selves. The second part of this chapter is devoted to Marilynne Robinson (1947-) and it examines her first novel *Housekeeping*. Robinson’s portrayal of troubled girlhood bears resemblance to Andersen’s “The Ugly Duckling.” By depicting Ruth, an outsider who rejects conventional gender roles and finds acceptance and understanding in her aunt Sylvie, Robinson draws the reader’s attention to the importance of celebrating selfhood, of finding autonomy but also kinship and support. The third part of the chapter focuses on the works of Toni Morrison (1931-2019), whose contribution to American literature is invaluable. As shown in this chapter, Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* and Sula Peace, the protagonist of *Sula*, represent archetypal female characters whose process of growing up and gaining identity is complicated if not altogether thwarted. Both heroines suffer severe traumas as they grow up in the marginalized African American communities where they face all-pervading racism generated by the dominant white culture which supports supremacist ideologies. Morrison questions the dominant standards of beauty, traditional gender roles and norms of behavior imposed on girls and women and warns against their destructive influence, especially on individuals living in unsupportive and unsympathetic environments. The last part of this chapter is devoted to Sandra Cisneros (1954-) and her works of fiction in which she challenges Chicano patriarchy and the traditional Chicana womanhood. Her protagonists can be seen as archetypal representations of young women who are forced to confront abusive and discriminatory realities in their quest to construct their cross-cultural identities. Esperanza of *The House on Mango Street*, for example, is a rebellious girl who refuses to become a passive object of male power and control and as such resembles the young wife of Bluebeard. In her archetypal quest, she acquires a new understanding of herself and gains authority over her own life. As shown in the above-mentioned analyses, the second half of the twentieth century is marked with a significant shift in the way American women writers depicted their female protagonists. These characters still have to face oppression and unequal treatment but what is noticeable is the unprecedented openness and straightforwardness with which writers talk about these issues. The representations of the wild woman archetype seem numerous and relatively easy to trace, which makes one expect that the twenty-first-century fiction is going to continue to give expression to and critically examine archetypal images.

To conclude, the following book shows that the archetype of the wild woman can be traced in the works of American women writers and it is often used by authors that wish to depict women who follow their instinctive natures, who decide to be independent and free of various forms of oppression imposed on them, who are not afraid to accept or even celebrate their otherness. However, these are not the same stories depicted over and over again. Just as in Jung's theory an archetype is just a structure that can be filled with images and ideas, "seen as structuring a *potential* which evolves towards its goal over time" (Samuels 28), the works depicting female experiences examined in this book contain similar archetypal images, yet they are filled with rich and varied contents and are influenced by different cultural and historical factors. These stories could also be seen as having a function similar to that of fairy tales, that is as having the power to inspire the process of change or individuation in the female reader, to resonate with their inner wildish selves, to bring awareness, knowledge and self-realization. From the point of view of literature and the history of literature, the novels and short stories discussed here point to the existence of certain recurring themes and motifs in the works of American women writers that go back as far as the nineteenth century and could be gathered under one umbrella term, that is the wild woman archetype.

CHAPTER 1

Who are you, Wild Woman?: Clarissa Pinkola Estés and her concept of the archetype²

Yet much as we treasure the stories of childhood, we also outgrow them, cast them off, and dismiss them as childish things, forgetting their power not only to build the childhood world of imagination but also to construct the adult world of reality.

Maria Tatar, *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* xii

The metaphorical manner of our speech communication and modes in which we reflect upon ourselves incorporate fairy-tale lore as we frequently seek to make our lives like fairy tales. Though we do not realize it, we bring ourselves closer to people from many different cultures through the cross-cultural connections of the tales, even though we endow them with our own specific individual and cultural meanings as we appropriate and replicate them in diverse ways.

Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 84

² Part of this chapter is based on the material used in my article: Popławska, Marta. "The female self as presented by Clarissa Pinkola Estés in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. The stories of female initiation, intuition and instincts." *Rozprawy Społeczne*, vol. 12. issue 3, 2018: 14-19.

Let us not delude ourselves: every fairy tale and every work of fantasy written and published in our times is a metaphorical reflection about real conditions in our own societies, even when it pretends to be about a distant past or realm that has never existed.

Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 137

In her work, entitled *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, Clarissa Pinkola Estés analyzes legends, tales and myths of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds to examine the wild woman archetype. Her interpretations of the stories, which serve to retrieve and understand the complexities of women's nature, seem to depict the characteristics of the female self that appears in different forms and shapes in many cultures. Exploration of the wild woman archetype, a term coined by C. P. Estés herself, gives the reader an insight into female psyche and soul, which relies strongly on instincts and intuition, which embodies freedom and creative energy, which is rooted in and resembles wild unspoiled nature, as opposed to civilization viewed as oppressive and imposing conformity to social rules and norms of behavior. In her work, Estés applies the methods of archetype analysis consistent with Jungian psychoanalytic approach and compares the wild woman archetype with images appearing in tales and myths. Jung describes archetypes as "a kind of structure of the primary images of unconscious collective fantasies", or "structural elements of the unconscious psyche that give rise to myths" (Meletinsky 44). Although his approach has been criticized for its "lack of precision about the nature of the relationship between myth and archetype" (Meletynsky 45), which leads some scholars to consider every image a myth, or for its ignorance of the social and historical aspects of myths and legends in favor of the psychological dimension, it cannot be denied that it allows us to reconsider our attitude to myths, legends and folktales and appreciate their value as meaning-bearing cultural artefacts. Drawing from Jung's theories, Estés rediscovers the richness of narrative folklore and its fundamental meaning for the modern woman. In her work, the author recounts and interprets, among others, the tale of Bluebeard, the story of Vasilisa the Wise, "The Ugly Duckling," "The Red Shoes," the tale of La Llorona, and "The Little Match-Girl."

BLUEBEARD

The first tale recounted by Estés to be discussed is the story of Bluebeard, which is a well-known folktale whose different versions can be found in many cultures, but whose first written version was published by Charles Perrault in 1697 (Zipes, *When Dreams Came True* 13). In short, it is a story of a noble man who in spite of his obvious monstrosity, in the story depicted in the form of his awe-inspiring ugly blue beard, succeeds in persuading a young girl to marry him. One day prior to his departure, Bluebeard encourages his young wife to enjoy herself in his mansion and do whatever she desires to on condition that she does not open the door of a certain forbidden room. During his absence, however, the young wife disobeys her husband's order and, urged by her older sisters, walks into the mysterious chamber, discovering Bluebeard's secret. The room is filled with bloody corpses of his previous wives. Horrified and determined to avoid the fate of her predecessors, the girl tries to obliterate the traces of her visit to the room by hiding the key, which got stained and started to bleed. Bluebeard, shown as a cunning predator, soon learns about the young wife's misbehavior and wants to murder her. He is, however, prevented by the girl's brothers who manage to come to her rescue in time and kill Bluebeard (Estés 39-43).

Undeniably, there are multiple interpretations of the story and, what is more, it is noticed by critics that the versions appearing in different traditions leave the reader with completely different impressions – the Italian and the English versions produce humorous effects, the German versions are horrific and the French seem dramatic (Hermansson xii). Traditionally, however, the tale's interpretations follow Perrault's moral to the story and revolve around the theme of "the evils of female curiosity" (Zipes, *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* 56), depicted in the figure of the young wife who cannot resist the temptation to enter the forbidden chamber. As Maria Tatar points out,

in his moral to the story, Perrault aligns the intellectual curiosity of Bluebeard's wife with the sexual curiosity of women in general, thus hinting that his protagonist is very much a daughter of Eve. By underscoring the heroine's kinship with certain literary, biblical, and mythical figures (most notably Psyche, Eve, and Pandora), Perrault gives us a tale that willfully undermines a robust folkloric tradition in which the heroine is a resourceful agent of her own salvation. Rather than celebrating the courage and wisdom of Bluebeard's wife in discovering the dreadful truth about her husband's murderous deeds, Perrault and many other tellers of the tale disparage her unruly act of insubordination. (*Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* 147)

Apart from the theme of knowledge acquisition, other possible interpretations include taboos surrounding the acquisition of wealth and high social status by a woman or depicting irrational male evil. Freudian interpretations focus on sexuality where “the key is phallic, while the lock into which it is inserted and the forbidden chamber are both vaginal” (Hermansson xv). Scholars also focus on the wife’s transgression interpreted as sexual infidelity and the following punishment as the husband’s right to execute his unfaithful wife practiced in some cultures. Feminist readings of the tale suggest that the fact that Bluebeard’s wives are slain for looking into the forbidden chamber is a warning for women against becoming excessively acquainted with their own bodies. Furthermore, postmodern feminists see the chamber as representing history, particularly the history of male physical and sexual violence inflicted on women with the support of culture (Hermansson xii-xix). All in all, the most elemental interpretations center around a prohibition and its transgression, and Bluebeard’s wife is seen as “a fairy tale representation of the archetype of female transgressive curiosity” (Hermansson 15).

Estés’s interpretation is consistent with Jungian psychoanalysis in which “the conflict between Bluebeard and his wife is between two warring aspects of the psyche, reconciliation of which is necessary to individuation” (Hermansson xvi). Individuation is a term used by Jung to describe

the process of personality development which leads to the fullest possible actualization of the Self. Individuation means becoming a single, homogeneous being, and, in so far as ‘individuality’ embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one’s own self. We could therefore translate individuation as ‘coming to selfhood’ or ‘self-realization.’ (Stevens 354)

Since it plays a vital role in the development of the self, it is not surprising that individuation is perceived as one of the most fundamental archetypes appearing in Jungian analytical psychology and is said to occur in the majority of folk tales (Garry and El Shamy 263). Therefore, for Estés, the Bluebeard tale is about the captor, or the innate predator who resides in all women’s psyches, who represents an “against nature” force which prevents development, disrupts harmony and “acts in opposition to the instincts of the natural Self” (45). According to Estés, every woman should be aware of the predator’s existence and the knowledge is essential for her to become a mature creature “who is not vulnerable out of naiveté, inexperience or foolishness” (45).

Generally speaking, Estés reads “Bluebeard” as a story of early initiation where a young naïve woman meets the destructive force, the predator, and falls prey to his powers and a cunning game, yet, she discovers the way to

reveal the secret and defeat the monster. The author's first question concerns the reasons for the girl's decision to marry the monster. It seems that having been trained all her life 'to be nice,' the girl disregards her intuition and ignores the danger connected with Bluebeard's monstrosity. Estés calls it "Bluebeardian mesmerisation" and explains it as follows:

When the youthful spirit marries the predator (...) instead of living freely, she begins to live falsely. The deceitful promise of the predator is that the woman will become a queen in some way, when in fact her murder is being planned. (...) He prompts the woman to feel a false sense of freedom. He implies she is free to nourish herself and to revel in bucolic landscapes, at least within the confines of his territory. But in reality, she is not free, for she is constrained from registering the sinister knowledge about the predator. (51)

However, in order to begin and complete this early initiation, the girl must disobey Bluebeard's order, use the key and open the forbidden door, thus revealing the truth about the monster-husband. The key which opens the forbidden door is an important element of Estés's interpretation. In its most basic meaning, it symbolizes entry into knowledge, here it is the knowledge that cannot be ignored or forgotten since the key gets stained with blood which cannot be removed. Additionally, in Estés's version of the tale, the key becomes a tell-tale sign of the wife's transgression as it starts to bleed. For Estés, opening the door is like awakening and the knowledge it brings is an essential step in forming a mature conscious female self. The corpses of beheaded wives can be thus read as "lifeless thoughts and feelings and desires; ones which were once graceful and promising but now are drained of blood" (Estés 53). Estés points to the fact that women fall victim to inner forces such as complexes or addictions which blind them, limit their hopes, block their dreams and impede the process of individuation. Yet, by retelling the story that depicts an inexperienced girl who is able to break the imposed restriction, identify the predator and eventually defeat him, Estés points to the possibility of change which stimulates proper development.

Jungian psychology, however, does not seem to be the only factor influencing Estés's tale analyses. In the introduction to *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, she writes:

My own post-World War II generation grew up in a time when women were infantilized and treated as property. (...) Dancing was barely tolerated, if at all, so they danced in the forest where no one could see them, or in the

basement, or on the way out to empty the trash. Self-decoration caused suspicion. Joyful body or dress increased the danger of being harmed or sexually assaulted. (Estés 3)

The vision of women constrained and belittled by the culture they live in is not alien to the author and it appears that her experiences as a woman brought about a feminist-oriented approach with special sensitivity to the issues of female empowerment, limited access to knowledge or wisdom, inadequate possibilities of development as well as undervalued, misunderstood or simply forgotten natural instincts and powers essential for the maturity of the female self. Thus, it should be noted that the destructive force of Bluebeard constraining the woman is also seen as the one that comes from the outside and takes the form of a peer group, oppressive culture, religion, family or husband (Estés 66). Furthermore, just as Tatar, who points out that many critics, including Bruno Bettelheim, “turn a tale depicting the most brutal kind of serial murders into a story about idle female curiosity and duplicity” (*Hard Facts* 161), Estés notices that “women’s curiosity was given quite a negative connotation, whereas men with the same attribute were called investigative. Women were called nosy, whereas men were called inquiring” (51). Moreover, for Estés the trivialization of female curiosity equals denying women’s intuitions, while “asking the proper questions is the central action of transformation – in fairy tales, in analysis, in individuation” (52).

VASILISA THE WISE

Another tale recounted by Estés is the story of Vasilisa the Wise, which is also a tale of initiation, although, this time it is a fuller initiation in which intuition plays a crucial role. Vasilisa, the main heroine, is called the Wise by Estés, but in other versions she is also known as Vasilisa the Fair or Vasilisa the Beautiful. The story belongs to Russian folklore and its most famous version was written by Alexander Afanasev (Tatar, *Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* 333). Vasilisa is a girl who becomes a half-orphan and has to struggle with various adversities including a jealous and spiteful stepmother and her daughters. Before her death however, Vasilisa’s mother gives her a doll asking the girl to look after it, feed it and give it something to drink in return for help and protection. When the father remarries, Vasilisa suffers injustice and discrimination on the part of her step-family, who hate the beautiful and hard-working girl. One day, during the father’s absence, the stepmother forces Vasilisa to go to the woods to Baba Yaga to fetch some fire. The obedient girl, although frightened, sets off and soon arrives at the witch’s horrifying house, which is made of human

bones and walking on chicken legs. Vasilisa, being exposed to death threats, becomes, in a sense, enslaved by Baba Yaga, who forces the girl to carry out various household chores including cleaning the house, cooking meals, doing the laundry or the almost impossible task of separating poppy seeds from specks of dirt. All the time, Vasilisa is given advice and support by the little doll she carries with her, which is one of the reasons why she finally gets the fire from Baba Yaga and manages to avoid death. She is even rewarded for her courage, as after she returns home happily, the fire she brings from the witch burns the stepmother and her daughters. They die in flames giving Vasilisa freedom from persecution. In some versions of the tale, although not in the one recounted by Estés, in the end Vasilisa also marries the tsar, who is impressed with the girl and her skills (Estés 77-82).

Generally, it seems valid to state that the tale follows the sequence of events as discerned by Vladimir Propp. Jack Zipes summarizes it as follows:

the initiation of a young man or woman that takes the form of a quest; and the visit to the land of the dead and regeneration. In the first sequence, the hero/ine of almost all wonder tales is an initiate who lacks something, must abandon or is banished from home, receives help in the form of advice or magical objects from a donor or donors (a witch, wise woman, or hermit), is tested, and either happily survives or dies. (*Irresistible Fairy Tale* 66)

Traditionally, the tale's interpretations focus on the theme of female obedience, industriousness and family conflicts. Zipes draws our attention to the way the main female protagonists are presented in fairy tales and Vasilisa appears to be one of them. He comments as follows:

Witches and fairies are not the only significant female characters in fairy tales. In fact, beautiful innocent maidens may be more important, but in the hands of male tellers, writers, and collectors, they tend to be depicted as helpless, if not passive. To be good, they must be obedient and industrious. The overwhelming number of oral and literary fairy tales up through the nineteenth century usually stereotype the young heroine (...). It is because of a more general patriarchal view of women as domestics and breeders, born to serve the interests of men. (Zipes, *Irresistible Fairy Tale* 80)

This claim seems to be consistent with what Tatar points out, that "the story of Vasilisa reflects the cultural values of an earlier age, of a time in which excellence in the household crafts was treasured as highly as beauty" (*Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* 173). For Afanasev, on the other hand, who saw fairy tales as carriers of knowledge about the natural world for primitive people, the tale epitomized

“a battle between sunlight (Vasilisa) and storm (the stepmother) and other dark clouds (the stepsisters)” (Tatar, *Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* 334). Critics also emphasize the significance of another female character of the story, that is Baba Yaga, who is one of the most popular figures appearing in Russian folklore to be discussed by literary critics and scholars of other disciplines. She is described as “compelling and dreaded because she forces the protagonists to test themselves while not deluding themselves that there is an easy way to reconcile conflicts” (Zipes, *Irresistible Fairy Tale* 63).

Again, with her Jungian approach, Estés offers a different perspective on the story of Vasilisa. She describes the theme of the tale as “the retrieval of intuition as initiation” (Estés 76), intuition which is viewed as the treasure of the female self, “inner seeing, inner hearing, inner sensing and inner knowing” (Estés 83). Estés writes: “Vasilisa is the story of handing down the blessing on women’s power of intuition from mother to daughter, from one generation to the next” (83). Nevertheless, in order to gain intuition a woman must complete certain tasks which form the whole process of initiation. The first stage is letting the good mother die and accepting her legacy. Estés points to the importance of eliminating all the obstacles inhibiting women’s development and maturity, one of them being an over-protective mother who prevents a girl from facing new challenges. In the story, it is only after her mother’s death that Vasilisa confronts her fears and accepts the challenge to meet Baba Yaga. Yet, Vasilisa also accepts the mother’s legacy, that is the doll. Tatar describes its function as follows:

Whereas Cinderella and her folkloric cousins usually receive assistance from nature (trees, fish, brooks) or from a fairy godmother, Vasilisa is given a cultural artefact, a figure that can be seen as a miniaturized version of herself or as a symbolic form of her mother. While the doll protects and helps Vasilisa, it is also something to be nurtured and cared for, thus strengthening the fact of her own agency in escaping from villainy at home. (*Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* 174)

For Estés, learning to listen to the doll means learning to listen to and rely on intuition, which she describes as “the voice of inner reason, inner knowing, inner consciousness” (92).

The next step in the process of Vasilisa’s initiation is facing Baba Yaga, who represents instinctive nature, the wild feminine as well as “the power of annihilation and the power of the life force at the same time” (Estés 96). Estés draws our attention to the fact that Baba Yaga is fair and “does not hurt Vasilisa as long as Vasilisa affords her respect. Respect in the face of great power is a crucial lesson. A woman must be able to stand in the face of power, because

ultimately some part of that power will become hers” (96). Thus, all the tasks Vasilisa is forced to complete in the witch’s house seem to bring her closer to her own instinctive nature and teach her how to look after her wildish self. When Vasilisa completes all the tasks successfully, she finally gets what she came for – the fire. Estes comments on this part of the tale as follows: “[w]hen the Yaga gives Vasilisa a lighted skull, she is giving her an old-woman icon, an ‘ancestral knower,’ to carry with her for life. She is initiating her into matrilineal legacy of knowing” (111). Here again apart from the conventional interpretation of the tale’s moral, that is if you are good and polite, listen to the wise and use your own intuition you will be rewarded, but if you are unkind and vicious, like the stepmother and her daughters, you may be duly punished, Estés offers us yet another feminist-oriented reading. She writes: “another way to strengthen connection to intuition is to refuse to allow anyone to repress your vivid energies... that means your opinions, your thoughts, your ideas, your values, your morals, your ideals” (Estés 118). It appears then that Estés perceives the story as that of female liberation presenting the protagonist’s passage from a subservient position to self-reliance and maturity.

THE UGLY DUCKLING

“The Ugly Duckling” is a tale written by Hans Christian Andersen. It has enjoyed international fame and has had many adaptations, including opera and animated films, ever since it was published in 1843. It tells a story of a little bird born on a farm in the family of ducks. However, because of his different appearance, the poor bird becomes a target of verbal and physical abuse for other animals. Even the duck mother, who at first tries to protect her child, eventually forces the ugly duckling to leave the farm. Alienated and abandoned, the animal tries to survive the upcoming winter. He meets wild geese, or is taken home by an old woman, yet wherever he goes the ugly duckling feels unwanted and lonely. After entire winter spent at struggling to find some company and a home to live in, the bird feels miserable and seems completely dejected. When seeing a flock of beautiful swans, the ugly duckling chooses to be killed by them rather than to spend another season in solitude. Surprisingly, when the swans accept his company, he realizes that he has matured into a majestic white swan and is no longer an ugly duckling (Estés 178-183).

This classic story does not seem to cause much disagreement among academics as far as its main motifs are concerned. Generally, by showing a metamorphosis of a taunted ugly duckling into a beautiful swan, the story “celebrates the triumph of the underdog” (Tatar, *Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*

289). It is a tale of comfort for all those who are ridiculed and teased, who feel lonely and unappreciated, who suffer because they are different and unwanted. What is interesting, unlike other fairy tale heroes, the duckling does not have to do anything to undergo the dramatic change, there are no grueling or impossible tasks to complete. As Tatar points out,

Andersen suggests that the ugly duckling's innate superiority stems from his being of a different breed. Unlike the other ducks, he has been hatched from a swan's egg. This implied hierarchy in nature – majestic swans versus the barnyard rabble – suggests that dignity and worth, along with aesthetic and moral superiority are determined by nature rather than by accomplishment. (*Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* 289)

On the other hand, it can be said that the duckling's endurance and resilience are actually tested and so the tale "also promotes a cult of suffering, one that sees virtue in physical distress and spiritual anguish" (Tatar, *Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* 289). What is more, "The Ugly Duckling" is seen as a story containing implicit suggestion that faith in God is essential to survive, to succeed and, as Zipes points out, Andersen seeks to "demonstrate that there is such a thing as intelligent design. The duckling must have faith to overcome all the obstacles in his life so that he can triumph in the end" (*When Dreams Came True* 124). Zipes also observes that the tale is generally seen as "a camouflaged autobiography" of Andersen, whose life was a painful and bumpy path from poverty through failures and humiliation to literary success and social appreciation (*Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* 14). What is interesting, although the author experienced and understood the problems of class struggle he still "expresses a clear disdain for the common people's lot and explicitly states that to be humiliated by the upper class is worth more than the trials and tribulations one must suffer among the lower classes" (Zipes, *Art of Subversion* 98). At the end of the tale, when the ugly duckling's frustration and weariness reach climax, he decides to face the beautiful swans risking being killed. It seems to be related to Andersen's lifelong complex of his low-class origin combined with genuine admiration for the elites and their lifestyle. Yet, although the similarity of the tale's plot to the author's own life experiences is striking, Zipes also argues that it should not be the only key to the tale's analysis as it would clearly limit and impoverish the complexity of possible interpretations (*When Dreams Came True* 119).

Estés's analysis of the tale also revolves around the theme of the outcast who suffers because of the circumstances beyond his/her control. With her focus on women, Estés observes that girls who "display a strong instinctive nature" (183) are often typical ugly ducklings who do not match the surrounding

environment. They are curious, creative, have artistic inclinations or do not conform to widely accepted female behavior patterns, instead they are seen as eccentrics who need to be properly socialized and domesticated. Estés, like other critics, comments that “exile begins through no fault of one’s own” (184) yet, growing up in a family or culture which precisely defines expectations as to desirable features but does not acknowledge the difference distorts the duckling’s self-perception, and undermines self-esteem. Thus, instead of realizing she simply does not match, the girl starts sincerely believing she is ugly and suffers rejection. Estés draws the following conclusion:

The most destructive cultural conditions for a woman to be born into or to live under are those that insist on obedience without consultation with one’s soul, those with no loving forgiveness rituals, those that force a woman to choose between soul and society, those where compassion for others is walled off by economic tiers or caste systems, where the body is seen as something needing to be ‘cleaned’ or as a shrine to be regulated by fiat, where the new, the unusual, or the different engenders no delight, and where curiosity and creativity are punished and denigrated instead of rewarded, or rewarded only if one is not a woman. (187)

This interpretation, which draws clearly from feminist movements, points to the cruelty of oppressive culture inflicted on girls and women. Where Andersen saw class struggle, Estés seems to notice the problem of women’s natural instincts being limited or suppressed.

Another aspect of the tale that Estés emphasizes is the role of the mother in the ugly duckling’s life and development. She observes that the mother “is divided emotionally, and as a result collapses, and withdraws her caring from the alien child. Although initially she tries to stand firm, the duckling’s “otherness” begins to jeopardize the mother’s safety in her own community” (Estés 186). The mother seems unable to defy the group she belongs to as she needs acceptance herself. She is either too weak or too immature to fight for herself and her child. Estés states that “when a mother is forced to choose between the child and the culture, there is something abhorrently cruel and unconsidered about that culture” (189). In addition, the mother has no support from either the father of the child or other women who could empathize with her in this situation. First of all, pointing to the absence of the father figure in the story, Estés argues against perceiving the mother as the only parent responsible for the child’s upbringing. Secondly, Estés points to the importance of sisterhood and the idea of women supporting other women. The analyses looking at the tale from the male perspective clearly ignore this aspect, suggesting implicitly that it is natural for the mother duck to isolate herself from and banish the child

because of its otherness. Estés, on the other hand, says that the mother might be lacking female support and encouragement, which could give her strength, or “[s]ometimes the frail mother is herself a swan who has been raised by ducks. She has not been able to find her true identity soon enough to benefit her offspring” (193).

Estés also appreciates the positive side of the exile noticing that “it is worse to stay where one does not belong at all than to wander about lost for a while and looking for the psychic and soulful kinship one requires. It is never a mistake to search for what one requires” (199). It seems that exile might not only strengthen the outcast but also free one’s true nature. Here, what is seen by Tatar as “a cult of suffering” is recognized by Estés as an opportunity to change, to sharpen the instincts and to develop the wild female identity. Furthermore, what is seen by Zipes as “an intelligent design” and the necessity of faith on the way to success is recognized by Estés as women’s natural longing and passion for wild nature and their own wild kind. Actually, Estés compares “ugly duckling” women to wild nature – they must withstand, persist and survive, and when the spring comes, they can blossom into new life (203). Therefore, it can be said that Estés sees the ugly duckling as symbolizing the need of an individual to find the place of belonging and to be accepted as well as the instinctive power of wild nature to survive.

THE RED SHOES

The next tale analyzed by Estés is a tale of lost instincts entitled “The Red Shoes,” originally written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1845 (Zipes, *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* 417). It is a story of a poor orphaned girl (in Andersen’s version called Karen), who is adopted by a wealthy old lady. The woman takes the girl to her house and gives her everything she needs but expects her to be polite, well-mannered and obedient. Among many other things she is gifted with, the girl receives a pair of beautiful red shoes as a substitute for her old hand-made ragged red shoes. She is impressed by the shoes to such an extent that she ignores the old lady’s order and wears the shoes to church on Sunday. One day she meets a strange-looking old soldier who comments on the girl’s footwear. Soon after, her shoes start to move around and dance even against the girl’s will. When the unhealthy fascination with the shoes fades away, the girl realizes her mistake, but it is too late. The shoes will not come off. Terrified and completely exhausted from this terrible dance, the girl finally decides to have her feet cut off. She learns a painful lesson as her life gets miserable after becoming disabled (Estés 232-235).

Although Estés's version of the tale differs in several details, especially as far as the ending is concerned (the author neglects Andersen's Christian motif of Karen going to heaven), the core and the traditionally interpreted moral of the story stay unchanged. It could be generally said that "The Red Shoes" tale revolves around the themes of vanity and selfishness (the girl seems blindly absorbed in the beauty of the red shoes), disobedience and conformity to social roles (when living with the old lady the heroine is expected to follow orders, but she disregards the old lady's request not to wear the shoes to church) as well as social class aspirations (she acquires higher social status after being adopted by the rich old lady). Yet, it cannot be denied that the major symbol of the story, that is the red shoes, provokes multiple interpretations both positive and negative. As Hilary Davidson writes,

red shoes synthesize multiple and ambiguous cultural codes. The meanings and conflicts around the combination of a color and footwear are highly charged as a cultural marker. The color red represents life and fertility in European and Asian traditions, but it also has associations with danger, war and death. Red is the color of the extremes of humanity, strong emotions, magic and religious experiences. (...) The highest ranks of the Catholic Church wear red vestments, but it is also the color of red-light districts, scarlet women and the Devil. The ambivalence between love and war, magic and religion, nobility and vulgarity, creates fundamental tensions in the use of this color. (273)

The shoes may be thus seen as manifesting passion and sexuality and the unrestrained dance as a form of bodily expression, which could be, on the one hand, perceived as positive suggesting freedom and mobility, and on the other hand, inappropriate for a well-behaved girl and thus severely punished. It is noted by scholars that "Andersen's productive work takes place within a male social order, and Andersen seems to never tire of brutally punishing female figures for disrespecting its laws" (Zipes, *When Dreams Came True* 134). Clearly, Karen is portrayed as a "bad" female character who must do penance for her defiant behavior. Interestingly, it is observed by some critics that "this association has proved to be an enduring cultural idea, with red shoes denoting women who transgress against acceptable feminine norms" (Davidson 277).

Estés criticizes the harmful influence of restrictive society on women and her reading of the tale's major symbol is rather negative. The tale itself is seen by the author as a warning against various traps waiting for the wild female self which lead to the loss of natural instincts. Estés comments:

the loss of the hand-made red shoes represents the loss of a woman's self-designed life and passionate vitality, and the taking on of a too-tame life. This eventually leads to loss of accurate perception, which leads to excess, which leads to loss of feet, the platform on which we stand, our basis, a deep part of our instinctual nature that supports our freedom. (236)

By the “too-tame life” Estés means living with the rich old lady, who is depicted as “the rigid keeper of collective tradition, an enforcer of the unquestioned status quo” (244), and being well-mannered or, more generally, conforming to the rules set by the community or culture. More importantly, it also means yielding to the temptation of an easy and pleasant life while actually ignoring one's own true needs and desires. Estés claims that women often resign from ambitious aims and aspirations to return to their old comfort zones where they feel safe and protected. It could also mean standing by abusive partners, employers or groups with helplessness and resignation. In consequence, women try to compensate for their passivity, submissiveness, “overdomestication,” or loss of self-expression and might become involved in “excessive behaviors” (Estés 248). In the story ‘excess’ is represented by dancing without control and it can denote all types of uncontrollable and overpowering addictions or obsessions such as “chronic negative thinking, poor relationships, abusive situations, drugs or alcohol” (Estés 268). All these behaviors, although at first they may seem to bring satisfaction or relief, result in losing control of one's own life and eventually lead to pain, trauma and self-destruction. The brutal ending is not, as Estés points out, uncommon for folklore and, typically, it contains a lesson that “a woman's meaningful life can be pried, threatened, robbed or seduced away from her unless she holds on to or retrieves her basic joy and wild worth” (236). It could be concluded that for Estés the red shoes represent unconscious destructive patterns of behavior, injured instincts and distorted perception of the surrounding world.

LA LLORONA – THE WEEPING WOMAN

Another tale, this time of Mexican origin, is the story of La Llorona, who is also called the Wailing or Weeping Woman. It is a legend commonly told in Hispanic cultures which, because of its widespread popularity, has numerous, very often quite dissimilar versions (see Fuller, Candelaria, Perez). The common thread of these renderings is the ghost of a young beautiful woman whose children got drowned in the river and, as a result, she keeps searching for them plodding in the waters and wailing. She is usually described as a tall thin pale woman with exceptionally long hair wearing a white dress. In some versions of

the tale, having been abandoned by her rich lover, the father of her children, the poor woman drowns her offspring in the river in a fit of madness and rage. In some, she kills her children in an act of revenge when she learns that her lover plans to marry another woman and take the children away from her. In other versions of the legend, the children get drowned as a result of neglect on the part of the mother who is concerned more with seducing rich gentlemen than looking after her own children. In most versions, when she realizes what has happened, the devastated woman drowns herself as well. Yet, it turns out that her soul cannot enter heaven unless she finds the souls of her offspring. In consequence, the spirit of the woman is forced to roam the rivers in an eternal search for the drowned children. Her apparition is, therefore, frequently seen sweeping the riverbeds with her long arms and crying for the lost children. The ghost is believed to be dangerous for people who wander lonely close to the rivers, lakes or even abandoned roads especially after dark and the tale is customarily treated as a warning for children not to stray away from home unattended as they might be kidnapped and killed by La Llorona.

Apart from being a scary bedtime story with a clear warning for children, La Llorona tale is often described as referring to the history of Mexico. As Amy Fuller puts it,

[t]he origins of the legend are uncertain, but it has been presented as having pre-Hispanic roots. La Llorona is thought to be one of ten omens foretelling the Conquest of Mexico and has also been linked to Aztec goddesses. In the Florentine Codex, an encyclopedic work on the Nahua peoples of Mexico completed during the 16th century by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, we find two Aztec goddesses who could be linked to La Llorona. The first is Cihuacoatl (Snake-woman), described as ‘a savage beast and an evil omen’ who ‘appeared in white’ and who would walk at night ‘weeping and wailing’. She is also described as an ‘omen of war’. This goddess could also be linked to the sixth of ten omens that are recorded in the codex as having foretold the Conquest: the voice of a woman heard wailing at night, crying about the fate of her children. (40)

Just like a mother crying after her lost children, La Llorona laments the Indian people who are to be conquered by Spaniards and as such she becomes “the symbol of the Mexican sadness and suffering as a nation, due to the Spanish conquest” (Van Hecke 63). She is also linked to La Malinche, who, in turn, is a historical figure, one of the slave women given to Cortés during the Spanish conquest, the mother of his first son. Both women’s stories have some essential elements in common, the strongest being betrayal and suffering. However, Domino Renee Perez argues that the figures merge in cultural consciousness

because of the mistaken fictionalized idea that La Malinche murdered her children. Perez asserts that we should distinguish between La Llorona and La Malinche as “each represents a different historical moment. One foretells the future; the other is shaped by that future” (30), which is the Spanish conquest.

Some interpretations of the legend draw our attention to social class disparities and point to La Llorona as representing the poor who will always fight a losing battle against the rich or the subjugated indigenous people who will stay inferior to the colonizers (Perez 29). Feminist interpretations, on the other hand, point to the stereotypical presentation of La Llorona as a woman who must be punished for her desires and the will to decide about her own life or control the situation, for being a subject, not an object. As Cordelia Candelaria points out, the legend functions as folklore

populist propaganda intended to reinforce the patriarchy (...) [and] it teaches that girls get punished for conduct for which men are rewarded; that pleasure, especially sexual gratification, is sinful; that female independence and personal agency create monsters capable of destroying even their offspring; that children are handy pawns in the revenge chess of female jealousy; and other lessons of scapegoat morality. (113)

In contrast, some more radical analyses suggest that wailing is La Llorona’s only weapon and should be perceived as an act of resistance against male superiority and not as a sign of feminine weakness and helplessness. All these varied possibilities of interpretation seem to account for the popularity and presence of the legendary figure in multiple past and contemporary references, adaptations and revisions. Yet, La Llorona’s rich and flexible symbolism might also lead to deterioration of its potency. Perez aptly comments:

La Llorona is used now around the world to sell or promote everything from coffee and women’s underwear to films and academic conferences. (...) She appears in poems and short stories. Her tragedy is used to promote tourism in New Mexico and sell T-shirts on the Internet. (...) The sheer number and variety of these productions can be overwhelming, and some may conclude that the Llorona they know is unrecognizable, or decide that La Llorona’s function in these works is indeterminate and, therefore, irrelevant. For many people who hear and pass on the story, La Llorona was condemned to suffer, not to become a celebrity. Others may worry that she is losing her ability to illustrate or convey the specific moral, social, or political concerns of Mexicans and Mexican Americans who continue to disseminate the lore. (3)

The multiplicity of versions is also recognized by Estés who, apart from the more traditional version of the tale, recounts one in which La Llorona’s

children are born deformed because of the river's polluted waters. This time it is a story of a woman who falls in love with a rich factory owner whose factories mercilessly pollute the river causing harm to people living next to it, including La Llorona. When she gives birth to disabled twins, the rich man rejects them and, as a result, the heart-broken woman lets the children drown. She is presented here as a destitute and helpless mother who chooses to protect the children from the cruelty of the world by killing them. As in other versions, La Llorona commits suicide and is severely punished for her desperate act – she is condemned to search the river endlessly looking for the children (Estés 327). Applying a mixture of Jungian psychoanalysis and feminist-oriented approach, Estés focuses on the motif of women's creative abilities and their wild creative force. Her interpretation of La Llorona revolves around the river as symbolizing creativity, fertility and energy and its pollution is seen as "the destruction of the fertile feminine" (Estés 328). When enumerating possible reasons for the river's contamination, the author emphasizes the fact that it could come from the woman's inner self as well as the outer world. The pollution coming from the outside that "poisons the psyche" may take the form of other people's negative opinions and comments concerning the woman's creative work or more generally a culture that devalues the feminine (Estés 329). Estés also calls our attention to the destructiveness and toxicity of the inner factors which include our complexes, lack of self-confidence, being disorganized, constant excuses of every kind, over-responsibility. The rich man is interpreted by Estés as "a malignant animus" who "takes over, prevents vital new life, and insists on dominating the life of the psyche" (335). The result is that the woman starts to denigrate her own skills, abilities and work and she wastes her natural gifts on unproductive and unimaginative jobs or duties. The pollution of the river metaphorically traps the woman and prevents her from having a fruitful, creative life. Estés concludes her analysis suggesting that La Llorona is a tale which shows us what not to do, how not to behave, which actually is in line with the traditional educational character of the story with its vivid moral. In her explorations, however, Estés insists that it is women's creative energy that is in danger and should be consciously protected regardless of the difficulties or costs appearing on the way (342-345).

THE LITTLE MATCH GIRL

"The Little Match Girl" is another story written by Hans Christian Andersen that brought him fame and, just like "The Ugly Duckling" or the tale of "The Red Shoes," comes from the golden period of Andersen's creative life

(Lederer 30). It is a very sad tale in which a child dies of cold. It is winter time, the last day of the year, and a poor girl struggles to survive by selling matches in the streets of a city. She is hungry, in need of warm clothes and proper shoes, but she cannot go back home since she will be punished by her father. She barely sells any matches as people pass her indifferently. In a desperate attempt to make herself warm she starts to light one match after another. Yet, the heat of one match is weak and short-lasting, it cannot give her protection against the freezing air. The child is so cold that she starts to have visions of a warm house with a burning stove, a table full of delicious food and finally of her grandmother hugging her warmly and assuredly. Unfortunately, the visions vanish the moment a match burns out. Time after time the poor girl escapes into this imaginary world and is forced to come back to the fierce reality. Eventually, the child loses contact with reality but stops feeling the pain, the cold, the hunger. The next day a body of a dead child is found lying in the street, frozen (Estés 346-347).

“The Little Match Girl,” also known as “The Little Match-Seller,” is one of the stories which gave Andersen a reputation of a pessimistic writer. Celia Catlett Anderson comments that

[m]any of Andersen’s heroes and heroines, though they suffer greatly, remain true to their ideals. If not rewarded, neither are they defeated. And the true triumph of the spirit, after all, consists not in winning the prince or princess, the kingdom or riches, or even immortality, but in being worthy of the winning. (36)

The little girl’s implied innocence makes her suffering undeserved and completely needless. Yet, Andersen seems to emphasize the fact that the girl’s death, although tragic, was peaceful and quiet, and that there was a smile on her face making her look almost happy, which people who found her the next day could not understand. Zipes argues that the tale can be classified as evangelical literature, one of “Christian allegorical fairy tales that celebrated the intelligent design of God” (*When Dreams Came True* 124), where the little girl is depicted as a devout, almost saint-like character who is prepared for self-sacrifice. Tatar also stresses the fact that the little girl is doomed to stay “little” forever as “rescue comes only in the form of divine intervention” (*Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* 278). Yet, she also points to the fact that the protagonist is portrayed as a victim and the tale could be read as “a powerful critique of social inequities” (Tatar, *Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* 279), where a poor underprivileged child dies because of neglect on the part of the cruel father as well as the well-off but unsympathetic society.

For Estés “The Little Match Girl” is a tale of the loss of the self-preservation instinct, which might be the result of injured or distorted instincts in general. Instead of taking some action, the child chooses to stay in the cold and fantasize about a warm house, warm food and warm, loving people. Estés points to the detrimental effect of these idle fantasies, which instead of bringing real nurture and support keep the child in an illusory ephemeral comfort, instead of leading to awakening bring only “the sleep of complacency, the sleep of numbness, (...) the sleep of denial” (354). Once again Estés underlines the role of proper environment in the process of fostering the wild woman within. The author claims that “[b]eing with real people who warm us, who endorse and exalt our creativity, is essential to the flow of creative life. Otherwise we freeze. (...) The Match Girl is not in an environment where she can thrive. There is no warmth, no kindling, no firewood” (Estés 349). With no genuine support of family, friends or community it is easy to lose focus, hope and the ability to fight the hostile conditions, it is easy to get trapped in illusions instead and lead a meaningless life full of self-sacrifice and suffering.

WHO ARE YOU, WILD WOMAN?

When examining Estés’s concept of the wild woman archetype as reflected in the fairy tales one is bound to observe certain recurring traits and motifs. On the one end of the axis one can find intuition, instincts, natural wisdom, strength, passion, vitality, energy, desires, creativity, self-expression, activity, inspiration, freedom, self-development, meaningful life, awareness, reality, courage, confidence. On the other end there is anxiety, depression, emptiness, passivity, useless fantasies, docility, submissiveness, negative complexes, obsessions, abuse, self-destruction, violence and oppression. The wild woman is the one who acknowledges the value of the first group of traits and qualities while being aware of the dangers the second group poses. Her life seems to be a constant struggle to find way to the first group and avoid the second. The archetype represents a woman who is aware of her strong independent self as well as her tight links with the natural world. She might be a girl or a young woman learning to follow her instincts, or an adult woman trying to find a way out of the traps she has fallen into. She is usually a person who is going through the process of awakening, a rite of passage, a life-changing experience, someone who completes a long and arduous quest, which might result in gaining knowledge as well as freedom. She becomes creative and learns to protect her creative energies from inner and outer foes. Understanding the significance of self-expression, she refuses to be silenced. She no longer feels obliged to

follow oppressive norms or rules or stick to abusive people and unsupportive environments. Instead, she finds pleasure in voicing her needs and desires, whether they are of spiritual or bodily character. She follows her instincts and intuition, which she nourishes properly. She understands her connection to the generations of women before her and appreciates the kinship she finds in other women. She is not ashamed of being a woman and understands that femininity does not necessarily presuppose weakness. She is not ashamed or afraid of taking care of herself. She celebrates her selfhood and womanhood.

CHAPTER 2

The wild woman archetype in the works of the nineteenth-century and the turn-of-the-century writers

The following chapter discusses the works of the nineteenth-century and the turn-of-the-century American women writers including Elizabeth Stoddard, Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The three subchapters it contains offer analyses of the novels and short stories that present female protagonists who make attempts at challenging strict norms of behavior expected of them in the nineteenth-century American society and pave their way to autonomy and self-awareness. Examined from the perspective of such fairy tales as “The Ugly Duckling,” the tale of Bluebeard or “The Red Shoes,” the works could be seen as containing archetypal images of female quest for knowledge and autonomous selfhood, which, however, is not always easy or successful. Cassandra Morgeson of Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*, Edna Pontellier of Chopin’s *The Awakening* or the narrator of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” are examples of female heroines who need to face the oppressive environment in order to regain control of their life and develop an autonomous self, they are women whose defiance and disobedience become prerequisites to self-discovery and longed-for independence.

2.1. ELIZABETH STODDARD'S NINETEENTH-CENTURY REBEL GIRLS

Elizabeth Stoddard was an American poet and novelist who attempted to defy conventions both in her life and her writing. Embracing the potential of Romanticism, especially that of self-expression, she endeavored to redefine American feminine identity. Though limited to the observation of the middle class of American society, her works challenge the nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood with its sentimental implications. As Mahoney points out, "Stoddard saw nineteenth-century Americans as more sexual, more turbulent, and more fiery than they were later portrayed" (xvii), which points to the unconventionality of the author. In *The Morgesons* Stoddard does not want her heroine to suppress her own desires and instincts in order to become a respectable, virtuous woman. On the contrary, she makes her confront and accept them as a means of achieving self-awareness and becoming an independent individual. Zagarell points to the contrast between Stoddard and other female writers of her era:

Whereas contemporary American women writers of fiction and journalism almost uniformly identified more as professionals than as artists, she embraced a male-derived Romantic model of self-as-artist in which passion and language, desire and creativity, fused. Her sense of herself as a woman was essential to her, and while her conception of that womanhood included, uneasily, a yearning for ties with other women, it was grounded fundamentally in a Romantic commitment to the primacy of individual experience that was deeply at odds with the domestic, religious, and communitarian tenets of Victorian American womanhood. In her writing and in her life (at least as constructed in her letters), the cornerstones of the subjectivity to whose pursuit Stoddard committed herself were sexuality, self-expression, and a quest for agency. (22)

Stoddard and her works defy simple classifications due to the author's versatility, creativity and freedom of self-expression. It is worth noticing that Stoddard "not only complicates our models of nineteenth-century American women writers but also, like many in her cohort, pursues questions that continue to speak across the distance of time" (Zagarell 32). This could also be the reason why her works did not result in spectacular success in the writer's lifetime, but had to wait till the twentieth century to be rediscovered and appreciated anew.

THE MORGESONS

The Morgesons (1862), Stoddard's first novel, is a work of fiction that openly criticizes the cult of virtuous womanhood which dominated the nineteenth-century idea of a woman and her role in society. The narrative portrays the process of a young girl's self-discovery, her growing maturity and independence in the face of various obstacles and boundaries, including the nineteenth-century cultural norms and expectations. Cassandra Morgeson can actually be looked at as an archetypal female character whose road to self-awareness and independence resembles that of Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling." What is more, following the story of Cassandra, the reader gets an insight into the life of the whole family, including that of her younger sister Veronica, who in turn might be compared to the heroine of Andersen's "The Red Shoes," as well as the workings of American culture, with its Puritan heritage as one of the sources of influence. Cassandra is one of Stoddard's heroines who defy stereotypes and represent female individuality and self-awareness. As Lynn Mahoney observes:

Adapting the romantic objective to women, [Stoddard] composed prose that explored the possibilities open to bourgeois women at mid-century if they dared articulate their desires. Stoddard rejected representations of passionless women sacrificing their happiness for the sake of others. Her heroines challenge prevailing paradigms of sentimental womanhood. They embrace their sexuality, explore the limits of their world, and, despite flouting convention, achieve happiness. In Stoddard's fiction, women who fail to challenge the boundaries of their culture are doomed to unhappy, unfulfilled lives. (xii)

Her protagonists, including Cassandra, are not the rebels of the twenty-first century doing whatever they can dream of with disregard of all rules, still, they do question the limited role of a woman while their identities are constructed "on a continuum which [mixes] submission and rebellion. Their lives [are] a process of negotiation – with their culture, with their friends and family, and with themselves" (Mahoney xiv). It is also noted that by portraying rebellious Cassandra, "Stoddard hoped to leave her contemporaries puzzled and doubtful, pushing them to confront the cultural construction of their own identities" (Mahoney 24). The result was that the novel was not widely appreciated by the public and Stoddard was perceived as "one who violated the laws of both religion and her female nature" (Croce 358).

The Morgesons can be classified as a Bildungsroman with its conventional depiction of a young character's growth. Yet, as critics observe, Stoddard did not seem to be satisfied with sticking to the conventions of the genre only, and

“many individual scenes are compelling because of an intensity of desire and expression that has no direct bearing on narrative line and often exceeds the narrative economy of bildungsroman” (Zagarell 31). In fact, critics indicate that the novel makes use of several writing traditions and genres, including among others “domestic woman’s fiction, feminist bildungsroman, female gothic, and New England gothic, [yet] no single tradition can account for it fully” (Zagarell 32). Pointing to the antisentimental character of the novel, Julia Stern adds that *The Morgesons*, elliptical in style, gothic in plot, and modernist in form, rejects “the literary conventions, affective atmosphere, and moralistic manifest narratives of many works produced between 1850 and 1870 by American women” (107). Acknowledging Stoddard’s eclectic and experimental style, Michelle Ann Abate examines the novel’s association with historical fiction and literary nationalism, in particular with its “engagement with the Salem witchcraft hysteria” (48). The critic points to “various links between Stoddard and Hawthorne”, yet underscores the writer’s need to “establish her own literary voice and even narrative aesthetic” (Abate 60).

Taking into consideration all these possible genres employed by Stoddard and the major motifs present in *The Morgesons*, critics concentrate on the depiction of Cassandra Morgeson, the main heroine of the novel. Mahoney sees Cassandra as “a prototype of assertive womanhood” (64), an autonomous heroine who set example to American women of the nineteenth century, to those women who were willing to reject submissiveness and were instead ready to gain self-awareness. Critics also point to the novel’s discussion of desires, passions and sexuality. Stern, for example, observes that “nearly every major character in *The Morgesons* maintains a troubled relation to desire” (108). Susanna Ryan comments that it is “[a] novel in which everyone seems to be described in relation to his or her appetite” (128). Elżbieta Foeller-Pituch, on the other hand, explores allusions to classical myths in Stoddard’s depiction of Cassandra’s developing identity. However, whether read as a conventional Bildungsroman or not, it cannot be denied that Stoddard’s first novel revolves around the theme of a young girl’s path to maturity and self-awareness and, as such, resonates with “The Ugly Duckling” tale. Andersen’s famous tale depicts an alienated hero who suffers because of being different and, having no support on the part of the closest family, embarks on a journey, becoming an outcast on the quest to discover their identity. The tale finishes with the duckling turning into a majestic swan, a mature creature who finds kinship and their own place in the world.

Much of this plotline can be also found in the story of Cassandra Morgeson, who from her early years manifests an unconventional personality and attitude. The very first line of the novel indicates Cassandra’s unique character: ““That

child,” said my aunt Mercy, looking at me with indigo-colored eyes, “is possessed”” (*Morgesons* ch. 1). Contrary to what is expected of her as a girl, she does not seem to care about her appearance, whether her clothes are clean and neat, she enjoys reading exciting stories of action and adventure that her mother sees as “unprofitable,” and refuses to listen to her mother’s or her aunt’s religious songs or preaching. When reprimanded to greet her grandfather, she offers a brutally honest remark: “I am not fond of my grandfather” (*Morgesons* ch. 3). She comes to school late, happy to miss the New Testament exercise, and is more interested in observing flies than in what is being taught at the moment. Finally, she is expelled from school for misbehavior. Her great-grandfather refers to her as an imp, which seems to reflect her personality accurately – a small lively restless spirit, a little mischievous, defiant and difficult to control. When her mother invites other women for tea, Cassandra comes home three hours late and brings a nest of mice with an intention to train them. What is more, she seems to be aware of the hypocrisy of the pious women, who try to appear ladylike and distinguished while they actually cannot wait to devour the delicacies prepared for the occasion and start gossiping about their neighbors or husbands as soon as possible. When, at another time, her mother is visited by Mr. Park, their neighbor, Cassandra “[grows] lonesome; the life within [her seems] a black cave” (*Morgesons* ch. 4), hearing him discussing the issue of sin and moral penalty and later singing about it. She is an exact opposite of her sister Veronica, who is so ethereal, withdrawn and apparently emotionless, and who often suffers from mysterious illnesses. As Cassandra comments contrasting her younger sister and herself: “[a]s for me, I was as much an animal as ever – robust in health – inattentive, and seeking excitement and exhilaration” (*Morgesons* ch. 6).

Cassandra turns out to be a child that, even if to some extent unintentionally, defies social rules, choosing to spend her days in nature rather than among people who revere all these conventions. Additionally, she is presented as a person who follows her natural instincts, is easily overcome with emotions and enjoys physical sensations:

I amused myself, and passed days on the sea-shore, or in the fields and woods (...) I was moved and governed by my sensations, which continually changed, and passed away – to come again, and deposit vague ideas which ignorantly haunted me. The literal images of all things which I saw were impressed on my shapeless mind, to be reproduced afterward by faculties then latent. (*Morgesons* ch. 3)

As Nakagawa comments when analyzing Cassandra’s conflict with her mother and the society, “Cassandra is more of nature. She is put in touch with life by

the wild sea of Surrey. She always misses and needs to return to the sea even after she grows up, for the wild sea assures her of her instincts" (4). All these aspects of Cassandra's personality and temperament seem to be analogous to the ugly duckling as described by C. P. Estés – a girl with strong instinctive nature, an eccentric who finds it difficult to conform to social norms and is seen by the surrounding environment as in need of proper socialization and domestication. Also, in a similar manner as in Andersen's tale, Stoddard's heroine is sent away from home. She is not expelled nor does she become an outcast in the literal sense, like the ugly duckling, yet she starts a quest that will take her to different places, people and situations, a quest that will gradually fuel her self-awareness and a sense of independence.

Another similarity that Cassandra shares with the ugly duckling is lack of proper motherly nurture and support. Mrs. Morgeson is actually one of the first models of femininity that Cassandra confronts and is clearly dissatisfied with. As Mahoney observes, "[d]isturbed by the evangelical bent of her female relatives, Cass finds feminized space equally onerous. Virtually all the sites of Cass's early rebellions are female spaces – the kitchen, the school, and her 'mother's winter-room'" (35). Those spaces are associated with conventional feminine activities, with "the domestic world of nineteenth-century middle-class women" (Mahoney 35) and instead of giving Cassandra the feeling of safety and support, they become symbols of oppressive rules. Cassandra's mother seems to be unable to accept her daughter's instinctive nature and free spirit or understand her passionate disposition and reliance on the senses and sensual experiences. She is a religious woman with little connection to reality and bodily matters. Stern makes an observation that Mrs. Morgeson is "a mother whose dreamy indifference to both reality writ large and its local unfoldings in the inner lives of her children fosters disassociation rather than nurture" (112). Finally, it is the mother who, persuaded by Aunt Merce, decides to send Cassandra to Barmouth to Grandfather Warren, her own father, who lives following strictly Puritan traditions and lifestyle. Considering it "a good place to tame [her]" (*Morgesons* ch. 6), Mrs. Morgeson wants her daughter to repeat her own experience. As Cassandra narrates: "It was because she wished me to comprehend the influences of her early life, and learn some of the lessons she had been taught" (*Morgesons* ch. 6). Stern refers to the mother's act as "unsympathetic" (108) or even "perverse" (114), which seems to point to the lack of true bond between Cassandra and her mother. When analyzing the role of the mother in "The Ugly Duckling," Estés explains that the mother might be unable to give her daughter proper support because she is an ugly duckling herself. This seems to be true in Cassandra's mother's case, who suffered living

in the world of strict rules and harsh conditions without anyone who would recognize her true needs or understand her nature.

Barmouth is the first place away from home where Cassandra gains experience and it seems more like a punishment than favor that the family assumes to grant Cassandra. Even her younger sister, Veronica, recognizes the dangers connected with the place and warns Cassandra before she leaves Surrey that she will be “stifled” (*Morgesons* ch. 6) if she stays in Barmouth. With Grandfather Warren having no gentleness or tenderness, it clearly is a place where piety takes the form of repression – repression of emotions, physical sensations, human communication and true bonds, individual expression, comfort and any other pleasures of the body. Observing the relationship between Grandfather Warren and Aunt Mercy, Cassandra remarks,

There was constraint between them; each repressed the other. The result of this relation was a formal, petrifying, unyielding system, – a system which, from the fact of its satisfying neither, was kept up the more rigidly; on the one side from a morbid conscience, which reiterated its monitions against the dictates of the natural heart; on the other, out of respect and timidity. (*Morgesons* ch. 7)

The nature of this relationship seems to reflect the essence of Cassandra’s Barmouth experience – formal, rigid and cold, suppressing any natural reactions. She constantly feels cold and hungry. Additionally, the days spent there seem to Cassandra dull and monotonous, without any interesting conversations or exciting activities, her life being “narrowed to that house, [her] school, and the church” (*Morgesons* ch. 10). Going to Miss Black’s school does not turn out to be a better experience. Cassandra fails to fit in with other girls and becomes an object of scorn and ridicule, which leads to misbehavior and even violence. As Nakagawa observes, “Miss Black blamed Cassandra for her faults and deficiencies in order to crush her independent spirit” (5). Eventually, after an incident in which Cassandra falls down and loses consciousness, she is forced to leave Miss Black’s school.

Clearly, Barmouth is not a place where lively and instinctive Cassandra can thrive. Her rebellion seems to be a natural reaction to the conditions she is faced with. As Nakagawa points out, “Stoddard revealed here how Puritanism imprisoned individuals: the denial of one’s well-being entailed denial of sensations and eventually led to the denial of individual self, which conformed with Calvinistic emphasis upon the individual’s sinfulness” (4). Ryan also observes that the time spent in Barmouth is for Cassandra “a regression” (141), rather than development. She does not yield to the repressive atmosphere of Barmouth however. Analyzing the incident in which the grandfather manifests

his cruel and unfeeling side by shooting pigeons living in the pigsty after Cassandra admires their beauty openly and asks him not to kill them, Mahoney points out that it happens because “Grandfather Warren is infuriated by his own inability to suppress Cassandra” (36). The critic concludes that

Stoddard’s depiction of Cassandra’s experiences in Barmouth reflected her explicit rejection of Calvinism and Puritan patriarchy, a theme common to New England novelists. Grandfather Warren not only fails to suppress Cassandra, but, despite the lack of physical and human warmth she experienced, Cass returns from Barmouth even more robust and more womanly than when she set off. (Mahoney 36)

Back in Surrey, Cassandra seems unchanged: “I was still “possessed,” Aunt Merce said, and mother called me “lawless”” (*Morgesons* ch. 12). She also gains peculiar popularity among her peers:

My whims were sneered at, and then followed. Of course I was driven from whim to whim, to keep them busy, and to preserve my originality, and at last I became eccentric for eccentricity’s sake. All this prepared the way for my Nemesis. But as yet my wild oats were green and flourishing in the field of youth. (*The Morgesons* ch. 12)

The year she spends in Barmouth with her cold and strict grandfather does not seem to produce the desired effect. She has not been tamed and her natural instincts are still strong, which Cassandra is aware of and does not feel guilty at any rate about it. As she reflects: “I concealed nothing; the desires and emotions which are usually kept as a private fund I displayed and exhausted. My audacity shocked those who possessed this fund” (*Morgesons* ch. 12). Her own father finds it difficult to discipline Cassandra and is unsure when it comes to her place in the world: “[h]ome, father said, was [Veronica’s] sphere. All that she required, he thought he could do; but of me he was doubtful. Where did I belong? he asked” (*Morgesons* ch. 12).

The next stage of Cassandra’s quest is her stay with her distant relatives Alice and Charles Morgeson in Rosville, where she is supposed to complete her education. The experience in Rosville turns out to be completely different from the one she gained in Barmouth. Her relatives are not as concerned with religious matters as Grandfather Warren or her aunt, and the atmosphere of the town is clearly not so stifled. As Cassandra narrates,

The secular concerns of life engaged the greatest share of the interests of [Rosville's] inhabitants; and although there existed social and professional dissensions, there was little sectarian spirit among them and no religious zeal. (...) Surrey and Barmouth would have howled over the Total Depravity of Rosville. (*Morgesons* ch. 15)

While Barmouth stands for piety, spiritual matters and restrictions, Rosville represents secular society, materialistic attitude and greater freedom. In contrast to Mrs. Morgeson and Aunt Mercy, Alice offers Cassandra a model of femininity that does not revolve around piety and disregard for material matters. She turns out to be a caring mother for her three children, a perfectly organized, dutiful housekeeper and a sociable, well-liked neighbor, a perfect example of “a good bourgeois wife” (Nakagawa 9). Cassandra quickly adjusts to her new comfortable life and seems to be consciously taking advantage of all the pleasures that life in Rosville offers:

I conformed to the ways of the family with ease, even in the matter of small breakfasts and light suppers. I found that I was more elastic than before, and more susceptible to sudden impressions; I was conscious of the ebb and flow of blood through my heart, felt it when it eddied up into my face, and touched my brain with its flame-colored wave. I loved life again. The stuff of which each day was woven was covered with an arabesque which suited my fancy. I missed nothing that the present unrolled for me, but looked neither to the past nor to the future. (*Morgesons* ch. 15)

Although Cassandra eagerly learns how to keep order and be neat, she does not fully absorb the model of femininity that Alice embodies. One of the reasons is that she discovers the truth of Alice's and Charles's marriage:

I discovered that there was little love between him and Alice. I never heard from either an expression denoting that each felt an interest in the other's individual life (...). But Alice was not unhappy. Her ideas of love ended with marriage; what came afterward – children, housekeeping, and the claims of society – sufficed her needs. If she had any surplus of feeling it was expended upon her children, who had much from her already, for she was devoted and indulgent to them. (*Morgesons* ch. 15)

She is rather critical of Alice's lack of love for her husband, as she realizes what passions are kept latent within her. This nineteenth-century model of true womanhood, a woman devoted to her house and children but passionless, does not seem to attract young and untamed Cassandra.

Rosville, with its relaxed atmosphere and acceptance of pursuing pleasures and self-satisfaction, is actually the place where Cassandra experiences her

sexuality being awakened for the first time. It is Charles Morgeson who becomes “the catalyst for Cassandra’s first steps toward womanhood” (Mahoney 37). Their relationship seems to be fraught with some sort of, possibly sexual, tension from the very start and Charles has an undeniable influence upon the young girl:

An intangible, silent, magnetic feeling existed between us, changing and developing according to its own mysterious law, remaining intact in spite of the contests between us of resistance and defiance. But my feeling died or slumbered when I was beyond the limits of his personal influence. When in his presence I was so pervaded by it that whether I went contrary to the dictates of his will or not I moved as if under a pivot; when away my natural elasticity prevailed, and I held the same relation to others that I should have held if I had not known him. (*Morgesons* ch. 15)

She is clearly attracted to him and, although she understands that a love affair with a married man is morally questionable, Cassandra decides to enjoy the relationship. Nakagawa seems to be right claiming that for Cassandra her attitude is “better than a marriage with little love” (11) since she never expresses any regret about it. As the critic observes, “[t]o Cassandra, sexuality, one manifestation of natural, instinctive behavior, was what made her feel alive; she refused to kill it” (Nakagawa 11).

Another aspect of this love affair that shows the growing self-awareness and autonomy of Cassandra is how she controls the situation. Though overbearing and forceful, Charles does not manage to dominate Cassandra. She is always self-possessed and, though desire between them continually grows, she never lets him even kiss her. This kind of behavior might actually be expected of a conventionally-minded woman who, understanding her own morally inappropriate behavior, decides to suppress her own desires. Yet, it is not the case here since, as Mahoney points out, “Stoddard depicted Cassandra’s struggle with Charles as a battle between individual wills, not as a moral dilemma over illicit sexual desire” (39). What is more, “[f]or Stoddard, Cassandra’s struggle with Charles was less sexual than intellectual. Cassandra clearly desires Charles; it is her individualism she refuses to surrender. (...) She acknowledges her sexual desires but refuses nevertheless to acquiesce to the demands of a tyrannical male.” (Mahoney 39). This unfulfilled love affair finishes tragically with an accident in which Charles Morgeson dies and Cassandra is left with a scar on her face. Yet, the girl returns home stronger, more mature and aware of her awakened womanhood. Not long after she comes back to Surrey, she decides to redecorate her room to satisfy her tastes and needs. Luxurious and lavishly decorated, the room becomes her own space, which reflects the emerging

female self. Her mother and aunt Mercy take note of the fact that Cassandra has a fireplace burning in her room while, when they were girls, they were not allowed to have one. This points to the contrast between the two ladies, whose cold upbringing and religious restrictions turned them into passionless women, and Cassandra, who “takes and shapes things in accordance with her desires” (Mahoney 41).

The next place on Cassandra’s path to maturity and self-awareness is Belem. The town and the atmosphere of the Somers house turn out to be completely different from other places that Cassandra has stayed at so far. As Nakagawa aptly observes, Belem is

a society of appearances and money. While in Rosville riches were a means to enjoy life, in Belem money apparently underlay the power structure. (...) The aristocratic heritage, manners, and tastes in cultural things such as poems were exploited by the aristocrats to hide their ugly money-chasing and to distinguish themselves from the emerging bourgeoisie. (13)

Apart from being materialistic and elitist, the Somers house “is cluttered and very chaotic, full of highly individualistic people with tremendous appetites – for food, for wine, and for people” (Mahoney 42). It is another place that makes Cassandra feel different, if not worse. Though the family history of alcoholism is not a secret, they still make the girl feel intimidated keeping all the appearances of sophistication and superiority. Mrs. Somers becomes another female role model for Cassandra, another one that she actually rejects in the end, and uses as a point of contrast to her own identity. One of the most prominent characteristic features of Mrs. Somers is her authoritarian attitude. As Mr. Somers explained:

Marrying Bellevue Pickersgill for her money, he married his master, and was endowed only with the privilege of settling her taxes. Simon Pickersgill, her father, tied up the main part of his money for his grandchildren. It was to be divided among them when the youngest son should arrive at the age of twenty-one. (*Morgesons* ch. 27)

She is presented as a matriarch, who, by being in charge of the family money, controls all the members of the Somers family, including her husband. She is manipulative and despotic. When her youngest son is almost twenty-one, she gives birth to another boy, only because she does not want to lose control of the family fortune. Cassandra, however, manages to resist her power, which is clearly seen when Mrs. Somers comes across Cassandra and Desmond, Mrs. Somers son, at night, alone in the parlor. Assuming they are having a secret rendezvous, which she does not approve of, Mrs. Somers loses her temper. Cassandra stays

unmoved, controlling her anger entirely, which can be interpreted as a victory over the domineering matron. Sometime later Cassandra acknowledges an important consequence of this unexpected situation: “it had freed me from any regard or fear of her opinion. I had discovered her limits” (*Morgesons* ch. 31).

Cassandra’s attitude and her relationship with Desmond also point to her growing maturity and independence. Though the affair is seen by some critics as a repetition of her affair with Charles (Ryan 143), it clearly proves that Cassandra values self-determination and resistance to negative influences. She might appear less passionate or less sexually open as first she is reluctant to admit her own feelings for Desmond, and later she delays their marriage until he recovers from alcoholism. Yet, it becomes apparent that being independent is more important for her and Cassandra learns to compromise in the process of gaining self-awareness. As Mahoney suggests, “[h]aving survived Charles with her individuality intact, she no longer fears for her self-possession” (43). Desmond, on the other hand, is attracted to Cassandra because of her otherness, her being different from Belem society, “because she [is] not a person of appearance but of passion and will, that is, a person of substance” (Nakagawa 14).

All of the places that Cassandra visits expand her experience, show different models of lifestyle and femininity, with Barmouth being the most restrictive, while Rosville and Belem more open, yet all of them are in some way oppressive and do not let Cassandra conform to and accept them fully. Barmouth is dull, stiff and repressive, Rosville offers more freedom but still supports the conventional role of a woman as a wife and a mother, and Belem, though giving the possibility to indulge one’s senses, represents materialistic matriarchal power, “one no better than Grandfather Warren’s Puritan patriarchy” (Nakagawa 13). Cassandra, like a typical ugly duckling, is perceived as different wherever she goes – she is too wild for Barmouth, too independent for Rosville, and too self-possessed for Belem. Cassandra is an ugly duckling also because she does not change into someone completely different but transforms to become someone she has always been – a passionate autonomous woman. The process of transformation allows her to acknowledge her own identity, an instinctive self with desires and the power to live free of dependence and other people’s control. When she follows any restrictions it is only because she decides to do it.

As an ugly duckling who has already turned into a swan, Cassandra appears to be conscious of the negative influence of a lifestyle in which one does not listen to one’s instincts and desires. When she takes the responsibility of managing their family house after her mother’s death, she is forced to suppress her desires, but believes it to be a necessary self-sacrifice. She notices how badly

it influences her passionate natural self, yet is willing to make the sacrifice for the sake of the family. As Mahoney explains, “[u]nlike the heroines of more conventional novels, self-denial does not make Cass a better woman” (45). Even Aunt Merce observes the unfavorable change in Cassandra, who is no longer so wild and naturally defiant: “I wish I could say,” she said, “what I used to say to you, – that you were ‘possessed’” (*Morgesons* ch. 38). It is only after Cassandra takes complete control of the Surrey house, when her father marries for the second time and Veronica moves out with Ben, that she restores her vitality and autonomy: “I was at last left alone in my own house, and I regained an absolute self-possession, and a sense of occupation I had long been a stranger to. My ownership oppressed me, almost, there was so much liberty to realize” (*Morgesons* ch. 40). The novel’s ending is surely not a fairy-tale happy ending, although it finishes with Cassandra getting married to Desmond. The novel then, as a whole, seems to contain Stoddard’s vision of life, as the writer explained herself, “the truth regarding human emotion – the turbulence, the repression, the expression of Passion” (qtd in Mahoney 48). Nakagawa draws the following conclusion:

Clearly Stoddard does not admire independence devoid of moral responsibilities. What she does oppose is Duty that is defined by conventions which neglect human naturalness. (...) In Stoddard’s view women’s development and independence are only possible at some price: alienation from the world or some amount of compromise. Her vision is neither blissful nor rewarding, and therefore, more realistic and powerful than that of her female contemporaries. (19)

Cassandra decides to compromise, yet she stays aware of the passions and desires within her, and retains her self-possession. Her marriage to Desmond is the union of two equal people, two autonomous beings, it is “a marriage that combines sexuality and gender parity” (Zagarell 31), which makes it quite unconventional for the nineteenth-century standards.

Apart from the motifs of the ugly duckling, the novel contains elements of Andersen’s “The Red Shoes.” Andersen’s tale of a girl who gets obsessed with her new red shoes and eventually cannot stop dancing, nor take them off is not seen by Estés as a tale of disobedience and punishment, as traditional readings suggest, but rather as a tale of lost instincts. Estés’s interpretation is concerned with women’s natural instincts, which might be lost in an unfriendly repressive environment where the female self cannot thrive. Such conditions might lead to so-called excessive behaviors, which initially become a source of comfort for a woman as they compensate for the dull, passive life, but, in the end, might lead to self-destruction. As far as Stoddard’s novel is concerned, one can easily

trace the motif of excess employed by the writer. It can actually be applied to the analysis of most of Stoddard's characters who in one way or another need to handle their desires and often struggle with excessive behaviors. As Stern summarizes:

Veronica subsists on a regressive diet of milk and buttered toast, the automaternal dimensions of which are suggestive indeed; Locke Morgeson, the novel's patriarch, is known for what the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (the DSM IV) might call compulsive shopping and speculating disorders; distant cousin by marriage Alice Morgeson is occupied monomaniacally by child-rearing; and Alice's husband, Charles, expresses an exclusionary passion for hothouse gardening and horse-breaking. Across multiple generations, the Pickersgill-Somers family is notorious for alcoholic self-immolation (Ben and Desmond); in lieu of drink, they control their kindred by means of inappropriate sexuality and economic tyranny (Mrs. Somers). (108)

Interestingly, as Stern argues, Stoddard's characters fall into two groups depending on the type of excessive behaviors they engage into:

The Morgesons is the story of a house divided. Accordingly, the novel parses its characters, delineating those who live through the body – eating with zeal or drinking to excess (the Surrey matrons who come for tea, Cassandra, and the innkeeper Mrs. Tabor; and Ben, Desmond, and the Pickersgill-Somers ancestors, respectively) – and those who dwell in the spirit (Veronica, Mrs. Morgeson). (110)

Cassandra is a person whose desires circle around the body and material things, yet she rarely lets them control her. Acting upon instincts, she also manages to be self-possessed and quickly learns that indulging oneself without limits might have disastrous effects (the scar on her face left after the accident in which Charles Morgeson dies seems to remind her of such a danger). Actually, one might claim that it is because of the fact that she is not afraid to defy rules and conventions, or to act according to her needs and cravings that she is not inclined to obsessive behaviors. Her sister Veronica, nevertheless, does not seem to be in complete control of herself and her behaviors often bear signs of excess.

Both sisters struggle with certain limitations that culture imposes on women and explore its boundaries, yet, it is Veronica who might be seen as most closely embodying the motifs found in "The Red Shoes." As opposed to Cassandra, who is always hungry, takes pleasure in physical sensations, explores her emotions and desires, Veronica engages in extreme abstinence on the verge of starvation, eating and drinking only milk and toast. She rarely leaves the house and is extremely withdrawn from real life but instead engaged in the

abstract. She seems completely detached from any physical sensations and never shows any emotions (apart from fits of violent anger). Ryan interprets Veronica's behavior as follows:

Using self-starvation to create an impenetrable boundary behind which she can maintain her self-possession, Veronica retreats from exterior objects of desire – a retreat that (...) comes about through negation. While Veronica establishes a sense of self-importance through self-starvation, however – effectively transforming the conventional limitations placed on the Victorian woman into a means of protection from the outside world, a world of sexuality and exposure – her self-enclosure immobilizes her and cannot ultimately shelter her autonomy from the influences and desires of others. (137)

Her tactics of “renunciation and denial” (Ryan 137) do not seem to be a successful way of achieving independence. She is too passive and too introverted, and her autonomy seems illusory as she is unable to take care of her own external life, being always dependent on other people, first her parents, then Cassandra and Ben. Following the destructive patterns of behavior, she does not seem to grow or develop truly in real life and, as Ryan observes, “[h]er retreat into herself functions both as a refusal to mature and as a means of becoming incomprehensible to others; that is, she will neither voluntarily enter into the narrative of her own life nor allow others to ‘read’ her” (139). Mahoney sees Veronica as unwilling to “embark on a quest for self-awareness,” which “[embalms] her in a kind of living death, which only true death can relieve” (46). As opposed to her own marriage, Cassandra perceives Veronica and Ben's marriage in terms of a recipe for disaster as neither of them is an independent, self-determined being that can take responsibility. After their mother's death, Veronica admits to her distorted instincts and her inability to take care of herself properly:

One thing you may be sure of – though I shall be no help, I shall never annoy you. I know that my instincts are fine only in a self-centering direction; yours are different. I shall trust them. Since you have spoken, I perceive the shadows you have raised and must encounter. I retreat before them, admiring your discernment, and placing confidence in your powers. (*Morgesons* ch. 35)

She is aware that it is Cassandra who has developed into a mature independent self and can now replace their late mother in her caregiving role. She is also clearly aware of Cassandra's instinctive nature and seems to trust it completely.

Cassandra's wild instinctive nature can be also found in her admiration of and attachment to the sea. Unlike Veronica's room, which has the restricted view of the fields, Cassandra's room faces the open unlimited sea. Cassandra often goes to the seaside not only to enjoy the view but to draw inspiration for her daily life matters:

A habit grew upon me of consulting the sea as soon as I rose in the morning. Its aspect decided how my day would be spent. I watched it, studying its changes, seeking to understand its effect, ever attracted by an awful materiality and its easy power to drown me. By the shore at night the vague tumultuous sphere, swayed by an influence mightier than itself, gave voice, which drew my soul to utter speech for speech. (*Morgesons* ch. 24)

The sea offers her the sensual pleasure she is looking for and allows her to find her own reflection in it. As Croce comments, Cassandra's

communion with this phenomenon of the material world restores her to herself and to the meaning of her life; joy comes to her through her senses, which affirm her own complicity in the breathtaking and powerful natural world around her. In this moment she embraces everything in herself that the sea evokes and symbolizes. (367)

Cassandra admiring the sea and contemplating the reflection of her mature self in it can be actually compared to the ugly duckling looking at its reflection in the lake and realizing its own transformation into a beautiful swan. She finds union with herself and the natural world around her. She seems to understand and accept her own place in this world, and other people notice it as well. When asked by Cassandra to define her, Ben replies: "I saw you first, so impetuous, yet self-contained! Incapable of insincerity, devoid of affection and courageously naturally beautiful. (...) I saw that, unlike most women, you understood your instincts; that you dared to define them, and were impious enough to follow them" (*Morgesons* ch. 36). Cassandra thus represents the possibility of self-discovery and becomes an example of defiant yet natural womanhood, which makes the reader confront the prevailing models of nineteenth-century femininity. Her portrayal as a transformed ugly duckling is contrasted with that of her sister who resembles the heroine of "The Red Shoes" tale. With her inclination to excess, destructive behavior patterns and lost instincts, Veronica seems to be Cassandra's opposite, she is the one who fails to achieve the type of womanhood that Stoddard favors.

2.2. MOTHERS, WIVES, LOVERS: KATE CHOPIN'S AWAKENING WOMEN

Kate Chopin was a prolific and innovative writer of short stories and novels, the most acclaimed one being *The Awakening*. Her stories often aroused controversies among the readers and critics because of “her recurrent depictions of women who deviate, in varying ways, from dominant ideologies of gender in their era” (Rich 152) and Chopin is said to have been writing about “sexuality and desire in the lives of both men and women with a frankness rarely before seen” (Beer, *Studies in Short Fiction* 2). As a local colorist brought up in Missouri and later living in Louisiana, Chopin depicted the life of American Southern society of the late 19th century, especially the Creole communities and their culture. But looking at Chopin as a regional writer only is to diminish the importance of her writing which explores multiple issues connected with women and society, gender roles, class or even race. As critics observe, “Chopin’s fiction engages repeatedly with the concept of the New Woman – a newly emancipated, progressive female ideal arising in the 1890s that challenged Victorian notions of the domestic, submissive True Woman” (Rich 152). Nowadays, being appreciated for her representations of Victorian women who struggled to become free in their choices, also including their sexuality, she is considered a precursor to contemporary feminist writers (Kort 53).

THE AWAKENING

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) is a novel that is famous for its thought-provoking picture of a woman of the end of the nineteenth century as well as the ambiguity of its ending. Yet, when it was published, the novel did not receive flattering reviews. In her introduction to *The Awakening* presenting the biographical and historical contexts of the novel, Nancy A. Walker reports that it was considered shocking, unhealthy, selfish and unfit for publication by most reviewers contemporary to Chopin (14). Protecting the nineteenth-century standards of morality, they condemned Chopin for her depiction of female sexuality, adultery, suicide, the main protagonist’s rejection of traditional female role of a mother and a wife. Removed from wide circulation, the work had to wait another fifty years to get more enthusiastic reception and critical recognition. It was in 1950s that Chopin was rediscovered and, as Walker recounts, “[b]y the early 1970s, it was the insights of feminist literary critics that revealed the complexity of both art and message in *The Awakening*”

(142), doing it justice as an important female voice of the turn of the century in America. With its diverse influences, rich symbolism and ambiguities, the novel has been subject to multiple interpretations ever since. One of the possible readings of the novel, one that this chapter offers, is through the lens of archetypes and fairy-tale motifs. Being rich in themes, the novel allows for the comparative analysis with reference to different fairy tales and their archetypal heroines, especially the tale of Bluebeard, “The Ugly Duckling” as well as “The Red Shoes” tale.

It is impossible to overlook the volume of criticism on Chopin’s work, yet it is important to note that the critics of the 1950s and 1960s were the first to appreciate *The Awakening*. One of them was Kenneth Eble, who saw it as “advanced in theme and technique over novels of its day” (188) and recognized the significance of Edna Pontellier’s struggle towards self-awareness. In 1960s, Larzer Ziff grasped what seems to be the major issue of Chopin’s work:

The Awakening was the most important piece of fiction about the sexual life of a woman written to date in America, and the first fully to face the fact that marriage (...) was but an episode in her continuous growth. It did not attack the institution of the family, but it rejected the family as the automatic equivalent of feminine self-fulfillment, and on the very eve of the twentieth century it raised the question of what woman was to do with the freedom she struggled toward. (197)

Examining the realistic and naturalistic aspects of Chopin’s novel, Per Seyersted compares it to the works of Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris. The critic makes an observation that though often seen as naturalistic, Chopin’s depiction of human sexuality is not animalistic or brutish in any way. The novel is, however,

suffused with sex, and we witness how Alcée arouses Edna and how she in turn sets Robert on fire with a voluptuous kiss. On this point of physical attraction and contact, Kate Chopin gave not only a fuller, but also a more convincing picture than any other serious American novelist had done. (Seyersted 203)

It seems that those early critics of Chopin tried to bring *The Awakening* to the public attention by proving its value as a full-bodied work of art as well as by showing how people’s perception of the issues it discussed had changed over the years and that the novel was not simply immoral or scandalous, but rather presenting a woman as a human being on a par with men as well as the complexity of human feelings and emotions.

Aware of the significance of the novel for the American culture and literature, later critical analyses of *The Awakening* employ various approaches to examine numerous themes and motifs that the novel encompasses. Among the themes discussed by contemporary critics one can find those of female independence and freedom, personal growth and identity, self-ownership, marriage and motherhood, isolation and loneliness, desire and passions, sexuality and sensuality, art and artistic creativity. As Nancy A. Walker points out,

Kate Chopin was heir to three successive traditions in women's fiction: the domestic sentimentalists who were popular when she was a young girl; the post-Civil War local color writers, such as Mary E. Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett, who considered themselves dedicated to the art form; and the "New Women" writers such as Sarah Grand, who envisioned dramatic new possibilities for women's lives. *The Awakening* draws upon all three traditions, creating a synthesis of their themes and modes of expression. ("Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts" 15)

This threefold legacy of writing by and about women has been acknowledged by Chopin's contemporary critics and it casts light on the significance of themes discussed in *The Awakening*. This richness of influences has also been the subject of many critical analyses. Among them there are those that discuss romantic imagery used by Chopin, e.g. Donald A. Ringe focuses on the imagery of the sea with its rich symbolism. John R. May explores the novel's themes and its Creole setting from the perspective of local color. Ann Heilmann argues that Edna's quest for her female selfhood reflects the nineteenth-century female literary traditions and can be seen as an example of the New Woman fiction. Other critical views include Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Walter Taylor and Jo Ann B. Fineman, or Deborah L. Madsen, who use psychoanalytic approach to analyze Edna's psyche and her struggle to discover her own self, gain personal identity and freedom. There are also critics who explore the mythical and archetypal elements in Edna Pontellier's story finding resemblance to such mythical heroines as Aphrodite/Venus, Psyche, Persephone or fairy tale heroines as Sleeping Beauty or Snow White (see Gilbert, Franklin, Hailey-Gregory). Zoila Clark employs a Foucauldian feminist approach and Michael Worton uses French feminist theory to trace the complex process of Edna's gaining awareness and her final birth as a feminist woman. Contemporary critics also point to the previously neglected theme of race and how Edna's process of gaining independence would have been impossible had it not been for the invisible support of black workers and servants (see Ammons, Taylor "Gender, Race, and Region").

With the richness of themes that *The Awakening* develops, the novel seems perfect for the comparative analysis with reference to fairy tales and archetypal fairy-tale heroines. Interestingly, because of its ambiguous ending and its various interpretations, it is possible to find resemblance to more than one fairy tale. The first one to be discussed here that finds its reflection in the novel's plot is the tale of Bluebeard. The tale's themes seem to be consistent with the feminist readings of *The Awakening* and their vision of Edna as an oppressed female whose personal freedom is limited by the nineteenth-century moral and social standards. Both *The Awakening* and the Bluebeard tale can be viewed as stories of initiation where the female protagonist becomes aware of the imprisonment that she lives in by committing an act of transgression and uncovering the harsh truth about the reality. Edna is in many respects similar to the protagonist of Perrault's tale, who gets married to a beast only because she is blinded by his high social position and wealth. She lives in a beautiful castle and does not seem to care about the apparent ugliness of her husband or limits that are imposed on her until one day she breaks the promise and opens the door of a forbidden room which hides a horrific secret – dead bodies of Bluebeard's previous wives. Both stories explicitly explore the themes of female curiosity and insubordination, knowledge acquisition, and implicitly, female transgressive behaviors, including sexual curiosity or infidelity. Estés's interpretation of the Bluebeard tale includes two possibilities – Bluebeard can be read as an inner force residing in a woman's psyche that disrupts individuation, that is the development of the self, or an external force that restrains the woman. In both cases, the woman needs to learn to recognize the influence of the negative force in order to fight it and develop an independent identity.

Despite multiplicity of critical interpretations, it is generally accepted by critics that Edna's story is that of a quest for selfhood and freedom, and that there are several inner and outer forces that seem to constrain Edna. Chopin presents her heroine's situation symbolically by introducing the caged bird metaphor in the first sentences of the novel:

A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: "Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That's all right!" He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence. (*Awakening* 43)

Edna, just like other women of her times, is at first like the caged bird who "does not see beyond her limits and is always in the same environment" (Clark 337). It is the new environment of Grand Isle and her Creole companions that

make Edna notice the bars that keep her imprisoned, dull her natural instincts and inhibit the development of her true self. The process of Edna's awakening is slow but, gradually, she gains awareness of all the patriarchal restraints that keep her caged. Eventually, she refuses to live in ignorance of the social as well as personal confinements and her quest for freedom seems to be complete. With this approach to Edna's situation, the novel's ending, that is the heroine's last swim in the sea, could be interpreted as an act of total independence expressing her refusal to be anyone's possession or have her true self limited by anyone.

In Perrault's tale, the girl's initiation starts with the horrific discovery which involves a conscious act of insubordination and leads to knowledge that cannot be ignored. The heroine identifies Bluebeard's deceptive promises and takes steps to escape the beast's control and manipulation. In Chopin's novel, the restraining force that Bluebeard symbolizes comes in the form of patriarchal gender roles that are imposed on Edna. The first one is that of a wife. Edna marries Léonce Pontellier without actually thinking about it or about its consequences:

Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate. It was in the midst of her secret great passion that she met him. He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with an earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken. Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband. (*Awakening* 62)

The conventional marriage that Edna so impulsively accepts turns out to be something that does not fulfill her, neither her needs nor passions, and what is worse, it jeopardizes her chances of becoming an autonomous subject. As a wife, Edna belongs to her husband – she has no right to decide about herself, cannot possess anything independently from her husband and is treated as one of his possessions. Chopin gives a very clear picture of Edna's position as a wife at the beginning of the novel with the narrator's comment upon Léonce's reaction to his wife's behavior:

“What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!” exclaimed Mr. Pontellier. He himself had taken a plunge at daylight. That was why the morning seemed long to him. “You are burnt beyond recognition,” he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage. (*Awakening* 44)

Léonce seems to care about Edna but does not see beyond stereotypical gender roles and does not understand the essence of her problems. He is ready to accept Edna’s small eccentricities as long as she sticks to the widely accepted convenances and does not stir public opinion with her odd behavior. As Heilmann observes, “[w]hile Edna grapples with the conflict between her romantic and sexual impulses, both urging her towards adultery, her husband appears blissfully unaware that she might have any such desires” (91). It is not because Mr. Pontellier is an exceptionally unfeeling husband but because he does not treat Edna as an autonomous being with individual needs that might be different from the needs of other women he knows.

Being a wife in the 19th century simultaneously meant being a mother, which is another role that Edna feels entrapped by. Unlike the mother-women around her, she does not feel the need to think about her children all the time, or to worry about their winter clothes in summer: “[s]he was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them” (*Awakening* 63). Even her husband, although he feels Edna somehow fails in her motherly duties, cannot identify any exact mistreatment or negligence on the part of his wife, “[i]t was something that he felt rather than perceived and he never voiced the feeling without subsequent regret or ample atonement” (*Awakening* 50). Edna has no wish to live up to the nineteenth-century ideal of the domestic woman but the internalized stereotypes are so strong that she is not even able to explain precisely her own attitude when talking to her friend Adèle:

Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one. (...) “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.” (*Awakening* 97)

As Madsen points out, “motherhood is represented as being opposed to creativity or self-realisation” (116). It seems that for Edna motherhood is something that seriously limits her freedom and she willingly hands over her childcare responsibilities to either the servants and nurses or her husband’s mother.

Sexual freedom, or rather lack of it, is another issue that Chopin explores in *The Awakening*. Analyzing the mother archetype present in Chopin's novel, Amanda Kane Rooks points to the problem of female sexuality, especially when clashing with the Victorian ideal of the mother figure: "[d]espite women's increasing freedoms at the fin de siècle, widespread public debates around sexual morality clearly suggested that women's sexual autonomy was far from being realized" (124). Elaine Showalter asserts that

[t]he nineteenth-century idea of female "passionlessness" – the belief that women did not have the same sexual desires as men – had advantages as well as disadvantages for women. It reinforced the notion that women were the purer and more spiritual sex, and thus were morally superior to men. (172)

In reality it meant that the nineteenth-century woman had to face among others such problems as strictly controlled sexual behaviors, the pressure not to refuse marital sex and the inability to control conception. Edna, just like Perrault's heroine, is supposed to fulfil her function, in Edna's case it is that of the mother and wife, and obediently serve her husband. Yet, led by her inner curiosity and prompted by the circumstances, she is tempted to disobey and unlocks the forbidden chamber of patriarchal control to discover desire, sensuality and sexual pleasure – the forbidden fruit that is denied to most women. The circumstances that inspire Edna's sexual awakening include her stay at Grand Isle, an almost completely feminized holiday resort, in the company of Adèle Ratignolle, a Creole "mother-woman" who, nonetheless, embodies openness to physical contact and emotional warmth that was completely alien to Edna before. Edna begins "to loosen the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her" (*Awakening* 97) and becomes open to new experiences. Moreover, Edna "starts her own flight to freedom little by little when her body is in contact with water, and she achieves an awareness of physical pleasures and bodily control through swimming" (Clark 337). Just like Bluebeard's wife's discovery of the secret chamber can be interpreted as the discovery of the secrets of her own body and the physical pleasures it is able to feel, so is Edna's awakening inseparably connected with the body and carnality.

The oppression that Edna needs to confront comes from the inside as well. This is what Clark refers to as internalized oppression or internalization of patriarchal gender roles. Using Foucauldian principles, Clark argues that "oppressive power does not come from above, but rather is exercised by everyone in different ways. Everyone has power, but when a person has internalized a dynamic of oppression, he or she is trapped in conflicting roles of subordinate and oppressor" (342). It seems that Edna, just like other women

in her environment, at least initially, learns to accept the patriarchal power that pushes women to accept “the sexist stereotypes as part of their identity” (Clark 339). The result is that the subjugation that women are subject to shapes their identity so that they become “prisoners of their own desire to live the stereotype of the mother-woman” (Clark 344). In practice, women do not even know their own individual needs and desires, but follow the patterns that are available to them. Additionally, apart from the stereotype of a selfless mother, women were forced to internalize the impossible ideal of perfect romantic heterosexual love. The result is an idealized vision of men and man-woman relations, which becomes a barrier to developing an independent self. As Nancy A. Walker asserts, Chopin “depicted a woman whose culture provided neither incentive nor model for women’s intellectual achievement – only for passions of maternity, art, or romantic love” (“Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts” 15). No wonder that it is difficult for Edna to imagine and then to build a different life as she is surrounded with mother-women who “[idolize] their children, [worship] their husbands, and [esteem] it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (*Awakening* 51).

The stages of Edna’s process of awakening are reflected in the novel in different acts of insubordination that she commits. She seems to be a caged bird that, nevertheless, manages to see beyond the bars and starts to understand its own pitiful situation. Taking all the steps that push her towards freedom and independence, she is like Perrault’s protagonist who breaks the cycle of passivity and opens the door of the secret chamber. In her struggle for autonomy, Edna starts to act upon her instincts. One of the first things she does that push her on her quest is learning to swim. Being a terrible swimmer, Edna determines, to everyone’s surprise, to master this skill and does not stop until she actually succeeds. Her first independent swim is an important step in her journey to self-discovery. It happens at night after the piano concert of Mademoiselle Reisz which arouses fiery passions in Edna and moves her to tears:

that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water. A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (*Awakening* 73)

Chopin's use of the imagery of a child learning to walk makes it clear that Edna begins a new journey during which she will have to learn new skills, but clearly, it gives her satisfaction to feel that for the first time in her life she is in complete control of her body and soul. The experience, as Heilmann observes, "establishes her sense of self-ownership, physical, mental and spiritual" (87) and gives her incentive to cross imposed boundaries and discover new paths. Symbolically, learning to swim represents, as Gilbert asserts, "a positive political lesson in staying afloat and an ambiguously valuable sentimental education in the consequences of getting in over one's head" (26).

Another more blatant example of Edna's disobedience happens right after her first swim, when Edna, overwhelmed with all the new emotions, refuses to go to bed and decides to stay outside, although it is past midnight. This small act of resistance makes her realize her own unthinking habit of yielding to her husband's wishes. She is actually quite surprised to discover her new attitude: "She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted" (*Awakening* 74). The incident is one of many more to come. Heilmann observes that "[in] the early stages of the novel, Edna engages in passive resistance, evading and side-tracking Léonce where she can, but not making her flight from his physical presence explicit" (94). Her passive resistance might not be explicit, but it certainly influences the relations between the spouses and makes Léonce seek medical advice for his wife. As Stange comments, "[it] is by withholding herself sexually, then, that Edna exercises the 'eternal rights of women' in insisting that she has a self and that she owns that self" (209). Another act of resistance that reflects her changing attitude to marriage happens one night when she flings her wedding ring on the carpet and stamps on it "striving to crush it" (*Awakening* 103). Yet, unable to do it, "[in] a sweeping passion she seized a glass vase from the table and flung it upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something. The crash and clatter were what she wanted to hear" (*Awakening* 103). Her dissatisfaction with the role of a wife can be also seen in her refusal to attend her sister's wedding, which, in her words, is "one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (*Awakening* 118). Her acts of insubordination also include neglecting her social duties. When Edna is back in New Orleans, she stops observing her reception day, that is a fixed day of the week for receiving guest, she goes out and, to her husband's dismay, does not even care to leave a suitable excuse for her visitors. Instead, she spends her days roaming around the city on her own, or engaging in artwork and enjoying her own company.

The final act of disobedience and, at the same time, Edna's demonstration of the newly realized right to self-ownership is her decision to move out of their "very charming home on Espandle Street in New Orleans" (*Awakening*

99), which her husband is very fond of, and which in reality is his property, to a rented 'pigeon house,' which is a space belonging to Edna only. She decides to celebrate this event with a fancy dinner party on her twenty-ninth birthday, which Arobin refers to as *coup d'état*. The phrase that Edna's lover uses to describe the party is precisely what Perrault's heroine does with Bluebeard – she overthrows the cruel ruler. Edna also seems to succeed in defeating the monster and becomes a free individual; as Gilbert comments, it is "her most authentic act of self-definition" (30). Heilmann observes that

[t]he carnivalesque feast with which Edna celebrates her freedom on her twenty-ninth birthday stages a symbolic over-enactment of the anarchic spirit that distinguishes the 'free woman' from the wife. Edna presents her guests with a carefully arranged spectacle of fin-de-siècle decadent splendour. (95)

Showalter points out that during the dinner "she seems powerful and autonomous" (185), she is described as a queen who looks from above and rules independently. It seems that all these acts of insubordination and their concluding celebration empower Edna and allow her to feel free and to develop an independent self; she begins "to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life" (*Awakening* 151). Just like Perrault's protagonist, she gains knowledge that liberates her.

Seen from this perspective, Edna's final swim cannot be read literally. It is not a suicide of a defeated soul but rather, as Heilmann argues,

a passionate assertion of her new-found identity and unconditional refusal to accept compromise: a rejection not of herself but of a social world that imposes moral imperatives on human desire, a celebration of this desire within a natural context that knows neither boundaries nor limits. (89)

Symbolically, Edna succeeds to stay independent, to stay away from people who think "that they could possess her, body and soul" (*Awakening* 176). She is unable to do it in a society that constrains her, so she chooses the limitless freedom of the sea. In the last scenes of the novel, Chopin compares Edna to Venus, the Roman goddess of love, desire, sex, but also victory. Edna, who is for the first time naked in the open air and is about to enter the sea, resembles Venus born of the sea foam. The imagery evoking a new-born child only enhances this vision: "She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known before" (*Awakening* 175). As Gilbert points out, "she is journeying not just toward rebirth but toward an imaginary world beyond the restrictive culture of the nineteenth century, a world in which women might be as free as the mythic Aphrodite was" (32).

Moreover, critics see Edna's final swim as her return to the mother (see Hailey-Gregory 299, Heilmann 101, Madsen 117). Madsen, who analyses the novel through the lens of psychoanalytic feminism, asserts that "Edna experiences the sea as empowering, as an experience of freedom without limits such as she has not known since she was a young girl" and that "[it] is this immersion in and merger with a world that has no limits, that knows no boundaries and imposes no boundaries upon the ego that is characteristic of the Imaginary Order, the pre-Oedipal, feminine experience of the world" (117). Edna has been looking for connection with it and her final swim can be interpreted as her return to the feminine. Heilmann argues that it can be seen as "homecoming" and it marks her return to childhood as the limitless sea represents maternal feminine force (101). Madsen concludes by pointing to the complexity of Edna's sense of liberation:

Edna rejects the patriarchal gender identity attributed to her by her male-dominated society, but this means that in terms of the world in which she must live she is crippled and maimed. She embraces the feminine as a return to a pre-Oedipal condition of unindividuated feminine existence, but this transformation is only possible in death. (118)

Another way of reading Edna's story is with the use of Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling". This famous tale revolves around the theme of an outcast who undergoes a transformation from an ugly duckling to a majestic swan and it is usually interpreted as a tale of comfort for those who suffer because of being different. Estés's analysis of the tale focuses on women who are seen as different, like the ugly duckling, because they do not conform to traditional patterns of female behavior, they do not want to be conventionally domesticated, they have strong instinctive nature, and they are usually creative artistically. With such an interpretation, it is easy to notice the resemblance between Andersen's tale and Chopin's novel, where Edna's awakening reflects the process of the ugly duckling's transformation. When the reader first meets Edna, it is at Grand Isle, a holiday resort dominated by Creole women where Edna, clearly not a mother-woman, does not seem to fit. Gradually, she comes to realize her own otherness and starts to cherish it. The process of awakening takes her from ignorance and unconsciousness to independent thinking and acting.

Edna starts her transformative journey towards independent selfhood; a quest that is marked with her sudden understanding of her own situation: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (*Awakening* 57). Her awakening can be seen, as Gilbert asserts, as a "metaphysical awakening to the implications of her own

femaleness" (24). Gradually, she awakens different aspects of her so far rather reserved and passionless personality, fashioned mainly by the culture that Edna was brought up in. This is exactly what Estés points to when analyzing "The Ugly Duckling" and the problem of girls and women who do not conform: "[t]hough her soul requires seeing, the culture around requires sightlessness. Though her soul wishes to speak its truth, she is pressured to be silent" (185). Edna transforms because she finally starts to see and feel things that she was blind or unresponsive to before. The first thing that changes in Edna is that she learns to free her emotions and lets her body experience different sensations, like the feeling of pure joy and exultation that overtakes her body after her first swim. She awakens her sensuality and becomes sensitive to various stimulants, coming both from culture as well as nature. She trembles and is blinded to tears when she hears Mademoiselle Reisz playing the piano. She is attracted to the seductive voice of the sea that "speaks to the soul" and "is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (*Awakening* 57). She also enjoys the "excessive physical charm" of Adèle Ratignolle, which, together with the woman's gentle caresses clearly melts "the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her" (*Awakening* 57). She pursues her artistic passion for painting, which gives her satisfaction. Finally, Edna allows herself to plunge in her infatuation with Robert and discovers physical pleasure and sexuality with Alcée Arobin. Apart from awakening senses and emotions, Edna's transformation involves her growing consciousness of herself as an individual:

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. (*Awakening* 151)

She becomes a self-constituted woman who does not belong to anyone but to herself only, who is independent and free to act upon her will or whim.

It is interesting to note that unlike other fairy tale heroes or heroines, the ugly duckling does not need to complete any arduous tasks to undergo the spectacular change, which is also the case with Edna, who seems to experience the changes not because she tries hard to achieve something particular but rather because she becomes open to the possibilities. Her acts of resistance and decisions are usually instinctive and often as surprising to herself as to other people in her environment. When she refuses to obey her husband's wish and stays outside the night after her first swim, it is clearly not planned: "She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted," and later that night

“[the] physical need for sleep began to overtake her; the exuberance which had sustained and exalted her spirit left her helpless and yielding to the conditions which crowded her in” (*Awakening* 78). It seems that her reactions are beyond her control really as things just happen to and around her. When she skips her reception day, it does not seem to be a fully conscious act of resistance, but something more intuitive, as she explains to her bewildered husband: “I simply felt like going out, and I went out” (*Awakening* 100). When she tries to destroy her ring by stepping on it, she does it on the spur of the moment, when she sees “it lying there” (*Awakening* 103). It appears that her affair with Alcée Arobin develops in the same way, with Edna being open to and accepting the course of events as they happen. Finally, when she decides to move to the pigeon-house it is also without a clear reason, or thinking about its consequences:

Neither was it quite clear to Edna herself; but it unfolded itself as she sat for a while in silence. Instinct had prompted her to put away her husband’s bounty in casting off her allegiance. She did not know how it would be when he returned. There would have to be an understanding, an explanation. Conditions would some way adjust themselves, she felt; but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself. (*Awakening* 135)

Yet, it becomes increasingly evident that during her journey Edna learns to rely on her instincts and with every step she seems more confident and bolder.

The ugly duckling undergoes the change without anyone’s help, yet it is thanks to the company of swans that it realizes its own transformation and finally starts feeling that it belongs somewhere. In Edna’s case, it is primarily the influence of two women, that is Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, that inspires her transformation. They, on the one hand, bring Edna closer to some dormant parts of her personality being “catalysts of her sensual awakening” (Heilmann 98), and on the other, they represent perfect foils for the heroine. Adèle is a perfect example of a mother-woman, which makes Edna realize how different she is in her attitude to the conventional role of a mother and wife. Being a Creole, Adèle is, nevertheless, devoid of prudery and enjoys her inborn freedom of expression. She also inspires Edna with her natural physical warmth and feminine beauty. Mademoiselle Reisz seems to be Adèle’s complete opposite – she is an independent artist with no husband or children, who tends to be coarse and unpleasant to other people. Although, as Thornton observes, “Chopin introduces Mademoiselle Reisz, whose clarity of mind offers a striking contrast to the essentially abstract nature of Edna’s quest” (53), it is clear that Edna also finds a kindred spirit in the musician through her music. In her opinion, Edna is the only person at Grand Isle that is worth playing concerts

for, as her reactions are always genuine and indicate Edna's emotional and passionate nature. It is after her piano concert that Edna dares to swim on her own for the first time. The musician is also the one who seems to support Edna's affection for Robert, but, being herself a rebellious and independent woman, she warns her about the dangers connected with pursuing the affair, or more broadly, with Edna's newly chosen way of living: "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (*Awakening* 138). Interestingly, both characters become for Edna, herself a motherless child, "surrogate mothers" (Heilmann 98) and give her maternal love and support that she lacks.

The influence of the feminine force seems to be decisive for Edna's identity development, but it does not reveal itself only in the women that Edna meets. It is also the peculiar environment of Grand Isle in general that awakens Edna from her unconscious life. Edna is, as Gilbert argues,

born specifically because the colony where she comes to consciousness is situated, like so many places that are significant for women, outside patriarchal culture, beyond the limits and limitations of the city where men make history, on a shore that marks the margin where nature intersects with culture. (25)

Edna awakens, but her newly transformed self does not really find a place where it could thrive – nineteenth-century New Orleans is not a place for a woman who wants to experience freely passions and desires, who wants to explore her femininity, who wants to enjoy her sensuous and instinctive nature. It seems, then, that she comes back to Grand Isle for a reason, even if it is only instinctive, and her last swim is "a triumphant act of self-assertion" (Farrell 270), her final expression of freedom and independence, a sensuous experience of the sea, both its infiniteness and its feminine force, which brings comfort and liberation. As Rooks argues, "the sea provides both maternal comfort and erotic appeal" (127) and Edna's final act "symbolizes her transition from ignorance to knowledge, from bondage to freedom" (133).

Another fairy tale that seems to be reflected in *The Awakening* is Andersen's "The Red Shoes," though such comparison presupposes a completely different interpretation of the novel's ending. Traditionally, Andersen's tale is interpreted as a story of vanity, selfishness, inability to conform and disobedience, which lead to a severe punishment or even death. Estés in her interpretation focuses on women's natural instincts which might be easily lost if a woman lives in a restrictive society that wants to domesticate her. This might result in excessive behaviors, which, on the one hand, bring initial comfort and compensate

for her dull domestic life and loss of self-expression, yet, on the other hand, they inevitably lead to self-destruction. It is possible to trace some elements of Andersen's fairy tale in Edna's story, especially with regard to its ending seen as a suicide that represents the heroine's failure, which some critics favor. Interestingly, traditional interpretations of Andersen's tale, which look at the girl as rightly punished for her disobedience, correlate with the early interpretations and reviews of Chopin's novel, which saw Edna as duly punished for her immoral behavior.

The first similarity between the two heroines is that initially Edna can be described as a domesticated woman, just like Andersen's girl, who is adopted by an elderly lady and is obliged to follow all the rules set by her in her house. Edna's situation is similar as far as she is obliged to follow a set of strict rules in order to fulfil her role as a wife and mother. Clearly, her life is that of confinement and passivity, as she is a woman living in a traditional patriarchal society and her freedom to decide about herself is rather limited. It is not surprising then that at some point, when Edna starts to realize her position, she becomes defiant. Gradually, she refuses to be a perfect mother-woman and obey social norms of behavior. Just like Andersen's protagonist, who becomes obsessed with her new red shoes and wears them to church, which she is forbidden to, Edna starts to enjoy a life where desires; emotions and a sense of freedom are more important than restrictions and proper conduct. Her suppressed longings get unleashed and her life fills with tumultuous emotions, sensual experiences, love, passion, and artistic expression. Soon, it becomes clear that Edna will not stop and will not let other people stop her in her quest for autonomy and selfhood.

It is also noteworthy that the red shoes may symbolize passion and sexuality, and the girl's uncontrolled dance may be read as positive because representing freedom and mobility, or negative because improper for a well-mannered girl and self-destructive as a result. In the same way, one could look at Edna's changing behavior – by some people, especially those traditionally-minded of her social environment, it might be read as a punishable act of disobedience, a female caprice that needs to be curbed, or it might be seen as a sign of her growing independence and new-born personality. A person in Edna's environment who does not seem to approve of her behavior, apart from her husband, who naturally objects to her new way of living as endangering the status quo, is Adèle Ratignolle. She is the one who warns Robert against his romantic involvement with Edna, who finds an excuse not to attend Edna's dinner party celebrating her new independent life in the pigeon-house, and who, finally, gives her friend the last word of advice that resonates in Edna when she comes back to Grand Isle: "Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (*Awakening* 170). Mademoiselle Reisz is, on the other hand, the one

who seems to approve of Edna's awakening and her new passionate life. Even though she does not represent sexuality in an explicit way, the musician's life is filled with passion for music and she supports Edna's romantic as well as artistic passions and gives her earnest advice.

All these experiences and events bear signs of excess and as such they inevitably lead to the dramatic end, which is also a motif present in "The Red Shoes." Nancy A. Walker asserts that "[in] the process, Edna has experienced a sexual awakening, and because of its suddenness and power, she is not really in control of herself" ("Feminist or Naturalist?" 255), which makes her similar to Andersen's protagonist, who loses control of her body because of the mad dance of the red shoes she wears. Also, it appears that Edna is looking for absolute freedom, absolute passions, and absolute emotions while at the same time she forgets about the society and real life around her. Overcome with love for Robert, she believes "the final, unlimited union of the fairy-tale lovers" (Wolkenfeld 245) is achievable, regardless of their actual situation and external reality. When they finally meet after his return from Mexico, Edna is clearly blind to notice the impossibility of such a resolution: "Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence" (*Awakening* 168). Edna's new self is, as Ringe argues, "one that insists upon its own inviolability, that will brook no interference from others. Indeed, Edna carries this insistence upon her own integrity almost to an extreme" (224). The climax of Edna's quest as well as a symbolic manifestation of her newly-discovered freedom is the dinner party she organizes on her twenty-ninth birthday. It is so lavish and luxurious that critics refer to it as a "carnavalesque feast" and "a carefully arranged spectacle of fin-de-siècle decadent splendour" (Heilmann 95). The dinner party becomes then the symbolic representation of excess that Edna is attracted and yields to.

Following this interpretation, Edna's last swim must be read as that of self-destruction and failure. Referring to the New Woman fiction of the 19th century, Heilmann observes that "[the] sea as an emblem of female passion was figured in ambiguous terms in women's fiction, as a site of sensual fulfilment but also as an elemental force driving women towards self-destruction" (99). In *The Awakening* it seems to be both, Edna finds sensual pleasure when swimming, but she also commits suicide in the sea. Heilmann further argues that "[one] of the reasons for Edna's great attraction to the sea is surely its limitless expanse, which offers welcome release from her feeling of domestic confinement" (93), yet it also leads inevitably to self-destruction. Andersen's heroine's dancing in the red shoes can be easily compared to Edna's swimming – it is at first very timid and restrained, but slowly, when the heroine starts enjoying it more, feeling pure sensual pleasure, it becomes reckless and gets out of control. The

result is that Andersen's heroine has to have her legs cut off as the shoes will not come off, while Edna swims "far out, where no woman had swum before" (*Awakening* 73), but never comes back. She becomes the "bird with a broken wing (...) reeling, fluttering, circling, disabled down, down to the water" (*Awakening* 175). Looking at Edna's final move from this perspective, one can read the novel's message as a lesson, as Rafael Walker argues, "that the kind of liberty that Edna seeks – pure autonomy, complete freedom from relations – is impossible" (38), or as Ramos argues, as a warning and "an example of what can happen to a protagonist whose unwillingness to continue dedicating herself to any of the available social roles leads her to abandon all of them in favor of an enticing yet ever elusive freedom" (147). It appears that excess that Edna chooses to compensate for her tamed life overpowers her and eventually leads her to death.

"A PAIR OF SILK STOCKINGS," "THE STORY OF AN HOUR"

Chopin's interest in female desires and tumultuous emotions can be also traced in her short stories, in which she presents women of different origins and social stands to show how they experience the world around them in the late 19th century. The two stories, that is "A Pair of Silk Stockings" and "The Story of an Hour," are poignant portraits of women who are overtaken by sudden emotions that seem to get out of their control. They are wives and mothers who, as it turns out, feel the burden of their confining situation, and suddenly are overwhelmed with their desire for greater freedom and autonomy, which they cannot find in their traditional roles imposed by society. In both stories one can trace the key elements of Andersen's "The Red Shoes," that is domestication, longing for freedom, natural instincts or self-expression, confining roles, which lead to some form of excess and a not-so-happy ending.

"A Pair of Silk Stockings" is a story of Mrs. Sommers, a woman who happens to have fifteen dollars at her disposal. Being a selfless and devoted mother determined to satisfy the demands of both her family as well as the culture, Mrs. Sommers initially plans her shopping list with utmost diligence: "For a day or two she walked about apparently in a dreamy state, but really absorbed in speculation and calculation. She did not wish to act hastily, to do anything she might afterward regret" ("Silk Stockings" 262). All she wants is "a proper and judicious use of the money" ("Silk Stockings" 262), which in practice means buying clothes that her children are in need of. She feels happy and excited when imagining "her little brood looking fresh and dainty" ("Silk Stockings" 262). Yet, while shopping, Mrs. Sommers is suddenly attracted to

a pile of silk stockings and their “soft, sheeny luxurious” quality. The purchase triggers an irresistible impulse that “[directs] her actions and [frees] her of responsibility” (“Silk Stockings” 264). The woman starts her shopping spree that focuses on her needs only, forgetting completely about her earlier resolves. It seems that the shopping spree is her reaction to years of self-effacement and total immersion in the role of a perfect mother who selflessly feeds all the needs of her family. This reaction resonates with the major theme of “The Red Shoes,” in which a girl who lives in an ordered environment that demands obedience grows obsessive about her new red shoes and forgets or disregards the rules that she was supposed to follow. Initially, she enjoys wearing them to church and dancing in them, but soon she loses control of her moves and starts a mad dance that leads to pain and suffering.

Mrs. Sommers’s spending spree is described by critics in terms of excess, as a “surrender to a state of narcissistic indulgences” (Taylor, “The Perfume of the Past” 153), or “a yearning more powerful than her commitment to domesticity” (Stein 360). Rafael Walker talks about “the total seduction of Mrs. Sommers by the marketplace” (30) and notes that her “appetite swells as she consumes” (31). Joslin observes that she “responds with natural animal joy to the leisure and luxury that fifteen dollars can buy” (73). Just like Edna, who awakens her senses and sensuality, Mrs. Sommers derives enormous pleasure from the sensuous experiences on that day: “How good was the touch of the raw silk to her flesh! She felt like lying back in the cushioned chair and reveling for a while in the luxury of it” (“Silk Stockings” 264); later she loses herself “for a second or two in admiring contemplation of the little symmetrical gloved hand” (265); in the restaurant, she admires elements of the luxurious décor, enjoys the pleasant sounds of music and a gentle breeze; in the theatre, “she [gathers] in the whole – stage and players and people in one wide impression, and [absorbs] it and [enjoys] it” (266), laughing at the comedy and crying at the tragedy. Finally, when in the cable car, she feels “a poignant wish, a powerful longing” to go on like this forever. It seems that, like Andersen’s heroine, who suffers as a consequence of her obsession with the red shoes, Chopin’s protagonist is also driven down the blind alley by her unexpected self-indulgence. Allen Stein aptly comments on Mrs. Sommers behavior:

Desperate to bring some autonomy and beauty into her meager, overburdened existence, she rebels against the conditions under which she has been laboring; but her rebellion takes the form merely of blind, impulsive, utterly desperate submission to the dictates of a commercially driven consumer ethic that insists that one’s true worth is determined by the quality and world of one’s possessions and amusements. (365)

The critic notes that the woman actually fails in her attempt to change her limited and unsatisfying life as the action that she undertakes is in fact meaningless and will not produce any long-term effects. It seems that Mrs. Sommers realizes that she will have to go back home and she will need more than that in order to achieve any kind of autonomy or sense of self.

In quite a similar manner Chopin narrates the story of Mrs. Mallard of "The Story of an Hour," who learns about her husband's death in the railroad disaster and her reaction is rather unexpected. Initially, she weeps "with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms" ("Hour" 213). When alone in her room, she discerns and contemplates the elements outside her house: the blue sky, the trees, the smell of rain in the air, street noises, birds and people singing. She seems to be giving in to the emotions that start to arise in her. First, she feels something "creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air," then, much to her surprise, she starts saying "free, free, free!" and imagines "a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely" ("Hour" 214). Just like Mrs. Sommers, who suddenly discovers the joy of luxurious, sensually attractive things, Mrs. Mallard gets immersed in the exultation that her newly discovered freedom of body and soul gives her: "There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory" ("Hour" 215). But her joy and triumph finish as suddenly and unexpectedly as they start with her husband appearing at the door safe and sound. Giving a piercing cry, Mrs. Mallard dies "of joy that kills" ("Hour" 215). Just like Mrs. Sommers, Mrs. Mallard is given a chance to escape marital oppression and experience the beauty of independence, yet, her unleashed senses and emotions lead to a dramatic end.

Chopin appears to have been deeply concerned with the problems that women of her own era had to face in their everyday lives. On the one hand, her works show the burdens of married life and the multiplicity of rules and restrictions imposed on women in the 19th century, on the other hand, they also include a warning against the destructive influence of unrestrained freedom and excessive behaviors. Edna Pontellier of *The Awakening* could be seen as an archetypal heroine struggling for self-awareness, autonomy and freedom, a heroine who wakes up from the illusion of a fulfilled life as a wife and a mother, one who dares to defy the conventional roles forced upon her, one who is ready to express and satisfy her own passions and desires. She is like Bluebeard's wife uncovering the dark side of the monster and fighting for her freedom from the oppressor. She is like the ugly duckling who eventually finds kindred spirits and transforms into a mature swan, one that is not afraid of following their instinctive nature. Yet, she could also be seen as the heroine of "The Red Shoes" – a self-obsessed woman with complete disregard for rules that organize social

life around her, a prisoner “[t]rapped in romantic longings whose objects are always vague and shifting in her mind’s eye” (Thornton 52), who, as a result, loses control of her life and dies tragically. The characters Chopin depicts in her short stories discussed here could be seen in a similar way – as women whose natural passions and instincts have been contained for too long and now, when they are given some freedom, they get carried away in self-indulgence, they lose control of themselves and waste the opportunity to develop an independent self. Chopin’s works show that female quest for knowledge and personal freedom is often strenuous and complicated and that being defined as a “creature in need of domestic security and comfort” (Solomon 62) imposes constraints that might be impossible to defy.

2.3. DOMESTICATION, MADNESS AND RESISTANCE: CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN’S WILD WOMEN

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is referred to as a writer, a publisher, a theorist and a social reformer engaged in the issues of women’s rights, not only in terms of their personal freedom but, first all, economic independence. The author of *Women and Economics* (1898) and the founder of *The Forerunner* magazine, Gilman successfully aspired to set an example as an independent woman. Nowadays, she is most recognized for her ground-breaking short story “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” Pointing to its significance, Martha J. Cutter explains the phenomenon of Gilman’s best remembered short story:

while certainly unique, [it] carried forward a number of themes that other writers have dealt with concerning women and language, women and masculine authority, women and the natural environment, and the material and historical basis of women’s oppression. The continuing popularity of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” then, can be linked to the way it articulates archetypal and enduring themes about the causes and resolutions of women’s social, economic, and linguistic oppression – issues which continue to be ambiguous and unresolved, even in our own era. (105)

In her fiction, Gilman often shows women whose low social status is a consequence of being undervalued by their husbands, limited in their choices, forced to enjoy domestic lifestyle only and rely on their husbands in everyday life situations. In her best-known novel *Herland* (1915), Gilman offers an alternative utopian reality where the all-female society gives women

an opportunity to enjoy their lives in peace and comfort, free of the oppressive male control. Being chosen “the sixth most influential woman of the 20th century” (Kort 107), Gilman continues to be considered an important and valuable female voice in American literature and culture.

“THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER”

“The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892) is Gilman’s short story which is said to have been rediscovered by the feminists in the 1970s, and has been widely acknowledged, anthologized and used as part of reading curricula for students ever since. The story of a woman’s postpartum depression, its treatment with so-called rest cure and her ensuing insanity is believed to have been inspired by Gilman’s own experiences, which makes the story and its message even more poignant and heartrending. Gilman herself talked of the story as that of “a description of a case of nervous breakdown” (qtd in Gilbert and Gubar 89), and “pure propaganda” against Dr. Weir Mitchell’s treatment that brought her “as near lunacy as one can” (qtd in Karpinski 28). The popularity of the story has brought multiple critical analyses from various literary perspectives, showing its depth and capacity for explicit as well as implicit meaning. As Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz remarks, “Gilman worked within the horror genre of Romantic fiction and followed its ghostly template, but by domesticating her tale and grounding it in realistic details, she enhanced its uncanny effect and opened up a world of suggestion and potential interpretation” (176). Taking into consideration various possibilities of the story’s interpretation, the following study explores its resemblance to two fairy tales, that is Perrault’s tale of Bluebeard as well as Andersen’s “The Red Shoes.” With her traumatic experiences, Gilman’s narrator shows marked similarities to these two archetypal heroines, one fighting successfully an oppressive force, and the other falling prey to excessive behaviors and losing self-preservation instincts.

The significance of the story has been explored and appreciated by multiple critics. Among numerous interpretations and critical studies, there are critics who examine “The Yellow Wall-Paper” as a Gothic tale, among them, for example, Greg Johnson, Eugenia C. DeLamotte, or Carol Margaret Davison, who sees the story as representing Female Gothic, which “centers its lens on a young woman’s rite of passage into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially the joint institutions of marriage and motherhood [deploying] the supernatural for political ends” (48). There are also analyses that consider the architectural space presented in Gilman’s story. Jeremy MacFarlane, for example, examines the upstairs

room as “a socially produced environment,” which is supposed to “restore the bodies and minds of women suffering from neurasthenia,” but which, instead, “[reinforces] an allegedly natural social situation” by imposing strict gender norms of behavior and has a profound influence on the medical treatment (8). Yvonne Gaudelius sees the space of the house and home as confining and infantilizing, which influences gender construction of the narrator (120). Other analyses include that of William C. Snyder, for example, who looks at Gilman as “a modernist *artist*” (72) and “The Yellow Wall-Paper” as “an exercise in ekphrasis” (72), a verbal-visual work of art employing vivid imagery of isolation and constraint that “[simulates] techniques of impressionism, cubism, and abstract expressionism” (76). Deborah L. Madsen explores the story’s themes through the lens of Marxist feminism, which “[enhances] our appreciation of Gilman’s exposure of the ideological construction of the self under [capitalist] patriarchy and the conditions of necessity (the social coercion) that make women conform to these oppressive gender roles” (76). Deborah M. Horvitz, on the other hand, explores the narrator’s trauma as a direct consequence of psychological and cultural sadism. Barbara A. Suess makes use of psychoanalysis and shows Gilman’s short story as “a literary representation of a Lacanian psychosis” (79). In most analyses, however, one can find references to what seems to be the major theme of the story, that is the narrator’s desperate struggle for freedom and independence, her “attempt to claim sexual and textual authority” (Ammons 35).

It seems that “The Yellow Wall-Paper” might also be successfully analyzed in terms of myths and fairy tales. Evans Lansing Smith, for example, discovers in Gilman’s story the mythical images of “the maze, the goddess, and the descent to the underworld” (227). It is also possible to find in this brilliant fin-de-siècle text traces of the tale of Bluebeard, both in its literal and more symbolic sense. Gilman’s short story seems to follow the same pattern that can be found in Perrault’s tale – a female protagonist gets married to a beast groom and finds herself trapped and imprisoned in his palace; led by her inner curiosity and a will to discover the truth, she disobeys the rules that are imposed on her and uncovers the mystery that is hidden from her; finally, she defeats the monster and regains her freedom. Just like the tale of Bluebeard, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” can be read as a story of initiation, in which a young woman meets a destructive force, becomes a victim of its cunning game, but through her own transgressive behavior manages to expose the secret and wins. This means that if we read Gilman’s story as reflecting the Bluebeard tale, then the story’s ending should be interpreted as that of the narrator’s victory over her husband’s restrictive methods of treatment, and more broadly, over the culture that imposes constraining gender roles.

The first element that resonates with the tale of Bluebeard is the motif of imprisonment and entrapment. Similarly to Perrault's protagonist, Gilman's protagonist and narrator is a recently wed young woman, who additionally has just given birth to a baby. It turns out, however, that the woman suffers from a condition, nowadays recognized as medical and called postpartum depression, but, in Gilman's times, it was referred to as "temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency" ("Wall-Paper" 166), and was, in case of the story's narrator, treated with so called rest cure. The cure, prescribed by the protagonist's husband, who is also a physician, is very restrictive and entails complete limitation of any sensory or intellectual stimuli, excitement, company, exercise, or work, especially creative work. Since the woman is supposed to let her body and mind rest, the family move for the summer to what seems to be a beautiful house in the countryside. The house, just like Bluebeard's mansion, is grand and impressive, but the narrator immediately notes its strange and ghastly character:

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity – but that would be asking too much of fate! Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it. Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted? ("Wall-Paper" 166)

Also, just like Bluebeard's newly-wed wife, Gilman's protagonist is supposed to enjoy the place but, instead, she gets trapped in it and becomes its prisoner, which she only realizes after some time. Its character shifts exactly like in a Gothic novel, where, as Eva Figes notes, "the house changes from being a symbol of male privilege and protection conferred on the fortunate female of his choice, to an image of male power in its sinister aspect, threatening and oppressive" (74). The house is a New England colonial mansion, which additionally locks the narrator in the historical, patriarchal past and, as Lockwood observes, becomes "the setting for the protagonist's encounter with gender history" (118).

Within the house, it is especially the upstairs room where Gilman's protagonist is made to stay that symbolically represents the constraining force of Bluebeard. The narrator, who is supposed to spend all her days as well as nights in the room, describes it at first as "the nursery at the top of the house, (...) a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore" ("Wall-Paper" 168). But soon, she adds that it also has barred windows and "rings and things in the walls" ("Wall-Paper" 168), which, together with descriptions of "scratched and gouged" ("Wall-Paper" 171) floor, indicate that it could have been some kind of a private mental hospital where other women received similar treatment. Gilbert and Gubar refer to these as

“the paraphernalia of confinement, (...) instruments that definitively indicate imprisonment” (90), Ammons comments that “the narrator is held prisoner in a room filled with images and symbols of coercion, torture, and death” (36). The room is supposed to enhance the effects of the treatment, but it actually has an adverse effect on the protagonist, pushing her toward insanity. MacFarlane refers to it as “a socially produced environment” and explains the influence it exerts on the narrator as follows:

as Gilman’s story makes clear, medical logic is largely corrupted by the influence of commonplace gender ideology in this instance, so what this space actually does has far less to do with restoring women’s health than it does with reinforcing an allegedly natural social situation. Just as the dominant architectural logic of the nineteenth century American home normalized the ideal of domesticated femininity, so too does the spatial form of this medicalized environment. (8)

It is a space that reinforces socially imposed divisions between the sexes, with men being active and in control, while women passive and subordinate. It represents, as Ammons asserts, “the repression and self-denial, the excruciating idleness and physical inactivity, expected of [the protagonist]” (37).

The threatening, scary and oppressive aspect can also be found in the male characters of both stories. The only difference is that Bluebeard’s monstrosity is evident, while John, Gilman’s narrator’s husband, seems to be an embodiment of a perfect Victorian husband – caring, loving, responsible and sensible. The narrator says: “[John] is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction” (“Wall-Paper” 168). On the one hand, he is a physician who seems to understand his wife’s problem, who takes necessary actions to prevent her health condition from deteriorating and prescribes the best cure to his knowledge. On the other hand, he is clearly dominant and wants to have complete control over his wife. In the same way as Bluebeard, John makes his wife believe that she can and will enjoy and derive satisfaction from the house, while, in reality, he constrains her by limiting her freedom to move about and explore her new environment freely. Interestingly, while Bluebeard encourages his wife to enjoy the whole mansion except for one secret chamber, the husband of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” confines his wife to one room only and makes her stay in bed almost all the time. Both, however, try to impose their own strict rules on their wives and expect unquestioning obedience. As Greg Johnson observes, “her husband exerts tyrannical control in the guise of protectiveness [, which] makes the narrator feel all the more stifled and precludes outright defiance” (524). Davison points to the fact that the narrator “grows increasingly fearful of [John] and suspects him of conspiring with his sister against her”

(48). Gilbert and Gubar describe him as “censorious and overwhelming” (90). Furthermore, critics point to the fact that by putting his wife in a nursery, John treats her like a helpless uncomprehending child that is unable to take any responsibility and thus needs to be controlled all the time, a child that cannot decide about herself or do what she pleases (Gaudelius 120, Johnson 524, Ammons 35). This obvious infantilization is another form of oppression and limits the protagonist’s freedom significantly.

If we read the tale of Bluebeard more literally then, John, the narrator’s controlling husband, can be seen as the monster’s reflection or embodiment. But the force and influence of Bluebeard can also be read more symbolically from Estés’s perspective, with the use of Jungian archetypal psychology, as an inner force that resides in a woman’s psyche and prevents the development of the self, or an external force that constrains the woman. Seen as external force, Bluebeard could be represented in Gilman’s story as patriarchal culture imposing strict gender norms of behavior. As presented by Gilman, it is a culture in which a woman’s major role is to be a wife and a mother, in which she is “a perpetually dominated subject who makes no claim to identity or purpose beyond purview of her male-oriented function” (MacFarlane 9). Her voice is silenced and unheard, her creativity suppressed, her natural instincts undervalued or completely misunderstood, her knowledge narrowed down and strictly controlled, her autonomy limited, all of which thwarts her attempts to define herself and take control of her own life. As far as the internal force of Bluebeard is concerned, it seems that the narrator has to some extent internalized the oppressive conceptions of the nineteenth-century domestic ideology. The reader can trace the narrator’s struggle between her autonomous voice that recognizes the situation she is in and the distorted vision of her self as imposed by the culture. Critics point to the fact that Gilman’s protagonist is not entirely conscious of what is happening around her as, for example, when she does not seem to acknowledge that the upstairs room might not to be a nursery but a home prison for violent mental cases. Madsen comments on this as follows:

The gap between the physical details of her environment and her interpretation of them derives in large part from her desire to believe the things her husband tells her. What she reveals in this way is the extent to which she is trapped in a conception of herself derived from John and the values of the patriarchal society he represents. (82)

The narrator’s individuation is all the more complex as she puts up a struggle between the internalized beliefs and her desire for autonomy, self-definition and self-expression. As DeLamotte observes,

her obsessive concentration on the wallpaper is both a desperate attempt to validate the ideology that limits women's proper sphere of knowledge to the mysteries of interior decorating and a way for her to inscribe her own mystery – the angry, Hidden Other Woman inside her – on the walls of her domestic prison. (191)

Whether internal or external, the heroine needs to recognize the oppressive influence of the forces if she is to develop an autonomous identity. In Perrault's tale, the girl's initiation begins when, through a conscious act of disobedience, she discovers the dead corpses of Bluebeard's wives. The girl identifies Bluebeard's deceptive promises and makes an attempt at escaping the monster's control and manipulation, at which she is successful. Similarly, in "The Yellow Wall-Paper," the narrator tries to live her own life within the limits of the environment she is in through, often small, acts of insubordination, one of the most significant being her writing. Writing is a clear act of disobedience since the narrator undergoes the rest cure that forbids any type of intellectual or creative activity as something leading to excessive excitement and sensual stimulation. The woman needs to be on the watch constantly so as not to be caught red-handed by her husband or his sister: "There comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word" ("Wall-Paper" 168). Done in secret, however, the activity turns out to be rather exhausting and does not bring the comfort it should, as the narrator states: "I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal – having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" ("Wall-Paper" 167). Despite tiredness and the danger of being seen, the narrator does not stop writing her diary, which becomes her own story and gives her the space to be a subject that is heard, a subject that has a voice and an identity, all of which she is constantly denied. As Horowitz points out, "[w]ith the very act of writing, she resists her husband's dominion" (179). Ammons comments that writing is a "subversive act, (...) a dangerous move because it threatens the system of control constructed to contain women (...). To be written is to be passive. To write is to be active, to take action, to be the actor – to own and create one's self" (38).

Another form of disobedience on the part of the narrator is giving herself to "all manner of excited fancies" ("Wall-Paper" 170). It is something that her sensible, practical husband, who "has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and [who] scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" ("Wall-Paper" 166), condemns and objects to. She, for example, enjoys looking out of the window and imagining she "[sees] people walking in these numerous paths and arbors" ("Wall-Paper" 170). Eventually, the narrator's fertile imagination is almost entirely captivated

by the yellow wallpaper in the upstairs room. She spends hours during the day as well as at night studying its peculiar pattern. Yet, as she is aware of its subversive character, it is another activity that she does in secret. Finally, she locks herself in the room with the intention of tearing the wallpaper down completely. Ammons comments on this as follows:

the action taken by Gilman's bound and silenced narrator, quintessential image of Victorian femininity, is radical. Venting her rage on the very domestic space that confines her, she permanently violates the silence imposed upon her by, as a theorist such as Cixous might put it, writing her body: both on the room, which physically bears her defiant inscription, and on the printed page before us. In doing so the narrator accomplishes a fundamental change in her relationship to the violence in the story. She moves from the position of victim to that of agent. (38)

She is no longer a submissive wife with no voice of her own, "a helpless, docile, overgrown infant" (Ammons 35), nor a patient that is weak and incapacitated, but a subject ready to disobey and act according to her own will, free to explore and to express her true emotions, including anger.

Tracking and tracing the patterns in the wallpaper, Gilman's narrator slowly uncovers the truth that has been hidden from her. At first, the wallpaper is just an ugly, even sickly yellow wall decoration with "sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" ("Wall-Paper" 168). On a more careful examination, the woman notices that the pattern has a recurrent motif that looks like eyes, "absurd, unblinking eyes" ("Wall-Paper" 170). Finally, trying to "follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion" ("Wall-Paper" 172), the protagonist of Gilman's short story discovers "a woman stooping down and creeping about behind [the wallpaper's] pattern," who is trying "shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" ("Wall-Paper" 174). Similarly to Perrault's heroine, who discovers the dead bodies of Bluebeard's previous wives hidden in a secret chamber, Gilman's narrator realizes that the front pattern looks like bars behind which, in the sub-pattern, a woman, or actually many women are imprisoned:

Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over. Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard. And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads. ("Wall-Paper" 174)

The discovery brings knowledge that has been hidden from the narrator before. Just like Bluebeard's wife realizes her own situation when she unlocks the door to the secret chamber, Gilman's narrator comes to understand her situation as a woman in the patriarchal upper-class world she lives in. Furthermore, in both cases, that is in the tale of Bluebeard and in "The Yellow Wall-Paper," the female protagonists uncover the truth about other women before them. Critics point to the fact that the wallpaper becomes evidence "of female imprisonment and temporal stasis" (Lockwood 128), an unwritten history of generations of women who have been denied freedom and social progress. As Lockwood comments, "[i]n featuring a female protagonist who realizes that she is indistinguishable from the ghosts of the women who came before her, Gilman critiques women's position as backward" (121).

The knowledge that the protagonist gains leads to a victorious ending, which is one of the possible interpretations of Gilman's iconic short story. Just like Perrault's protagonist, the narrator of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" manages to defeat the beast, and the story's ending might be read as a victory over his constraining force and an important stage in the woman's identity formation. The finale of Gilman's short story might be interpreted as the narrator's triumph over the constraints that she has been subject to in a sense that she finally regains control of the space she is in and can act as she wills. MacFarlane comments on the last scene as follows:

As she tears the paper from the walls, strip by strip, she imagines herself liberating a parade of women that have been trapped by its disgusting pattern – and she ultimately liberates herself. In short, because she's removed the paper, (...) she's no longer subject to the pattern of subjugation that characterizes the status quo. (10)

When she says triumphantly: "I've got out at last" ("Wall-Paper" 182), she clearly identifies with the woman trapped behind the front pattern of the wallpaper, which is another indication of the knowledge she has gained and a proof of her liberation. As Johnson asserts,

Gilman's heroine identifies wholly with the raging "madness" of the double she discovers locked within the tortured arabesques of the wallpaper. Her experience should finally be viewed not as a final catastrophe but as a terrifying, necessary stage in her progress toward self-identity and personal achievement. (523)

It is true that, viewed from the outside, the narrator seems to have fallen into total insanity, crouching around the room, even over the unconscious body of her husband, but there is a clear sense of freedom and victory in the picture. As

Davison aptly comments, “[g]iven her perceptive analysis of late nineteenth-century American patriarchy, as delineated in her creative journal, Gilman’s narrator may be said to be never so sane as when she appears the most insane” (67). She discovered herself trapped behind the bars and tore them down. She is now in control of the room, of her body, free to express herself the way she likes with no need to repress her natural instincts. Her husband, lying on the floor unconsciously, is a symbol of a defeated patriarchal culture, of all the constraints that have been limiting, immobilizing and infantilizing the narrator so far.

However, if we look at “The Yellow Wall-Paper” from a different perspective, as a story of a woman’s descent into complete insanity, then it is possible to trace elements of Andersen’s tale of “The Red Shoes,” which, traditionally, has been read as a story of vanity, inability to conform, which eventually leads to punishment. Estés’s interpretation of the tale centers on women’s natural instincts, which might be lost in an improper environment that represses the female self. The consequence of such unfavorable atmosphere is that the woman gets involved in so-called excessive behaviors, which initially become a source of comfort, but eventually lead to self-destruction. When seen from this perspective, Gilman’s narrator follows the same pattern of behavior. First, she is shown as a woman whose artistic and intellectual inclinations are brutally repressed, who is denied freedom of expression or the freedom to decide about herself, who lives a life of passivity and confinement. Yet, she does not want to give up completely and becomes defiant, writing her secret diary, using her natural creativity to imagine scenes happening outside the house, and finally focusing all her thoughts on the yellow wallpaper.

The narrator’s focus on the wallpaper bears clear signs of excess, which is the major motif of “The Red Shoes” tale as interpreted by C. P. Estés. In Andersen’s tale, the girl’s mad dance in the red shoes symbolizes all types of excessive behaviors over which the person does not have control any more, such as addictions or obsessions. Clearly, Gilman’s protagonist develops an obsession with the ugly yet fascinating yellow wallpaper. First, she studies in disbelief its strange curves and flourishes as well as the “repellent, almost revolting [color,] a smouldering unclean yellow” (“Wall-Paper” 168). Yet, as the time passes, it seems that she cannot get her eyes of it, trying to track some intelligible pattern or meaning in it. The more she feels confined and the more her self-expression is repressed, the more fixated she becomes on the wallpaper. She is like the girl from “The Red Shoes,” who gets fascinated with her new shoes and, disregarding the prohibition imposed on her, keeps wearing them. Gilman’s narrator is in the same way fascinated with the wallpaper and, despite her husband’s disapproval, keeps examining it. Another similarity is that in

Andersen's tale the red shoes gain some kind of magical power over the girl, they become as if alive. Likewise, in Gilman's story, the wallpaper has a life of its own in some sense. The narrator notes at one point: "This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!" ("Wall-Paper" 170) and later she explains: "You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream" ("Wall-Paper" 175).

In both stories the protagonists get fascinated with the spellbinding objects, which at first brings comfort and satisfaction. However, soon their fascination turns into a self-destructive obsession and the result in that they lose the ability to control their own bodies. In both cases, the stories have a traumatic ending. Andersen's protagonist enjoys walking and dancing in the shoes but soon they overpower her and she loses control over her own movements. She cannot stop dancing and her only solution is to have her feet cut off. Gilman's narrator develops an unhealthy obsession with the wallpaper and cannot stop thinking about it. After discovering the figure of an imprisoned woman behind the front pattern of the wallpaper, she feels the need to tear the paper down and release the woman. The dramatic ending shows the narrator, who, having torn the paper down, creeps on the floor of the room, round and round, with her shoulder fitting the "long smooch around the wall" ("Wall-Paper" 182). Though she feels victorious after liberating the woman/herself, the realistic picture is that of the state of total insanity, of a woman "trapped in repetition" (DeLamotte 192). As Horvitz comments,

she is traumatized, beaten down, and "driven crazy"; her relentless suffering and gradual decline inform us that she does not freely or consciously elect to be psychotic. Though she selects the only alternative in which physical survival is possible, John as patriarchy wins; she is "knocked off her feet," reduced to crawling on the floor like the infant she is treated, and does not enact what would have been her "true" choice – that of feeling and being treated as a competent, adult woman. (125)

This vivid picture of defeat, trauma and self-destruction might be also read as Gilman's warning against oppression that Estés refers to as "overdomestication" (248), which results in loss of self-expression, loss of identity, loss of natural instincts and loss of connection with one's self.

“DR. CLAIR’S PLACE”

Another story in which Gilman discusses the problem of women’s mental health and the influence of the nineteenth-century culture and social standards is “Dr. Clair’s Place” (1915). It is said to be a story in which Gilman “summed up much of her thinking on the mental and emotional well-being of women” (Wegener 62). It actually seems to be an antithesis to “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” or at least to the rest cure prescribed to the major protagonist and its influence on her, it is its “explicit critique and alternative” (Edelstein 134). “Dr. Clair’s Place” is a story of Octavia Welch, a woman who suffers from severe depression with suicidal thoughts but, fortunately, meets the narrator of the story who selflessly sends her to the eponymous Dr. Clair’s place called the Hills. The treatment she receives there, the opposite of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell’s infamous rest cure, proves to be successful and the woman quickly regains her mental powers and emotional stability. Experiencing the pleasures of the body, the beauty of the world around her, and the joy of being with other people, she rediscovers passion for life. Seen as a story of a woman’s path to self-knowledge and rediscovered identity, “Dr. Clair’s Place” might be said to be a version of H. Ch. Andersen’s “The Ugly Duckling” tale.

The major motif of Andersen’s tale is that of an outcast who is unable to conform, who is different and therefore rejected, who lacks support and needs to start a journey of self-discovery. The exile, although at first seen as a form of punishment that is full of suffering, leads to the transformation of the hero, who finds kinship and acceptance. Gilman’s heroine of “Dr. Clair’s Place” seems to have followed a similar path. When she is first described by the narrator, Octavia Welch is like an ugly duckling – dejected, in a terrible mental condition, with no support of friends or family. She enumerates her miseries effortlessly, in one breath almost:

Health utterly broken and gone since I was twenty-four. Youth gone too – I am thirty-eight. Beauty – never had it. Happiness – buried in shame and bitterness these fourteen years. Motherhood – had and lost. Usefulness – I am too weak to even support myself. I have no money. I have no friends. I have no home. I have no work. I have no hope in life. (“Dr. Clair’s” 280)

Clearly, she feels lost and worthless, her nervous breakdown, or neurasthenia as the narrator’s diagnosis suggests, is apparent even to herself. She seems to understand her own situation but cannot see any hope for a better future. Although the reasons she enumerates are not very precise, and the reader is not informed what exactly has happened to her, it is clear that she understands she does not have what she was supposed to achieve and enjoy in her life – among

others health, beauty, family, and happiness. This seems to be consistent with how Estés perceives the ugly duckling – as representing girls or women who do not conform to social expectations, which leads to suffering, rejection and lack of self-appreciation. The discrepancy between the reality of Octavia's life and the society's expectations turns the woman into "nothing but misery" ("Dr. Clair's" 281). Now, completely alone on a train, she does not seem to care anymore about what is going to happen to her, which makes her resemble the ugly duckling that starts its exile on its own without any precise aim or hope.

Andersen's tale revolves around the theme of the ugly duckling's transformation into a beautiful swan, suggesting that a difficult journey can come to a happy ending. After all the harrowing experiences, the duckling finds company that recognize it as one of their kind, accept it without questioning and help it understand its own uniqueness. A similar transformation happens in Gilman's story. Octavia is persuaded by the narrator to go to Dr. Clair's place – "a psycho-sanatorium" for women suffering from various forms of nervous breakdown. The narrator is the first one who recognizes Octavia as 'one of her kind,' one in need of proper company and treatment, as a woman who is lost and needs to rediscover her path, her own self. In Octavia she seems to recognize herself from before her own transformation and sends her to a place where she will find help and understanding. What Dr. Clair offers Octavia as well as other patients, however, is not a complex medical treatment, but rather, a process that gives each patient an opportunity to connect to their own emotions, senses, and desires, to their own selves. Acknowledging the variety of women's needs and desires, Dr. Clair lets her patients explore them on their own. As opposed to the rest cure commonly prescribed by male doctors, Dr. Clair's treatment is "in keeping with nature rather than resisting it" (Edelstein 134), it is based on physical and creative activity, on sensual excitement, and finally on other people's inspiring company. When describing her treatment, Octavia recalls listening to music she liked, eating tasty food, color and fragrance therapies appealing to the senses, later physical exercise, and then:

Then came the People. This was [Dr. Clair's] secret. She had people who were better than Music and Color and Fragrance and Sweetness, - People who lived up there with work and interests of their own, some teachers, some writers, some makers of various things, but all Associates in her wonderful cures. ("Dr. Clair's" 287)

Being with other people seems to be the most inspiring and effective part of the treatment. Just like Andersen in "The Ugly Duckling," Gilman seems to be emphasizing the importance of kinship and proper environment. As Edelstein observes, "[s]pending time at the Hill enables women to find their places. Once

they are no longer spatially or psychologically limited by gender conventions, the visitors to Dr. Clair's Place experience themselves as more expansive and alive" (134).

When analyzing "The Ugly Duckling" Estés concludes that the tale can be read as a critique of an oppressive culture that requires obedience and represses women's natural instincts and desires (187). Gilman's story seems to address the same issue by showing an alternative, a place where women can do what they want, where they can express and satisfy their desires, where they can develop their interests and learn who they really are, without being defined by others. It is noteworthy that they take active part in the process of their diagnosis and recovery. Octavia recalls being encouraged to tell about herself whatever she felt as well as to observe her own reactions to different treatments. Additionally, Dr. Clair consulted her not only in her own case but in other cases as well. She offered her patients opportunity to recognize themselves as subjects that are autonomous, active and creative, all that male-imposed rest-cure forbade them. Instead of being infantilized like the narrator of "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Octavia and Dr. Clair's other female patients seem to grow as independent individuals. The story finishes with Octavia's complete recovery and transformation – now she enjoys her life and earns her living by helping other patients of the Hills.

"MRS. BEAZLEY'S DEEDS"

Gilman's critique of the culture that oppresses and disempowers women can also be seen in the story entitled "Mrs. Beazley's Deeds" (1911). It is also one of Gilman's short stories that, as Martha J. Cutter asserts, "insert an unruly feminine subject into masculine language. This angry subject breaks apart patriarchal discourse by traversing boundaries, by refusing to silence herself, and by telling stories that critique and rewrite the gaps of patriarchal history" (111). Just like "Dr. Clair's Place," it is a narrative of a woman who "is inspired not to lethargy (as in "The Yellow Wall-Paper") but to action" (Elbert 113). In short, it is a story of a woman, a wife and a mother, who decides to change her life and free herself from the cruel and controlling husband. In her fight to liberate herself from his despotic rule she resembles Bluebeard's young wife of Perrault's tale.

Similarly to Bluebeard's wife, Mrs. Beazley finds herself trapped in her marriage. She is supposed to be a silent, hard-working wife who always follows her husband's requests and orders. Mr. Beazley, on the other hand, is clearly the Bluebeard type – an unfeeling tyrant who demands absolute obedience

and “exercises complete control over his wife’s access to information and knowledge” (Cutter 113). He runs a shop and often uses the help of his wife but never really informs her about his business plans. He forces her to sign contracts to sell her family property against her will. He takes a boarder without even consulting his wife. Although his business skills are questionable, to say the least, he treats his wife as inferior and not worthy of being informed. When analyzing the woman’s position, Cutter observes that she is “completely cut off from discourse, so much so that she is reduced to getting information through holes in the floor” (112). This is how the reader actually meets Mrs. Beazley for the first time – “crouching on the floor of her living-room over the store in a most peculiar attitude (...) listening at a stove-pipe hole” (“Mrs. Beazley’s” 207). Her arguments or attempts at resistance are no more to him than “the squawking of a to-be beheaded hen” (“Mrs. Beazley’s” 208). She seems to be like Bluebeard’s wife, who is also denied access to knowledge, and who needs to undertake acts of insubordination in order to uncover Bluebeard’s secrets. Later, the reader learns that apart from being arrogant and patronizing, Mr. Beazley is abusive and aggressive, also towards his children.

Mrs. Beazley seems to be accepting her fate with resignation until the moment when her husband decides to sell “the Rockford lot” (“Mrs. Beazley’s” 208), the last property that she inherited from her father, a place where she grew up and where she has always wanted to live. His decision arouses her resistance, which is at first very weak and undetermined. It is only thanks to the encouragement and support of Miss Lawrence, Mrs. Beazley’s boarder, who turns out to be “the best woman lawyer in New York” (“Mrs. Beazley’s” 219), that Mrs. Beazley decides to leave her husband, move to her family estate and start an independent life. Miss Lawrence is the one who helps her “find her voice” (Cutter 113), believe that she can oppose her husband effectively and regain control of her life. With the smart help of the female lawyer, Mrs. Beazley defeats the monster-husband – she sells the store and the house above it, withdraws all the money from the bank account and takes her children with her. Mr. Beazley is left with nothing and he no longer has control over his wife.

Gilman’s short stories discussed in this chapter show that the situation of women at the turn of the century was far from satisfying. Silenced and controlled by their husbands, limited and disempowered by the culture, Gilman’s female protagonists create part of the history of gender injustice. Gilman, however, seems to be pointing to the possibilities of resistance. Her creative, sensitive but also defiant heroines show that it is possible to fight the unwanted and discriminatory status quo, to regain control of one’s life and develop an autonomous self. Such defiance, however, is not easy and usually comes at a price, including that of one’s sanity. The nameless narrator of “The

Yellow Wall-Paper,” Octavia of “Dr. Clair’s Place,” and Mrs. Beazley of “Mrs. Beazley’s Deeds” could be seen as archetypal heroines as they all need to go through some harrowing experiences to understand their position and to undertake steps leading to a change or escape. The narrator of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and Mrs. Beazley can be compared to Bluebeard’s young wife who, through an act of disobedience, manages to discover the horrifying truth about her oppressor and break free. Octavia could be seen as an ugly duckling – an alienated misunderstood woman who, nevertheless, undergoes transformation when given support in an empathetic environment. These portrayals show the disastrous effects of being confined, whether literally, socially or psychologically, and misunderstood, without the possibility to voice one’s own emotions, needs or desires that go beyond the domestic realm.

CHAPTER 3

The wild woman archetype in the works of the early- and mid-twentieth-century writers

Chapter three focuses on the representations of the wild woman archetype in the works of the early- and mid-twentieth-century American women writers including Willa Cather, Zora Neale Hurston and Sylvia Plath. The analyses provided indicate gradual changes that occurred in America in the first half of the twentieth century regarding the position of women, who gained substantial rights and became more conscious of the necessity to fight their unequal status as well as the relevance of voicing their needs and cherishing their desires. Yet, the heroines depicted still have to face various forms of oppression and they are often restrained from developing a fully autonomous identity. Cather's *The Song of the Lark* portrays a heroine who succeeds in her quest for independence and becomes a self-assured woman artist, in which she resembles Vasilisa the Wise. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a depiction of a culturally disempowered, yet unconventional, female character which contains the archetypal images of a wild woman as represented in "The Ugly Duckling" and the tale of Bluebeard. It is a story of self-discovery, a struggle to gain voice and a quest for happiness, passion and independent womanhood. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is another account of a young woman's struggle to define her identity. In her search for an autonomous self, Plath's heroine resembles the Little Match Girl who, being devoid of true support and care, chooses to stray from real life

and its difficulties into an imagined world, where she finds only illusory relief leading directly to death.

3.1. RISE AND FALL: WILLA CATHER AND HER WILD WOMEN

Willia Cather is an author without whom a study of American women in literature would not be complete. She is recognized as a novelist of the frontier describing the experiences of the pioneers and immigrants, often employing a nostalgic tone. Having moved to Nebraska, she started to draw inspiration and material from places, people and experiences she was familiar with, as in her “Prairie Trilogy,” including *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918), which is set on the prairies of the Great Plains. Cather is also noted for her depiction of American natural landscapes, as she is said to have “learned to appreciate the windswept wilderness: the splendor of willowy sunflowers that grew in profusion; the golden wheat rustling in the wind; and the coppery grass that blanketed the prairie” (Kort 46). Today, she is also appreciated for her portrayals of women who manage to move outside and redefine conventional roles imposed on them. As critics note, “Cather presents increasingly restrictive social and economic circumstances surrounding her female characters, at the same time giving them increasingly personal and specific strength to defy apparent restrictions placed upon them” (Rosowski 233).

THE SONG OF THE LARK

The Song of the Lark (1915) is conventionally classified as *Künstlerroman*, a narrative tracing the process of artistic awakening and growth to maturity of a young protagonist. Thea Kronborg is a talented girl of Swedish origins living in a small town in Colorado who struggles with adversities to finally become a successful artist appreciated by audiences in Europe and America. In her *Student Companion to Willa Cather*, Linda De Roche writes:

The Song of the Lark is Cather’s artistic manifesto. In it, the novelist examines the forces that shape the artist’s vision and considers the meaning and purpose of art itself. In it, she affirms her belief that the artist’s life and work do indeed matter. Like other portraits of the artist, *The Song of the Lark* is thus a triumphant tale of vision and voice for both Cather and her heroine and surrogate self, Thea Kronborg. (89)

The author herself makes it clear in the last chapter that the novel is an attempt “to deal only with the simple and concrete beginnings which color and accent an artist’s work and to give some account of how a Moonstone girl found her way out of a vague, easy-going world into a life of disciplined endeavor” (*Song* 447). What makes the novel unusual for its times is that it places at its center the life of a girl, which is read by critics as “an effort to revise tradition and to claim for the female artist an equivalent role in society” (De Roche 104). Cather seems to challenge the traditional notions of weak and helpless femininity by focusing on the female power to achieve spectacular success as well as gain respect and genuine appreciation. Yet, *The Song of the Lark* is also a novel which at its core is a story of initiation, and as such it bears resemblance to the tale of Vasilisa the Wise, especially as interpreted by Estés. It depicts an archetypal heroine who sets off on a quest for maturity and self-reliant autonomy.

Both stories, that is Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* and Afanasev’s tale of Vasilisa the Wise, depict young, beautiful and innocent girls who embark on a quest, undergo a certain type of initiation ritual and turn into stronger, more independent individuals. Thea Kronborg starts as a child whose needs seem to be undervalued, or who often goes unnoticed because of other siblings, the most vivid example described at the very start of the novel being when Thea’s mother is giving birth to the seventh child in the family and it is only the visiting doctor Howard Archie who gets serious about Thea’s condition – the girl turns out to have developed pneumonia and needs professional help. Fortunately, the mother, who finds Thea “more interesting than her other children” (*Song*, 62), seems to understand the girl’s sensitive and creative disposition and lets her act and behave her own way without exerting any restraining or disruptive influence on the child. Though at first presented as a silent and obedient daughter, Thea, like Vasilisa, turns out to be a determined and almost unstoppable character who is marked with remarkable perseverance and courage to face all types of difficulties. She paves her way from sleepy small-town childhood in Moonstone, through tedious and disheartening experience in Chicago, to an accomplished singing career in New York and Germany. Her pursuit of professional success seems to reflect a fairy tale pattern in which a hero embarks on an arduous quest leading, through self-discovery, to a happy ending. This is suggested by critics, who notice that “Thea succeeds so thoroughly in fairy-tale fashion” (Dubek 293), or that “Cather uses a great deal of heroic imagery and symbolism throughout the novel, what is truly heroic about Thea is her ability to rise above the common environment of her childhood home and its standards – “Moonstone standards,” as Thea calls them” (Privett 188), or more indirectly that “Thea is a young woman on a mission” (Athitakis 24). Even Cather herself, as Dubek notices, “called this novel her fairy tale,” adding that

the author “must have enjoyed creating novels for the same reason, creating characters who liberate their second, secret selves and triumph as her heroine in *The Song of the Lark*” (293).

Development, growth, maturity are the key motifs of Thea’s story and they are strictly connected with the notion of intuition. It seems that this internal power to see, feel and understand more is what pushes Thea on her long and rocky road to triumph. Just like Vasilisa, Thea needs to learn to recognize and use intuition as it is essential in the process of development. In the tale, the first step on Vasilisa’s path to self-awareness, strong intuitive powers and independence is parting with the loving mother. Estés interprets this stage as follows:

Vasilisa’s initiation begins with learning to let die what must die. This means to let die the values and attitudes within the psyche which no longer sustain her. Especially to be examined are those long-held tenets which make life too safe, which overprotect, which make women walk with a scurry instead of a stride. (85)

This stage is also present in Thea’s story, when at the age of 17 she decides to leave Moonstone behind. Leaving Moonstone means leaving the love and protection of her family, all her childhood experiences, all the people she has managed to build some relationships with so far, like Dr. Archie, who is her understanding friend and treats Thea like his own daughter, appreciating her uncommon personality, Mr. Wunsch, her first serious music teacher, Ray Kennedy, a man who dreamed of Thea becoming his wife one day and who sincerely believed in her talent and ability to succeed. Actually, it is after his tragic death and thanks to the money from his life insurance that Thea gets the opportunity to move to Chicago. Cather narrates the moment of Thea’s departure as follows:

Her eyes did fill once, when she saw the last of the sand hills and realized that she was going to leave them behind for a long while. They always made her think of Ray, too. She had had such good times with him out there. But, of course, it was herself and her own adventure that mattered to her. (...) Thea was surprised that she did not feel a deeper sense of loss at leaving her old life behind her. It seemed, on the contrary, as she looked out at the yellow desert speeding by, that she had left very little. Everything that was essential seemed to be right there in the car with her. She lacked nothing. (*Song* 148)

She seems to have been waiting for this moment for a long time and is now ready to begin the journey.

The role of the mother figure is crucial on Thea's as well as Vasilisa's path to awakened intuition. Both heroines have wise mothers who support their daughters. Although they disappear physically from the girls' lives, their presence is clearly felt. In Thea's case, the mother, though at first presented as rather ignorant of her child's specific needs, turns out to be an understanding guardian and her awareness of Thea's exceptionality is one of the factors leading to the young singer's success. She is the one who takes her "more seriously" (*Song* 62) than her other children, who recognizes her uniqueness and makes other siblings respect Thea's right to privacy or to her own routines. She arranges a small yet separate room so that Thea can stay on her own, undisturbed, she lets young Thea have close friendly relations with adults like Dr. Archie because she knows the girl appreciates their company, and finally she lets young Thea leave the safety of her hometown to take on the challenge of busy big city life. She clearly lets Thea listen to her own instincts and follow her artistic nature. She is understanding and forgiving even on her deathbed when she accepts the fact that Thea is not going to visit her because of a sudden career opportunity that is not to be missed. When talking to Dr. Archie Mrs. Kronborg says: "I hate to interrupt her, now that she's begun to get advancement. I expect she's seen some pretty hard times, though she was never one to complain. Perhaps she'd feel that she would like to come. It would be hard, losing both of us while she's off there" (*Song* 378). She is completely unselfish and understands the consequences of Thea wasting her chance, even if it means not seeing her bright daughter again. When it comes to Vasilisa, she is also forced to start her journey without the physical presence of her mother, yet, she is not left to her own devices. Her dying mother entrusts her with a little doll which turns out to be a magical object endowed with the power to guide, support and nurture, an object symbolizing maternal love and care, natural wisdom passed from generation to generation, an object which teaches Vasilisa to rely on her instincts and awakens her intuition, which has been hitherto lying dormant.

In both cases, initiation starts when the heroine faces a difficult, intimidating or simply frightening situation and makes effort to overcome the obstacles thanks to perseverance and by learning to rely on natural instincts. As Estés explains,

[i]nitiation is enacted by completing certain tasks. (...) Through completion of these tasks, a woman's intuition (...) is re-set into woman's psyche. The goal is a loving and trusting relationship with this being whom we have come to call "the knowing woman," the essence of the Wild Woman archetype. (83)

Vasilisa gets trapped in Baba Yaga's house and it is only thanks to the doll that she manages to survive and complete all the tedious and impossible duties imposed by the witch figure. Thea, in turn, gets stuck in Chicago without clear and easy progress of her career that she expected. She shares her time between her work, which is singing in the church choir, and piano lessons given by Andor Harsanyi, a Hungarian musician. The first winter in Chicago is in some sense disillusioning as Thea gets confronted with harsh reality. Cather narrates:

Andor Harsanyi had never had a pupil in the least like Thea Kronborg. He had never had one more intelligent, and he had never had one so ignorant. When Thea sat down to take the first lesson from him, she had never heard a work by Beethoven or a composition by Chopin. (...) [S]he had been given no direction, and her ardour was unawakened. She had never heard a symphony orchestra. The literature of the piano was an undiscovered world to her. He wondered how she had been able to work so hard when she knew so little of what she was working toward. (*Song* 165)

It seems that at this point Thea is still a child who is frantically looking for some direction but has no clear goal yet, the final destination remaining rather vague and remote. This initial experience, being evidently one of the many tests she goes through before taking the right path, brings confusion, uncertainty and ambiguity:

for Thea Kronborg, that winter was almost beyond enduring. She always remembered it as the happiest and wildest and saddest of her life. (...) There were hours, too, of great exaltation; when she was at her best and became a part of what she was doing and ceased to exist in any other sense. There were other times when she was so shattered by ideas that she could do nothing worthwhile; when they trampled over her like an army and she felt as if she were bleeding to death under them. She sometimes came home from a late lesson so exhausted that she could eat no supper. If she tried to eat, she was ill afterward. She used to throw herself upon the bed and lie there in the dark, not thinking, not feeling, but evaporating." (*Song* 167)

This atmosphere of ambivalence can be also detected in the way Chicago is seen by Thea, who, on the one hand, seems rather uninterested in what surrounds her, but on the other, is forced to face the challenges it poses. With its crowds, constant noises, huge buildings, lavish window displays, the city is depicted as "a wilderness through which one had to find one's way" (*Song* 183). Chicago then becomes for Thea, who has "no city consciousness," another obstacle to be faced. It is interesting to notice that, just like Baba Yaga for Vasilisa, the city experience has its two sides for Thea – one clearly negative with day-by-day

struggle to get by financially, all the effort put in piano lessons and various disappointments that it brings, as well as the positive one with moments of inspiration leading to awakening, like visiting the Art Institute to discover the painting called “The Song of the Lark,” or going to the symphony concert for the first time to realize the significance of singing. Estés points out that “Baba Yaga is fearsome, for she represents the power of annihilation and the power of the life force at the same time” (96). By analogy, Chicago experiences can either overpower Thea and break her or elevate her to the longed-for position and bring fulfilment.

The process of Thea’s growth is long and there is a moment, after two years spent in Chicago, that brings Thea to the bottom edges of her grit and determination. She sees her effort as a failure and believes that “in the essential things she had made no advance” (*Song* 278). It seems that the city has sucked out all her vivid energies and enthusiasm. Seeing Thea in this miserable condition, Fred Ottenburg sends her to his father’s ranch in Arizona. Her unique experience in Panther Canyon, a remote deserted place where the Ancient People built their houses on the cliffs, is one of the milestones on Thea’s path to success and self-realization. As De Roche summarizes, the time spent in the canyon

connects her once again to a natural landscape that speaks to her internal geography. As she follows the ancient trails in Panther Canyon and explores the ruins of the Navajo Cliff-Dwellers who had once built a civilization in the arid terrain, Thea recovers her strength of purpose and dedicates herself to her art. (95)

She spends long sunny summer days in solitude, surrounded by the wild desert landscape, free of any duties and “completely released from the enslaving desire to get on in the world” (*Song* 278).

This refreshing experience is described in ritualistic terms as Thea takes symbolic baths in the stream every day and explores the ancient dwellings where she admires the beauty of hand-made pottery. She spends time feeling rather than thinking, which sharpens her senses. She reflects upon the historic past of the people who once lived there and its connection to her own life. It is a classic rite of passage, a moment when a girl changes into a woman, unconscious turns into conscious, weak becomes strong, confused and undecided turns into clear and confident, as indicated in the passage:

she herself seemed older. (...) Here everything was simple and definite, as things had been in childhood. Her mind was like a ragbag into which she had been frantically thrusting whatever she could grab. (...) The things

that were really hers separated themselves from the rest. Her ideas were simplified, became sharper and clearer. She felt united and strong. (*Song* 288)

In Thea's case, this ritual of initiation also means discovering the source of intuition and true creativity. As Ann Moseley points out, "[in] Chicago, Thea has trouble discovering her real self, for Bowers teaches voice through intellect rather than intuition, and Thea cannot learn that way" ("Elements of Modernism" 239). It is only when surrounded by wild nature and remnants of ancient civilization that Thea experiences genuine awakening of her intuitive powers, and "instinctively and intuitively lets go of her personal consciousness and develops a universal consciousness" (Moseley, "Creative Ecology" 227). Cather narrates:

On the first day that Thea climbed the water trail, she began to have intuitions about the women who had worn the path, and who had spent so great a part of their lives going up and down it. She found herself trying to walk as they must have walked, with a feeling in her feet and knees and loins which she had never known before. (*Song* 284)

She keeps returning to the historic dwellers of the canyon and one day, when taking a bath in a pool at its bottom, a sudden idea strikes her:

what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself, (...). The Indian women had held it in their jars. (...) In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals. (*Song* 286)

This moment, described by critics as epiphany (Prenatt 260, Doležal 283), is a true breakthrough in Thea's perception of art, creativity and life in general. She realizes that just as her body is a vessel carrying her voice, her singing, which is art, carries life. Discovering the meaning of art inspires Thea to pursue her career and devote her life to singing. Critics suggest that from now on "Thea will be able to combine instinct and intelligence, subject and form, into one intuitive artistic whole" (Moseley, "Creative Ecology" 231).

What makes Thea's artistic awakening similar to Vasilisa's initiation is that they both need to learn to trust their inner senses and instincts to reach their goals and they both discover and start to rely on intuition, which is, as Estés notes, "handed down from woman to woman (...) and all females of her lines who have gone before her" (94). Vasilisa is given a doll which represents intuition handed down by females from generation to generation and learns to depend on its powers when facing different obstacles. Similarly, Thea, while

staying in the canyon, contemplates the pottery of cliff-dwellers, which could not only hold water but was also artistic and beautiful, and she enacts the process of Indian women carrying vessels with water up the cliffs to feel the connection between them and herself. As James Seaton notices, “[the] pottery of the ‘Ancient People’ connects everyday life with art in a way that suddenly allows her to feel an importance in her own singing that she has never felt before” (148). Critics emphasize the importance of the connection to other women that Thea discovers in the canyon and they agree, as Nancy Gobatto notices, that “Thea finds her strength as a woman artist rooted within a history of women artists” (par. 3). Even the landscape itself is seen, as Ellen Moers puts it, as “the most thoroughly elaborated female landscape in literature” (qtd in Rosowski 234), and adds to the general feeling of Thea discovering the spiritual as well as physical connection to the generations of women before her.

Following her intuition, Thea achieves success that she has always dreamt of, and the reader is offered a fairy-tale like happy ending. What needs to be stated is that the fairy-tale aspects of the novel are, nevertheless, in some sense reversed. As Michelle E. Moore points out, “Cather creates Thea as the opposite of these heroines who seek a life of queen-like domesticity” (46). Although there are almost always men by her side who offer their support, Thea manages to stay independent and her success is the result of her own talent, passion, determination and hard work. She does not seem to look for romantic love either and, as De Roche observes, “she identifies with strong, powerful conquerors” (97), rather than ‘domestic angels’ of her times. De Roche also suggests that Cather’s focus is “Thea the artist, not Thea the woman. Romantic love, in fact, seems one of the sacrifices that Thea must make for her art” (95). It could be, however, argued that Cather’s focus is Thea the woman but it is not a traditionally perceived woman, it is a woman who “finds freedom from the oppressive social and psychological forces that have prevented her from emerging fully as an artist” (Doležal 277). Thea does not have to sacrifice romantic love because it has never been her aim, it is not what she has been looking for. What is more, Thea seems to represent features that has been traditionally ascribed to men such as strength, willpower, ability to act or take independent decisions but, at the same time, she is intuitive, sensitive and creative. To quote Laura Dubek:

By defining Thea in terms of her ability to integrate ostensibly antithetical attributes, however, Cather questions rather than reverses the traditional gender roles which rely on Western civilization’s use of dichotomies (male/female, mind/body, dominant/submissive) to maintain the social order.

(...) Thea frees herself from the confining, fixed gender role prescribed for her by Victorian society and realizes the full integration of feminine and masculine qualities that ensure her success. (294)

It could be argued then that not only does she become a fully awakened artist but, first of all, a fully conscious wild woman, exactly as Estés describes.

SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL

Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940) is one of those novels that critics argue about, often presenting contradictory interpretations and criticizing Cather for her depiction of the characters involved. It is a story of Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert, an aging woman struggling desperately to maintain her status, respect and independence against her deteriorating health condition. It depicts Sapphira who falls into obsessive thoughts and starts mistreating her young female slave for having an alleged affair with her husband. Much of the criticism naturally focuses on the issue of slavery as the novel is set in antebellum Virginia and directly touches the master-slave relations and other “dimensions of slaveholding like racial abuse, desire, ethics, family loyalty, and regional ideology” (Matthews 157). In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison makes a harsh judgement as to Cather’s plot, characters and concerns concluding that the author felt “obliged to gesture compassionately toward slavery,” and that in the novel “Africanist presence is permitted speech only to reinforce the slaveholders’ ideology” (28). Pointing to the novel’s resemblance to slave narratives and its failure to be one, Cynthia Griffin Wolff remarks: “the slave narrative is a quintessentially African American form; however, the blacks of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in no way ‘own’ the story” (221). De Roche goes as far as to claim that the novel is so equivocal in the presentation of the subject that it “gives evidence of the writer’s declining powers” (37). John Jacobs asserts that *Sapphira* “clearly has affinities with nostalgic plantation narratives” (151), and it is a complex mixture of “fond memory and harsh criticism” (152). Naomi E. Morgenstern agrees with the criticism of “Cather’s antimodernism and idealizing representation of past cultures” (185), and argues that *Sapphira* is both a gothic novel and a slave narrative in which nostalgia is mixed with brutal content. Traci B. Abbott, on the other hand, places Nancy, the young slave girl, at the center of the novel’s focus and discusses her sexual autonomy to prove that Cather’s text is actually a revision of “southern stereotypes of black female sexuality with a modern interpretation” (55). Similarly, Sharon Hoover maintains that *Sapphira* “represents women with power over their lives” (251).

Apart from the issue of slavery and race, analyses of the novel also focus on the motif of desire, including lesbian desire, domination, dependence and resistance in a patriarchal society, connection between the past and present, loss and pain, or age and disability. All these considerations lead us to notice the correspondence between *Sapphira* and H. Ch. Andersen's tale of "The Red Shoes" as both are stories of lost natural instincts. Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert is a powerful controlling woman, a slave-owner, a classic antebellum Southern lady. However, she suffers from dropsy, an illness which gradually makes her immobile and, therefore, unable to supervise everything happening in Back Creek, where she lives with her husband and slaves. The onset of the novel presents Sapphira's attempts to sell Nancy, her favorite slave girl, as a consequence of rumors concerning an alleged affair between Nancy and Sapphira's husband, Henry. Although her decision meets with Henry's refusal, she does not yield her once almost absolute power to control things and starts plotting against the young slave, her ultimate aim being Nancy's rape. The bigger part of the novel is actually the struggle of Sapphira to punish Nancy as well as Nancy's efforts to avoid the brutal attack, in which she is finally successful, mainly thanks to Sapphira's daughter, Rachel. At the same time, however, the slave girl is forced to flee from Back Creek in search of freedom. The Epilogue of the novel presents middle-aged Nancy meeting her mother, Till, after twenty-five years of separation, Sapphira being long dead already.

The first aspect that makes Sapphira's story resonant of the tale of "The Red Shoes" is the motif of restrictive social rules with ensuing "overdomestication" and passivity, which in Sapphira's case means decline of her authority and all-powerful influence. Sapphira has always been an independent woman, a manager and a businesswoman, even in her youth:

Sapphira was usually present at [her father and Henry's] business conferences, and took some part in their discussions about the management of the farm lands and stock. It was she who rode over the estate to see that the master's orders were carried out. She went to the public sales on market days and bought in cattle and horses, of which she was a knowing judge. (*Sapphira* 24)

As a result of marrying a man of lower social position she must, however, leave her family plantation and move to the backcountry to avoid social ostracism. Although she is a strong woman of aristocratic background, she is not exempted from following the imposed social order. Nevertheless, she seems to approve of this kind of culture and reinforces this order herself, even if it means unfavorable circumstances, as long as she is able to maintain her authority. After marrying Henry, she manages the farm and a group of slaves single-handedly, being the

only person who establishes the rules and who can decide about the future of the farm and people who live there, as Henry asserts openly one day: "You're the master here, and I'm the miller. And that's how I like it to be" (*Sapphira* 50). She is, as Merrill Maguire Skaggs puts it, the master planner, but she must learn that "control, in the long run, is an illusion" (135). She learns this painful lesson as she develops dropsy, an illness that eventually confines her to the house. She is no longer self-reliant and her power to control things becomes limited as she spends most of her day in her room and becomes completely dependent on her servants. She hears rumors about Nancy and Henry but, because of her disability, cannot get direct confirmation of their disloyal deeds. Additionally, when she decides to sell Nancy, it turns out that she has no right to do it against her husband's will. Marilee Lindemann aptly comments that "Sapphira is economically powerful, but as a married woman she is politically in-valid and cannot sell her 'property' without her husband signature" (135). Neither does she have any real control of her husband nor of her daughter, Rachel, who seems to be an opposite of her mother, being an abolitionist and a person full of sympathy towards people in need. She is the one, after all, who arranges Nancy's escape to Canada.

As a result of her disability and the imposed passivity, Sapphira seems to develop obsessive thoughts. Lindemann observes that "Sapphira experiences her illness that transforms her body as an ontic wound that exacerbates her already prodigious narcissism and fuels a rage to preserve her authority" (137). She cannot accept her declining power and her response to the experience is desperate as critics point out (see Morgenstern). Estés explains that women, when caught in the net of social, domestic or personal constraints, might try to compensate for their passivity or loss of self-designed life by becoming involved in so called excessive behaviors (236). In Andersen's tale, the girl starts dancing and unexpectedly loses control of her body, which eventually leads to pain, suffering and self-destruction. In Sapphira's case, it manifests itself in obsessive jealousy and a desperate struggle to reassert control. In her attempts to punish Nancy, first by selling her, then by plotting to have her raped, she is presented as sadistic, brutal, unfeeling. Angela M. Salas makes an interesting argument that

[an] irony of Sapphira's condition and of her response to it is that she never notices the manner in which her bodily powerlessness mirrors the powerlessness of the people, most particularly the women, she enslaves; her bodily frustrations do not engender in Sapphira any empathy for the people she exploits. (98)

Quite irrationally, she designs the plan to have Nancy raped, which, as Skaggs observes, "punishes Nancy for being young and desirable, not aging Henry

for harbouring desire” (143). Actually, critics argue over Sapphira’s reasons for choosing the particular type of punishment, with readings including lesbian motif and “Sapphic desire” (Matthews 160). Morgenstern sums it up as follows, “her plot to rape Nancy can be read either as an expression of rivalry (this rivalrous reading has been the privileged one) – she wants to hurt Nancy who has come to occupy her place – or as an expression of her desire to be master and to possess the slave girl” (191). Whatever her real reasons are, Sapphira does not seem to get any relief from her obsessive thoughts, instead, her actions lead to family separation as Rachel gets estranged from her parents after arranging Nancy’s escape.

One of the major motifs of the novel as well as the tale of “The Red Shoes” is the motif of female disobedience and resistance. In Andersen’s tale the young girl disobeys the old woman’s request and wears her new red shoes to church, for which she is afterwards severely punished. In *Sapphira* the motif of disobedience is more complex as it concerns other characters as well. Yet, it is, first of all, Sapphira as a young woman who refuses to conform to the stereotype of a domestic lady and regularly assists her father in his business. What is more, she is not afraid to take independent decisions including one to marry Henry Colbert, a miller, “a plain, hard-working, little-speaking young man who stayed at home and helped his father,” someone who “was certainly no match for Captain Dodderidge’s daughter” (*Sapphira* 23). Sapphira’s daughter, Rachel, is also a character who displays the ability to disobey and resist. As Cather narrates, “Rachel had always been difficult, rebellious toward the fixed ways which satisfied other folks. Mrs. Colbert had been heartily glad to get her married and out of the house at seventeen” (*Sapphira* 15). Having abolitionist opinions, she is, as Salas asserts,

the disruptive force of virtue in Sapphira’s play. (...) She acts upon her own moral authority to create a scenario in which Nancy evades Martin’s clutches and Sapphira’s machinations. In Rachel’s play, Nancy grows up, unmolested and free. Rachel dares to think it and make it so. (102)

There is also the story of young Jezebel, Nancy’s grandmother, who was brought from Africa as a slave, yet managed to show her insubordinate and strong personality on board of the ship carrying her to America and later in the slave quarters of Sapphira’s farm. Finally, there is Nancy, who does not seem to be a passive victim but rather “a black woman who refuses the white community’s interpretation of her sexual identity and seizes control of her sexual fate” (Abbott 36). She is, after all, the first generation of women in her family who starts a free life and is able to choose the husband herself without anyone’s interference. As Sharon Hoover notices, disobedience and resistance

in the novel always lead to “the overturning of privilege” (248), with young generations overthrowing old orders and replacing them with new ones.

It is also interesting to notice how the motif of ‘shoes’ is incorporated in the novel. In the tale the red shoes become a factor that takes control of the young girl’s movements and eventually life, which in turn leads to a great loss – the girl’s legs need to be cut off if she wants to regain control over her life. In quite a similar manner, Sapphira’s illness starts limiting her and her ability to control her own life as well as the environment:

The mistress had dropsy and was unable to walk. She could still stand erect to receive visitors: her dress touched the floor and concealed the deformity of her feet and ankles. (...) This dropsical affliction was all the more cruel that she had been a very active woman, and had managed the farm as zealously as her husband managed his mill. (*Sapphira* 10)

The notion of excess that the red shoes stand for is also present in the novel where, as Lindemann notices, Sapphira’s “disability is also the mark of monstrous corporeality, of a body out of control of its size and shape and unable to tend to its most intimate needs” (Lindemann 136). Interestingly, both protagonists suffer trauma connected directly with their legs and both struggle to reassert control they used to have, in Sapphira’s case it is not only the control over her own body and life but of other people’s as well. Thus, one can draw comparisons between the mad dance of the red shoes and Sapphira’s disability as representing “body as the battleground where competing desires and possibilities circulate with a terrifying mobility” (Lindemann 136).

Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are two novels that present completely different protagonists in different life stages, facing different problems and, finally, set in different historical contexts. The contrast these two works offer seems to reflect the natural changes in Cather’s personal life experiences, including the process of maturity as well as aging. *The Song of the Lark* is a story depicting the adolescence and young adulthood of Thea Kronborg, a talented girl of Swedish origins living in a small town in Colorado, who strives to become a successful artist esteemed by audiences in Europe and America. Although the process is long and arduous, Thea is exceptionally determined, and as a result, the reader witnesses the growing independence and inner strength of the heroine, all charged with a hopeful, optimistic atmosphere. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, on the other hand, the protagonists and their lives seem darker if not downright miserable and depressing. The main protagonist, Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert, is an aging privileged white woman struggling desperately to maintain her status, respect and independence against her deteriorating health condition. The novel

is set in antebellum Virginia and unambiguously touches upon the issue of slavery with Sapphira who falls into obsessive thoughts and starts mistreating a young slave girl for having an alleged affair with her husband. The reader can observe a reverse process, a mirror reflection of Thea's experience – a strong, self-sufficient woman starts losing control of her life to become completely dependent on other people. Thus, Cather gives us two contrasting archetypal heroines, one, resembling Vasilisa the Wise, who succeeds in her struggle to become an independent, self-aware woman artist, and the other, resembling Andersen's protagonist of "The Red Shoes," who loses independence and gets trapped in a life which she can no longer control. Both stories, nevertheless, show the role of passion, desire and natural instincts in a woman's life, one by depicting their importance in the process of artistic awakening and developing a strong autonomous self, the other by portraying the deterioration of a woman who loses her natural instincts and engages in destructive behavior patterns.

3.2. GIVING VOICE TO THE SILENCED: ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S VISIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMANHOOD

Zora Neale Hurston was an American fiction writer and anthropologist who greatly contributed to the study and promotion of African American culture. As an anthropologist, Hurston gained renown with her collections of folk tales, especially with the publication of *Mules and Men* (1935), a collection of tales from the rural South. In her fiction, she explored the issues of race, class and gender, drawing public attention to the problems of African Americans living in the South in the era of Jim Crow laws, which enforced racial segregation, and with the burden of slavery legacy. Her special focus was the situation of African American women, whose unequal status, caused mainly by the intersectionality of racial, class and gender discrimination, significantly complicated their lives and made them often incapable of gaining personal fulfilment in life and healing the traumas inherited after their mothers and grandmothers. Drawing on and depicting African American experience, Hurston became a part of Harlem Renaissance, an unprecedented outburst of African American culture, including among others art, music and literature, with its center in Harlem, New York City, where Hurston arrived when it was at its peak in 1920s. However, in spite of the recognition her works gained in her lifetime, it was only in the 1970s and 1980s, with the emergence of feminist and especially black feminist literary criticism, that she gained true

fame and appreciation in the literary world. As Michael Awkward comments, feminist and Afrocentric strategies of analysis “provided readers with the capacity to respond to elements crucial to a comprehension of Hurston’s artistic sensibilities” (7). Nowadays Hurston is seen as “one of the most distinctive voices in American literature” (Kort 144), and her most acclaimed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* belongs to the canon of American literature. She also became, as Alice Walker put it, “the intellectual and spiritual foremother of generations of black women writers” (qtd in Kort 146).

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

Published in 1937, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is Hurston’s most recognized novel, which, nevertheless, has provoked mixed reactions of the critics and readers ever since its publication. It is a narrative in which the main protagonist, Janie Crawford, becomes the storyteller recounting the experience of her own life as an African American woman living in Florida. The novel has a frame structure as it starts and ends with Janie coming back to Eatonville to tell her best friend Phoebe about her experiences. The reader gets an insight into both past and present that shape the life of the heroine. Apart from being a story of self-discovery, a quest for happiness and passion, a journey to independence and a struggle to gain voice, the novel can also be viewed from the perspective of black oral tradition and the language employed by Hurston. These two themes, that is the main heroine’s quest for independent womanhood in a patriarchal society and Hurston’s use and depiction of African American folk culture, seem to prevail in the novel’s criticism (Awkward 16). Within the first theme, critics seem to be divided essentially into two groups, one in favor of interpreting Janie’s quest for self-discovery and self-realization as fulfilled in her third marriage and what follows it, and the other group trying to disprove the idea and show all the limitations and forms of patriarchal oppression imposed on Janie by her third husband, Tea Cake. The following analysis falls into the first group and its aim is to show that Janie’s portrayal can be also examined from the perspective of archetypal criticism as the novel and its main protagonist bear resemblance to Perrault’s tale of Bluebeard as well as Andersen’s “The Ugly Duckling.” Regardless of the contradictions found in the novel’s analyses, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a compelling novel with an unconventional female character at its center which points to the complicated and long-standing problems that racial, economic and gender inequalities cause in American society as well as their influence on individual people’s lives.

Sadly, Hurston seems to have been misunderstood by male writers or critics of her times as their response to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was often unfavorable. Examples of early criticism provided by Michael Awkward suggest that they were often not able to appreciate Hurston's focus on female concerns such as women's oppression in American cultural and economic environment. For instance, Richard Wright, himself an African American writer, argued that, in Awkward's words, the novel "[failed] to possess a basic idea or theme that [lent] itself to significant interpretation" (11) and it catered for the tastes of white audience by replicating stereotypes about black community. One of the reasons for such interpretations could be that Hurston's novel was "a radical departure (...) from contemporary norms for black fiction in the 1930s" (Rishoi 121), mainly because its focus is on a black female in the process of self-discovery and self-construction in an era during which "black women were marginalized in fiction as well as in life" (Jones, *Critical Companion* 173). More contemporary critics acknowledge that the major theme of the novel is that of womanhood and the limitations imposed on it, especially in reference to race and social status. Christy Rishoi, who examines *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a coming-of-age novel, is one of the critics who recognize Janie's achievements in gaining voice and see her quest for independent self as successful. Referring to Robert B. Stepto's critique of Hurston's choice to tell most of the story in the third person, Rishoi argues that this type of narration results from the historical limitations imposed on female narrators seen as inferior and should not be perceived as detracting from Janie's self-empowerment. Rather, readers should "look beyond Janie's verbal expression to determine the success of her quest for selfhood" (Rishoi 123). Mary Helen Washington concentrates on how the novel presents women's relationship to community and to language, observing that Janie is in fact excluded from both as she is "trapped in her status as object, as passive female" (10), not allowed to take active part in the community's oral tradition. Furthermore, Washington asserts that "[w]hen the voice of the black oral tradition is summoned in *Their Eyes*, it is not used to represent the collective black community but to invoke and valorize the voice of the black *male* community" (10). Cynthia Bond also points to the fact that Hurston is critical of the black oral tradition with its exclusion of women as speakers and its insistence on making women its objects mainly, but argues that it is through figural language, that is "the deployment of figures within the sphere of language" (42), that Janie can express herself.

Contemporary critics use multiple perspectives to examine the richness and complexity of the novel's themes and motifs. Nellie McKay, for example, looks at *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through the lens of autobiography from the perspective of Hurston as a writer and Janie as a speaker. McKay observes

that their voices are complementary and “writer Hurston – the experiencing self – and character Janie – the narrative self – take us on a journey of personal discovery to the place where language, gender, and culture merge to give full voice to the otherwise often-marginalized black female self” (54). Rachel Blau DuPlessis explores the novel’s themes from the perspective of feminist cultural studies to draw conclusions on how different social determinants such as race but also class and gender roles influence the narrative and its main protagonist. DuPlessis observes that thanks to her three husbands Janie is given a possibility to travel “through an array of social classes. And Hurston’s narrative tests each class for its possibilities of satisfying a woman’s life – that is, she tests social class by gender criteria” (114). The critic concludes that “[r]eckless gambling artists come out best” (DuPlessis 114). Sigrid King analyzes “the importance of naming and unname” (59) as tools of power and oppression. John Lowe considers the issue of humor and argues that Janie is a gifted humorist, “a narrator who entertains, indeed, mesmerizes” (73) and who “learns that humor can be constructive, supportive, and joyous, and that it can create personal and communal harmony as well as discord” (72). Analyzing the power of voice and the visual, Deborah Clarke argues that it is not only the voice that is crucial in constructing Janie’s identity but the visibility of the body seems as important. Clarke comments: “[r]esponding to the long history of blacks as spectacle – from slavery to minstrelsy to colonized object – [Hurston] offers the possibility of reclaiming the visual as a means of black expression and black power” (148).

It seems almost impossible to summarize the multitude of analyses of Hurston’s masterpiece, and the ones mentioned above are only part of it, but it only confirms the complexity and depth of the work that was seen at the time of its publication as a text “merely celebrating the spontaneous primitivism of black life” (Meisenhelder 117). To add to the body of existing criticism, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a novel depicting a female quest for identity and self-empowerment might also be interpreted with the use of fairy tales and archetypal psychoanalysis employed by C. P. Estés. Taking this perspective into consideration, one can notice that the novel bears strong resemblance to Perrault’s tale of Bluebeard. In Estés’s interpretation, it is a story of initiation in which the heroine is faced with a monster, a destructive force in disguise that disrupts the process of individuation and inhibits the development of the self, but is able to uncover the terrifying truth about the monster and manages to defeat him. Hurston’s novel appears to follow a similar pattern as it also depicts a young female protagonist who gets married to a beast groom whose monstrosity no one seems to notice initially or does not want to acknowledge. The initiation comes with the heroine discovering Bluebeard’s secret and realizing the fact that she has fallen victim to his cunning game and she has been

imprisoned against her will. In Hurston's novel, Janie actually goes through this process at least twice – with both Logan Killick, her first husband, and Joe Starks, her second husband, as oppressive monsters in disguise who demand complete subordination of her and entrap her developing self. In both cases Janie manages to escape the destructive influence of her oppressors, which is crucial to her growing self-awareness and independence.

Logan Killick, Janie's first husband, is an aging man who owns a house, a field and a mule, and is chosen by Janie's grandmother Nanny as a man who can guarantee the girl financial safety and protection against abuse. As it quickly turns out, her life with Killick is not even close to what Janie imagines as love, marriage and "things sweet (...) lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (*Their Eyes* 27). As Sigrid King observes, even his name ironically underscores this idea, "for his relationship to Janie quickly "kills" her definition of marriage" (61). There is nothing in Logan Killick that attracts the young girl, she "hates the way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides" and "his belly is too big too, now, and his toe-nails look lak mule foots" (*Their Eyes* 27). But the lack of physical attraction, as it turns out, is only a minor problem. Just like Bluebeard, who allows his bride to enjoy herself in his house but demands absolute obedience to his rules, Killicks gives Janie a home and financial stability but expects her to do whatever he wants her to. At first, he is not aggressive, yet when Janie attempts to be a little more assertive and refuses to do some of the chores, Killicks gets enraged at her insubordination. He insults her and her family and even threatens to kill her with an ax, which resembles Bluebeard's threats directed at his bride. When Perrault's heroine discovers the secret chamber filled with the corpses of Bluebeard's previous wives, she gains knowledge of her husband's real personality and realizes the danger she is in. Similarly, Janie makes a discovery of her husband's real personality and her role as his wife. She realizes that essentially Logan Killicks wants her to stay silent, work like a mule on his farm and be his "domestic servant" (188), as Shawn E. Miller notes. Thus, it can be said that both heroines become the victims of an oppressive male who feels the need to control his wife, and both of them gain valuable knowledge which triggers change. It is also interesting to note that just like Perrault's heroine who is taken as a bride to Bluebeard's big yet isolated estate, Janie is taken "away from people to an isolated location where she has no other human connections" (Patterson 118).

Interestingly, it is actually Nanny who pushes sixteen-year-old Janie into the arms of this old man and unconsciously becomes her first oppressor. She is unable to understand or empathize with Janie's budding self as a woman, the girl's emerging sexuality or her vision of and craving for love because "her ethic subscribes to the maintenance of male dominance over women's lives" (59), as

McKay argues. Having gone through all the traumatic experiences of her life including slavery and rape, Nanny believes that the role of the black woman is to be “de mule uh de world” (*Their Eyes* 17). Now, the only way to save Janie from sharing the experiences is to make her marry a man who can secure her economically and physically. As Susan Edwards Meisenhelder observes, Nanny is “limited in her conception of alternatives” and accepts “the hierarchies and inequalities of her world as universal and immutable” (118). Imposing her limited view of a black woman’s possibilities, Nanny blocks Janie’s development and, in fact, becomes her first oppressor, though she obviously does not mean to be one.

Janie’s second marriage, although at first shown as liberating her from the role of the mule that Logan Killicks intends for her, also bears marks of Bluebeardian oppression and turns out to be no less confining than the first one. Joe Starks meets Janie when she is still Logan’s wife and clearly expedites her decision to leave the old man. Starks makes it easier for her to realize that being a mule on a farm does not need to be and should not be her destination. Although Joe Starks does not represent what is Janie’s first vision of love, that is “sun-up and pollen and blossoming trees, but he [speaks] for far horizon. He [speaks] for change and chance” (*Their Eyes* 34). This seems to be what Estés refers to as Bluebeardian mesmerization, that is “[t]he deceitful promise of the predator (...) that the woman will become a queen in some way, when in fact her murder is being planned. (...) a false sense of freedom” (51). At first, Janie’s marriage to Joe looks as if she had won a lottery ticket as Starks quickly gains respect and establishes his strong social position in the community of Eatonville. Not only does he start a successful business which allows him to buy a huge house, but he also becomes the mayor of the town. What on the surface looks like a future that Nanny could not even conceive of, a dream come true, when examined more carefully becomes a complete disappointment and is more like a nightmare for Janie. Just like her marriage to Logan Killicks, the second one to Joe Starks desecrates her youthful idea of love and connection with another person.

The first time Joe Starks makes it clear what his definition of a wife is and how he perceives Janie’s role is when he is chosen the mayor of the town and does not allow Janie to give a short speech to honor the event: “Thank yuh fuh yo’compliments, but mah wife don’t know nonthin’ ‘bout no speech-making. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (*Their Eyes* 49). This is one of many instances to come when Joe silences Janie depriving her of her true voice and pointing to her role as his subordinate. As Rishoi comments,

[p]romising to place her on a pedestal, Joe provides Janie with a means of escaping Logan's definition of her as a mule, but Joe ends up interpellating her more successfully than either Nanny or Logan. (...) He gives her social position and material wealth, but he does not allow her to join in community life. Silencing Janie, he positions himself as the authority on who Janie is and should be. (126)

Meisenhelder makes a similar observation that Janie is elevated in her social status because of Joe's position, yet she is "subjugated and objectified in her relationship with Joe: her pedestal will place her above other black women, but decidedly beneath him" (121). Janie is not allowed to participate in the conversations that take place on the porch of Starks's store, which means denying her the opportunity of being a part of the community's oral tradition. Though Janie clearly enjoys so called "mule talk," that is making up the stories about Matt Bonner's neglected mule, Joe openly disapproves:

Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge. He didn't want her talking after such trashy people. 'You'se Mrs Mayor Starks, Janie. I god, Ah can't see what ah woman uh yo' sability would want tuh be treasurin' all dat gum-grease from folks dat don't even own de house dey sleep in. (*Their Eyes* 61)

Critics assert that Joe represents "a false model of black manhood" and "he strives simply to usurp the white man's place at the top of the social ladder" (Meisenhelder 120), that he "replicates the authority by which whites have oppressed African Americans" (Simmons 170), which in turn predestines Janie's position as his wife. Being a light-skinned woman with beautiful long Caucasian hair, Janie perfectly fits the role of an ornament for other people to admire and becomes an obvious sign of Starks's social status and economic success.

Although Janie is not forced to work hard like a mule, her role as that of an object, a passive recipient of male orders, limits her independence and impedes the development of her self-defined identity. Jones aptly observes that "Hurston presents Janie's rise from folk to bourgeois status in terms of loss of identity and voice" (*Rereading the Harlem Renaissance* 93). Yet, just like Perrault's heroine, who discovers Bluebeard's secret chamber, Janie uncovers the truth about Joe and their relationship. She manages to resist the oppression of the monster by developing an idea of inner and outer selves. The realization comes to her after an incident in which Joe slaps her for a badly cooked dinner:

She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. (...) It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. (...) She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. (...) She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (*Their Eyes* 82)

She comes to understand that her life with Joe will never bring fulfilment and the only way to survive in it is to become an obedient and silent wife on the outside but, simultaneously, have an inside full of emotions and thoughts, a hidden self with the unwavering dream of the blossoming tree that she envisioned as a figure of love when she was a teenager. As Rishoi observes, it “allows Janie to protect the part she cherishes – her interior knowledge – which is still alive and in process while externally coping with and surviving her marriage” (127). With time, her hidden self seems to empower Janie and finally triggers her disobedience as she openly expresses harsh criticism of Joe’s authoritarian behavior and his condescending attitude to her in front of all the men in the store. Although critics like Rishoi assert that having two separate selves “does not empower her to act” (128), Janie’s words humiliate her husband and the result is his figurative castration, as Bond argues (49), and the reversal of power in their relationship, as King observes (64). Ultimately, it also leads to Joe’s death since being robbed “of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish” he has “nothing to do in life anymore” (*Their Eyes* 82). It is also quite understandable that after Joe’s death, as critics note, “Janie feels a newfound sense of relief and freedom from the oppressive atmosphere his desire for wealth, status, and power gave them” (Jones, *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance* 94).

Janie’s third husband Tea Cake, although often examined by contemporary critics as also abusive at times and using his patriarchal power over Janie, does not really share the characteristic features of Bluebeard. Initially, he appears to be his exact opposite as he encourages Janie to free herself of traditional female roles and try her hand at things she has never done before, to finally enjoy herself. When he teaches her how to play checkers, how to shoot, how to drive a car, when he encourages her to speak her mind, tell stories and jokes, he recognizes and acknowledges the fact that she does not need to be defined by widely-accepted social roles. Instead of forbidding her to explore the secret chambers, he lets her discover what is enjoyable, the pleasures of everyday life she has been denied so far. He also draws her attention to the beauty of her own body and her hair. Although clearly not without flaws, he makes it easier for her

to construct her autonomous self on her own as well as lets her come closer to the community that she has been isolated from so far. Being an embodiment of her teenage vision of love, that of a blossoming pear tree pollinated by bees, Tea Cake shows Janie “how to give herself in love and to reach out to others in acceptance of their love” (McKay 62). McKay also observes that Tea Cake “opens the way for her to construct a language of liberation” which “permits her to join communities from which she was previously excluded, first on the muck and then in Eatonville” (68). It is also interesting to note that “Janie’s quest for self takes place in the context of romance and continues beyond the traditional marriage ending” (Rishoi 129). Though Tea Cake turns into a monster quite literally when he gets infected with rabies and Janie is actually forced to kill him, it seems only a very superficial parallel to the tale of Bluebeard. After his death, equipped with new experiences, Janie is ready to continue her quest, and her “primary need seems to be to voice her complex understanding of her experience; she privileges her inner voice, and is finally confident enough to listen to others and learn from them too” (Rishoi 131).

Another way of reading Bluebeard’s oppressive power over his newly-wed wife is to see it from a broader perspective as the culture that constrains the woman preventing or impeding the process of identity formation. This is also one of the issues that Hurston seems to draw the reader’s attention to. María Eugenia Coteria makes the following comment:

This story within a story draws important links between Janie’s own position at the intersection of racial and gendered oppression and a tradition of Black women’s thought elaborated within the confines of a system that denied them both physical and intellectual autonomy. It is a story that locates Janie’s coming to consciousness within a broader history of Black women’s oppression and contextualizes her struggle for autonomy as a historical struggle that reaches far beyond the individual horizon of her own aspirations. (185)

These are not only her two husbands that oppress Janie, but the whole culture she lives in demands that she, as a black woman, obey the rules. These are the rules that were established a long time ago and that she is in no position to waive. Hemenway also points to the fact that

the novel documents Janie’s search to liberate herself from a world that imposes artificial distinctions of class, a world that imposes male fantasies of socialization that deny women the right to autonomous decisions. It also shows Janie seeking her place – and her voice – in the African-American community as an individual woman. (43)

Janie's disobedience to and escape from Logan Killick and Joe Starks can be seen as evidence of her growing awareness and can also be read as her attempts at liberating herself from the culture that through categories like race, class and gender imposes repressive roles and patterns of behavior, impairs people's relationships, prevents natural development of identity and autonomy.

Their Eyes Were Watching God can also be successfully analyzed in reference to another fairy tale, that is "The Ugly Duckling" by H. Ch. Andersen. The fairy tale has been traditionally interpreted as a tale of comfort for all those who are treated like outcasts, who might be undervalued or victimized due to being different and thus look for true kinship and recognition. Taking the traditional interpretation into account, Estés points to the advantageous side of the exile that the ugly duckling is forced into. The author of *Women Who Run With the Wolves* emphasizes the fact that the quest and the resulting transformation the ugly duckling undergoes make it stronger as well as appreciative of its own nature, its identity. In her analysis of the tale Estés concentrates on women who come to be treated like ugly ducklings because they do not want to conform to traditional female roles, refuse to be conventionally limited to domestic life only, have strong instinctive nature, and often prove to be creative or artistically skilled. Janie's life as described in *Their Eyes* seems to bear resemblance to the ugly duckling's quest and transformation in Estés's interpretation. Both stories feature the motif of a child who is different and who does not seem to belong to the group or environment s/he lives in. In Hurston's novel, Janie first learns about her otherness at the age of six, the moment she suddenly realizes she is "colored" (*Their Eyes* 11) when looking at a photograph of her and the Washburn children, "quality white folks" (*Their Eyes* 10) she is growing up with. Everyone is amused when the little girl cannot recognize herself in the picture and is so surprised at her own dark skin: "before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest" (*Their Eyes* 11). When Janie goes to school, which is obviously a school for black children, she is again the different one. Living in white people's backyard, being dressed in white children's clothes, having lighter skin color and beautiful Caucasian hair, she becomes a victim of teasing and bullying at school. She does not seem to belong anywhere actually, being too black for white people and too white for the black.

In her analysis of the tale, Estés underlines the role of the mother, or rather lack of her, in the ugly duckling's development. The duckling cannot rely on the mother's support as she is not strong enough to resist the bullying and pressure of the hostile environment. In Andersen's tale, it is actually the mother who sends the duckling into the exile. In Hurston's novel, Janie is abandoned by her mother who is not able to cope with reality after being herself raped by her teacher. Nanny, who fulfils the role of the mother for Janie, is the one who

forces the girl to embark on the quest. Just like the ugly duckling's mother who believes that the exile is the only way to protect her child, Nanny makes Janie marry Logan Killicks at the age of sixteen, as a way to protect her from abuse and poverty. This is also the beginning of Janie's path to self-awareness and self-discovery. Though the final result of the exile seems positive and encouraging, it cannot be denied that Janie lacks true female support and understanding, which significantly disturbs her development. As McKay argues,

Janie has no female models, no mother or female relatives from whose examples she learns to pattern her acts of rebellion against the peculiar oppressions that confront all black women. However, in the relationship between Janie and Pheoby, especially after Janie's return from the muck - Pheoby's act of bringing food to her friends, Janie's recitation of her story to Pheoby, the latter's response to the story, and Janie's investiture of Pheoby with the authority to communicate the story to the women in the community - the narrative affirms the significance of female bonding in women's search for their identities. (62)

The importance of proper female role models and true female bonding is what Estés points to in her analysis of "The Ugly Duckling." She makes an interesting observation that "[s]ometimes the frail mother is herself a swan who has been raised by ducks. She has not been able to find her true identity soon enough to benefit her offspring" (193). The words might in fact refer to both Nanny and Janie's mother, Leafy, who, as a result of the oppression and violence they experience, cannot free themselves from imposed patterns of behavior, from being the mules of the world, and develop as autonomous beings ready to give proper support to their offspring.

Just like the ugly duckling, Janie is left on her own at a very young age. Her exile but at the same time quest for identity start when she is forced to marry and her three marriages might be seen as her attempt at finding kinship. Killicks, her first husband, gives her financial protection and stability, but Janie soon realizes that it is not what she expects from life and his farm is not the place where she belongs. Joe Starks, her second husband, though initially giving hope for a happy satisfied life, confines Janie as much as Killicks. Unable to voice her thoughts and feelings, she only grows inward, outside she is still the ugly duckling. Interestingly, Starks quite literally keeps Janie ugly by forbidding her to show her beautiful hair in the public and making her feel unattractive and insecure about her aging body. It is only in the relationship with Tea Cake, her third husband, that Janie blossoms into the pear tree in full bloom and "her soul [crawls] out of the hiding place" (*Their Eyes* 146). As Rishoi observes, "[r]ejecting previous discourses that, in her view, defined her erroneously, Janie

sets about to create an alternative subjectivity that privileges her own vision of life and love" (128). Although his domination over her is quite explicit, Tea Cake is the first one who offers Janie a true alternative and lets her explore her own self, "the uncharted territory of her subjectivity" (Rishoi 130). It is next to him when living on the "muck" that she starts realizing she is a beautiful swan, not an ugly duckling, and this self-knowledge seems to give her the power to handle the difficulties she is bound to face. Tea Cake's illness that makes him aggressive seems to be Janie's final test of self-discovery and self-empowerment. The fact that she finally kills him in an act of self-defense points to her strength, autonomy and reinvention of her autonomous self. She is now able to go back to Eatonville and face the community as an independent woman.

It is also crucial to understand the importance of the environment of the "muck" in Janie's transformation into a swan. It is a place that Tea Cake takes her to live, where she can liberate herself from her previous role of the mayor's wife, where she can spend time with other people working together, but also enjoying conversations, telling stories, playing games. Though she works there in the field, she does become the mule of the world. The setting of the muck is for Janie a complete opposite of Eatonville, and when thinking about these two places, she feels "sorry for her friends back there and scornful of the others" (*Their Eyes* 153). As Patterson observes, Janie and Tea Cake

become part of an international community of African Americans, West Indians, and Native Americans. Though all are transients, the residents create a community based on laboring on the land and living and working in a communal environment. Life on the "muck" shows people in motion – singing, talking, playing – with concern for their community as well as their individual welfare. Here Janie can live without pretensions and experience love without restrictions. (122)

It is a community that accepts her without putting pressure on her, where she can voice herself without fear of being ridiculed or ignored, where she can finally take active part in the black oral tradition. As Meisenhelder observes, the "muck" is presented in the novel as "a black Eden free of outside cultural influence and the deadly insipidity of the dominant white world" (124). "With no white man tossing his load to the black man, black men do not toss it on to black women" (Meisenhelder 125), thus, Janie can enjoy her love and life there avoiding and resisting the racial and gender oppressiveness that other places and communities force onto her. The experience seems to contribute to Janie's empowerment and so she is able to come back to Eatonville after Tea Cake's death "for reintegration; she thereby achieves wholeness while enriching the community with her newfound insights" (Lowe 73). By showing the influence

of the “muck” on Janie’s development, Hurston seems to underscore the interdependence of an individual and the community they are part of.

Though the novel has a frame structure and it starts and ends with Janie coming back to Eatonville to tell about her life experiences to her friend Pheoby, the proper story of Janie’s life is told in the third person, which might suggest Janie’s passivity and failure to gain voice, as some critics underlined (see Stepto 5-8). Contemporary readers might also criticize the fact that Janie forms her identity through her relationships with others, and especially her husbands, which makes it resemble a conventional romance, where a woman is defined only in relation to the man she loves. But Hurston, as Meisenholder aptly comments, actually subverts the genre and shows Janie as “a woman who does finally love herself more, who neither dies at her lover’s hands nor withers away after his death” (140). Simmons makes a similar observation:

In every marriage relationship depicted in the novel, Hurston shows that, while it is unclear whether a culturally disempowered woman like Janie can create a successful life for herself alone, the presence of men is not itself the antidote to the vulnerability of women. No man can keep Janie safe – men can protect neither her body nor her voice – and therefore, *if* a successful narrative is to be achieved by Janie, it will be a result of her own decisions and actions, whether or not she makes these in the company of a man. (177)

At the end of the novel Janie is able to shape her own story. By choosing to come back to Eatonville, to face the people who have been holding her in contempt after she ran away with Tea Cake, and to tell her story to her female friend, Janie proves her strength, autonomy of decisions and understanding of complex life experiences. She is a transformed ugly duckling that acknowledges her own beauty. She is the liberated wife of Bluebeard, who is not afraid to face the monster. Either way, her quest seems to be complete – she is a woman who understands her womanhood and is ready to share the knowledge with those who need it.

3.3. MADNESS AND SELF-DESTRUCTION: LOOKING UNDER THE BELL JAR

Sylvia Plath was an American poet writing within the genre of confessional poetry who, “in the years following the posthumous publication of her second poetry collection, *Ariel* (1965), became the movement’s chief icon” rising “to

near legendary status” (Bawer 8). Although she managed to publish only one poetry collection and one novel during her lifetime, she is now recognized as “one of the leading figures in twentieth-century literature and culture” (Jo Gill ix). Her writing was very personal, full of violent emotions and strongly connected with her own, often traumatic experiences such as her father’s unexpected death or her mental breakdown, her suicide attempt and the ensuing treatment at a mental health institution, which included the electroshock therapy. Plath wanted to write from a very early age and she is said to have been afraid of becoming a housewife trapped in the cage of her own house and family, which is actually one of the themes she discussed in her only novel *The Bell Jar*. As critics note,

[w]riting between the first two waves of modern feminism, her work anticipates many of the issues and ideas that women in subsequent decades were to pursue, but she was deprived of the cultural, political and aesthetic framework in her own time that might have helped her to articulate these. (Jo Gill 15)

Her works, in which she reflected on the problems of female identity and autonomy, as well as her suicide at the age of thirty drew public attention and Plath “became something of a cult figure among adolescent women, while her poetry, often about feeling betrayed and powerless, foreshadowed feminist writing in later years” (Kort 253).

THE BELL JAR

Sylvia Plath’s only novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) has become a classic reading, as much popular among scholars as among young people struggling with their emerging identities. Since its publication in 1963 and the author’s suicide a few months later, the novel has stimulated diverse interpretations and commentaries and, as Ellen McGrath Smith notices, “Plath’s suicide and her gradual canonization as one of America’s great poets have both had impacts on the critical responses to *The Bell Jar*” (93). It is especially the suicide that has influenced the novel’s readings as it seems almost impossible to separate the life of Esther Greenwood described in the novel from Plath’s personal battles and experiences. Thus, many readings refer to the biographical aspect of the novel and this one will not try to overlook it either. The novel is often read as a Bildungsroman or more specifically a female Bildungsroman with Esther being a young protagonist at the verge of an adult life trying to understand the world around and discover her ‘true’ self (see Linda W. Wagner, renee c. hoogland). In the process of defining her identity she gets completely disoriented, which

has additionally inspired multiple feminist analyses as Esther gets stuck in the 1950s American suburbs, which endorse traditional female roles of wives and mothers. As Wendy Martin aptly observes,

[n]ot since Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* or Mary McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps* has there been an American novel which so effectively depicts the life of an intelligent and sensitive woman eager to participate in the larger world, who approaches experience with what amounts to a deep hunger, only to discover that there is no place for her as a fully functioning being. (qtd in McGrath Smith 96)

Because of Plath's poignant account of Esther's declining mental health and evident depressive condition the novel has also become an object of interest for psychoanalysts as well as other researchers inquiring into psychological aspects of the novel. Moreover, the historical setting of the novel in the Cold War era has also encouraged analyses focusing on its influence on the main protagonist and the shaping of her identity. And it is not only about the oppressive influence of "domestic ideology of the postwar United States" (67) that Iris Jamahl Dunkle writes about, but first of all, about "the state of being Other to oneself, of selfdissociation and dislocation" (133) that Sally Bayley points to. It seems that more recent critical analyses, as McGrath Smith observes, "step back from the text to see it in relation to other texts, other discourses, and competing narratives about literary, cultural, and geopolitical history" (102). Thus, we have ecocritical readings like that of Allison Wilkins looking at women-nature relations and parallels, analyses examining the feminist discourse and aesthetics in the novel (see Budick), interpretations comparing it with other novels of similar topics and themes (see Bridgford), readings tracing the relation to the language of women's magazines of the 1950s (see Leonard) or explorations referring to disability studies to discuss Esther's body as "inebriated, poisoned, broken, assaulted, depressed, shocked, overdosed and bled" (Boyer 200).

With so many themes and motifs, possible readings and interpretations, the novel seems an interesting object for further study with reference to fairy tales. When looking closer at the main protagonist and her experiences, one is bound to notice similarities between *The Bell Jar* and the tale of "The Little Match Girl" by H. Ch. Andersen. On the most general level, both stories depict characters who, being devoid of true support and care, choose to stray from real life and its difficulties into an imagined world, where, unfortunately, they find only illusory relief leading directly to death. Just like the Little Match Girl, who escapes into fantasies of a warm house when forced to survive a harsh winter in the city entirely on her own, Esther, when being on the verge of independent adult life and struggling to establish her true identity, gradually loses contact

with reality. The narration with a series of flashbacks lead us through Esther's difficult, sometimes even traumatic experiences to witness the protagonist's nervous breakdown. From the very start of the novel the reader is made aware of Esther's peculiar emotional state. She narrates:

I knew something was wrong with me that summer, (...). I was supposed to be having the time of my life. I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America (...). Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley-bus. (*Bell Jar* 2)

From a college girl achieving the best results in scholarly work who believed she could conquer the world, Esther turns into a confused individual who is not able to define her goals, do anything productive or simply enjoy her time in New York. Slowly, she starts withdrawing from social life, her mind being filled with visions of executions, cadavers, death. It is evident from the first lines of the novel where Esther, thinking about the Rosenbergs' electrocution, remarks: "It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves" (*Bell Jar* 1), or later, when she admits: "I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I'd stop and look so hard I never forgot" (*Bell Jar* 12). It seems Esther is unconsciously trying to escape her identity dilemmas and, as a result, falls into the trap of some sort of depressive disorder or neurosis, as she later declares herself. Her condition might be, however, read as a form of liberation, as Maria Farland observes: "madness represents one possible release from the deformations of social convention, emerging as Esther's best prospect for liberation from conformist ideals of marriage and family" (229). Just like the Little Match Girl for whom fantasies and ensuing death offer release from the cruel cold world, Esther seems to choose madness instead of what the world has to offer.

Analyzing "The Little Match Girl," Estés points to the role of the proper environment in the process of fostering the wild woman within. Neither the Little Girl nor Esther have the support they need, instead they both suffer because of unfriendly conditions. The Little Girl is completely on her own in a big city in wintertime, she cannot rely on her parents, and the people around her do not care whether the girl freezes to death or not. Esther's situation seems parallel. First of all, although the plot starts in summertime, the historical time setting is that of Cold War, which might arouse associations with wintertime presented in the tale. Moreover, just as the weather conditions are extremely

unfavorable for the Little Girl, the atmosphere of the 1950s Cold War America is detrimental to Esther's development. The post-war United States became almost hostile towards women who wanted something more than the role of a housewife. As Dunkle observes, "the greatest contribution a woman could make to Cold War international politics was to cultivate the home," and to promote this ideology "images of domestic bliss and virtuous mothers were purveyed in magazines, television programming, political speeches, and advertising" (67). This was not an environment that a talented, hard-working and intelligent woman could thrive in. Additionally, the first half of the novel is set in New York, a big unsympathetic city where Esther becomes a tiny particle in the crowd of anonymous people, where no one seems to notice her deteriorating mental and emotional state. Plath makes it evident that the city is of no advantage to her protagonist. As Wilkins argues,

[p]airing the cityscape of New York with the electrocution of the Rosenbergs is Plath's way of aligning the city with Cold War and nuclear holocaust fears. Plath repeatedly shows the city to be a place of pollution and destruction, removed from nature or distorting of nature, and harmful to Esther. (49)

It is in New York that Esther suffers from a serious food poisoning after the *Ladies' Day* banquet or is assaulted by Marco, her woman-hating date, who makes an attempt at raping her. As Linda W. Wagner comments, "[r]eplete with scenes of violence, sexual aggression, mud and possession, this last of the New York stories plunges the reader further into relentless depravity the city has provided" (60). This incident is also the last straw that pushes Esther down the hill of depression and a nervous breakdown.

Another aspect that makes Esther's environment unfavorable and difficult is American consumer culture, already in force in the 1950s, which forces people to be both producers and consumers at the same time. This, as Renee Dowbnia argues in her study of the influence of American culture on Plath's characters, "produces a binge-purge cycle of consumption as the model American lifestyle" (568). The binge-purge cycle is a constant fight between indulging our desires to consume and repressing or delaying them when it is needed. Esther's relation with food and material possessions actually reflects her internal fight and dilemmas as she either conforms to consumer culture or criticizes and rejects it. Thus, the reader can observe Esther indulging her desire to consume by going to lavish parties, wearing fancy dresses or devouring huge portions of caviar and crab meat salad only to suffer next day and long for purification. This is when we see her taking baths, or suffering food poisoning

or, finally, throwing all her stylish new dresses out from the sunroof of her New York hotel. Dowbnia makes an interesting point:

in a social climate that expected women to funnel their talents solely to the role of homemaker, Esther's relationship with food is symbolic of the expression and tempering of her larger desires: the freedom not to know what she wants to be (or to balance more than one role) as an adult, sexual freedom and control over her reproduction, and access to the luxuries and privileges of an upper-class lifestyle. (568)

Esther is clearly confused about the consumer culture or American culture and its demands in general as she makes sometimes desperate attempts at finding some balance between refusing to consume and overconsuming. We see her buying the latest fashions or wearing the same boring clothes for three weeks, taking long baths or not taking baths at all, being completely sober or drinking too much, starving or overeating. The fig tree metaphor that appears in the novel is a perfect reflection of the battle that Esther is going through – she would like to have them all –

one fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers, (*Bell Jar* 73)

but because of cultural restrictions she can choose only one, which makes her unable to decide and eventually leads to starvation. As Dowbnia concludes,

[u]nable to satisfy all of her life's desires due to restrictions of 1950s gender roles, Esther is fated to either conform or starve. Starve is exactly what Esther does, and her inability to eat, sleep, read, and write are symptoms of her descent into the bell jar, a complete loss of control over her body that mirrors her feelings of social and economic powerlessness. (582)

This social and economic powerlessness is what characterizes both Esther and Andersen's Little Match Girl.

The people that Esther is surrounded with do not create a positive environment either as they are not able to provide her with true meaningful support. Male figures presented in the novel are to a great extent unhelpful, if not harmful. Neither Buddy Willard, Esther's first object of affection, who believes a home can make a woman happy and satisfied, nor Dr. Gordon, her first psychiatrist, who prescribes electric shock therapy without trying to

understand the essence of Esther's crisis, can give her what she is in need of. As Wilkins aptly comments,

each male character has already decided what he thinks Esther should become. By trying to force Esther into roles that she has not chosen for herself, the male characters thwart Esther's ability to make decisions and oppress her. If the ability to choose is a life-sustaining activity, then the inability to choose results in the decaying of life. (39)

It is especially interesting to notice how Esther's attitude to Buddy Willard changes with time. The more she learns about him, the more disappointed she becomes, starting from an innocent and naïve teenage infatuation, where she only admires her friend from a distance, to a fully conscious rejection of a now grown-up man. Esther cannot accept the fact that Buddy believes that poems are after all just dust and that marriage, home and motherhood can solve all her identity problems. She does not want to end up being a soiled and dull kitchen mat: "I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs Willard's kitchen mat" (*Bell Jar* 80). But Buddy is not the only man who brings disappointment in her life. It turns out that the first male figure in her life to fail her was her father, who died when she was only nine, leaving her completely upset, which she only realizes some years later: "It had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old" (*Bell Jar* 71).

When it comes to the influence of female figures on Esther, it is arguably more positive, yet still insufficient to prevent her crisis. Esther is clearly lost when looking for a role model among the women she knows. When in New York, she can choose between Betsy, a sweet innocent girl from Kansas, and Doreen, a fashion-conscious, self-confident, carefree, sexually active and always ready for adventures girl with an air of decadence around her. Hoogland comments that Doreen represents "the stereotypical image of Woman as flesh" while Betsy is the incarnation of "clean and healthy virginity" (295). Although Esther feels attracted to both, neither is a good enough choice as her true self seems bigger than these one-dimensional personalities of her New York colleagues, or it can be said that each of them appeals to only one part of Esther's personality without making her feel complete. She is caught in this peculiar dilemma after the night out with Doreen when she reflects: "I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled by heart" (*Bell Jar*

21). But soon she starts missing the excitement that Doreen stands for and she finds herself unable to follow any of the paths these girls represent. After refusing to accompany Doreen she ponders: "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 feel even sadder and more tired" (*Bell Jar* 28). Another New York female figure that seems promising but turns out to be inadequate is Jay Cee, the *Ladies' Day* editor, Esther's boss, a successful professional. She is another character that is completely one-dimensional, as if apart from being a smart career woman, she had no personal life, as Esther admits: "I tried to imagine Jay Cee out of her strict office suit and luncheon-duty hat and in bed with her fat husband, but I just couldn't do it" (*Bell Jar* 6). Critics also point to the fact that she is not truly feminine but represents the male world and values. E. Miller Budick comments:

Esther looks to Jay Cee as a source of a female language through which she can enter into meaningful discourse with the world. She wishes Jay Cee were her mother and believes that if she were all of her problems would be solved. But Jay Cee is only another version of female submission. She is the masculine in female disguise. (207)

All the female role models Esther meets in New York turn out to be unsatisfactory and only add to her feeling of confusion.

When Esther comes back home, she is faced with more female role models, but just as in New York, being unable to find any real connection, she rejects all of them. She does not want to be like Dodo Conway, a Catholic ideal of a mother with six children, or Mrs Willard, who sacrificed her personal aspirations to become the wife of a university professor, or her mother, who struggled to support her family after her husband's death and fails to understand Esther's crisis suggesting that the girl is simply being uncooperative and immature. Diane S. Bonds argues that "Esther embraces relations with most of the women in the novel only to cast them off, as if they constituted a foreign presence within the purity of her own identity, some threat to her integrity" (55). The women of her hometown are clearly the opposites of what Esther imagines to be her future as they all accept the role of the housewife to be a woman's "default identity" as Dunkle names it (68). Yet, she neither can find connection with Philomena Guinea, an independent woman, a wealthy writer of certain acclaim, who grants her college scholarship, who, nevertheless, is too distant from what Esther is going through. All these female characters, as Budick concludes,

represent female environments that ought to have provided Esther with the language and identity she seeks. But each has abnegated authority, either by allowing male language to infect and dominate female expression or by giving up on expression altogether. Each, therefore, contributes to the ultimately self-annihilating distortion of Esther's basic instincts, rendering them voiceless cries of help. (206)

The only arguably positive female character to help Esther is Dr. Nolan. She is the only one who seems to listen to her patient and understand her problems. Her support and treatments, although including the terrifying and dehumanizing electroshock therapy or insulin shock therapy, seem to wake Esther up out of the zombie-like sleep and push her closer to a socially-acceptable life. Yet, she is the figure that appears in Esther's life only after her suicide attempt.

When analyzing "The Little Match Girl" with the use of Jungian psychoanalysis, Estés sees the work mainly as a tale of the loss of the self-preservation instinct. This also seems to be the thematic focus of *The Bell Jar*. The distorted instincts that result from the improper environment that Budick mentions lead to the decline of Esther's mental powers, complete passivity as well as obsessive suicidal thoughts. When Esther comes back from New York, she learns she has not been accepted to a writing course she was hoping to attend. The bad news disempowers her completely and she rejects her friend's offer to join a different summer course. The reader is a witness to her multiple futile attempts at doing something productive, like spending the rest of the summer writing a novel, or studying shorthand in the evenings, or reading *Finnegans Wake* and writing her thesis, all in vain. Esther turns out to be unable to complete any of these tasks, actually, she cannot even decide what to do first:

plan after plan started leaping through my head, like a family of rabbits. I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn't see a single point beyond nineteen. (*Bell Jar* 118)

She is disoriented and discouraged as she cannot see anything beyond her present situation and nothing seems to have meaning anymore. Her condition gets even worse as she starts having problems with sleeping, eating, reading and writing. She spends days doing nothing, or wandering around the town aimlessly, or reading tabloid newspapers "full of the local murders and suicides and beatings and robberies" (*Bell Jar* 131). She is especially attracted by the accounts of suicides or suicide attempts, which she later fantasizes about and, in most cases, deems useless because of being either too brutal, or difficult, or unreliable. The reader gets a really long list of possible forms of suicide,

including suicide by jumping off a high building, or Japanese hara-kiri – suicide by disembowelment, or cutting the wrists with a Gillette blade, or a gun shot in the head, or suicide by drowning in the sea, by burning, or by hanging oneself, or finally by taking the pills. It is evident that Esther, just like the Little Match Girl, gradually loses contact with reality. She persists in a zombie-like state on the verge of life and death as she stops feeling pain, or cold, or hunger. Her passivity and the lack of self-preservation instinct finally push her beyond the invisible boundary – one day she hides in the depths of the cellar and swallows a bottle of pills.

Although Andersen's tale ends with the girl's death and Plath's protagonist is saved, we can still draw some parallels between the two. First of all, *The Bell Jar*, although finishes with Esther waiting to be released from the mental asylum, is not necessarily seen as having a happy ending. Critics are careful, if not skeptical, about the last scenes and their possible positive meaning. Farland, for example, argues:

If madness is the inevitable outcome of Esther's resistance to socially-prescribed norms, recovered sanity is an uneventful return to her former, socially-acceptable self, in the absence of any meaningful alternative. At the novel's end, Esther's cure consists in resigning herself to social prescriptions and norms rather than escaping from them. (235)

It seems that Esther, although possibly physically and emotionally in a much better state, has not overcome the problems that caused her condition in the first place. She has not managed to rebel effectively and must succumb to the reality she wanted to escape. Furthermore, she is not quite certain herself if the healing process is really over and she is now completely cured: "I wasn't sure at all. How did I know that someday – at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere – the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?" (*Bell Jar* 230) This concern turns out to be especially valid if we take into consideration the autobiographical aspect of the novel and look at its ending through the prism of the author's suicide – the therapy's success was rather superficial and did not bring desirable effects in the long run. Critics also point to Esther's lack of self-directed actions and decision-making abilities. Wagner-Martin comments:

In this closing scene, Esther is still in the object position. She is still going to be acted upon by the authorities; she, in fact, does not even have the volition to walk into the room on her own. (...) The volitionless Esther, even accompanied by her doctor, does not inspire the reader to believe she has yet become her own person. (53)

As a counter-argument, however, it can be said that Plath actually allows for the positive ending as she introduces the motif of rebirth here and the debatable thread metaphor, interpreted by Wagner-Martin as objectifying Esther, can be read in a more positive sense. Budick interprets the closing scene as follows:

As Dr. Nolan's touch, thread-like, draws Esther into the room, she discovers the magical thread that is both the source of her inner creativity and her link with the world. The thread moves in two directions. On the one hand, it emanates from the doctors (including the male doctors) who guide her into health and whose knowledge, experience, and language she must absorb. But it is also a thread spun out of self; it is she herself who fixes their gaze upon her and enables the thread to materialize. (219)

Yet, the critic also adds that the thread "leads out of the bell jar, out of the room of one's own, into a room that is, and perhaps will remain, largely a male space" (Budick 219), which puts us back to the argument of the ineffectiveness of Esther's therapy and an ill-fated ending.

Another feature that makes the novel's finale resonant of "The Little Match Girl" and its fateful ending is Plath's choice to introduce Joan, Esther's friend, as her double. As Esther herself remarks: "Joan was the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me" (*Bell Jar* 197). Although at first it might seem that they are opposites because in certain aspects they are rivals and Esther is rather critical of her, they actually share a number of features and experiences. As Wilkins summarizes:

Joan's life is no different from Esther's. The two young women go to the same school, and both date Buddy. Both spend time in New York, and both attempt suicide (which puts them in the hospital together). Joan follows Esther's suicide attempt through the newspaper as Esther later follows Joan's progress at the hospital. Both take lovers: Esther takes Irwin and Joan takes DeeDee. (54)

Joan's role in the novel is quite important since "[in] psychoanalytic terms, the setting up of (imaginary) Doppelgänger or doubles serves to screen the subject against unwanted or anxiety-ridden aspects of herself, by displacing them onto (an) external Other(s)" (hoogland 293). Therefore, it can be said that the use of the double in some sense saves Esther. It is Joan that eventually commits suicide while Esther manages to survive.

In what sense is Esther a wild woman, then? She seems to be a struggling wild woman – one that looks for freedom, self-expression and meaningful life but is constantly limited by the environment she lives in, one that wants to indulge her desires but is reminded to stay pure and modest, one that craves

creativity but falls into the trap of passivity. Her depression and nervous breakdown are, however, signs of her rebellion. She does not want to conform to rules and norms that hinder her creativity, independence and development. Her problem, apart from the unfavorable cultural environment, is the fact that there are no truly awakened, independent women around her or if there are, they do not appeal to Esther's idea of freedom, which is, as Teresa De Lauretis observes, "availability, refusal of classifications, growth, diversity. She cannot accept the either-or of culturally defined role which seem to be the only alternatives open to her" (182). Thus, Esther reflects: "Jay Cee wanted to teach me something, all the old ladies I ever knew wanted to teach me something, but suddenly I didn't think they had anything to teach me" (*Bell Jar* 6). Philomena Guinea, as a successful writer, has creativity and independence, yet she remains impersonal, aloof and uninspiring. Jay Cee has intelligence and a great professional career, but it seems devoid of creativity and true personal satisfaction. Even Doreen, who has intuition, which Esther appears to appreciate as she remarks: "Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones" (*Bell Jar* 7), seems to waste her natural talents and energy on bodily matters and physical love. Esther's idea of freedom and independence is the one that resembles Henry David Thoreau's views expressed in *Walden*:

Old deed for old people, and new deeds for new. (...) I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it. (8)

Yet, she is not a man with a whole array of rights and privileges, and, as a woman, she turns out to be unable to have the independence she craves and not to become a social outcast at the same time. The problem is that Esther by rejecting both conventional and unconventional female role models is left "with nothing" as Bonds points out (60). She seems to be unaware of the importance of other women in a wild woman's life. Her initiation, her rite of passage is not complete, she has not become her mature independent self yet. Bonds concludes: "[t]hus, at the end of the novel, far from having moved in the direction of an 'authentic self,' Esther has been systematically separated from the very means by which such a self might be constituted: relationships with others" (61).

CHAPTER 4

The wild woman archetype in the works of the late-twentieth-century writers

Chapter four focuses on American female writers of the second half of the twentieth century including Joyce Carol Oates, Marilynne Robinson, Toni Morrison and Sandra Cisneros. The analyses it contains show that this period is marked with a shift in the way American women writers depicted their female protagonists. Though their characters still have to face different types of oppression and unequal treatment, the writers show unprecedented openness in their discussions of these issues. Their awareness of the need to establish one's autonomous identity even if it entails confronting repressive culture and to celebrate selfhood seems to be at the core of the period's understanding of womanhood. The consequence is that the representations of the wild woman archetype seem numerous. The chapter also makes an attempt at reflecting the variety of female voices that find expression in this period, including ethnic and cross-cultural writers and their protagonists. Joyce Carol Oates's female characters of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and *Black Water* can be seen as archetypal representations of young inexperienced girls who have to go through brutal rites of passage, losing their childish innocence in the process without a chance to develop their autonomous selves. Marilynne Robinson's portrayal of troubled girlhood in *Housekeeping* bears resemblance to Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling." By depicting Ruth, an outsider who rejects

conventional gender roles and finds acceptance in her aunt Sylvie, Robinson draws the reader's attention to the importance of celebrating selfhood, of finding autonomy but also kinship and support. Toni Morrison's protagonists of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* represent archetypal female characters whose process of gaining identity is complicated if not altogether thwarted as they grow up in marginalized African American communities where they face all-pervading racism. Morrison questions the dominant standards of beauty and traditional gender roles imposed on girls and women and warns against their destructive influence, especially on individuals living in unsupportive environments. Last but not least, Sandra Cisneros's works of fiction challenge Chicano patriarchy and the traditional Chicana womanhood. Her protagonists can be seen as archetypal representations of young women who are forced to confront abusive and discriminatory realities in their quest to construct their cross-cultural identities. Like the young wife of Bluebeard, Cisneros's rebellious girls refuse to become passive objects of male power and, in their archetypal quests, gain authority over their own life.

4.1. INITIATION THROUGH VIOLENCE: JOYCE CAROL OATES AND HER HEROINES

Joyce Carol Oates's works, which offer an incredibly broad choice of characters depicted and problems discussed, are said to contain a portrait of modern American society and Oates, being an exceptionally prolific and diverse author, is described as "the most American of writers" (Cologne-Brookes 7). Her literary output has been considered a well-informed chronicle of American life, yet one cannot ignore the author's focus on individual experiences. As Monica Loeb notes, "[her] ambition from the very beginning has been to draw a panoramic picture of her country and culture through the experiences of the individual" (9). Additionally, critics point to the fact that the experiences the author chooses to depict are often fraught with violence and crime, which makes Oates's interest in individual human beings and human psychology even more evident. As Greg Johnson argues,

Oates's work as a whole makes clear that her stories are deliberately mimetic transcriptions of experience as felt by her characters, rather than a "created meaning" imposed by an omniscient narrator, only by cutting to the heart of experience, in all its unmediated rawness and violence, can Oates suggest its allegorical significance for the culture. ("Barbarous Eden" 9)

There is often something familiar as well as strange in her works, something totally human but at the same time otherworldly, something completely realistic but with a postmodern twist. Eileen M. Bender observes that

using the devices of both realist and fabulist, sifting through fragments and larger patterns of Milton, Yeats, Kafka, Dreiser, Dostoevsky, Lewis Carroll, working with ideas from philosophy, psychology, and popular culture, Oates has traced alternative survival routes for her seemingly autonomous characters. (415)

Oates's fiction offers an especially rich selection of female characters, whose portraits give insight into varied identities, personalities, ideals, desires, dreams or dilemmas that women experience in the 20th century.

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?”

Oates's multiple female characters are an interesting subject of study for a literary scholar researching into the problems of identity formation, initiation rituals or rites of passage. Being involved in various violent acts or events, Oates's female protagonists become either victims or survivors. What is interesting, the omnipresent violence of Oates's world does not detract from the archetypal traits of her characters, who are often compared to fairy tale heroines. One of such archetypal female characters who resembles a fairy tale heroine, especially Andersen's female protagonist of "The Red Shoes" tale, is Connie of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (1966), one of Oates's best known short stories. The lack of explicit ending as well as the ambiguity of Arnold Friend, the male figure depicted in the story, who is either seen as a realistic portrayal of a psychopathic killer or an allegorical embodiment of the devil, have inspired numerous, often contradictory analyses and interpretations of this now classic reading. Some critics point to the realism of the story and its sources in real life events. Tom Quirk and A. R. Coulthard, for example, trace the similarities between Oates's story and the case of Charles Schmid, a serial killer from Arizona, who murdered three teenage girls in the 1960s and whose crimes were covered by major American magazines shortly before the publication of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Drawing parallels between the story and Schmid's murders, Coulthard asserts:

Absolutely nothing occurs [in Oates's story] that can't be explained in purely literal terms or that isn't best explained so. Like all good stories, "Where Are You Going?" resonates in the mind, but its style is realistic,

not allegorical. Its principle characters are not personifications of abstract qualities but a demented killer and giddy teen-aged girl. Arnold Friend does not appear in a dream but at Connie's kitchen door. (506)

On the other hand, there are critics who read the story as an allegory "fraught with religious overtones and nightmarish imagery," in which Connie, the female protagonist, is forced "to recognize the divine presence in the world; (...) come to terms with moral responsibility and concern for affairs other than those of the self" (Dessommes 433). Arnold Friend is not a serial killer but the incarnation of the devil or "the grotesque embodiment of spiritual reality" who threatens and finally conquers the teenage girl "in a cataclysmic vision at the end of the story" (Dessommes 437). Marie Mitchell Olesen Urbanski argues, in turn, that the narrative is "an allegory which applies existential initiation rites to the Biblical seduction myth to represent *Everyman's* transition from the illusion of free will to the realization of externally determined fate" (203).

Most critics agree, however, that the story's central motif is that of the young girl's initiation, a violent rite of passage that involves a sudden loss of innocence and crossing over to the world of adulthood. Those less brutal analyses suggest that it all happens in a dream and functions as a nightmarish wake-up lesson for the carefree girl whose life seems devoid of true values and serious aims, who is clearly lost in her search for a meaningful identity (see Dessommes). Other interpretations point to a crueler ending in which Connie, an ordinary American teenager, is abducted, raped and murdered by Arnold Friend, a psychopathic killer. She becomes a victim and her traumatic experience might serve as a warning to other teenagers (see Coulthard, Creighton, Theriot). When discussing the realistic aspects of the story, Quirk concludes that the questions asked in the title might refer to Connie's life as well as to America of that time in general. These questions, Quirk claims, "address a society which, by tradition, has preferred its agrarian dreams and promises to harsher realities and aggressive evils and is therefore dangerously blind to them" (419). It turns out that the story might serve as a commentary on American society and a warning for Americans who might not be noticing the dangerous direction their country is going to due to the overwhelming influence of modern mass culture.

Oates's interest in human psychology as well as the archetypal character of her protagonist make the story resemble a fairy tale. Critics like Gretchen Schulz and R. J. R. Rockwood or Stan Kozikowski analyzed its themes and motifs to find similarities with various fairy tales such as "Snow White," "The Three Little Pigs," "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Cinderella." Yet, they do not mention "The Red Shoes" tale, originally written by H. Ch. Andersen.

Interesting parallels between Oates's and Andersen's stories can be drawn in reference to traditional interpretations of the fairy tale as well as the one offered by C. P. Estés. On the most general level, both texts depict young innocent yet vain girls who yield to an easy but empty life, they ignore their true needs, escape responsibility for their own behavior and, as a result, fall prey to a destructive force, they get trapped in a toxic situation which leads directly to a cruel ending. Both stories focus on distorted natural instincts and the ensuing initiation which is, nevertheless, brutally forced on the protagonists. Connie of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is a self-centered fifteen-year-old girl who spends days doing nothing particularly useful, creative or of any true value but listening to music, thinking about boys and gazing at her own reflection in the mirror or shop windows instead. The only thing she seems to be concerned with is her own beauty and the impression she can make on the boys she meets. As Joyce M. Wegs observes, "Oates delineates the moral poverty of Connie (...) by imaging a typical evening Connie spends at a drive-in restaurant as a grotesquely parodied religious pilgrimage" (67). The drive-in restaurant is depicted as "a sacred building that loomed out of the night to give [Connie and her friend] what haven and what blessing they yearned for" ("Where" 120). Additionally, the music that is always in the background is like "music at a church service" ("Where" 120). Wegs is one of the critics who notice Oates's references and allusions to religion in the text and view them as indicative of Connie's shallowness and impoverished morality.

This emptiness of Connie's life is not, however, entirely her fault. Oates seems to be as critical of the young girl as of her parents and the whole mass culture she grows up in. Clearly, there is no genuine communication or understanding between the family members, no one really cares where and how Connie spends the summer days and evenings, no one asks the quintessential questions, i.e. "Where are you going?" and "Where have you been?" Finally, none of the family members bothers to go to church on Sunday, which additionally implies departure from traditional values and beliefs. As Michele D. Theriot shows, Connie is stuck in the eternal present and her family has no control over it. She does not care about the past or think it useful to treat past experiences as a form of guidance for her future decisions. To quote Theriot, Connie, who as a typical teenager questions her mother's authority, "does not esteem the link to the past, the valuable feminine family heritage that her mother provides or represents" (par. 14). Actually, it is not very surprising as the mother is shown to be constantly picking at her daughter rather than forming any real mother-daughter bond of understanding and support. It turns out then that neither her parents nor her sister are good role models for the teenager. The environment Connie grows up in does not support her moral or

spiritual development either. She is surrounded by the plastic popular culture, which only reinforces her shallow interest in boys and the “trashy daydreams” she cherishes. It is especially the rock-and-roll music promoting cheap and sentimental ideas of love that appeals to Connie and her adolescent friends. As Theriot notices, “Connie finds articulated in the songs those ideas about life, love, her place in both that mold her identity – they are her identity. Music is always in her head” (par. 16). As a result, Connie seems to be excessively yet rather superficially interested in boy-girl relations and, as Coulthard concludes, “in love with love. Or maybe just sex” (507).

Excess and excessive behaviors are an integral part of “The Red Shoes” tale as interpreted by C. P. Estés. In Connie’s case, excess can be seen in her narcissistic attitude, obsessive attention to and concern about her appearance, especially her hair, combined with her preoccupation with boys and “experiments with sexual provocation,” as Joanne V. Creighton describes Connie’s attempts to be sexually appealing to boys (381). Wegs also points to “excessive devotion to such aspects of popular culture as rock music, movies, and romance magazines” (66), which leads to illusions and false values. It seems that Connie’s easy and comfortable but empty life boosts her vanity, self-centeredness and narcissism to a dangerous level in which she no longer acts responsibly or sensibly. Such unconscious destructive patterns of behavior and subsequent distorted perception of the surrounding world are also important themes of “The Red Shoes” tale. Andersen’s protagonist cannot stop thinking about her beautiful new shoes until it is too late and she gets trapped in the mad dance of the red shoes. In a similar way, Connie’s obsessive thinking about her good looks and boys pushes her further and further into dangerous situations and finally leads her to a traumatic end. What is interesting, both tales include the motif of disobedience – Andersen’s girl disobeys the old lady and repeatedly wears her red shoes to church, where she cannot stop looking at them and thinking about them. In a similar way, Connie dismisses her mother’s nagging about her narcissistic tendency to gaze at her reflection in the mirror and she cannot stop thinking about her appearance, boys and the excitement of the evenings spent at a drive-in restaurant. Their rebellion is, nonetheless, ineffective or even counter-effective. To quote Estés,

[t]he problem with the girl in the red shoes is that instead of becoming strong for the fight, she is off in la-la land, captured by the romance of those red shoes. The important thing about rebellion is that the form it takes be effective. The girl’s fascination with the red shoes actually keeps her from a meaningful rebellion, one that would promote change, give a message, cause an awakening. (261)

This seems to be an exact description of Connie, who contests her parents' lifestyle, but instead of growing stronger, more independent or more mature, she gets stuck in her own la-la land, which has little in common with real life.

The major motif of Andersen's tale is unambiguously the red shoes and it is possible to draw further parallels between Andersen's and Oates's stories in this respect too. Connie's encounter with Arnold Friend bears strong resemblance to the red shoes experience and in a similar way it allows for multiple meanings and interpretations. First of all, initially Arnold Friend appears to be a representation of Connie's dreams and desires, "the external embodiment of the teenage ideal celebrated in popular songs" (Wegs 68) and, just like the red shoes, which attract the girl with their beauty and extraordinary color, Friend attracts Connie's attention and tries to seduce her with his hip appearance, trendy clothes, a car painted gold and rock-and-roll music. Connie seems flattered by his interest and starts playing the game, which can be seen in her flirtatious body language. Although at first neither Friend in Oates nor the red shoes in Andersen arouse any suspicions, it soon turns out that there is something extraordinary about them. When she takes a closer look at him, Connie notices eyes "like chips of broken glass" ("Where" 126) and unnaturally pale skin around them, thick black as if painted eyelashes, hair that looks like a shaggy wig. She realizes he is not a boy but a grown-up man only pretending to be a teenager. Suddenly, his car is not just gold but "painted so bright it almost [hurts] her eyes to look at it" ("Where" 127) and the slang expression at the front fender turns out to be no longer in vogue but one that "kids had used the year before" ("Where" 127). Finally, Arnold's face becomes a mask "tanned down onto his throat but then running out as if he had plastered make-up on his face but had forgotten about his throat" ("Where" 130). He is clearly the embodiment of excess – there is too much of everything about him, he tries too hard to be, look and talk like a typical teenager. Connie slowly realizes that Arnold Friend is dangerous and only disguises his true nature and intentions. Moreover, Connie is made to believe he has some supernatural powers when he reveals he knows her name as well as some of the details concerning her life, her family, her neighbors, which only adds to his image of excess.

One of the possible interpretations of the red shoes in Andersen's tale suggests that they stand for erotic desires and the girl's mad dance in the shoes represents her unrestrained sexuality for which she is later severely punished. Similarly, Arnold Friend is presented in Oates's story as, to quote Wegs, "the incarnation of Connie's unconscious erotic desires and dreams, but in uncontrollable nightmare form" (70). It is because of Friend that Connie becomes a truly sexual object and loses her innocence. Indeed, Friend comments himself: "I'm your lover. You don't know what that is but you will" ("Where"

130). As the reader might expect, Connie has to suffer as the consequences of this meeting. Just like the experience of girl in Andersen's tale with the red shoes leads to trauma and self-destruction, Connie's experience ends with a dramatic anticipation of rape and murder. Both girls are brutally taken away from the world of illusions they have lived in so far. Additionally, with his cruel intentions to hurt Connie, Arnold Friend is clearly represented as evil. As Wegs argues, "Arnold is far more than a grotesque portrait of a psychopathic killer masquerading as a teenager; he also has all the traditional sinister traits of that arch-deceiver and source of grotesque terror, the devil" (69). When comparing Friend to the devil, critics point to his black shaggy hair, thick tart-like lashes, mask-like face, darkened cheeks, soiled shirt and strangely bent shoes as if hiding hoofs, not feet. It could be argued that there is also something sinister and devilish in the red shoes represented in Andersen's tale. They seem to wield the same kind of power over the girls. While Andersen's protagonist cannot help but look at her shoes, Connie cannot help but look back when she sees Arnold Friend in a drive-in restaurant for the first time. Later, they both lose control over their own bodies, "The Red Shoes" girl is trapped in a terrible dance while Connie gets trapped in her house, unable to oppose the intruder. The last scene in the story shows Connie walking out of the house as if hypnotized by Friend's insistence: "She put out her hand against the screen. She watched herself push the door slowly open as if she were back safe somewhere in the other doorway, watching this body and this head of long hair moving out into the sunlight where Arnold Friend waited" ("Where" 135). It seems that she is not the one who controls her own moves and that her body does not belong to her anymore.

This unnatural dissociation of the body from the mind, the dream-like inability to control her movements as well as Arnold Friend's 'supernatural powers' could also imply that Connie's experience is just a nightmare, as Nancy Bishop Dessommes suggests, "one that has been triggered by the shaggy-haired boy in the gold car whom she had seen at the drive-in" (437). Dessommes also argues that "Connie's vision expresses the anxiety typical of dreams: search for self-identity, fear of the future, and suppressed sexual desire" (437). When interpreted as a dream, the story has a far more positive message. It could imply that Connie experiences a violent awakening which may, however, result in growing awareness and actual change, not rape and murder. It could lead to Connie learning to be responsible for her actions, becoming more mature or taking her life more seriously. Mike Tierce and John Michael Crafton take a stance that Friend is one of Connie's "trashy daydreams" but as such he becomes her savior:

Arnold is the personification of popular music, particularly Bob Dylan's music; and as such, Connie's interaction with him is a musically induced fantasy, a kind of "magic carpet ride" in a "convertible jalopy painted gold." Rising out of Connie's radio, Arnold Friend/Bob Dylan is a magical, musical messiah; he persuades Connie to abandon her father's house. As a manifestation of her own desires, he frees her from the limitations of a fifteen-year-old girl, assisting her maturation by stripping her of her childlike vision. (224)

If we consider "The Red Shoes" tale from a similar point of view, then it might be also seen as a bad dream which makes the protagonist reconsider her attitude to life. There is then another parallel between "Where Are You Going?" and "The Red Shoes." Both heroines experience a kind of wake-up lesson, and both are forced out of their empty lives. What is more, both of them learn by experiencing a sacrifice in the dream – Andersen's girl has to have her legs cut off in order to survive, Connie decides to sacrifice her own life to protect her family. Thus, both experiences, even if appearing only in a dream, influence the body and the initiation rites the girls go through have a markedly violent and somatic character.

BLACK WATER

The heroine of Oates's *Black Water* is another character whose portrayal resembles that of fairy tale heroines, although its plot appears to be relatively simple and lacks magic: a girl dies trapped in a sunken car. The story, just like in the case of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" has its roots in real-life events, that is the 1969 Chappaquidick incident, in which a young woman named Mary Jo Kopechne died as a result of an unfortunate ride with Senator Edward Kennedy. In spite of its obvious references to those authentic events, the story is a poignant depiction of a young woman in the moment of death, its strength lying in, as Gavin Cologne-Brookes argues, the "evocation of basic human desires and fears" (178), and as such, it seems to be especially resonant of Andersen's "The Little Match Girl." Just like in Andersen's fairy tale, this moment of death appears to be "simultaneously desired, dreaded, and inevitable" (Cologne-Brookes 178), as from the beginning it is almost clear that the protagonist will not be saved. In both stories, the girls become helpless victims who die tragically, left to their own devices. So far, critics have attempted to draw parallels between Kelly Kelleher and other fairy tale heroines, especially Cinderella. Sharon Oard Warner points to the fact that Kelly, just like Cinderella, "is thrilled to have her night at the ball" (521) and seems to be even more excited if not astonished when she is singled out at the party by the

Senator-prince. Oates herself creates the fairy-tale-like atmosphere of the story, with Kelly being referred to as a princess that is young and privileged and that cannot be harmed (*Black Water* 60). There is, however, no happy ending, no “and they lived happily ever after,” as the story finishes almost as soon as it starts with the narrator asking “Am I going to die? – like this?” (*Black Water* 3) in the first few lines of the novella.

In Estés’s interpretation, “The Little Match Girl” is a tale of lost instincts, of a woman trapped in a ruthless world that blocks her creativity, that gives her a false sense of comfort, of a woman trapped in her own fantasies that are “seductive and lethal distractions from the real work” (351). Similarly, Oates’s Kelly Kelleher is a young ambitious hard-working woman who seems, nevertheless, childishly infatuated with the world of politics and particularly with the Senator, the man representing power, authority, success and high social position. She is a young idealist, a volunteer teaching black illiterate adults to read, who believes democratic ideas can save the world and turn it into a better place. With a bachelor’s degree in American Studies and “her ninety-page senior honor’s thesis on The Senator” (*Black Water* 12), Kelly is so excited about the opportunity to meet the Senator in person that initially she almost dismisses it as impossible. Yet, his sudden and intense interest in her awakens Kelly’s hidden emotions and desires. She leaves her polite, reasonable and conscientious personality behind and is ready to “embark upon a new life a new adventure a wildly romantic adventure, reckless Scorpio” (*Black Water* 14), as the horoscope tells her. This fairy-tale-like experience of being chosen by him – “It’s him – Jesus, is it really him?” (*Black Water* 38), as she narrates, pushes her further into the unreal world of illusions.

Estés emphasizes the negative influence of the environment on the little girl in Andersen’s story resulting in the tragic ending. Kelly is surely not an orphan nor an underprivileged child, but she seems to be alone in the cold world of male politics. There are no true friendships or people that Kelly can really trust and rely on and everyone around seems absorbed in their own world. The only strong emotions mentioned are the ones she had for her last boyfriend, which actually led her to suicidal thoughts after their breakup. She has parents that she clearly loves, but when one looks closer at their relations, it turns out they have been strained and lack the warmth which Kelly needs and which, in the past, she found in her Grandpa Ross, who is now dead. They seem to be the relations typical of the generation gap where the teenage child is critical of her parents’ beliefs and lifestyle and wishes they would leave her alone. When already trapped underwater, Kelly reflects on their previous experiences. She recalls being “[g]uilty of making her mother worry about her, guilty of provoking quarrels with her father, those “political” quarrels that

were really about Daddy's authority" (*Black Water* 52), her father supporting Republicans and Kelly Democrats. It is no wonder that she embarks on 'the Senator adventure' as soon as she feels his growing interest and she feels it is her only opportunity to change something in her life, to be noticed and appreciated, to be close to the world that she has only studied so far: "He was one of the immune, beside her: he, one of the powerful adults of the world, manly man, U.S. senator, a famous face and a tangled history, empowered to not merely endure history but to guide it, control it, manipulate it to his own ends" (*Black Water* 61). Sadly, she seems to be aware of the importance of this moment as well as her inferior position in the situation, as she explains: "if I don't do as he asks there won't be any *later*" (*Black Water* 7).

With the situation developing so quickly and unexpectedly, Kelly has no time to consider it carefully, she is clearly driven by strong emotions and desires. Although conscious in some sense of the consequences of her decision, she chooses to leave the party and get in the Senator's car. As Cologne-Brookes comments, "she sees it as an adventurous assertion of her own will" (181). Yet, her instincts, especially her self-preservation instinct, seem to fail her as she lets the drunken Senator drive his car. As they are leaving the party, he is already "not coherent with his speech (...), nor so fluent with repartee" and "he [has] a newly freshened vodka-and-tonic in hand, and he [wants] Kelly to bring a second. Kelly [hesitates], but only for a moment" (*Black Water* 142). Later, when the Senator drives the car recklessly and seems to take the wrong turn, Kelly still does not resist, sticking to self-justification or wishful thinking. It seems that she experiences some kind of cognitive dissonance:

Thinking, *Lost*.

Thinking, *An adventure*.

Thinking coolly even as her teeth rattled in her head as the man beside her braked the car, accelerated, braked, braked harder and accelerated harder, that she was not frightened, what she felt was excitement: that adrenaline-charge: as, on the beach, earlier that day, she'd felt the urgency of a man's desire, and vowed to herself, No I will *not*. (*Black Water* 17)

Kelly is clearly lost, not only physically somewhere on the island, but, first of all, emotionally and morally. Is the experience exciting or dangerous, morally acceptable or not, should she say yes or no, should she protest or stay silent? These are the questions that Kelly actually evades. Just like the Little Girl who knows she cannot come back home without any money and stays in the cold of the winter risking her own life, Kelly feels she cannot resist the Senator's will and, in a way involuntarily, embarks on this 'adventure' risking her own future. She is afraid to react when the Senator drives recklessly or when he seems lost

so as not to offend him. She knows it is her chance and she prefers not to think about the dangers or unpleasant consequences even when the accident happens: “She was twenty-six years eight month old too young to die thus too astonished, too disbelieving, to scream as the Toyota flew off the road and struck the surface of the near-invisible water” (*Black Water* 9). She is so excited, surprised and confused that she does not even scream.

Kelly’s instincts clearly fail her as the car splashes against the black water. Nevertheless, it appears that the accident is not yet her awakening. She seems to dive deeper into illusions instead. Her situation is evidently hopeless – the Senator escapes the sunken car using her body as a lever, not even trying to help her and she stays underwater, trapped. Yet, like the Little Match Girl who is freezing gradually to death but keeps escaping into dreams of a warm house each time she strikes a match, Kelly retains hope and instead of fighting to change her situation, or at least being angry and defiant, she chooses to stick to illusions and dream-like memories gradually losing contact with reality. The reader is faced with cruel irony of Kelly’s naïve attitude when, after a dramatic struggle between her and the escaping Senator in which the girl gets shoved and kicked in the head, she still believes or makes herself believe that he will come back to save her:

there was blood in her eyes, her eyes were wide open staring and sightless, her head pounding violently where the bone was cracked, she knew the bone was cracked believing that it would be through this fissure the black water would pour to extinguish her life unless she could find a way to escape unless *he will be back to help me of course*.

In fact he was comforting her, smiling, frowning concerned and solicitous touching her shoulder with his fingertips. *Don’t doubt me, Kelly. Never.*

He knew her name, he had called her by name. He had looked at her with love so she knew. (*Black Water* 75)

Kelly forces herself to stay positive but she is completely unrealistic in her thinking or even self-deceptive as she tries to convince herself that “he had not abandoned her to die in the black water. He had not kicked her, he had not fled from her. He had not forgotten her” (*Black Water* 144). Cologne-Brookes observes that “her hopes are absurd, but we share them passionately, just as in her delirium, she thinks she can sip the water rather than drown in it” (179). Also, like Andersen’s protagonist, when being close to death, Kelly starts having visions of her home, family and friends, she “conjures an alternative future, one in which she will live to tell the story,” as Warner notes (522).

What is also interesting, suddenly Kelly changes from a sexually active adventurous adult into a scared child, as she says: “Take me home from here Mommy” (*Black Water* 118), or “Mommy, Daddy hey I love you, you know that I hope, please don’t let me die I love you, okay?” (*Black Water* 119) She seems to be a helpless embarrassed child who misbehaved but will be saved, forgiven and everyone will be happy again. Oates’s narration features this comparison directly: “She was trembling with the effort, whimpering like a small sick frightened child. Like a child pleading *Help me. Don’t forget me. I’m here*” (*Black Water* 92). This presentation makes Kelly even more similar to the Little Match Girl who is forced to stay out there alone, in wintertime, begging for help. What is more, Cologne-Brookes aptly observes that “*Black Water’s* ending provides a perspective on Kelly that the self-absorbed politician never considers: Kelly as a fragile human being, a child, a daughter, someone particularly vulnerable to a man in his position” (182). This seems to be one of the interpretations of Andersen’s tale as well – a fragile human being at the mercy of unsympathetic strangers, indifferent adults who care only about their own matters. Also, in both cases the girls are portrayed as victims and their suffering seems undeserved and completely needless. An interesting note could be also made of the very moment of death: the Little Match Girl stops feeling any pain as she freezes to death, while Kelly, engrossed in her dreams and illusions, drowns in the black water that is cold although it is the fourth of July, “colder than you could imagine on such a warm midsummer night” (*Black Water* 75). Both protagonists turn out to be unable to fight hostile conditions, both die tragically without a chance to learn from their own experiences.

When examining Oates’s presentation of her female protagonists one is bound to reflect upon their resemblance to fairy tale heroines. Oates’s use of fairy tale patterns seems to enrich the portrayals adding the dreamlike quality to the down-to-earth and often violent situations that her protagonists experience. Although both narratives discussed in this chapter are said to have originated from true stories, Connie of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” and Kelly of *Black Water* can be seen as archetypal representations of young girls who are naïve, inexperienced and vulnerable, who have not learned yet to recognize and withstand external destructive influences, who have not developed strong autonomous selves yet and who, in consequence, suffer physical and emotional injuries. Oates gives the reader an insight into the brutality of these rites of passage and seems to give a warning against various dangers awaiting a fragile self whose natural instincts and intuition have been lulled or ignored.

4.2. WILD AND VAGRANT: MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S *HOUSEKEEPING*

Marilynne Robinson is an American writer who seems to stand in contrast to Joyce Carol Oates as far as her overall literary output is concerned, with five novels of fiction published so far and a twenty-three-year break between the publication of her first novel, *Housekeeping* and her second novel, *Gilead*. Yet, critics appreciate Robinson's contribution to American culture and she is perceived to have had "a significant influence on contemporary American literature" (Kort 278). Critics often point to the oneiric, spiritual, visionary and symbolic quality of her fiction. Carol Kort describes her first novel as follows: "Robinson's poetic, precise imagery of the Northwest reflects her understanding of the natural world, but she is equally adept at depicting emotionally based themes such as adolescent angst, transience, and the fleeting nature of happiness" (279). It seems that the motifs of female identity, spiritual awakening, transcending boundaries, sublime experiences as well as the idea of the self and the other are crucial in her first work of fiction. Her later fiction, that is her second, long-awaited novel as well as three more that actually form the *Gilead* series, also has a meditative and metaphysical character but with more focus on spiritual and religious aspects of life. Set in rural Iowa or Missouri, the novels picture American life and show Robinson's deep interest in the human condition as well as theology and faith.

HOUSEKEEPING

Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1981) is a coming-of-age novel depicting two teenage girls at the crossroads of adolescence. Orphaned and abandoned by a line of relatives, Ruth and Lucille struggle to find the place and people they can belong to and discover their own identities. In these attempts one can notice a strong resemblance to Hans Christian Andersen's classic fairy tale "The Ugly Duckling," especially its interpretation offered by C. P. Estés. It appears that the ugly duckling motif can be applied to both protagonists, but it is Ruth, the older sister, who seems to be particularly similar to Andersen's ugly duckling, being lost and unadjusted to the small town life with its traditional domesticated vision of an adolescent girl. As a typical outsider, Ruth finds acceptance and understanding she desperately needs in her eccentric aunt Sylvie. Their otherness is what binds them together while, at the same time, separates them from Lucille and the rest of the community. By showing the

struggles of these two orphaned sisters, the novel offers a valuable insight into troubled girlhood and ensuing identity formation. It is also a thought-provoking commentary on middle-class values and ideals, especially those referring to women and their role as perceived by the American society of the mid-twentieth century.

The major motif of “The Ugly Duckling,” that of an orphaned child and an absent mother, is also central to Robinson’s novel. *Housekeeping* seems to revolve around the issue of the protagonist struggling to discover her own identity and reclaim her independent self after being abandoned by the mother, who commits suicide. Helen, the mother, is a mysterious figure not only for the reader but, first of all, for the daughters, and especially Ruth. It is noted by critics that Ruth is “universally emblematic as a grieving child who carries the image of the lost mother and the unresolved past into all phases of her mental and emotional life. Her quest and choice is always for the missing mother” (Ravits 648), and “Ruth’s narrative looks backwards then, in the sense that she constantly longs for, attempts to remember, and fantasises about the recovery of, her lost mother” (McDermott 263). It seems that Helen’s disappearance, although not the first in the family’s history nor the first to be described in the novel by Ruth, who is the narrator, had the largest and, in a sense, defining influence on her daughters. Before Helen drove off the cliff in a borrowed car straight into the lake, Ruth and Lucille’s grandfather died in the very same lake in “a spectacular derailment” (*Housekeeping* 5). He became part of that legendary train disaster of Fingerbone leaving his wife, that is Ruth’s grandmother, and three daughters to their own devices. Later, also unexpectedly, the grandmother was left alone as all three daughters decided to walk away. Ruth narrates: “One year my grandmother had three quiet daughters and the next year the house was empty” (*Housekeeping* 15). Although Ruth and Lucille are not direct witnesses to the described events, their lives are greatly influenced by the family’s past as they grow up in their grandmother’s house in Fingerbone.

Another feature which makes *Housekeeping* resonant of “The Ugly Duckling” tale is the lack of support from the father or other women, which Estés points to when analyzing Andersen’s tale. McDermott observes that Robinson’s novel “is notable for the absence of male characters: it has been described as presenting a ‘world of women’, in which male characters are either dead (Ruth’s grandfather), absent (her father) or marginal (the town sheriff)” (262). Just like the mother of the ugly duckling, Helen is all alone, without the support of the husband. Ruth refers to Reginald Stone as their “putative father” (*Housekeeping* 14) – she recalls two photographs of him but has no memories of him whatsoever. What is more, Helen can neither rely on women around her as there is no true connection between the women in the family, each of them

living their own separate lives: the widowed mother stays in Fingerbone, the oldest sister Molly decides to work as a missionary in China, Helen moves to Seattle, and the youngest sister Sylvie leaves without settling in one particular place. The bonds are clearly disrupted and fail when most needed.

In Robinson's novel, both sisters struggle with abandonment while growing up and both undergo a transformation, but it is Ruth who fits Estés's definition of the ugly duckling. She is not a rebel consciously breaking social norms and oppressive rules, but she seems to be an outcast incapable of fulfilling traditional female/girl roles. "Through no fault of her own" (Estés 184) Ruth is different. She is too tall, too gawky, too silent, too absent-minded, too introverted. She does not care about her outfits or her school performance. She is a dreamer who does not want to socialize or be noticed and, actually, up to a certain moment, she is not noticed. When talking about school, she mentions: "Because we were quiet we were considered docile, and because our work was not exceptionally good or bad we were left alone" (*Housekeeping* 77). When Ruth and Lucille start skipping school and spend all days wandering by the lake, no one really takes notice of this violation of school rules. However, her strangeness attracts growing attention on the part of the community after Sylvie, her eccentric aunt, comes to town to look after the girls. Interestingly, it is also the moment when Ruth herself starts to notice and understand her own otherness. Clearly, Sylvie is the one who spurs Ruth's emerging distinctiveness, but she also makes the sisters grow apart. Her appearance at their grandmother's house is a breakthrough moment for both girls.

Seeing Ruth observing Sylvie takes the reader back to the ugly duckling observing swans. Having no awareness of its true belonging or identity, the ugly duckling feels unexpected admiration for the majestic birds. The swans represent beauty, freedom but also kinship that the duckling craves. Estés comments that "[w]e all have a longing that we feel for our own kind, our wild kind" (202). It seems that Ruth feels this kind of longing when she observes her aunt. On the one hand, as critics observe, it could be said that Ruth is attracted to Sylvie mainly because she treats her as a natural replacement of her lost mother (Tyndall and Ribkoff 2014), which is suggested in Ruth's narration: "Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it" (*Housekeeping* 53). On the other hand, Sylvie is unable or unwilling "to adopt a conventionally maternal attitude toward [girls]" and "resists this role, choosing instead a less conventional but more important role as spiritual guide" (Tyndall and Ribkoff, 96). Thus, the attraction Ruth feels appears to be more connected to the aunt's transient spirit and her wandering lifestyle than her maternal role and mother-like qualities. As Joanne Hall puts it, "Robinson depicts people who seek a static and stable mirror-like similarity with those they feel a kinship to" (45). Estés

also notices that “[a]t the end of the tale, the swans recognize the duckling as one of their own before he does” (204), which seems to be exactly the case with Ruth and Sylvie. It is Sylvie who triggers Ruth’s final transformation, who forces her to confront her undiscovered self, who makes her realize her own otherness in relation to the environment around her.

Sylvie’s otherness is apparent to everyone in town. Starting with her own mother who, when arranging things before her death, does not even consider Sylvie as a possible guardian to Ruth and Lucille, and instead chooses her elderly sisters-in-law. Sylvie wears her oversized raincoat all the time regardless of the season, wanders around the town aimlessly often visiting the railway station, sleeps on benches in public places, repeatedly tells stories of people she used to know, but is unable to say anything of value about Helen, that is Ruth and Lucille’s mother. At home she sleeps in her clothes and shoes “on top of the covers”, keeps her clothes “in a cardboard box under the bed” (*Housekeeping* 103), collects empty cans and old newspapers, or eats her cold suppers in the dark with her fingers. Gradually, the house under Sylvie’s ‘management’ gets into a complete chaos. As Ruth narrates:

Sylvie in a house was more or less like a mermaid in a ship’s cabin. She preferred it sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude. We had crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic. Lucille and I stepped through the door from sheer night to sheer night. (*Housekeeping* 99)

Critics rightly notice that Sylvie imposes her transient habits onto the house’s structure turning the inside out and letting the outside in. Hall remarks that “Sylvie is trying to recreate a hobo jungle” (46), Laura Callanan observes that “the items in the house play a critical role in suggesting Sylvie’s renegotiation of the conventions of middle-class domesticity from her perspective as a transient” (254), and Jacqui Smyth points out that the conception of home as presented in the novel actually dismantles the dominant domestic ideology (284).

The only person who seems to accept Sylvie’s strange habits is Ruth. Lucille, the younger sister, on the other hand, is the one who, after initial hopeful fascination, starts to oppose and criticize her aunt’s transient habits. As Ruth puts it, “[t]hey offended Lucille’s sense of propriety” (*Housekeeping* 103). It is interesting to notice how the two girls gradually grow different to become completely estranged from each other. At the beginning, the bond between them seems naturally strong – they have the same traumatic experiences and most of the time they rely on each other for support or company. Ruth once comments on their relationship as follows: “We – in recollection I feel no reluctance to speak of Lucille and myself almost as a single consciousness”

(*Housekeeping* 98). Yet, the differences between them become apparent with Sylvie's arrival. It becomes clear that Lucille is more confident, active, decisive, open, sociable and, most importantly, she cares about other people, their opinions, social norms and conventions. It is not surprising then that she feels extremely embarrassed seeing her aunt sleeping on a bench in the park. The two girls still spend a lot of time together outside the house, but their objectives change. Ruth observes:

Say rather that the cold forced me home, and that the dark allowed Lucille to pass through the tattered peripheries of Fingerbone unobserved. It is accurate to say that Lucille went to the woods with me to escape observation. (...) But I went to the woods for the woods' own sake, while, increasingly, Lucille seemed to be enduring a banishment there. (*Housekeeping* 99)

In this short passage, which seems additionally resonant of H. D. Thoreau's *Walden*, the reader can clearly see the growing gap separating the sisters – with one turning increasingly to the peripheries of the society and the second in the completely opposite direction. Finally, Lucille acknowledges socially accepted conventional femininity and makes effort to change. As Hall puts it,

Lucille, the more conventionally adventurous sister, approaches womanhood as a challenge to be conquered. She is fully aware that if she does not embrace this stance she faces a journey into the abyss, into uncharted territory outside the frame of patriarchy's 'protection', into, like Sylvie, a life as an outsider. (45)

Critics also notice how the sisters' divergent attitudes are reflected in their contrasting memories of the mother. McDermott summarizes it as follows:

in Ruth's account, Helen was absentminded, forgetful, and prone to abandon them: for Lucille, Helen was the well-organised mother whose death was accidental. The contrast here suggests Lucille's more pragmatic usage of the past, in a manner that suits the needs of the present: she remembers the mother she should have had. (...) Lucille's view of the past as subservient to the needs of the present fits with the rhetoric of self-improvement that she discovers in the women's magazines she reads in her attempt to attain respectable feminine subjectivity. (265)

They clearly grow apart with Lucille trying to fit more and more into the society and its normative rules of behavior while Ruth turning away from its expectations.

Sylvie's and Ruth's otherness is what unites them, but, at the same time, it disconnects them from Lucille and the community of Fingerbone. In her

attempt to regain social acceptance, Lucille leaves her sister to settle with her Home Economics teacher. Ruth is abandoned one more time. Recognizing her needs, Sylvie forces Ruth to face her longings, her past, her self. The early morning trip to the woods, which is interpreted by critics as an initiation ritual, “a trial of loneliness and rite of self-recovery” (Ravits 658), is a milestone in Ruth’s transformation. Anne-Marie Mallon points to Ruth’s awareness of its significance: “[e]ven before she goes, Ruth knows that the journey will be difficult, that it will force her to confront the limits of her ordinary human faculties” (99). The idea of the rite of passage is reinforced by Robinson’s use of vivid birth imagery suggesting Ruth’s symbolic rebirth as an empowered female, which additionally implies the positive side of the transformation. As Ravits puts it: “[t]he female rite of passage, a ritual of rebirth and connection, is complete when Ruth’s internalized struggle against the sense of abandonment is resolved in her kinship with Sylvia, a relationship that affirms the power of will and mutual choice above all else” (661). Estés also appreciates the positive side of the transformation of the ugly duckling resulting from the exile noticing that it is never too late to look for kinship one requires (199). It seems that the exile might not only strengthen the outcast but also free one’s hidden identity.

Housekeeping is a fascinating novel discussing the problems of girlhood, adolescent identity, otherness, female vagrancy, transience, boundaries of freedom, confines of domesticity. By giving the reader insight into the troubled mind of Ruth, Robinson draws our attention to the importance of celebrating selfhood, being independent but also the importance of kinship and support. Yet, at the same time, she seems to be aware of the price one has to pay for autonomy. It might be argued that Lucille, the younger sister undergoes a transformation as well – from an outsider skipping classes to a well-behaved and well-dressed nice girl. She is the conventionally understood ugly duckling, but Robinson seems to favor Ruth’s transformation. As Tyndall and Ribkoff argue,

[t]he central irony of *Housekeeping* is that Lucille’s gradual movement out of an anomalous world defined by loss and grief and into the normal, social world of Fingerbone represents a spiritual death, whereas Ruth’s movement toward darkness and solitude is a spiritual birth, and the foundation of her evolving values and beliefs. (95)

In the end, Ruth chooses to drift with Sylvie, which implies freedom from the confines of society and social expectations, freedom to follow one’s natural needs and freedom to shape one’s own identity.

4.3. COMFORTABLY NUMB OR PAINFULLY AWARE: TONI MORRISON'S HEROINES IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING

Toni Morrison is an acclaimed American writer who gained international renown after she won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Her novels typically focus on the experiences of African American women and explore the issues of race, class and gender. Her female characters struggle to develop or maintain their cultural, racial and personal identity, to find freedom and independence, or simply to survive in the cruel world full of injustice, discrimination and inequalities. One of her best known novels is *Beloved* (1987), a poignant story of a runaway slave who kills her own child to save her from slavery, and “while she never indicates that she regrets this act, it denies her the ability to define herself outside of the experience” (Dana A. Williams 76). Morrison is said to have constructed her novels with great care, and

as readers have attempted to explicate, analyze, critique, and evaluate Toni Morrison’s writing, some have lamented about the challenges her novels pose for the reader, while others take pride in filling in the hermeneutic gaps with the historical, cultural, and political meanings they believe her stories invoke. (Mobley McKenzie 221)

Reading Morrison’s fiction is always a challenge that seems to reward the reader with multiple possibilities of interpretation, thought-provoking questions, uncommon inferences and conclusions. It seems impossible to overrate the significance of her novels and their influence on contemporary American culture in general and literature in particular.

THE BLUEST EYE

The Bluest Eye (1970) is Toni Morrison’s first published novel with which she started her writing career and paved her way to international renown and appreciation. This poignant story of Pecola Breedlove’s tragic girlhood experiences does not leave the reader indifferent. The amount of sympathy and empathy that it breeds seems to be inversely proportional to the amount of love and support that Pecola receives in her life. The novel, which portrays a process of a black girl’s victimization and downgrading as well as the resulting retreat into insanity and total disintegration of the self, expresses strong criticism of the dominant white culture and its oppressive influence on African-American communities, with special interest in the problems of black girls on the verge

of adolescence. Set in the 1940s in the industrial town of Lorain, Ohio, it addresses the issue of social tensions of the times, that is racism, marginalization, dysfunctional families, struggling individuals, violence and poverty. Exposing the multifaceted interrelations existing both inside and outside the presented community, the author draws the reader's attention to their complexity and raises our awareness of some key factors that shaped generations of people in the United States.

As with other Morrison's novels, the spectrum of themes and motifs present in *The Bluest Eye* is so wide that it allows for multiple literary analyses and interpretations. At its core, it is a coming-of-age novel which gives a picture of troubled black girlhood and demonstrates how racial hatred can distort proper development of the female self. This seems to be one of the most widely analyzed themes with critics such as Jan Furman or Sam Vasquez exploring the theme of black girlhood and its complex underpinnings. Critics point to a contrast between Pecola and Claudia, two girls of similar social status but with completely different family relations. Marilyn Mobley McKenzie discusses the significance of the domestic space as well as community's complicity in Pecola's downfall. Deborah De Rosa examines the novel with a womanist approach and points out that "[w]hile Morrison upholds, with some variation, the bildungsroman tradition, she simultaneously embraces and questions a central element of womanism: the creation of a female community or sisterhood to counter male dominance" (44). Racism, a key issue in all of Morrison's novels, is also widely analyzed with reference to *The Bluest Eye*. To mention only a few, Doreatha Drummond Mbalia examines how class and race lead to the oppression of African-Americans in the US; Anna Zebialowicz and Marek Palasinski give an insight into racial dilemmas presented in the novel by employing psychological tools and theories; Daina Miniotaitė explores the causes and effects of racialization on an individual's development; José Endoença Martins, with a womanist perspective in mind, discusses how the young protagonist "[deals] with both the black and the white worlds, in [her] search for identity, self and humanity" (28). There are also interpretations revolving around the themes of the dominant white standards of beauty and the influence of white mass culture on African-American adolescents (see Schreiber, Kuenz, Hunt). Another theme discussed by critics, one which seems to be the most emotionally complex issue raised by Morrison, is incest and child abuse (see Scott, Ansarey). Exploring the theme of female victimization in *The Bluest Eye*, Tracy L. Walters points to similarities between the novel and the Persephone myth with Pecola presented as a victim of "the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender" (105).

Racial hatred and denigration, the hegemony of oppressive white culture, social exclusion, victimization, lack of support and proper family care – all these factors, discussed extensively by critics, have a defining influence on Morrison's young protagonist. Interestingly, all the harrowing experiences of Pecola Breedlove bear strong resemblance to H. Ch. Andersen's "The Little Match Girl." The fairy tale and its images of a poor and neglected child find their reflection in the themes and motifs presented by Morrison in her first novel. In both texts the reader follows an underprivileged girl who, from the beginning of the story, is bound to fail tragically, a helpless victim of various forces beyond her power to fight or resist, with no adequate support that can save her. In Andersen's tale a poor girl dies lonely on the street on a cold winter night trying to sell some matches to indifferent passers-by. Lighting one match after another and dreaming of a warm home with a loving family and food on the table, she slowly freezes to death. In Morrison's story a poor black girl has to go through all types of traumatic experiences resulting from rejection, hatred and indifference while dreaming of the bluest eyes that would make her beautiful and accepted. Unable to fight the violent and oppressive environment, she ends up in a state of complete insanity. At the very start of the novel, Claudia, Morrison's narrator, leaves no room for any hope of a happy ending:

there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at that time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. (...) We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too. (*Bluest* 10)

Morrison makes it clear that her protagonist's fate is already decided, that it is too late to save her: she was raped by her father and the child did not survive. The only thing left to do is to tell the story of this victimized black girl and to make the reader understand how it all happened and what the underlying causes of Pecola's downfall were.

When the reader is slowly introduced into the life of Pecola Breedlove it turns out that there are multiple factors underlying the girl's tragic fate, but all of them can be gathered under one umbrella term, that is unfavorable environment, although, clearly, the phrase seems to be much too mild in reference to Pecola's traumatic experiences. Just like Andersen's Little Match Girl, who is hungry, in need of proper clothes, shoes and a safe home, Pecola

is not given appropriate conditions to grow or even survive. One of the most crucial phenomena that Morrison deals with in her novel as well as the one which defines Pecola and her life is undeniably racism. The tensions that racism creates inside and outside the community shape relations between people to an extent that no one can actually escape its influence and the weakest members become naturally most vulnerable and most badly hurt in the process. Pecola's life seems to consist solely of moments and situations in which she needs to confront some forms of racial violation. Wherever she goes and whatever she does, she is shunned by most people she encounters. At school, she is treated like an ugly duckling – always pointed at, laughed at, or ignored at best by other pupils as well as teachers:

She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk. (...) [Her teachers] tried never to glance at her, called on her only when everyone was required to respond. She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say. "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!" and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused. (*Bluest* 45)

It seems clear that even children understand that Pecola's status is lower than theirs and, having no support from the teachers, she can be treated with contempt and become an easy object of ridicule or denigration. Further, she experiences another form of discrimination and hatred when she visits Mr. Yacobowski's store. For this white middle-aged immigrant storekeeper, himself not of the highest social status, Pecola is invisible, her little black self seems to him devoid of humanity, something that he is disgusted to touch, something that is not worth even taking a glance at:

Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. (...) She looks at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition – the glazed separateness. (*Bluest* 47)

Pecola appears to be painfully aware of what causes Mr. Yacobowski as well as other white people she encounters to perceive her as vacuum: "it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes" (*Bluest* 47). Racism and racist behavior is her everyday life, a reality that she wishes she could not see.

It is interesting to note how Morrison presents the black community and the effects of long-term racist atmosphere it has been submerged in, how she critiques the community's "intraracism as they internalize feelings of otherness, of degradation and loss of identity (Riley 170). Pecola, being a black, poor and "ugly" girl, becomes the victim or the scapegoat, an easy aim of all types of attacks on the part of her own community, one example being when boys circle her and have fun harassing her, calling her names and making scornful remarks about her father. Morrison points to the possible reasons for such behavior:

That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds – cooled – and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming what was in its path. (*Bluest* 61)

Morrison indicates that Pecola's misery is both directly and indirectly caused by racism. She does not blame the black society only for being cruel towards Pecola, but by pointing to its complicity, the author shows the complex correlations between black and white worlds in America and their disastrous consequences. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber offers the following commentary: "[d]ependence on victimization or the objectifying of others for subjectivity constantly threatens the subject position, and it is from this precarious position that the community continues to reject and avoid Pecola" (86). All members fight for their own right to be recognized as subjects, and in the circumstances described it turns out that the only way to do it is to victimize the weaker, poorer, uglier, or 'not-yet-defined' members. Not only does Pecola's community fail to protect or support her, but they use her to make themselves recognized and visible. By doing this they also maintain the idea of white supremacy and the inferior position of black people in their own world.

Morrison gives more examples of Pecola's abuse and exclusion on the part of black community to show how they affirm "intraracial acceptance of the world's denigration of blackness" (Furman 221). One of them is Maureen Peal, "a high-yellow dream child" (*Bluest* 58) who is rich, always dressed in beautiful clothes, admired by both teachers and other pupils, desired as a friend. She seems to be an exact antithesis of what Pecola represents. What the girls have in common, however, is their acute understanding of their own position in the society. Just as Pecola is already aware of her "ugliness," Maureen Peal is proud to belong to higher spheres, she says: "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and

ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!” (*Bluest* 69) Her cuteness, as opposed to Pecola’s ugliness, encompasses her higher social class, lighter skin color, material wealth and a proper family background. Another person who makes Pecola feel the difference in their status is Geraldine and her spoilt son Junior. As Furman notes, “[when] Pecola stands in Geraldine’s house – tricked there by Geraldine’s hateful son – she transgresses a line demarking “colored people” from “niggers,” light-skinned from dark, hand-me-down whiteness from genuine culture” (221). It is a line that makes people like Geraldine proud of who they are, but only because they have this point of reference to look down on. For Geraldine, Pecola is not an underprivileged black girl who needs to be helped, she is a “nasty little black bitch” (*Bluest* 86) that her son should avoid by any means. As Furman comments: “[t]hrough her Morrison demonstrates that such a life as Geraldine’s is only validated by exclusion of others” (221).

Pecola’s feeling of unworthiness is only amplified by the dominant white mass culture that surrounds her. This culture is extremely powerful and effective when it comes to imposing certain standards of beauty and behavior on people who take part in it, regardless of whether they do it willingly or not. The standards the mass culture promotes are oppressive and often unreasonable, especially as regards African Americans who are not properly represented in the media and, as a result, strive to reach unrealistic goals. The first example of the dominant culture, that is the fragments from the Dick-and-Jane readers, is introduced at the very start of the novel. The narrative presents a picture of an ideal family with caring parents, their lovely children and a pet dog in a beautiful green-and-white house. Apart from the unattainable level of the family’s financial comfort that the text presents, it, first of all, offers a representation of white people only. Thus, it puts pressure on African American children by making them feel inadequate and inspires their desire for whiteness. In addition to foregrounding the major theme of the novel, which is racism, the passages introduced by Morrison also foreshadow Pecola’s disintegration. As Kuenz aptly observes,

[her] breakdown at the end of the novel is the last in a series of instances in which boundaries marking the space inside and outside, self and other, sense and nonsense are broken, removed, or simply no longer perform their tasks. As the novel’s prefatory Dick-and-Jane story turns from order to chaos with the gradual removal of punctuation and spacing, so too does the erasure of Pecola’s body and sexuality lead to her madness and isolation. (par. 29)

It is primarily the boundary between being black and white, ugly and cute that traumatizes Pecola. Her desire for cuteness as well as love and acceptance that she associates with beauty is further aroused by the images from white popular

culture, whether in the form of the child star Shirley Temple and a cup with her image that she drinks milk from or the Mary Jane candies that she eats with a wrapper presenting a blonde-haired blue-eyed girl. Pecola consumes these icons of whiteness as if they were to erase her black “ugliness” and it is through confrontation with these images that she develops her desire for blue eyes: “To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (*Bluest* 49).

Pecola’s resemblance to the Little Match Girl is quite peculiar and the hostile conditions that lead to a disastrous ending in both cases refer not only to the outside world but to the family that fails as well. In Pecola’s case, it is not only the poverty that the family has to face, but most importantly, it is total neglect of the child and her emotional needs on the part of her parents. Neither Pauline Breedlove nor her husband Cholly can give Pecola what she really requires to develop properly – love, support, care, understanding, warmth, and protection against the cruel outside world. Even worse, they create a cruel world within their own family as physical violence is Pecola’s everyday reality also at home. Just like Andersen’s protagonist strives to survive wintertime surrounded by unsympathetic people, Pecola strives to survive in the emotional coldness of her own house as well as the world outside. Tellingly, she never calls her mother mom but always Mrs. Breedlove. The emotional detachment pervades the family relations – Pauline and Cholly fight constantly, Pecola’s brother runs from home repeatedly and Pecola wishes she could disappear completely. There is no true parental love or care present in this family, as Cholly is a drunk who eventually burns their house making the family literally homeless and Pauline cares more about the house and the daughter of the Fisher family that she works for than her own. Quite ironically, as Furman observes, the Breedloves

breed not love but violence and misery, Cholly and Pauline eventually destroy their daughter, whose victimization is a bold symbol of their own despair and frustrations. In the pathos of their defeated lives, Morrison demonstrates the process by which self-hatred becomes scapegoating. (222)

What Furman points to in the quoted passage is that this neglect and violence has its roots in Pauline’s and Cholly’s childhood and early days, that it is the result of a bigger process, that they are only the carriers of racial self-hatred they were brought up in. Morrison draws the reader’s attention to the fact that Pecola is another generation of people who are marginalized, who have internalized racist ideas and are not able to cope with it more rationally. As De Rosa notes, “[the] most important female for Pecola, Pauline Breedlove, cannot help her daughter overcome her oppression because she, too, lives with a sense

of her own ugliness (lame foot and missing tooth) and loneliness” (44). She cannot be a good role model for her child since she herself has never had one. What she can only pass on to her daughter is the white culture standards of beauty that she has been consuming all her life. The flashbacks to Pauline’s early days of marriage, used by Morrison to present the roots of Pecola’s misery, show Pauline as an alienated lonely young woman who does not find any support either in other black women or her husband, a woman who spends money she does not really have on clothes only because she wants “other women to cast favorable glances her way” (*Bluest* 108), a woman who escapes to the cinema to refresh her memory and succumb to her teenage dreams of being loved by someone. Unfortunately, this is also a place where she acquires the notions of beauty and ugliness:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another – physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. (...) She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen. (*Bluest* 111)

The most tragic thing is that Pauline uses the scale when looking at her own child and what she sees is ugliness, not a self that deserves to be loved and cared for. It is not surprising then that, when Pecola accidentally knocks a pan of blueberries down on the floor, Pauline, instead of making sure that her own daughter has not burned herself seriously, is more concerned with the Fishers’ daughter, who gets scared as a result.

Cholly is another figure in Pecola’s life that brings his own experiences of inferiority, marginalization and racial hatred to his family life and victimizes the weaker. As Furman observes, “Cholly fights whom he can and not whom he should” (223), which is, among others, the result of his childhood experience when he was violated during his first sexual act with a girl by armed white men. Furman concludes: “Cholly realizes that hating them is futile, and he decides instead to hate Darlene for witnessing his degradation. He could not protect her so he settles for despising her” (223). Pecola is to him, then, like Darlene, a pitiful reminder of his own sad fate, humiliation, ugliness. The fact that Morrison gives details of Cholly’s early traumatic experiences, also including being abandoned by his mother as an infant or being rejected by his father as a teenager, makes it impossible to draw simplistic conclusions in reference to the scene where he rapes his own daughter. Without a doubt, the

rape is the most traumatic experience that Pecola is forced to go through, and the one that pushes her into insanity. It is a defining moment in the process of her disintegration, one that marks her failure to develop as a conscious black female self. Yet, it also gives the reader an insight into “how abused children turn into abusive parents” (Ansarey 53). Morrison makes the scene even more complicated by showing it from Cholly’s point of view and hinting at his sudden burst of love and compassion for the hopelessness of his as well as Pecola’s life mixed with a well-known feeling of hatred:

Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her – ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? (...) His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit. (*Bluest* 147)

Guilt and impotence, hopelessness and helplessness, anger and hatred, love and tenderness, and finally the brutal desire – the horrible mixture that makes the father rape his own daughter completes, as Scott points out, “the destruction of a black family, while reconstituting a system of white hegemony” (98).

The horrifying incestuous rape takes place in the kitchen of the Breedloves’ house and it symbolically shows the destruction of the family. Home is a space that is supposed to give shelter and safety and Pecola suffers its lack on many levels. Physically, she has no proper space to live because of her parents’ poverty. The Breedloves live in a storefront whose deficiencies sharply contrasts with the beautiful green and white house from the Dick-and-Jane readers. It is an abandoned store with two rooms and no bath facilities and prostitutes living in an apartment upstairs. But the narrative gives also the following explanation: “They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly” (*Bluest* 38). It becomes clear that this house does not give Pecola protection from the cruelty of the outside world either as the Breedloves have internalized the white standards of beauty and denigrate themselves as a result. Pecola becomes also homeless emotionally and the space of the storefront fails to become a home, that is a place where the family ties are strong and supportive. No one seems to instill pride, self-confidence or at least a sense of belonging in Pecola, she is left to her own devices when it comes to developing an identity. She does not even know what it means to be loved by someone as one day she asks Claudia: “how do you get somebody to love you?” (*Bluest* 33) What is more, Pecola is homeless when it comes to her ancestry and cultural background that could give her a sense of self by making her feel that she belongs somewhere.

Pecola’s house and family is contrasted by Morrison with Claudia’s and the differences that emerge are actually those crucial factors that let Claudia

survive and develop her autonomous self while making Pecola fail in her quest for identity. The most prominent difference is that the MacTeers care about their daughters. The images of the tired and irritated but caring mother rubbing ointment into the body of sick Claudia or tending to her at night when she is feverish and vomits make it clear that parental love and instincts are strong and can overcome the harsh reality. When Frieda is molested by Mr. Henry, the family's tenant, her parents' reaction is immediate – they throw him violently out of the house, their daughters' safety being most important. These two examples contrast strikingly with the images of Mrs. Breedlove beating Pecola for knocking a pan down, or Mr. Breedlove brutally raping his own daughter. Another crucial difference is, as Lisa Williams argues, that "Claudia is connected to the oral tradition of her ancestors, which is communicated through her mother's songs. Pecola, on the other hand, is the stranger in the wasteland of the North, isolated from both black and white communities" (76). Joyce Irene Middleton, who discusses the issue of orality in *The Bluest Eye*, also notices this fundamental difference between the two families:

the Breedlove family does not 'pass on' the communal memory of the African American oral tradition in their home. No music, laughter, gossip, and most of all no life-sustaining or celebratory rituals are represented in their family's story. One of their few rituals performed in their home is self-destructive: a dance of horror between Cholly and Pauline which is terrifying, spontaneous, anticipatory, and predictable. (312)

The only bond that Pecola finds is with the prostitutes that live in an apartment upstairs. Ironically, they are presented as the only representatives of the community that do not victimize the girl, but offer some sort of intimacy, communication and attention. Yet, their support turns out to be insufficient, just like Claudia's and Frieda's attempt to save Pecola's child by planting marigolds.

When analyzing these two characters one can notice more traces of fairy tales. Claudia is like the protagonist of the Bluebeard tale – she gets attracted to the monster, in this case it is the white dominant culture that oppresses black people, but discovers the truth behind the façade of Bluebeard's big and rich mansion, understands the ways in which the monster wants to enslave her, relies on the support of her family, and manages to defeat the monster. She is the one who, through her ability to question white standards of beauty and following the African American folk tradition of storytelling, develops an identity and survives. Pecola, on the other hand, is like the Little Match Girl who, made invisible by the indifferent world, chooses to fantasize about blue eyes rather than confront the reality. Her longing for the blue eyes is self-destructive. She

might have been an ugly duckling, but she does not transform because there is no one to awaken her, no one to support her. Instead, her idle fantasies block her development. She is not able to overcome the society's negative perception of her on her own and she has to stay ugly. Estés in her analysis of Andersen's fairy tale points to the loss of self-preservation instinct as the result of the negative influence of the environment. In Pecola's case this loss can be seen when, first, she wishes to disappear completely so as not to look at her parents' fights, then, she dreams of being white and beautiful and drinks enormous amounts of milk from the Shirley Temple cup, and finally, when she starts fantasizing about blue eyes, which would make her loved and visible, and additionally, which would protect her from seeing ugly things like the brutality of her parents or the outside world. In both stories the protagonists turn to their fantasies for help. Yet, the refuge they find in the world of illusions is deceitful. In Andersen's tale, the girl freezes to death while escaping into the fantasies of a warm house, in Morrison's novel, Pecola, confined to the world of illusions, is also in a sense dead – her insanity kills her chances of developing a true sense of self. As Furman concludes, "Pecola's sad fantasy expresses Morrison's strongest criticism of a white standard of beauty that excludes most black women and that destroys those who strive to measure up but cannot" (225). Claudia also comments on the trauma that Pecola is forced to go through by pointing to the community's complicity in her downfall:

All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. (...) We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (*Bluest* 185)

The tragic ending of Morrison's novel clearly exposes the dangers connected with the lack of proper environment in the process of growing up and developing an identity.

SULA

Just like *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison's second novel *Sula* (1973) also deals with the problems and traumas that African American community has to face due to omnipresent racism generated by the dominant white culture and its supremacist ideologies. Likewise, it is about adolescent girls growing up in conditions determined by class and race, their troubled girlhood and derailed

identity formation. As Karen Carmean observes, in both novels Morrison talks about “the conditions for growth and development critical for nurturing healthy human beings through love unblighted by possessiveness or self-sacrifice, love allowing feelings for oneself as well as for others” (159). Philip Page makes a valid point that both works are also “based on the condition that fragmentation and displacement are the fundamental barriers to the formation of African-American identities” (183). Another similarity is that in both novels the protagonists that are at the center of the plot are not the only characters who are given voice. Interestingly, both Pecola and Sula appear to be pushed aside as Morrison portrays other characters – in *The Bluest Eye* the reader is given an insight into the past and present of Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, or even side characters like Soaphead Church or Geraldine; in *Sula* one learns first about the Wright women, that is Helen, her mother and grandmother, as well as the Peace women, that is Hanna and Eva, or characters like Shadrack before learning anything about Sula or Nel. What is more, Sula dies many years before the novel’s plot ends, which is quite unusual for the main hero. In addition, in both cases the novels seem to be as much about a particular character as about the whole community in which the character lives and on which she has a major influence. Both Pecola and Sula become scapegoats and pariahs that the communities use to define themselves against. Nevertheless, there are some significant differences and *Sula* as well as the novel’s main protagonist seem to be significantly more complex than *The Bluest Eye* and Pecola. Also, due to this complexity, one can notice in *Sula* resemblance to more than one fairy tale pattern. The main protagonist’s experiences could actually be compared to the patterns present in “Vasilisa the Wise,” “La Llorona,” as well as “The Red Shoes” and “The Ugly Duckling,” especially with reference to Estés’s interpretations of the tales.

The body of criticism on *Sula* is immense, which only points to the fact that the novel is rich in meanings, themes and motifs, and that their complexity allows for multiple readings and interpretations from various angles and with the use of diverse approaches. The first impression that the reader gains is that *Sula* is a novel that cannot be easily classified, just like Sula as a character cannot be easily defined. It is a Bildungsroman and simultaneously it is not. Pamela Thurschwell discusses *Sula* as a deformed coming-of-age novel with the derailed development of the main protagonist. As the critic notes,

[a]lthough the book proffers the eponymous Sula Peace and her best friend and later enemy, Nel Wright, as potential protagonists, it does not easily read as a Bildungsroman, even as a negative one, of female development. An episodic work filled with magical realist, mythopoetic events, it pushes against developmental narrative expectations. (111)

Thurschwell argues further that the novel contains “powerful anti-developmental voices” (112), one of them being Shadrack, a shell-shocked war veteran whose story of mental incoherence and fear of unexpected death turned into National Suicide Day, presented at the start of the novel, shapes the entire narrative. When exploring Morrison works from the womanist perspective, Deborah De Rosa states:

In *Sula*, Morrison tests the nature of the womanist quest by casting an air of ambiguity around whether or not Sula’s journey empowers her. Whereas Morrison dooms Pecola’s quest from the start, she seems to instill in Sula a ray of hope. Sula’s quest to make herself takes her out of the chaos of her home, into the order of Nel’s home, into the mystery of Shadrack’s shack, to college, and to major U.S. cities. However, like Shadrack and Plum, Sula returns “home” disillusioned with and alienated from the world and from herself. (42)

John N. Duvall, for example, asserts that “Sula becomes an empowered Pecola, (...) [she] takes her lack and attempts to construct identity out of her very marginality and absence of self” (55). Whether empowered or not, most critics seem to agree that Sula’s development is twisted and her identity gets deformed in some way, although there are different interpretations as regards the character of this deformation. One reason for this difficulty in defining Sula might be that Morrison consciously challenges our conventional thinking of what is good and evil (see Carmean, Mobley McKenzie). Rita A. Bergenholtz, for example, reads the entire novel as “an extended satire on binary (reductive, clichéd) thinking” (3).

The ambiguity of the character’s quest also indicates the complexity of issues that have impact on Sula. De Rosa points to the lack of proper support on the part of female community that could “help her formulate an empowered self-image” (45). Terry Otten researches motherlove and its destructive potential both in reference to Sula and her girlfriend, Nel. Examining the presentation and influence of male characters in *Sula*, Susan Neal Mayberry argues that

Morrison’s male characters reveal that issues of gender, race, and class cannot be separated; the conflicts between African American men and women result not from a sexual but from a cultural disease, the cure for which would require radical structural surgery. Viewed specifically, *Sula* reveals that the traditional African American community is not ready to accept a woman who assumes a man’s freedom. (519)

Mobley McKenzie discusses Morrison’s presentation of female friendship “gone awry” (225) and how it is shaped by spaces that are racialized. The critic observes that

[e]ven before the reader meets Nel and Sula, the two protagonists, she learns about the social space that has transformed a black neighborhood into an exclusive country club. In a passage that describes a familiar form of regentrification, in which less economically able citizens are displaced by those who can afford to buy the land and force those who once claimed it as their own to relocate, Morrison seems almost prophetic in anticipating how urban phenomena are changing public and private spaces. (Mobley McKenzie 224)

Nel and Sula's friendship/relationship is also analyzed with reference to the theme of Black girlhood and womanhood (see Furman), the theme of alienation of the main protagonist (see Watkins Fulton) or through the lenses of psychoanalysis (see Bouson, Coleman, Pruitt). Duvall sees Sula as "an individual who should have but did not become an artist" (49), and as a result, suffers painful consequences of not being able to express herself properly.

Being rich in symbols, signs and various omens, the novel also inspires readings that explore the elements of the African American tradition (see Harris, Gyetvai, Hinton) or its mythological tone. Barbara Christian in "The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison" looks at *Sula* as "deeply rooted in history and mythology" (25). She notes that

the novel is not only about Nel Wright and Sula Peace, it is most emphatically about the culture that spawns them. (...) Sula's destiny is charted by the mythology of Evil and Nature her hometown ascribes to and by the view the Bottom as well as the larger society hold of woman, her span and space. In exploring this community's system of beliefs, Morrison weaves a fable about the relationship between conformity and experiment, survival and creativity. (Christian 26)

The critic points to the omnipresence of death as well as "Morrison's pervasive use of nature images" (Christian 28), which add to the mythological tone of the novel. In studies of this kind, Eva, Sula's grandmother, is often compared to a goddess. For Christian, for example, she is like the primeval Earth Goddess that is both feared and worshipped by people (32). Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, who examines the female bonds and images of the feminine in *Sula* "through a framework of both Christian and Greek goddess figures" (78), sees Sula and her female predecessors as ancient goddesses such as Demeter or Hestia who "emerge as powerful twentieth-century feminine archetypes" (81). Michele Pessoni uses current feminist archetypal theory and views Morrison's work as one which "calls for the revaluation of the feminine" through the revisioning of the Great Goddess archetype. Pessoni asserts that "[the] archetypal feminine as Morrison envisions it encourages expansiveness and inclusion. It sets up

a pattern for cultural and individual wholeness, for health and healing through connection.” Moreover, Pessoni notes that although Morrison uses myth, she does not move *Sula* to a mythical timeless place, but rather she is “deeply concerned with the racial and sexual ills which plague modern-day America.” Due to its multifaceted character, the novel defies easy classifications, also when it comes to the fairy tale patterns that could be used to interpret its main themes. Harris asserts that *Sula* is actually “antithetical to the basic premise of the fairy tale – that the heroine is a helpless, passive creature who must depend upon some man (...) to save her” (107). Yet, taking into consideration the main protagonist’s experiences, it can be stated that *Sula* actually resonates with four of them, that is “Vasilisa the Wise,” “La Llorona,” as well as “The Red Shoes” and “The Ugly Duckling,” especially with reference to Estés’s interpretations of the tales. It seems that the fairy tales can be effectively used to interpret certain aspects of *Sula* even though Morrison’s work and protagonist are so unconventional and complex as the author fights stereotypes and conventional binary thinking as well as challenges the classic genre of Bildungsroman by showing the peculiar complexity of identity formation and human relations underlying it.

Sula contains numerous elements that make it resemble the tale of “Vasilisa the Wise” but there are also some significant differences. “Vasilisa the Wise” is basically a tale of initiation in which learning to rely on one’s instincts is a crucial skill that the heroine acquires. It is a tale in which the heroine embarks on a quest to discover her independent self, and turns into a stronger, self-reliant individual. Regardless of all the ambiguities concerning the interpretation of Sula’s life experiences, whether they empower her or not, it cannot be denied that *Sula* is a novel whose major theme is the search for self and that Sula is a character who sets off on a quest and who undergoes certain rites of passage that mark her shift from childhood to adulthood. She is also a character who becomes fiercely independent and strong enough to withstand the rules and restrictions imposed by the society. The novel is often analyzed in terms of a Bildungsroman, a genre which depicts the process of the main protagonist’s development from inexperienced childhood to self-awareness and maturity. In Morrison’s case it is, however, a process that is distorted by the socio-historical environment that the protagonist lives in. When examining the genre of Bildungsroman in the African American tradition, Claudine Raynaud notes:

The term “coming of age” entails the achievement of the goal: one is finally “of age,” mature, ready to face the outside world. The novel contains the proposition of a solution to the formation of the black subject in America. Alternatively, it depicts the impossibility of such a solution, the damage wrought on these black selves by the horrors of history and racism. (110)

It appears that Morrison complicates the life of Sula to show that coming of age in case of African American girls/women is never easy, that it is subject to powerful forces that the person is not able to control and which might lead to various deformations of the maturing self. In Sula's case, as De Rosa observes,

Morrison subdues the hostile environment's destructive potential by giving her protagonist the power to leave it. From her earliest moment of self-awareness, Sula Peace wants to create an individual self; however, both the larger community and her family environment threaten this goal. (40)

This desire to be independent, to choose one's own path and to feel free in one's choices is what makes Sula similar to Vasilisa, who learns to overcome obstacles in life and becomes independent by following her instincts.

The quest that Sula begins is initiated through a series of events. The first factor that influences Sula's process of growing up is her friendship with Nel. The girls get attracted to each other as each one represents something that the other is missing, Sula and her family stand for chaos, creativity and freedom, Nel and her mother, on the other hand, for orderliness, stability and conformity. Additionally, the girls seem to share the underprivileged social position, as Morrison narrates: "[b]ecause each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on" (*Sula* 52). The key event that marks the border between childhood and maturity in Sula's life and the major rite of passage in the novel is an incident that happens by the river and involves Sula, Nel, as well as a little boy named Chicken Little. The incident is preceded by a crucial moment in Sula's life – she overhears her mother telling her friends that she loves Sula but that she does not like her. The revelation stirs Sula's emotions, including that of fear, anger and frustration. The scene that follows is often interpreted in ritualistic terms. Sula and Nel go to the river bank and start "the grass play," (*Sula* 58) which has evocative symbolic undertones. Neal Mayberry observes that the play is Sula's way to "[cope] with her pain by acting it out" (525). Watkins Fulton sees the scene as erotic but at the same time asserts that "Morrison metaphorically buries the potential for a sexual relationship between her two characters" (73). Carmean comments that "Hannah's statement unwittingly severs a significant bond with Sula" and, as a result, the girls "strengthen their union in a wordless ritual, loaded with sexual implications" (154). The tension is at its peak when the little boy appears and Sula, overwhelmed by repressed emotions, accidentally throws him into the river. The incident, as unexpected to Sula and Nel as it is to the reader, becomes an unusual ritual of initiation which turns out to be a defining

moment in Sula's development. Its influence is described as follows: "[the] first experience (her mother's remarks) taught her that there was no other that you could count on; the second (Chicken Little's drowning) that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow" (*Sula* 119). Sula discovers she can neither rely on other people nor herself, the reader realizes that Sula's identity formation is going to be thwarted. Neal Mayberry explains that the boy becomes "the means by which Sula is set dangerously free from any context, any community; having killed, even accidentally, she is no longer afraid of death" (526). Christian also points to the event as becoming Sula's initiation by commenting that "this accidental death by water is Sula's baptism into her search for some continuity between the natural world and the social world, between the precariousness of life and inevitability of death" (35).

Another aspect that makes Sula similar to Vasilisa is that both girls lose their mothers and they start their quest on their own. Yet, in Vasilisa's case the mother is loving and overprotective, her death is unwanted, and the heroine is forced to separate herself from the mother in order to gain independence. Sula loses her mother twice in the novel, first symbolically, when she overhears her remarks about her feelings for the daughter, second literally, when she dies in flames. The most crucial difference, however, between Vasilisa and Sula is their attitude to matrilineal heritage. As far as Vasilisa is concerned, when her mother dies, she is not left to her own devices as she is entrusted with a little doll, a magical object that symbolizes maternal love, care and guidance as well as, more broadly, wisdom passed by women from generation to generation. It is thanks to the doll that Vasilisa learns to rely on her instincts, awakens her intuition and gains independence. Sula, on the other hand, does not seem to accept the legacy that her mother and grandmother want to pass on her. Although she surely inherits the sense of freedom and strength that the Peace women cherish, she openly rebels against the way Hannah or Eva live and want her to live. If "[it] was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. (...) [and the] Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake" (*Sula* 41), then Sula is not the one who loves men, but rather, she is the one who would like to be like a man – free and independent. Her major point of disagreement is connected with the traditional role of a woman as a mother and a homemaker. When Sula comes back after ten years of absence in Medallion, Eva, her grandmother confronts her:

"When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you."

"I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."

"Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around with no man."
(*Sula* 92)

While Eva perceives this as selfishness, Sula sees no point in producing children, her aim being making herself, that is forming an identity. Her attitude to her mother and grandmother seems to determine the result of her quest. As De Rosa comments,

[in] *Sula*, Morrison suggests what can happen when the heroine feels rejected by, and in turn rejects, the female community that theoretically should help her formulate an empowered self-image. (...) Morrison suggests the negative consequences of the complete absence of a female community, because not only does Sula develop into a woman independent of men, but she also dismisses women, which explains why she can watch her mother burn, can so easily commit Eva to Sunnyside Nursing Home, and can seduce other women's (including her best friend's) husbands. (45)

It also explains why her quest is not fully successful. Sula transgresses social norms of behavior and becomes dangerously free, as Raynaud aptly observes (117). She disrespects both the feminine as well as patriarchal tradition and becomes a pariah. Instead of living fully and creatively, she lives in isolation destroying whatever comes her way, like her friendship with Nel. Pessoni asserts that

[in] rejecting Eva, Sula cuts herself off from the one character who comes closest to pointing the way back to life through connection to the archetypal feminine. Even if she rejects patriarchal culture, without these sacred feminine bonds, Sula remains just as isolated and just as barren as Pecola, unable to create, unable to nourish, unable to connect.

In this respect she is unlike Vasilisa who can overcome all the obstacles on her path because she understands the importance of maternal feminine forces she discovers within her.

The next element that both stories have in common is the figure of Baba Yaga. According to Estés, Baba Yaga represents instinctive nature and the wild feminine with the power to give life as well as to destroy and annihilate (96). This is exactly how Eva has been described by critics. Christian writes: "[l]ike the primeval Earth Mother Goddess, feared and worshipped by man, like the goddess of antiquity, older even than the biblical Eve, Eva both gives life and takes it away. She performs a ritual killing inspired by love – a ritual of sacrifice by fire" (32). Harris observes that "[in] the mixture of love and revulsion surrounding her burning of Plum, Eva egotistically eliminates what offends her. (...) Eva becomes the vengeful goddess in destroying a creature who has failed to worship in an appropriate manner at her altar" (124). Eva does seem to be like Baba Yaga who rewards those who serve her well while punishes

those who cannot fulfill the tasks she sets them. In the novel, the reader sees Eva burning her son Plum who ruins his maleness and lives in a child-like state because of the drug addiction caused by the traumas of the war he took part in. At the same time, she is able to sacrifice her own life by jumping out of the window to save her daughter from burning, a daughter who serves her well and shares her lifestyle. Also, her house is like a fortress that she is solely in control of, just like Baba Yaga's, and whoever enters it falls under her authority. Vasilisa is the one who, regardless of her fear, faces Baba Yaga and succeeds in completing all the tasks that the witch obliges her to do. Sula turns out to fear Eva, yet, her reaction is to rebel against her and constrain her power by sending her to a nursing home. Pessoni argues that rejecting Eva means rejecting the archetypal feminine, and by doing it "Sula steels herself against all maternal feminine forces" (par. 29). This seems to be the reason why Sula does not really develop her true potential as a woman and dies alone, completely alienated from the family, friends and community. There is, however, one thing that she gains in her quest and that is her freedom. Estés sees "Vasilisa the Wise" as a story about female liberation which is essential if one wants to have a strong connection to intuition. In some sense, Sula's story reflects this idea and Sula clearly "stands for feminine freedom of thought" (Demetrakopoulos 89).

Another tale that *Sula* seems to be resonant of is that of La Llorona, or the weeping woman. The most evident similarity between the two stories is the motif of the river and child homicide. La Llorona is presented as a woman who, overwhelmed by anger and jealousy aroused by her husband's disloyalty, drowns her own children. Quite similarly, Sula lets Chicken Little, a small boy who happens to roam the river bank where Sula and Nel play, slip out of her hands and fall into the river:

Sula picked him up by his hands and swung him outward then around and around. His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled the birds and the fat grasshoppers. When he slipped from her hands and sailed away out of the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter.

The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was still in Sula's palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water. (*Sula* 60)

The incident seems unintended, unlike in La Llorona's case, yet the emotions that both protagonists are overcome with are similar. It is just before the incident that Sula hears her mother saying she does not like her own daughter, which turns out to have a disastrous influence on the girl. The intensity of negative emotions that Sula is filled with can be compared to the feeling of having been betrayed by the lover that La Llorona experiences, and results, first, in a strange

ritualistic play with Nel, then, in the tragic event involving the little boy. La Llorona gets punished for the atrocious act – she commits suicide and her spirit is forced to roam the rivers in an eternal search for her drowned children. Sula, on the other hand, does not get punished for her act in a direct way because no one discovers how the accident happened, yet, the consequences of the incident are also endless and rather devastating. Thruschwell comments as follows:

Her mother's words and Chicken Little's death constitute the poles of Sula's self-loss and self-creation. The symbolic loss of her mother's love (...) means the loss of the first and presumably most secure prop to identity. The second experience, Chicken Little slipping from her hands, signifies Sula's unjoinedness in literal terms, her inability to hold fast to another. (121)

It initiates her into the world of adulthood, but derails her proper development as she loses the ability to join others. The consequence is that Sula starts a ceaseless search for her true identity, but it seems never successfully completed.

What is more, similarly to the ghost of La Llorona, who gains symbolic meaning and starts to be perceived as dangerous for other people, later in her life Sula becomes the town pariah and a scapegoat for all the failures of the community she lives in. Harris aptly observes that “[l]ife, death, responsibility, the limits of behavior – all are contained in Chicken Little's death. Once Sula ignores them and moves into a realm of her own unrestrained seeking and exploration, she is forever outside the world view of the Bottom” (126). For the people of the Bottom, she becomes an embodiment of evil and “their catch-all explanation for natural and unnatural occurrences” (Harris 115), “she transgresses and embodies the dangerous freedom that Morrison's heroes and heroines experiment with” (Raynaud 117), she becomes “a woman who assumes a man's freedom” (Neal Mayberry 519). Cedric Gael Bryant notes that Sula is seen as dangerous because she is perceived as having the power to destroy familial relationships:

Sula's own rootlessness and disdain for signifiers of stability in her culture, such as motherhood and marriage, are stolen privileges reserved for men. Sula is, therefore, an anathema to the community because she threatens traditional gender arrangements which, despite the obvious ways these assigned roles restrict female autonomy, are approved by the general community. By appropriating male prerogatives, Sula, in effect, abandons her sex and becomes a man – a monstrous perversion of the passive “nature” that has been socially constructed for women. (par. 18)

The way Sula is seen by the community of the Bottom seems to be coherent with the way the tale of La Llorona has been traditionally interpreted, namely that, as Candelaria put it,

it teaches that girls get punished for conduct for which men are rewarded; that pleasure, especially sexual gratification, is sinful; that female independence and personal agency create monsters capable of destroying even their offspring; (...) and other lessons of scapegoat morality. (113)

Quite interestingly, both La Llorona and Sula are characters directly associated with water. La Llorona is a ghost figure that roams riverbanks and riverbeds looking for the souls of her children, and is said to be a threat to children who go too far without parental supervision. Sula's rite of passage takes place by the river and defines her whole life. Shadrack, the town traumatized war veteran, sees Sula's birthmark as showing a tadpole, a water creature. Even after her death, water imagery is used to show the influence Sula had on the town. First, it is the unexpected rain and frost that come in late October and make people's life almost unbearable, and then, at the beginning of January the sun comes out and everything starts to melt, the result being a flood that kills many citizens of the Bottom on Shadrack's National Suicide Day.

Another noteworthy similarity between Sula and La Llorona is connected with Estés's interpretation of the tale that revolves around the theme of female creativity that is often restrained or destroyed by various outside and inside factors. Estés mentions the toxicity of a culture that devalues the feminine or of inner factors that have negative influence on a woman's creative work or life. It is interesting to note how this motif is employed in Morrison's novel:

In a way, her strangeness, her naivete, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for activity that provided her what she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous. (*Sula* 121)

Sula is described as an artist who does not have a medium to express herself and is, therefore, forced to repress the creativity and energy that flows within her. Her tragedy is that she is creative and experimental, but the world around wants her to conform and limits her activity. Hortense J. Spillers argues that

Sula is specifically circumscribed by the lack of an explicit tradition of imagination or aesthetic work, and not by the evil force of "white" society, or the absence of a man, or even the presence of a mean one. Morrison, then,

imagines a character whose failings are directly traceable to the absence of a discursive/imaginative project – something to do, some object-subject relationship which establishes the identity in time and space. (55)

Duvall adds that the novel “explores the painful consequences for those whose voices do not find their appropriate expression” (49). In Sula’s case this deficiency results in self-destruction, isolation and lack of progression or arrested development of the feminine self.

Sula can be also said to contain the traces of Andersen’s “The Red Shoes,” which is essentially a tale discussing the theme of vanity and selfishness as well as disobedience and conformity to social roles. It seems clear that Sula is a rebellious character who does not want to accept social norms, especially the ones concerning ascribed gender roles. She does not want to be a wife or a mother as these do not help in developing selfhood and being independent. As Maggie Galehouse observes,

the adult Sula thwarts community mores surrounding gender, race, and vocation/avocation, generating a tension that is three-fold. Her disinterest is interpreted as selfishness; she believes in self-nurture as an end in and of itself, whereas for Eva, Nel, and the other women in town, mothering, care-taking and running a household are non-negotiable women’s work. (353)

Sula is much like Andersen’s protagonist, who disobeys the rules and repeatedly wears her new red shoes to church, the result being an obsession with the shoes and a mad dance that she cannot control. Eventually, she is severely punished for her defiant behavior – her legs are cut off and she dies. Sula seems similarly obsessed with her self, which is perceived by the society as selfishness:

She lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life – (...) She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments – no ego. (*Sula* 118)

Sula does whatever she wants, she cherishes her individual self, she relishes her freedom without thinking about the consequences. It is also interesting to note the similarity between the symbolism of the red shoes and Sula’s behavior. The shoes might symbolize passion and sexuality, and the girl’s unrestrained dance can be seen as a form of bodily expression, which, in turn, could be perceived as positive suggesting freedom and mobility, or as inappropriate for a well-behaved girl and duly punished. This seems to be exactly the essence of controversy

around Sula's behavior and the discrepancy of various interpretations. On the one hand, Sula's behavior, including her sexual exploits, points to her freedom and independence, her ability to overcome the oppressive environment, on the other hand, it leads to alienation, loneliness and eventual self-destruction. Galehouse, who views *Sula* as a parable, concludes: "[o]ne must strike a balance between self-knowledge and narcissism. Nel should have known herself better, Sula should not have known herself quite so well, and the people of the Bottom should have recognized the good that their perception of Sula's evil fostered" (360). The excess that Galehouse is referring to in this quotation and the need to find a balance seem to be the lessons that both stories teach.

Another tale that *Sula* could be compared to is Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling." In some respects, Sula is like the ugly duckling, who is born different and because of that is rejected from its environment. Sula's uniqueness is evident from the start as she is born with a birthmark over her eye, which continues to change its shape and color. As Galehouse observes, "[u]nlike clothing or tattooing, or other, more contrived, means of self-presentation, Sula's permanent, "natural" adornment comes unencumbered by invention or economic signification. It exoticizes her, setting apart from the rest of the community" (349). It is also noteworthy that the birthmark changes its shape depending on people who look at it. At first, it is seen as a stemmed rose, to Shadrack it is a tadpole, to Jude it looks like a rattlesnake, but later it changes into something totally sinister and evil:

That incident (Mr. Finley choking on a chicken bone when seeing Sula), and Teapot's Mamma, cleared up for everybody the meaning of the birthmark over her eye; it was not a stemmed rose, or a snake, it was Hannah's ashes marking her from the very beginning. (*Sula* 114)

For people of the Bottom Sula becomes evil incarnate, a daughter who could watch her mother burn without helping her, a woman who behaves like a man and does not respect any social mores, a carefree selfish black girl who sleeps with her best friend's husband, or worse than that, with white men. It appears that Sula feels she does not belong to the Bottom from the start and, just like the ugly duckling, she starts her quest. Yet, she comes back after ten years since she is not able to find what she needs – a proper companion that she could feel union with. Christian notes that after her ten-year-long quest she "abandons any attempt at union and seeks only herself. (...) Marked at birth, she will pursue her own uniqueness" (41). This seems to be the most significant difference between Sula and the ugly duckling, who finally manages to find support, understanding and kinship in beautiful swans. There are only two people that Sula feels connection with, that is her friend Nel, and later her

lover Ajax. Yet, both of them leave Sula when she transgresses their borders. For Nel, it is the moment when Sula has sex with her husband Jude, which means betrayal and disappointment. For Ajax, it is the moment when she manifests desire to possess him, thus invading his strong sense of freedom. It turns out that being free of convention frees her of any meaningful relations with other people as well, yet it cannot be dismissed that all the time she stays true to her self and she stays independent.

The dispute that arises over Sula and her quest for identity can be explained by Morrison's wish to question the world where binary thinking is the only option. As Page comments,

[i]n *Sula* Morrison depicts a rigidly bipolar world, one in which the falsifications and privileging are so extreme that the tensions between opposed terms are overwhelming, as attested by the novel's numerous deaths. As the novel documents this bipolarity and the concomitant tensions, however, it undercuts that system and privileges a fluid, open, and liberating perspective. Sula, forced to become exile and then pariah, personifies this new freedom that dares to reject the old dichotomies and to create a new kind of identity. Both the character and the novel become representative of divisions within the American and African-American cultures. (184)

Sula might be then seen as trying to form an identity that would defy simple classifications and definitions because the world she lives in is so complicated. That is why, most of the questions that *Sula* asks are not given any definite answers, it is the reader's task to consider who is good and who is evil, what it means to be a male and a female, or black and white, who is free and who is enslaved, or what is real and what is fantastic. As can be expected, the reader will find it almost impossible to come to firm and irrevocable decisions or give the novel one valid interpretation. Sula's fluid identity could also be the reason why she can be compared to so many fairy tale heroines – she is a character who embodies diverse ideas and faces multiple challenges and dilemmas, among them black girlhood, search for identity, maternal legacy and maternal nurture or lack of it, oppressive environment, death and traumas, friendship and loneliness, social isolation, freedom and independence, creativity and passivity, selfhood and excessive narcissism, femininity and maleness. It seems then that classifying her is like trying to contain the uncontainable.

Morrison's two protagonists discussed in this chapter, that is Pecola Breedlove and Sula Peace, could be seen as archetypal female characters whose process of growing up and gaining identity goes down a winding and bumpy road. Both heroines suffer major traumas as they grow up in the marginalized

African American communities, as they face all-pervading racism generated by the dominant white culture and its supremacist ideologies, as they try to discover who they are. Pecola, who could be compared to Andersen's Little Match Girl, fails completely in her attempts at self-definition since she is not offered any support, love, nurture, or healthy relationships. The only defense she manages to come up with, that is her impossible dream of becoming a beautiful white girl with blue eyes, turns out to be ineffective and pushes her into some sort of numbness, rather than a much needed awakening. Those extremely unfavorable conditions that she is forced to grow up in lead eventually to a tragic ending – a state of complete insanity. In comparison to Pecola's traumatic experiences, Sula's process of growing up might seem less harrowing, but she is also subjected to tensions, strained relationships, unsettling events including accidental deaths. In some aspects, Sula is like Vasilisa the Wise, who embarks on a quest for independence and maturity, in others, she is like the protagonist of "The Red Shoes" tale, a self-obsessed woman who cannot form any true emotional bonds, who is completely devoid of empathy, and who destroys everything on her way instead. Her uncanny connection to a river, or water in general makes her resemble La Llorona, while the fact that she is seen by the community as an outcast and a danger to their safety and well-being reminds one of "The Ugly Duckling." Generally, in both novels, by showing troubled coming-of-age stories, Morrison questions the dominant, traditional, and socially accepted standards of beauty, gender roles, norms of behavior, with special emphasis on those regarding girls and women. Being aware of the threats resulting from emotional and psychological damage that adolescent girls might suffer, the novelist points to conditions needed for proper growth, especially healthy relationships, loving family, loyal friendships, empathetic and supportive environment.

4.4. CULTURES AT THE INTERSECTION: SANDRA CISNEROS'S CHICANAS AND THEIR TRANSGRESSIONS

Sandra Cisneros is an American poet, novelist and short story writer who is described as "a passionate Chicana activist and an original, fresh voice in American literature" (Kort 57). Her works bring awareness to the problems of Chicano communities, and especially Chicano women, their victimization and marginalized position within culture, and as such are part of the process of reconstructing tradition and redefining identities. In her works, Cisneros challenges Chicano patriarchy and the traditional Chicana womanhood in

which being a passive recipient of male treatment is especially valued. Her protagonists are often forced to confront violent, abusive and discriminatory realities on their quest to construct their cross-cultural identities. Her works are seen as an important voice in depicting the intersections and dynamics of ethnicity, gender, and class. Additionally, Cisneros is noted for her use of Latino myths, legends as well as ancestral voices, enriching the portraits of her cross-cultural protagonists and pointing to their need to be free but also to belong.

THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) is a coming-of-age novel at the intersection of cultures. On the most obvious level, by depicting characters of Latino origin living in the US, it shows the clash of Latino culture with that of North America. Throughout the forty-four vignettes that the novel consists of, the reader witnesses the struggles of female characters against the traditional patriarchal culture they belong to as well as the disadvantageous economic situation they live in as citizens of Latino origin. These two factors seem to have a quintessential influence on the life of young Esperanza Cordero, the main character, and other neighborhood girls and women that she observes daily. Feminist critics see Esperanza as a young rebellious character who refuses to accept the traditional patterns of female behavior, who does not want to become a passive object of male power and control, who objects to being like the heroines of traditional European fairy tales waiting for the prince to come, rescue her and upgrade her economic status. Cisneros's references to such fairy tale heroines as Cinderella or Rapunzel are quite explicit in the novel. Yet, when looking at Esperanza's story from the perspective of archetypal criticism, one can find elements in which it is actually resonant of Perrault's tale of Bluebeard with its rich symbolism and representation of female individuation.

Most critics, quite understandably, explore the themes of identity formation, gender relations and ethnicity as major issues raised by Cisneros. All these three factors are interrelated and cannot be considered separately, which is often pointed out by scholars, who see this interrelatedness as a crucial characteristic of ethnic literature. As Annie O. Eysturoy indicates,

[a] central theme of contemporary Chicana fiction is the quest for authentic female self-development. This process is both environmental and psychological, and it entails coming to terms with multiple social and cultural forces, external as well as internal, that infringe upon the path toward female individuation and an understanding of the individual self.
(3)

It is noted that identity formation of ethnic women is subject to so called “triple oppression,” with race, class and gender overlapping and having a defining influence on characters’ development (see Eysturoy, Scapp). It is also true of Esperanza, who is a poor girl of Mexican origin living in the United States, confined and domesticated by her ancestors’ tradition while simultaneously marginalized by the mainstream American culture she lives in. Exploring the bicultural implications and their influence on the self, Ellen C. Mayoc sees Esperanza as a rebellious character who “makes a conscious decision to eschew the traditional values of her cultures (both Latina and North American)” (225). Pointing to the novel’s focus on female subordination and social realities, Alvina E. Quintana refers to *The House on Mango Street* as belonging to the third wave of the feminist movement. The critic also recognizes that Esperanza is one of those young women who “struggle to reinvent themselves and transcend socially imposed gender and cultural limitations, including their own patriarchal baggage” (Quintana 364). Another critic underscoring the problem of poverty, discrimination and marginalization is Alejandro Latinez, who examines *The House on Mango Street* as representing Hispanic/Latino Bildungsroman tradition. Latinez also refers to the “triple condition” of female immigrants and regards the novel as articulating the young female character’s “longing for residency in a cultural, political, and topological sense of the term, in the midst of a historical reflection on citizenship and social recognition as individual with civil rights and duties” (72).

Another crucial theme that Cisneros examines in her novel is that of creative writing, particularly female creative writing, and its effect on the main protagonist’s life. Female authorship is viewed by critics as essential in Esperanza’s self-development. Kelly Wissman argues that Esperanza “can be read as a feminist heroine by harnessing the power of writing as an act of personal freedom and transformation” (19). Maria Elena de Valdes refers to the novel as a fictional autobiography in which Esperanza weaves her stories “into a narrativity of self-invention through writing” (par. 37). Critics such as Fiona Hartley-Kroegeer or Katherine Crawford-Garrett notice Esperanza’s transition as a narrator from an active participant directly involved in the events described to a passive spectator whose growing awareness allows her to develop a critical attitude to the realities around her and eventually shapes her identity. Eysturoy also underscores the significance of Esperanza’s creative imagination as a factor leading directly to her development: “[l]acking role models, it is through an act of the imagination that the female protagonist must envision her own liberation, her own future of independence and self-realization” (87). This is also the reason why the novel is classified as a Künstslerroman, that is a portrayal of a young creative character who grows to become an autonomous artist.

Using the perspective of archetypal literary criticism is yet another way of looking at Esperanza's story. Its resemblance to the Bluebeard tale as interpreted by Estés is quite striking. On the most general level both are tales of early female initiation and the resulting process of individuation in which a naïve girl will grow wiser, stronger and more independent as a result of a forced contact with a monster. Initially, she falls prey to the cunning game of the beast, but later she discovers his secret and manages to defeat the predator. In the fairy tale, the girl is deceived into marrying Bluebeard despite his obvious monstrosity and forced to stay in his big house. Being left there on her own, she discovers a secret room filled with dead bodies of Bluebeard's previous wives. This act of obvious insubordination brings about Bluebeard's rage, who wants to punish the girl in the same way he punished his previous wives. Yet, the girl is smart enough to use the help of her sisters and brothers to defeat the beast. In Estés's interpretation, the girl discovers the existence of this predator, "a force which will act in opposition to the instincts of the natural self" (Estés 45), recognizes his destructive force and manages to protect herself from its devastations. Estés emphasizes that the constraining force that Bluebeard stands for might come from the inside or the outside, being either inner complexes that a woman develops or external influences that hinder her proper development. In Cisneros's story, Esperanza is constrained by a few factors actually and they all might stand for Bluebeardian predatory, destructive, if not murderous force. Being a poor Chicana, Esperanza has to face ethnic, gender and class prejudice. First of all, she is disadvantaged economically as she belongs to the working class. Secondly, being of Mexican origin, she is seen as the other and thus excluded from the mainstream American culture and its privileges. Finally, she is a girl who grows up in a traditional patriarchal Latino community where women are supposed to serve men and their families. By limiting her choices and possibilities, all these factors constrain Esperanza and have a destructive influence on her life, possible career or personal growth. Yet, like the girl in Perrault's tale, Esperanza succeeds in discovering the truth about the beast and finds a way to overcome his debilitating influence.

The process of Esperanza's realization of all the limitations surrounding her is long and entails both her own experiences as well as those of other women that she has a chance to observe. Her own experiences resemble in some way the process of Perrault's protagonist falling prey to Bluebeard and what Estés refers to as "Bluebeardian mesmerisation" (51), that is, being attracted to some compelling yet harmful patterns. The reader witnesses Esperanza's attraction to and attempts at internalizing some of her culture's gender roles and patterns of behavior, especially the ones connected with sexuality, which adolescent Esperanza is clearly intrigued with. In the vignette titled "The

Family of Little Feet,” the girl narrates the incident in which she and her girlfriends are given some second-hand high-heeled shoes. The vignette starts with an innocent scene of girls playing with the shoes, trying to learn to walk in them, discovering they actually have legs that are long and can be looked at, to eventually develop into a scene where they become the objects of male interest and desire. Esperanza narrates: “Down to the corner where the men can’t take their eyes off us. We must be Christmas” (*House* 40). At first, they are just happy to be like Cinderella with their feet fitting the shoes perfectly. Yet, it turns out that the shoes they wear have the power to attract men’s attention and sexualize the girls to an extent which they are not yet ready for. Although initially the experience is pleasant, it finishes with one of the men threatening to call the police for wearing inappropriate footwear and a tramp-type man offering them a dollar in exchange for a kiss. In her study of fairy tale allusions in Cisneros’s work, Wissman observes that the girls’ bodies become here “a blatant commodity” and “rather than transporting the heroines to a festive ball filled with prospective mates, these shoes instead transport them to streets filled with desirous and lecherous men” (22). Eventually, they become “tired of being beautiful” (*House* 42), which might indicate that “the myth of beauty as a steppingstone to happiness is troubled, if not shattered, in this vignette” (Wissman 22).

The most violent example of Esperanza falling prey to the power of Bluebeard is her fascination with boys as prompted by her girlfriend Sally and the eventual experience of sexual assault described in the vignette titled “The Red Clowns.” Sally is a beautiful girl whose attention focuses on boys mainly. She wears makeup and seductive clothes that are seen as inappropriate by Esperanza’s mother. It seems, however, that Esperanza is attracted to what Sally represents – an image of a sexually awakened young woman who, unlike Esperanza, is no longer a child that is invisible to boys. Their relationship is quite surprising as Esperanza is shown as a rebellious character who questions rather than accepts traditional patterns of behavior. In this case, however, it seems that her fascination with sexuality and the other sex wins and Esperanza follows Sally in her encounters with boys. Yet, the relationship is not devoid of some tension. As Crawford-Garrett comments: “The one female on Mango Street whom Esperanza struggles to place in her expanding worldview is Sally. Their relationship becomes indicative of Esperanza’s struggle to make a definitive move from the participant to spectator stance” (105). This move is actually forced on the girl when she is faced with unexpected violence. Being left alone by the girlfriend she trusted, Esperanza becomes a victim of sexual abuse, which brings pain and anger but also awareness of false hopes and promises: “Why did you leave me all alone? I waited my whole life. You’re a liar. They all lied. All the

books and magazines, everything that told it wrong. Only his dirty fingernails against my skin, only his sour smell again" (*House* 100). Her narration, although very emotional, shows how this brutal sexual initiation leads to maturity and critical attitude to the surrounding culture. As Eysturoy observes,

she feels violated, not only physically by the boys, but also psychologically by a framework of omnipresent cultural myths that shroud the reality of patriarchal violence in idealistic romance. [...] Esperanza's sexual initiation is thus initiation into knowledge about herself as a sexual subject who has been manipulated by a framework of cultural myths. (100)

Being an active participant brings about important experience but Esperanza's most crucial knowledge and understanding comes from being a narrator who observes the world around her focusing on other girls and women of the Latino neighborhood and discovers the truth about their lives, status, and possibilities. This could be, in turn, compared to Perrault's young protagonist's discovery of Bluebeard's secret – a room filled with corpses of his previous wives. For Estés, it is a breakthrough moment in the girl's initiation as the discovery involves a conscious act of insubordination and leads to knowledge that cannot be ignored. The girl recognizes the false promises of Bluebeard and undertakes actions to escape the monster's control and manipulation. In Cisneros's novel, the constraining force of Bluebeard comes in the form of the oppressive culture, community or family. Thus, it can be said the girls and women of the barrio that Esperanza observes every day are like corpses hidden in the secret chamber – they are victims of the potent myth of love, idealized vision of married life and romanticized patriarchal traditions. It is young Esperanza who is smart and brave enough to face this knowledge, to recognize the danger of following in their footsteps, to oppose the restrictions and, finally, to defeat the predator becoming a strong, self-defined female self.

Most of the girls and women that Esperanza meets seem to be constrained by social norms, traditions as well as economic factors and might be described in terms of certain fairy tale patterns including that of Cinderella, Rapunzel or Beauty and the Beast. They are waiting for their beloved prince or knight to come and rescue them, to free them from their entrapment or other unsatisfactory situations. They believe in idealized romantic love that can conquer all obstacles and bring joy and happiness in their lives. Yet, Cisneros seems to be showing that it all comes at a price that these women have to eventually pay and such patterns are often unfavorable, discriminatory or clearly destructive. As Zipes observes in his study of the Beauty and the Beast tale,

[c]rucial here is the instinctual desire to select a male who will be the best provider and caretaker of the female's offspring. First and foremost, the young woman must demonstrate courage and perseverance. But in many other beast bridegroom tales, there is another emphasis: the female is expected to prove how submissive she is, first to her father and then to her future husband the beast. (...) The name Belle or Beauty assumes meaning through the behavioral traits that the young woman displays as a good housekeeper and domesticated woman: industrious, diligent, loyal, submissive, gentle, self-sacrificial. Not all these traits are necessarily bad, but in the context of the plot, Beauty's behavior leads to the denial of her own desires. In fact, we never really know her desires, but we certainly know what her father and the Beast want. (*Art of Subversion* 140)

It appears that the girls and women of Cisneros's novel suffer because they believe men can provide them with a better life if only they stay loyal and submissive while, in fact, they only change the person they are controlled by, from their fathers to their husbands. As a result of falling into the trap of these false promises and dreams, they become domesticated, passive and helpless, they never develop any defined and independent identity. Instead, they are often enslaved and abused. As Eysturoy concludes, "Esperanza constructs an image of the women around her that is predominantly one of entrapment and constraint. Women are behind windows, entrapped in their own houses, entrapped in the circumstances that determine their lives as women in a poor Latino barrio" (101).

One of such victims of romanticized tradition of love and male dominance observed by Esperanza is Marin, a young Puerto Rican who spends her days looking after her aunt's children and is never allowed to go out. As Esperanza narrates: "We never see Marin until her aunt comes home from work, and even then she can only stay out in front. She is there every night with the radio" (*House* 27). Being confined to the house, Marin dreams of finding a proper man who will take her to a big house and make her happy. It is clear that for Marin marriage appears to be the only possible option for a better future: "What matters, Marin says, is for the boys to see us and for us to see them" (*House* 27). The vignette finishes with Esperanza's dreamy description: "Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life" (*House* 27). Marin's vision entails waiting only and is clearly the one in which passivity is a prerequisite and the only possible solution to her sad reality. Another female character of *Mango Street* who is suspended between reality and some kind of dream, and who spends her days waiting is Ruthie, a grown-up woman who lives with her mother. She is unlike any other adult woman that Esperanza knows

as she enjoys playing with children, laughs without any obvious reason, likes sweets, whistles like a nightingale and “sees lovely things everywhere” (*House* 68), like a beautiful moon or interestingly shaped clouds. From the descriptions provided by Esperanza there emerges a picture of a child rather than a grown-up woman, a girl who asks her mother if she should go out to play bingo or not. Ruthie, clearly on the verge of insanity, is continuously waiting for her husband to come and take her home. Her arrested if not reversed development might be the result of some traumatic experiences, like being left or thrown out by her husband, and shows Esperanza a devastating influence of a married life. The disillusionment with married life, traditional female roles and the culture that approves of violence towards women comes also with the example of Esperanza’s great-grandmother, who was “a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn’t marry” (*House* 11). Yet, she was brutally kidnapped, forced to get married and “looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow” (*House* 11). She seems to be another example of a reversed Rapunzel tale – one who is waiting all the time for a better life, but the situation is forced on her not by an evil witch, but by the prince-husband who was supposed to ensure the happy ending. Esperanza seems conscious of the limitations and dangers connected with conventional feminine roles and choices of marriage and family when she says “I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (*House* 11).

The most brutal and tragic examples of women who suffer as a consequence of male dominance are Rafaela, Sally and Minerva. All of them are constrained and abused by men, who take complete control of their lives denying their freedom and independence. Rafaela is a beautiful young woman whose husband locks her in their house out of jealousy and fear of her running away. The only thing Rafaela can do is to “[lean] out the window and [lean] on her elbow and [dream] her hair is like Rapunzel’s” (*House* 79). Actually, her life is like Rapunzel’s as it consists in waiting, hoping and dreaming. What makes it even more tragic is the fact that she dreams of simple everyday things that she has no access to: “On the corner there is music from the bar, and Rafaela wishes she could go there and dance before she gets old” (*House* 79). Unlike Rapunzel however, she has already found a husband, but her marriage turned out to be that of disappointment rather than the fairy-tale-like happy ending. Another beautiful girl, Sally imagines that love and marriage can bring a relief from her dominant, abusive father, who believes that “to be this beautiful is trouble” (*House* 81), and so he disapproves of Sally spending time with any male friends. Although she claims that “he never [hits her] hard” (*House* 92), it is evident that his brutality and strict attitude have a devastating influence on the young girl. As Wissman points out, “beauty is again linked to sexuality and

endangerment (...) [it] is dangerous and provocative; it requires regulation by fathers. (...) [It] is linked to male control of female bodies and breeds forms of violence to maintain that control" (22). Sally finally manages to escape her father's control only to be enslaved by her husband. Not only is she again forced to be submissive, but she also becomes a victim of physical and mental abuse. Not being able to call anyone or even look out of the window, she spends her days aimlessly "[sitting] at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission" (*House* 102). Another sad abused Latina shown in the novel is Minerva who is, as Esperanza narrates, "only a little bit older than me but already she has two kids and a husband who left" (*House* 84). Minerva seems to be a sensitive and creative girl who, nevertheless, has no chance to develop her creative talent or any conscious sense of self. As Wissman asserts, she is one of "many survivors of domestic violence whose lives become crippled by on-going cycles of abuse, broken promises, and pleas for forgiveness" (25). She is another female character who believed in the fairy-tale power of married life to make her happy and now is waiting passively for things to change on their own.

Just like the corpses locked in Bluebeard's secret chamber give Perrault's young protagonist a clue of what may eventually happen to her, all the women of Mango Street, some of them literally locked in their own houses, show the possible roles and positions available to Esperanza if she is to stay there and it is in relation to them that she negotiates her identity and sense of self. As Crawford-Garrett points out,

[as] a young, inexperienced girl, Esperanza must use the experiences of neighborhood women to inform her views of misogyny and to situate herself within the gender stereotypes present in the neighborhood. Observing the fates of various women allows Esperanza to make critical decisions about leaving Mango Street once and for all. (104)

There is an uncanny similarity between Bluebeard's house, in which his wives have to follow the rules, be submissive and quiet or they will die, and all the houses on Mango Street where women become prisoners, "where their talents are stifled and their aspirations renounced in favour of years of domestic drudgery and child care, tears of stagnation and self-abnegation" (Burcar 119). By growing conscious of her surrounding environment, Cisneros's narrator also draws the reader's attention to the pervasive Chicana stereotypes. As Eysturoy asserts, "the Chicana has been defined and confined within the mother/virgin/whore stereotypes of the past, both within her own Chicano culture and the larger American cultural context" (24), and it is mostly within these stereotypical identities that Cisneros's protagonists are forced to exist. Esperanza, however, manages to assume a critical perspective and becomes "a conscious being who,

through the act of understanding and interpreting her socio-cultural context, gains a new understanding of herself and her position in the world as a Chicana" (Eysturoy 86). It becomes evident in the vignette titled "Beautiful & Cruel," in which Esperanza refuses to be domesticated and submissive: "I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain. (...) I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (*House* 89). She understands that the only way to avoid patriarchal oppression is to oppose the socio-cultural limitations by being like a man – active, self-reliant and in control of one's own life.

In Perrault's tale, it is because of the young wife's transgressive curiosity that the secret of the hidden room is revealed. Although traditional readings of the tale blame the wife for being nosy and insubordinate, Estés praises her curiosity and courage to break the imposed restrictions showing that to open the door means to gain knowledge and make progress in forming a mature female self. The knowledge and understanding that Esperanza gains are also the result of her curiosity, or rather her desire to see and understand. She seems to be the only one who questions the status quo, who rebels and, unlike most of the women of Mango Street, does not accept things blindly just as they are. To enter the room also means to break the cycle of passivity, which leads to freedom and independence. As Wissman points out, "Esperanza creates a new set of guiding life principles for 'success.' Her discovery of these alternative ways of being and experiencing the world as a woman serves to position her as a heroine of her own life" (28). Moreover, just like Perrault's protagonist, who asks her brothers and sisters for help, Esperanza gets the support of some members of her community. She is not left alone in her fight. Her mother is one of such figures, who although herself got stuck as a poor Chicana wife and mother, now understands the limitations of such life and encourages Esperanza to use all the opportunities, especially the one connected with education, to become independent and so to have a better life. She serves as an example for her daughter that it is easy to waste one's opportunities in life when she says: "You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains" (*House* 91). Another character who supported Esperanza in her process of self-definition was her Aunt Lupe, who, because of her illness, was trapped at home without proper care from her sons or husband. She, however, enjoyed Esperanza reading her stories and poems, including the ones written by the girl herself, and gave her a very direct piece of advice: "You must keep writing. It will keep you free" (*House* 61). There are also three mysterious sisters from Mexico who "came with the wind that blows in August, thin as a spider web and barely noticed. Three who did not seem to be related

to anything but the moon. One with laughter like tin and one with eyes of a cat and one with hands like porcelain" (*House* 103). Critics compare these three figures to three Fates from Greek mythology "who govern human destiny" (Eysturoy 108), to "fairy godmothers of fairy-tale lore, each with a unique image and gift for the heroine" who serve as "the evocation of self-knowledge" (de Valdes par. 27), or to witch-like figures representing female power (Allen 73). Most critics agree, however, that they come to help Esperanza "move on to her final stage of her journey, that of embracing her talent as a writer who does not refute her heritage, but works towards its transformation" (Wissman 31). One of the last females to be mentioned in Cisneros's novel is Alicia, a girl who serves as a model of female resistance to the limiting conditions she is forced to live in. She is a girl who is strong and ambitious enough to attend university even though her traditionally-minded father clearly disapproves. Alicia becomes Esperanza's friend and she is the one who makes Esperanza consider Mango Street as a place where she actually belongs: "Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you'll come back too" (*House* 107).

In the end, just like Perrault's young protagonist who defeats monstrous Bluebeard, Esperanza overcomes the limitations imposed on her as a poor Chicano woman and manages to imagine a new authentic independent female self. She is the one who can imagine a house of her own, without a dominating man, where she can tell and write her own stories, where she can be herself, where she can be free. Nevertheless, this final freedom seems illusory, as some critics underline. On the one hand, it seems clear that Esperanza achieves certain goals as she "bears witness to her life and the lives of other women, revealing how social constrictions of poverty, gender, culture, and ethnicity touch upon her life and those around her" (Wissman 28). She also acquires a new understanding of herself and gains authority over her own life. On the other hand, Esperanza, by imagining her better life out of the barrio, implies that white America is free from all these forms of female oppression. As Lilijana Burcar notes,

[to] mature or to grow up then, as suggested in *The HMS*, is to leave the ghetto rife with patriarchal practices and to join mainstream America as though these two were socioeconomically separate and socially qualitatively different worlds, with the first one mired in a patriarchy that subsists on women's domestication and the other one free of patriarchal institutions and oppressive gender norms, a veritable safe haven and a thriving outlet of opportunities for women's unlimited development and growth. (124)

The critic explains her argument further,

[the] impression created is that the domestic confinement of women alongside their sexual objectification, curtailment of their bodily freedom and possibilities of professional self-realization, as well as domestic violence, is a unique problem underwriting ethnic communities and a phenomenon that does not exist beyond the ghetto borders. (Burcar 127)

What Burcar suggests is that Esperanza, even if she leaves the oppressive Latino ghetto, will have to face other forms of oppression including that of gender or ethnic discrimination as America is still a place of “segregation and strict hierarchical gendered and racialized division of labor” (129). Similarly, Perrault’s heroine will most probably end up getting married again, which will be another form of entrapment and forced domestication. Yet, in both cases the heroines have gone through a rite of initiation and the knowledge and awareness they have gained as a result will be crucial in their future decisions and might make them more cautious.

WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK AND OTHER STORIES

Published in 1991, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* is Cisneros’s collection of short stories in which the author gives voice to a variety of Chicana and Mexicana women. To paint a picture of a troubled borderland life, Cisneros employs rich Mexican folklore with special interest in its three key female figures that is La Virgen de Gaudelupe, La Malinche and La Llorona, all of them imposing strict stereotypes of feminine behavior. Yet, by depicting different, often transgressive females, the author offers a redefinition of these mythical characters. As Anna Marie Sandoval points out, Cisneros seems to follow a long-established trend:

The re-visioning of myths, legends, cultural symbols has always been a significant feature of the literature of Chicanas and Mexicanas. (...) The trilogy of La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche (also called Malintzin or Marina), and La Llorona has long been present in the literature of Latin America and the Latino United States. As Chicanas and Mexicanas write their experience into history, their literature depicts this corrected history. New archetypes are surfacing in Chicana and Mexicana literature that are replacing or redefining earlier archetypes. (11)

However, in addition to these old yet redefined symbols and legends, the reader can also notice resemblance to some fairy tales of European origin. Thus, the collection seems to be another work of Cisneros at the intersection of cultures, the site that is very much inhabited by the author herself and her heroines.

One of the stories employing both Latina and European folklore is “Woman Hollering Creek.” It follows the life of Cleófilas, a young Mexican woman who marries a Texas man and moves with him north of Mexican border with a hope of improving her material situation and satisfying her dreamy, romantic aspirations. Being tightly linked to Mexican traditions and folklore, the story contains direct references to the legend of La Llorona, but it also greatly resembles the pattern presented in the Bluebeard tale. Firstly, as critics note, the traditional symbolism of La Llorona is challenged and redefined in the story (see Sandoval, Herrera, Nan). La Llorona becomes La Gritona and appears as the name of the creek that the main protagonist lives by. Cleófilas is intrigued by the river and its name from the very first day she learns about it: “Pain or rage, Cleófilas wondered when she drove over the bridge the first time as a newlywed and Juan Pedro had pointed it out. *La Gritona*, he had said, and she had laughed. Such a funny name for a creek so pretty and full of happily ever after” (*Hollering Creek* 47). The possibilities she imagines are limited to negative emotions that can be associated with traditional symbolism of La Llorona, a betrayed woman suffering after killing her own children in an act of utter despair. Yet, as the story unfolds, the wailing woman is transformed into the hollering woman, which actually reflects the main protagonist’s course of life – from an unhappy, frustrated woman, passively dependent on her husband, she changes into someone who is able to take action in order to protect herself and her children. Cleófilas is not the crazy woman who in a fit of jealousy and anger, helpless and unable to act more effectively, drowns her own children, but rather a woman who gains awareness and is determined to prevent a tragic ending. She saves her children and herself by taking action. She is no longer a wailing woman but a hollering one – the yell that is let out by Felice, who is taking her across the creek and away from her abusive husband, becomes Cleófilas’s own empowered hollering. As the last lines of the story indicate: “Felice began laughing again, but it wasn’t Felice laughing. It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water.” (*Hollering Creek* 56) Also, the symbolism of the creek changes as a result, from one representing death to one epitomizing rebirth and new life. If, as Herrera asserts, “La Llorona’s search for her dead children may, in fact be a psychosexual search for the integral female self denied her by a patriarchal and confining construction of motherhood” (Herrera 61), then it can be said that Cisneros’s presentation of Cleófilas and La Gritona is a way of showing how to regain the lost identity or find a new one, free and independent.

In the light of Estés’s interpretation of the legend, Cisneros’s heroine resembles La Llorona as far as she is trapped in her suburban American life with no possibility to develop her creative talents or enjoy a meaningful life. As Estés asserts:

[t]o create one must be able to respond. Creativity is the ability to respond to all that goes around us, to choose from the hundreds of possibilities of thought, feeling, action, and reaction that arise within us, and to put these together in a unique response, expression, or message that carries moment, passion and meaning. In this sense, loss of our creative milieu means finding ourselves limited to only one choice, divested of, suppressing, or censoring feelings and thoughts, not acting, not saying, doing, or being. (343)

Cleófilas lives with a man who abuses her physically and emotionally while having complete control over her. Having no car or even a driving license, no money of her own, she is almost literally trapped in her house. Her choices are severely limited, as she herself observes: "There is no place to go. Unless one counts the neighbor ladies. Soledad on one side, Dolores on the other. Or the creek" (*Hollering Creek* 51). The implication is that she lives surrounded by loneliness, sorrow and death, with Soledad literally meaning solitude, Dolores pain or sorrow, and the creek's reference to La Llorona legend makes it symbolic of death by drowning, but also sadness and suffering. Before she realizes how desperate and miserable her situation is, Cleófilas acts as if there was no other way to live her life, as Sandoval puts it, "she tolerates the abuse and suffers for love" (Sandoval 34). She seems to be surprised by her own reactions even: "when the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again; until the lip split and bled an orchid of blood, she didn't fight back, she didn't break into tears, she didn't run as she imagined she might when she saw such things in *telenovelas*" (*Hollering Creek* 47). Instead, she stays completely passive, "speechless, motionless, numb," (*Hollering Creek* 48) as if unable to control her own mind and body. This is the point where Cleófilas clearly suppresses or censors her own thoughts and feelings, she does not want to acknowledge the fact that her life is devoid of true love and passion that she has always dreamt of. Actually, the reader follows her slow decline from a youthfully idealistic girl excited to start her new life into a disappointed sorrowful woman. When comparing her own life to the soap operas she enjoys watching so much, she realizes that "now the episodes got sadder and sadder. And there were no commercials in between for comic relief. And no happy ending in sight" (*Hollering Creek* 53).

With its picture of a woman trapped in a patriarchal house with a beast-like husband, "Woman Hollering Creek" is strongly resonant of the Bluebeard tale as interpreted by Estés. Cleófilas, just like Perrault's young protagonist, gets tricked into believing that married life, even though the groom is a monster, will bring joy, happiness and fulfilment, will change her life into something better and beautiful. To use Estés's language, Cleófilas falls prey to so called

“Bluebeardian mesmerization,” a compelling force that makes her inattentive to possible dangers and lets her accept the risk in hope of an exciting future. In Cleófilas’s case these are her beloved *telenovelas*, Mexican soap operas praising love and romantic relationships, as well as love songs and romance novels that fascinate her and influence greatly her life choices, making her believe that getting married to a man she hardly knows and moving to the US will make her happy. As Saldívar-Hull argues, “Cleófilas is totally immersed within a fully mediatized culture which instructs young women that their goal in life is marriage, and that marriage to a US citizen is synonymous with social mobility and unbridled consumerism.” (Saldívar-Hull 253) It is not surprising then that Cleófilas gets disappointed with her new husband quite quickly after moving to America as her marriage is nowhere near the relationships she has admired so far; it has nothing to do with “passion in its purest crystalline essence” that she has been dreaming of. Instead, she gets trapped with a husband who “doesn’t look like the men on *telenovelas*,” and he “farts and belches and snores as well as laughs and kisses and holds her” (*Hollering Creek* 49). The situation gets even worse when Cleófilas becomes a victim of domestic violence. On a more general level, it can be said that she becomes a victim of the culture that romanticizes love and marriage while at the same time oppresses women as well as a victim of her husband who represents this culture and its traditional patriarchal values. As a consequence, as Saldívar-Hull observes, she experiences “a rude awakening. Instead of romantic love, she finds herself with a child, an abusive husband and another pregnancy. Instead of the comfortable life she believed that the United States would offer her, she lives in isolation from the community of women she had known across the border” (Saldívar-Hull 254). She slowly starts realizing the monstrosity of her husband and the situation she is in. She is like Bluebeard’s young wife who, when faced with reality, realizes that being trapped in a palace with a monster still means entrapment, lack of freedom and independence, and finally that the monster will never become a prince.

Although at first Cleófilas seems to bear all the inconveniences without complaining, passively accepting all of her husband’s whims and behaviors, with time she discovers the truth not only about her but also other women’s reality. She resembles Bluebeard’s wife who discovers the horrifying secret of the hidden chamber. The tragic stories of other women that Cleófilas reads about in newspapers are like the dead bodies of Bluebeard’s previous wives:

Was Cleófilas just exaggerating as her husband always said? It seemed the newspapers were full of such stories. This woman found on the side of the interstate. This one pushed from a moving car. This one’s cadaver, this

one unconscious, this one beaten blue. Her ex-husband, her husband, her lover, her father, her brother, her uncle, her friend, her co-worker. Always. The same grisly news in the pages of the dailies. (*Hollering Creek* 52)

Together with her own experiences, these stories form the knowledge that can no longer be ignored – Cleófilas realizes that she is not safe in Bluebeard's house and she might become just another corpse in his secret room. This is a breakthrough moment as Cleófilas decides to take action – she goes to the doctor's office and accepts the help of a nurse, and later that of her friend, Felice. Very much like Perrault's protagonist, she is not left alone and, as Esquibel points out, "is helped by a sisterhood of women, showing that she has more choices than Soledad, Dolores, and the creek" (31). Critics also underscore her growing agency as she plots her escape:

This is a transformative experience because at that point, Cleófilas takes control of her *historia* and becomes a producer of meaning rather than merely a consumer of dominant ideology. Resisting the power of the media, she transforms herself from being a passive object of dominant discourse to the agent of an alternative vision and backs up transformation with specific practice: a counter-migration from north to south and a separation from her abusive husband. (Saldívar-Hull 253)

Even though Cleófilas's escape is seen as an act of rebellion, it cannot be denied that the chances are she will go back to another form of female oppression as her Mexican family is rooted in patriarchal values. This also makes her similar to Bluebeard's wife, who manages to escape the monster but might be expected to marry again as she is still young and does not renounce the values of the culture she lives in. Yet, the reader might also expect that the experience is a kind of ritual of initiation for Cleófilas that changes her into a more conscious and independent woman. As Sandoval observes, despite the ambiguity of the story's ending,

[her] willingness to leave an abusive environment to return to a town where she may be ostracized for her abandonment of her husband reveals Cleófilas's strength. She will cross the border, but, by virtue of her new personal liberation and development, she will probably resist the patriarchy and boundaries placed on her by her community. (Sandoval 42)

Another short story in Cisneros's collection that offers an intriguing mixture of Chicano and European cultures is "Never Marry a Mexican." Clemencia, the main protagonist of the story, seems to be an exact opposite of Cleófilas depicted in "Woman Hollering Creek." She is a self-reliant artist who decides to follow her mother's advice not to marry a Mexican as she understands

what the reality of a married life entails for a woman, especially a woman of Mexican origin. Thus, she lives independently, has a professional career and a successful social life. Yet, what from the start seems to be a picture of a strong autonomous woman and an example of a liberated female protagonist overcoming stereotypes actually turns out to be only a façade, a sad portrait of lost instincts and a hindered development of a wild female self. As such the story greatly resembles H. Ch. Andersen's "The Red Shoes" tale, especially in C. P. Estés's interpretation, which presents the tale as a warning against numerous traps set for the wild woman that result in the loss of natural instincts.

From the very start, Clemencia appears to be an unconventional and unrestrained individual who makes a living by being a translator, a substitute teacher and a painter, one who manages to overcome various limitations like that of gender or class. She says: "I'm amphibious. I'm a person who doesn't belong to any class. The rich like to have me around because they envy my creativity; they know they can't buy that. The poor don't mind if I live in their neighborhood because they know I'm poor like they are, even if my education and the way I dress keeps us worlds apart" (*Hollering Creek* 72). Being an educated professional makes her more like a man than a helpless and vulnerable woman, being an artist excludes her from the lower class, and finally living in the poor neighborhood, where at night you can hear gunshots all around, excludes her from the rich. It seems that Clemencia knows what she wants from her life and does not need anyone, especially not a man, to tell her what to do or how to live her life. There is, however, one thing that gives this picture a smudge or a discoloration that reveals all this is only a veneer. It is her attitude to men. Clemencia narrates:

I'll never marry. Not any man. I've known men too intimately. I've witnessed their infidelities, I've helped them to it. Unzipped and unhooked and agreed to clandestine maneuvers. I've been accomplice, committed premeditated crimes. I'm guilty of having caused deliberate pain to other women. I'm vindictive and cruel, and I'm capable of anything. (*Hollering Creek* 68)

On the surface, it might seem like an attitude of a strong liberated woman who understands the drawbacks and constraints of married life, who through her transgressive sexual behavior opposes the oppressive patriarchal system. Yet, her strong attitude might be misleading since, as Thomson argues,

her power rises from a misuse of sexuality and is a dangerous result of women recapitulating the mistakes of men. Like a stereotypical male, Clemencia takes lovers easily and leaves them quickly; she uses sex as power as a weapon. (...) Her sexual conquests, like those of her stereotypical

Don Juan counterparts, are attempts at control: she wants dominion over her lovers without giving up any of her own authority. Clemencia has escaped her traditional identity as a female only to find herself trapped in a different system. (421)

It is quite unbelievable that being vindictive and cruel is what makes Clemencia happy and satisfied. Quite the opposite, as it is not possible for her to have that complete control of men that she craves, it looks like her relationships with men are actually the main cause of pain and frustration in her life. What is more, they are still strongly influenced by stereotypes and traditional ideas of love and marriage: "I'm too romantic for marriage. Marriage has failed me, you could say. Not a man exists who hasn't disappointed me, whom I could trust to love the way I've loved. It's because I believe too much in marriage that I don't. Better to not marry than live a lie" (*Hollering Creek* 69).

Clemencia's complicated view of men and marriage seems to stem mainly from one particular experience – an affair with Drew, her professor and a married man, that she had when she was still a student. This troubled relationship has a profound influence on her future relations with men as well as her status as an independent woman. Clemencia narrates:

I paint and repaint you the way I see fit, even now. After all these years. Did you know that? Little fool. You think I went hobbling along with my life, whimpering and whining like some twangy country-and-western when you went back to her. But I've been waiting. Making the world look at you from my eyes. And if that's not power, what is? (*Hollering Creek* 75)

She has not recovered from this unfulfilled relationship even after years, and still craves power over her lover. Instead, the pain of being rejected and frustration of being completely helpless seem to rule her life. Her staying mentally and emotionally in this toxic relationship leads to certain excessive behaviors, thus making Clemencia resemble the heroine of "The Red Shoes" tale. In Andresen's tale, the girl starts dancing without control as a result of her forbidden fascination with the red shoes. It is a dance that leads to pain, trauma and self-destruction. In Cisneros's story, the protagonist gets obsessive about her former lover to such an extent that she plots to hurt his wife in most intricate and unexpected ways. It becomes evident that this is an unhealthy obsession when she reminisces with joy about making love to Drew while his wife was giving birth to their son, or leaving gummy bears in most intimate places which only the wife could later find, and finally when she has an affair with the son, years after she and Drew decided to split up. It is clearly a form of obsession, an insatiable desire to regain control over her lover. As Clemencia explains herself:

"I sleep with this boy, their son. To make the boy love me the way I love his father. To make him want me, hunger, twist in his sleep, as if he'd swallowed glass. I put him in my mouth. (...) I can tell from the way he looks at me, I have him in my power" (*Hollering Creek* 82). Just like the dance of the red shoes, the revenge feels pleasant at first, but it soon turns into something noxious and destructive. There are critics who perceive Clemencia's acts as signs of agency and attempts at transgressing the traditional female roles (Wilson 118), but it is also clear from the descriptions that Clemencia suffers because she cannot stop thinking about her lost lover, she becomes "dangerous as a terrorist" (*Hollering Creek* 83), as she comments herself. It is not an empowering experience and, as Herrera notes, she "is utterly alone and unable to move beyond events that happened eighteen years in the past" (Herrera 149). Again, just like Andersen's protagonist, Clemencia struggles to have complete control of her life, which also means having control of men who inevitably create part of this life.

For Estés, the red shoes from Andersen's tale represent unconscious destructive patterns of conduct, injured instincts and a falsified view of reality and this is what Clemencia seems to experience – an unhealthy obsession with her ex-lover, hurt feelings and the resulting inability to form healthy relationships with men. Yet, the red shoes might also symbolize sexuality, especially forbidden female sexuality and introduce the motif of disobedience and ensuing punishment. "Never Marry a Mexican" is also a story that employs the motif of female sexuality that is deemed taboo and of transgressive behavior. Clemencia is compared in the story to La Malinche, Hernan Cortes's Mexican courtesan, a woman who was accused of betraying Mexican nation and, as a result, lost social respect. Clemencia is guilty of "having caused deliberate pain to other women" (*Hollering Creek* 68), of betraying the sisterhood of women, and also lives in some sort of social isolation. The result is that, as Thomson observes, "her world is formed around an emptiness, a vacant space she can never quite fill, and she believes all others must share this vacancy" (Thomson 421). It seems the boundaries that Clemencia crosses do not bring the expected results, they do not liberate her in the long run but rather put her in a different type of constraint or confinement.

Cisneros's female protagonists show how difficult it is to develop an independent identity being surrounded by wrong patterns of behavior and unsupportive environment. Esperanza of *The House on Mango Street* or Cleófilas of "Woman Hollering Creek" are characters who prove that it is possible to withstand the negative influences and cross the boundaries that hinder development of the self. The triple oppression of class, race and gender is not an easy enemy, but they manage to fight it and as such they might be seen as strongly resembling the heroine of Perrault's tale of Bluebeard. Esperanza

and Cleófilas discover the truth about their situation as women belonging to patriarchal working-class Latino families/communities and find courage to withstand the monster. Esperanza believes that becoming a writer will give her strength and freedom while Cleófilas manages to wake up from her dream of being a happy Mexican wife in America and escapes from her abusive husband before the dream turns into a nightmare. Both characters could be seen as archetypal female heroines, as wild women ready to act in defense of their independence, of their mature autonomous selves. Clemencia of “Never Marry a Mexican” is, on the other hand, an example of a strong and liberated female protagonist who, nevertheless, falls into a trap that eventually confines her – an unhealthy obsession with her ex-lover. Just like the young protagonist of Andersen’s tale of “The Red Shoes,” Clemencia could be seen as an archetypal heroine who embodies unconscious destructive patterns of behavior and lost instincts. In general, Cisneros’s portrayals of women discussed in this chapter draw attention to the challenges that Chicanas have to face when developing their cross-cultural identities, a process which often involves a redefinition of deeply ingrained traditional values and ideals.

CONCLUSION

The works of American women writers of the last two hundred years have been varied – conventional or unconventional, following literary trends or ahead of their times, written in a particular genre or defying classifications, multilayered or minimalist, straightforward or dissembling, mainstream or niche, but regardless of all the differences many of them offer accounts of female experience of unrivalled value, which inform the readers' opinions and knowledge of a particular period of time by presenting perspectives that might have been overlooked. Thanks to the work of the twentieth-century feminists who fought for the reevaluation and recognition of previously neglected or underrated female writers and their literary output, the contemporary reader is given access to literature and its critical readings that are not necessarily man-oriented. This book, in turn, assumes the perspective of the twenty-first-century reader attempting to trace the wild woman archetype in the works of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century female writers. More particularly, it looks for similarities between the depictions of American female characters by American women and selected fairy tales that employ archetypal images of wild womanhood. The chapters that discuss the works of American women writers show that the archetype taken from psychology can be adapted to literary studies to enrich the understanding of women's literature and uncover certain existing patterns and themes in their writings.

The study of the wild woman archetype that the book traces, first, in selected fairy tales, then, in selected works by American female writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, points to the cultural and social changes in American society, to the shifting conceptions of femininity as well as to the growing recognition of female voices and appreciation of their significance for the development of individual women and American culture in general. As Wendy Martin and Sharon Williams observe in *The Routledge Introduction to*

American Women Writers, “[w]riting has been a countercultural act for women throughout most of the history of the United States, a mark of resistance to the prevalent idea that the world of literature and letters belongs properly to men” (ix). By assuming authorship, female writers take over the power that they have been deprived of and state their independence. The wild woman archetype seems to resonate strongly with the attempts of American women writers to make their voices heard, to actively contribute to the literary heritage, to offer other women support and behavior patterns that will empower them as autonomous selves, as well as to give them a sense of identity and the power to resist discrimination and restrictions in various spheres of life stemming from their social or cultural background, economic status, education, class or race.

The book could also be perceived as a further attempt at rehabilitating and reorienting the very phrase “wild woman.” The wild woman should be, thus, looked at as a self-aware person of value, an independent self that is capable of and fully responsible for their own decisions, as a woman who openly voices her needs and desires, a woman who finds strength and courage to fight unfavorable circumstances and oppressive environments. Many of the characters analyzed here are examples of such strong and independent women who, at multiple times and in varied circumstances, refuse to be tamed by society and its restrictive norms of behavior. As seen in these depictions, “wild” is no longer a derogatory term that can be used to criticize the excessive freedom a woman could be willing to assume and, as a result, to control her unwanted behavior. Nor is “wild” a term used as an opposite of “civilized” to signify complete lack of rules and unlimited freedom that could actually be harmful to both the individual and the society. The wild woman could be, however, compared, as Estés points out, to wild nature, which develops and thrives when not tamed or constrained by man, which follows its natural cycles and rhythms and “has innate integrity and healthy boundaries” (6).

As can be seen from the analyses provided, the wild woman archetype can be embraced in various ways, depending on the historical circumstances and factors such as economic or social position. The nineteenth- and the turn-of-the-century writers presented in chapter two focus on recognizing women’s basic right to autonomous decision-making, economic independence and freedom of self-expression. By depicting characters who are forced to live under their male guardians’ control, which usually means either the father or the husband, and according to strict social norms in order to attain the Victorian ideal of womanhood, women writers of the era show how difficult it was to be a creative, passionate and independent woman, who additionally dared to have sexual needs. In their novels and short stories, Stoddard, Chopin and Gilman challenge the nineteenth-century ideal of the woman as a domestic angel and

portray heroines who refuse to suppress their own desires and instincts in order to become respectable, selfless women, loving wives and caring mothers. Depicting the protagonist who might be seen as representing archetypal images of the individuation process, often including an arduous quest or a rebellious escape, which leads to self-awareness and independence, the authors manage to show certain alternatives to the possibilities that the nineteenth-century American society offered women while, at the same time, pointing to some inevitable dangers connected with such defiant and unconventional behavior in a society that favors passive and submissive femininity.

The need for self-definition through self-expression and creative activity seems to be of special significance to the authors of early- and mid-twentieth century selected for the third chapter of the book. Cather, Hurston and Plath represent a variety of cultural and social environments, but their female characters gain awareness of the importance of finding one's own voice and being heard in their quest to develop a sense of self. Their protagonists begin an archetypal struggle to define their identity and to speak their own voice as an adult woman, as an artist or simply as a member of a community. The self-definition they look for brings fulfillment, satisfaction and happiness, yet it might be difficult to attain as the society's patriarchal conception of the woman and her subordinate role can seriously disrupt her development. Furthermore, what the authors seem to emphasize in their depictions of female protagonists is the importance of proper support, especially on the part of other women. The characters who find kinship and appropriate role models or discover the matrilineal heritage and understand its value become successful in their quests for selfhood.

Finally, the authors of the second half of the twentieth century offer representations of the wild woman archetype that point to certain changes in society, but simultaneously they also suggest that the patriarchal power structures still have influence on women's development. On the one hand, it can be noticed that women writers of the era enjoy unprecedented freedom to openly discuss the issues that might have been considered taboo earlier, such as female sexuality or oppressiveness of male-dominated power structures operating in the society. On the other hand, the characters they depict are still forced to face various forms of oppression or discrimination, especially those representing underprivileged ethnic or racial groups. Oates and Robinson offer portrayals of adolescent heroines who are on the verge of adulthood and are forced to undergo archetypal rites of passage. The knowledge they gain as a result is crucial in their further development, yet for some of these characters the knowledge comes too late to save them. Others, though perceived by the society as different and strange, manage to find acceptance and develop

their own sense of self. Morrison and Cisneros present their underprivileged protagonists who have to face various forms of oppression. Their works point to the intersectionality of multiple factors of disadvantage such as race, class and gender that shapes the lives and identity of their female characters. Their protagonists can be seen as archetypal representations of young women who are forced to confront abusive and discriminatory realities in their quest to construct their cross-cultural identities. Again, those who manage to find support acquire a new understanding of themselves and gain authority over their own lives, those who are left to their own devices in the cruel reality end up traumatized and defeated.

The representations of the wild woman archetype that can be found in the twentieth-century American fiction seem plentiful and fairly easy to trace, which makes one expect that the twenty-first-century writers are going to continue to give expression to such archetypal images in their fiction. It seems crucial to recognize and appreciate the value of these accounts of female experience for American culture and literature, to show its diversity that reflects the reality of American society. Additionally, these stories could be perceived as having a function similar to that of fairy tales, that is as having the power to inspire the process of change or individuation in the female reader, to resonate with their inner wildish selves, to bring awareness and knowledge. The social movements taking place in the twenty-first century such as *MeToo* or *Black Lives Matter* show that equal treatment and opportunities, freedom of individuals to live the way they aspire to, or freedom of expression are issues that should never be taken for granted and that people's awareness of various forms of social oppression should be constantly raised. From the literary perspective, the novels and short stories discussed in this book point to the recurrence of certain patterns and motifs in the works of American women writers that can be traced as far back as the nineteenth century and can be gathered under one umbrella term, that is the wild woman archetype. Considering the fact that the works selected for this study constitute only a fraction of American women's literature, the wild woman archetype can be assumed to be a potent literary theme in American fiction.

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STRESZCZENIE

Niniejsza publikacja podejmuje zagadnienie archetypu dzikiej kobiety w twórczości pisarek amerykańskich dziewiętnastego i dwudziestego wieku. Praca opiera się na pojęciu archetypu i obrazów archetypowych zdefiniowanych przez Carla Gustava Junga, a samo pojęcie „archetypu dzikiej kobiety” czerpie z monografii zatytułowanej *Women Who Run With the Wolves. Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* autorstwa Clarissy Pinkoli Estés, psychoterapeutki i badaczki ludowej kultury werbalnej. Praca skupia się na przedstawieniach postaci kobiecych w prozie amerykańskich pisarek i bada w jaki sposób są one realizacją archetypu dzikiej kobiety. Wykorzystuje do tego zaprezentowany przez Estés sposób interpretowania tego archetypu przez pryzmat baśni i legend, ich schematów strukturalnych, jak i treści tematycznej wraz z zawartym w nich przesłaniem. Praca bada podobieństwa między przedstawieniami wybranych postaci kobiecych a baśniami wykorzystującymi archetypowe obrazy dzikiej kobiecości przytoczonymi przez Estés takimi jak baśń o Sinobrodym, Mądra Wasyliśa, Brzydkie kaczątko, Czerwone trzewiki, La Llorona oraz Dziewczynka z zapalkami. Przedmiotem analizy stały się wybrane powieści i opowiadania następujących pisarek amerykańskich: Elizabeth Stoddard, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willi Cather, Zory Neale Hurston, Sylvii Plath, Joyce Carol Oates, Marilynne Robinson, Toni Morrison i Sandry Cisneros. Praca ma na celu zatem pewien przegląd twórczości pisarek amerykańskich reprezentujących różne epoki i nurty literackie m.in. romantyzm, regionalizm, realizm, modernizm, *Harlem Renaissance*, jak również literaturę współczesną, w tym afroamerykańską i literaturę Chicano.

Publikację otwiera rozdział poświęcony analizie wyżej wymienionych baśni i legend, w którym tradycyjne interpretacje zostają skonfrontowane z objaśnieniami i komentarzami Estés, z których wyłania się obraz archetypu dzikiej kobiety. Koncepcja archetypu, do której odnosi się Estés, wywodzi się

z psychologii analitycznej Junga i oznacza konstrukt ściśle związany z ludzką psychiką, a w szczególności tzw. nieświadomością zbiorową. Według Junga archetypy jako wrodzone struktury dziedziczne pozostają w nieświadomości, ale ujawniają się świadomemu umysłowi poprzez obrazy, które odnaleźć można między innymi w mitach i baśniach. Tworzą one transhistoryczne i transkulturowe ramy wypełnione treściami charakterystycznymi dla poszczególnych kultur i czasów. Kolejne trzy rozdziały omawiające twórczość amerykańskich pisarek podejmują próbę zbadania, w jaki sposób archetyp dzikiej kobiety zaczerpnięty z badań psychologicznych przejawia się w literaturze i jak kobiecie doświadczenie wyrażone w formie literackiej może być interpretowane przez pryzmat baśni i motywów baśniowych.

Jak wynika z przedstawionych analiz, archetyp dzikiej kobiety może być ujmowany na różne sposoby, w zależności od okoliczności historycznych i czynników takich jak status społeczny czy ekonomiczny. Pisarki dziewiętnastego wieku i przełomu wieków przedstawione w rozdziale drugim zwracają uwagę na problem uznania podstawowych praw kobiet takich jak prawo do autonomicznego podejmowania decyzji, niezależności ekonomicznej czy wolności wyrażania siebie. W swoich powieściach i opowiadaniach Stoddard, Chopin i Gilman kwestionują dziewiętnastowieczny ideał kobiety tj. skromnej żony, troskliwej matki oraz godnej podziwu gospodyni domowej, przedstawiając bohaterki, które nie chcąc tłumić własnych pragnień i instynktów rezygnują z pogoni za ideałem. Niekonwencjonalne zachowania tych bohaterek stanowią próbę dyskusji z dziewiętnastowiecznymi standardami społecznymi, które propagowały bierną i uległą kobiecość. Ich poszukiwania własnej tożsamości, dążenie do autonomii oraz próby wyrwania się z ograniczających ram społecznych można interpretować z perspektywy realizacji archetypu dzikiej kobiety.

Autoekspresja i aktywność twórcza mają szczególne znaczenie dla przedstawionych w rozdziale trzecim autorek z początku i połowy dwudziestego wieku. Cather, Hurston i Plath reprezentują różne środowiska kulturowe i społeczne, ale ich kobiece postacie łączy świadomość istoty i potrzeba odnalezienia własnego głosu. Ich bohaterki podejmują archetypową walkę o zdefiniowanie swojej tożsamości jako kobiety, artystki lub po prostu równoprawnego członka społeczności. Jak pokazują przytoczone teksty literackie swobodna ekspresja przynosi spełnienie i wspiera proces rozwoju jednostki, ale może być trudna do osiągnięcia ze względu na patriarchalne społeczeństwo, które mimo wielu przemian wciąż widzi kobietę w podrzędnej roli i ogranicza możliwości jej rozwoju.

Czwarty rozdział poświęcony jest autorkom drugiej połowy dwudziestego wieku. Pomimo znaczących przemian społecznych pozwalających na swobodę

w wyrażaniu kobiecego doświadczenia i przełamania wielu tabu, takich jak kobieca seksualność czy opresyjność zdominowanych przez mężczyzn struktur władzy działających w społeczeństwie, postacię przedstawioną w tym rozdziale wciąż muszą stawiać czoła różnym formom ucisku lub dyskryminacji, zwłaszcza te reprezentujące marginalizowane grupy etniczne lub rasowe. W drodze do określenia własnej tożsamości, w tym tożsamości rasowej i etnicznej, bohaterki opisane przez Oates, Robinson, Morrison i Cisneros zmuszone są poddać się archetypowym rytuałom przejścia, które niejednokrotnie oznaczają trudne, związane z przemocą doświadczenia.

W zakończeniu podsumowano najważniejsze kwestie poruszone w pracy. Analizowane w niniejszej publikacji powieści i opowiadania wskazują na powtarzalność pewnych wzorców i motywów w twórczości amerykańskich pisarek, które można określić jednym wspólnym terminem, tj. archetypem dzikiej kobiety.

AB JPII
WYDAWNICTWO

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