# SHADOWING FEMI(NI)CIDE, MADNESS AND THE POLITICS OF FEMALE CONTROL IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S "A WHISPER IN THE DARK"

# LA SOMBRA DEL FEMINICIDIO, LOCURA Y LA POLÍTICA DE CONTROL FEMENINO EN "UN SUSURRO EN LA OSCURIDAD" DE LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

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## Abstract

The term 'femicide' entered public discourse only in the late 1970s, when feminist critic Diana Russell used the term to bring attention to male violence and discrimination against women. This article intends to re-examine the representation of femicide through Louisa May Alcott's short story "A Whisper in the Dark" (1865) in light of studies on femicide and female violence. Drawing from Russell's definition of femicide, its theoretical approach and multiple redefinitions, the article proceeds by exploring Alcott's depiction of femicide in the text. After a preliminary discussion, I critically examine Alcott's short story in light of studies on femicide by placing the text within American female Gothic fiction. Afterwords, I will demonstrate how femicide in the tale is based upon an interplay of three main tropes: wrongful confinement, the threshold and madness, all of which are themes that Alcott develops with astonishing topicality and which underscores the importance of the tale as an example of female abuse and domestic violence, a phenomenon that has improved considerably all over the world in recent years. I conclude by showing how Alcott illustrates the politics of female control and offers an example of femicide long before the term was ever used.

**Keywords:** femicide, Alcott, female abuse, madness, female control.

## Resumen

El término 'feminicidio' no entró en el discurso público hasta finales de la década de 1970, cuando la feminista Diana Russell lo utilizó para llamar la atención sobre la violencia masculina y la discriminación contra las mujeres. Este artículo pretende reexaminar la ilustración del feminicidio a través del relato corto de Louisa May Alcott "Un susurro en la oscuridad" (1865), que se examinará a la luz de los estudios sobre el feminicidio y la violencia femenina. Partiendo de la definición de feminicidio de Russell, su enfoque teórico y sus múltiples redefiniciones, el artículo procede a explorar la ilustración que Alcott hace del feminicidio en el texto. Tras esta discusión preliminar, examino críticamente el cuento de Alcott a la luz de los estudios sobre el feminicidio, situando el texto dentro de la ficción gótica femenina estadounidense. A continuación, demostraré cómo el feminicidio en el cuento se basa en un intercambio de tres tropos principales: el confinamiento injusto, el umbral y la locura, temas que Alcott desarrolla con asombrosa actualidad y que subrayan la importancia del cuento como ejemplo del maltrato femenino y la violencia doméstica que en todo el mundo ha mejorado considerablemente en los últimos años. Concluyo mostrando cómo Alcott ilustra la política del control femenino y ofrece un ejemplo de feminicidio mucho antes de que se utilizara el término.

**Palabras clave:** femicidio, Alcott, abuso femenino, locura, control femenino.

## 1. Introduction

In the 1990s, the neologism 'femicide'[1] entered public discourse forcefully in the Western world as media, scholars, feminists and activists devoted attention to the epidemic of men exercising violence on women, in most cases going so far as to kill them. Since then, its dramatic rise in international attention has been unprecedented. In 2021,[2] staggering statistics from the United States proved how domestic violence, and more generally, gender asymmetries, still pervade in many areas of social, political and professional life, occurring at a shameful rate. This persistence seems to constitute a backlash to the fight for gender equality. According to recent data, violence in America affects almost three women every day —a fact that led the month of March to become recognized as female violence awareness month in the US. In 2023, the White House launched a first-of-its-kind national action plan to end gender-based violence, such as domestic abuse, sexual assault, stalking and dating violence.[3] Beyond doubt, the phenomenon of gender-based violence has gained greater visibility all over the world, especially in recent years, when the actual numbers of victims have begun to increase.

Taking a step back from recent media attention, violence against women and femicide were first represented in 19th century North American literature, coinciding with the earliest documented examples of femicide, even though at the time these representations appeared as tacit demonstrations of denunciation that, if read today, make us ponder more deeply the actual roots of this phenomenon. Louisa May Alcott's short story "A Whisper in the Dark" (1863) deserves prominent attention in the debate on this surprisingly topical phenomenon, addressing the question of psychological and physical violence exerted upon women. From the very first pages, the main plot line is a case of domestic and gender-based abuse or, to use a contemporary term, an example of femicide. At the time Alcott wrote the story, the term femicide did not yet exist; however, throughout the gloomy framework of the narrative, abuse and violence run like an inner thread that stretches to the present debate on this issue. By contrast, it is revealing to note how, for decades, scholars did not acknowledge the innovative aspect of this text. The reason for this oversight can be traced back to critical appraisal of Alcott's work, which recurrently classified her works under domestic, sentimental or sensational fiction. More gripping, however, are those approaches arguing that Alcott's narratives do not deal with the image of fragile and passive women, as they conversely present active and self-sufficient female archetypes (Cogan 1989). Those who are familiar with the work of Louisa May Alcott, who achieved fame with her undisputed classic *Little Women* (1868),[4] can easily note that "A Whisper in the Dark" is narratively and stylistically distinct from her masterpiece, which consecrated her popularity and helped to sketch the decisive portrait of Alcott as a sentimental writer. The tale is part of a series of thrillers Alcott published —anonymously and pseudonymously— in *Frank Leslie*'s illustrated newspaper and that were eventually republished in 1889 in the volume *A Modern Mephistopheles and a Whisper in the Dark*.

First published in 1863, "A Whisper in the Dark" offers a fierce portrayal of issues that are still crucial today —freedom of individual choice, the accusation of insanity and power relations within the traditional family— narrated with an apparent simplicity through a brilliant style and with the help of a gripping story line. The plot is based on a young woman who is deceived, threatened, accused of insanity and eventually confined. The narrative tells the story of Sybil, a seventeen-year-old orphan heir. The young woman has been placed in the care of her uncle; the man is in charge of managing the girl's assets until she comes of age and marries her cousin, as written in her father's will. Sybil is then forced by her uncle into an arranged marriage with her cousin, Guy. Initially, the young woman is curious and well-disposed to the arrangement, but her arrival at the uncle's residence changes the course of events. Sybil is young and naïve in appearance and, seduced by her uncle's ambiguous charm, she initially seems to accept Guy's courtship, but, discovering she is trapped in an arranged marriage, she rejects her preordained future and declines the proposal. As Sybil will eventually discover, the will contained a clause stating that if Sybil showed signs of madness like her mother, all assets would pass into the hands of her uncle and cousin. Because of her refusal to marry her cousin, the uncle, with the aid of an unscrupulous doctor, Dr. Karnac, causes Sybil to be diagnosed as mentally unstable and, supported by the doctor's false diagnosis, he confines Sybil to a mental institution. In the asylum, Sybil meets her mother, whom she believed to be dead, discovering instead that she was condemned to the same fate and imprisoned on charges of insanity. Yet, the story ends with a positive outcome: Sybil manages to escape from the asylum and marries her cousin, who discovers the truth and his father's dreadful plan.

As Alcott's narrative can be read through the lens of femicide and gender-based violence, in what follows I delve into the meanings and implications of femicide, its theoretical approaches and multiple redefinitions, mostly drawing on Diana Russell's theory. This discussion will be necessary to examine "A Whisper in the Dark" as a fictional representation of femicide long before its current definition and within the context of American female Gothic fiction. Afterwards, I will demonstrate how femicide in the tale is based upon an interplay of three main tropes: wrongful confinement, the threshold and madness —all of which are themes that Alcott develops with astonishing topicality and which underscore the importance of the tale as an example of female abuse and domestic violence.

## 2. Femicide: Meanings and Implications

Before delving further into the text and its author, it is crucial to clarify the moral and epistemic significance of femicide, which before being associated with Alcott requires definitional and conceptual clarity. Undoubtedly, the concept has had many definitions and has evolved over time. Feminist critic Diana Russell coined the term in 1979, even though it officially acquired a definition in 1990 with the seminal study by Russell and Radford, *Femicide: The Practice of Women Killing*, regarded as the most compelling study on the phenomenon. There, Diana Russell and Jill Radford explain how the term designates extreme violence by men against women, who become victims primarily because of their sex. As Russell and Radford observe, femicide is the peripheral of a broader phenomenon: violence against women, including domestic violence, sexual violence and psychological abuse (Russell and Radford 1990). Besides this, in 2001, Russell slightly changed the original epistemic meaning, considering femicide as an umbrella term that encompasses *any* form of male sexism over women, turning them into victims especially because they are female. As she additionally notes, "There are many kinds of femicides that can be identified, for example serial femicide, rape femicide, wife femicide, racist femicide […]" (Russell and Hermes 2001: 18), to name but a few examples from a long list. Although femicide generally refers to the misogynous killing of women, its significance has changed to encompass any form of violence systematically exercised on women in the name of a patriarchal ideological superstructure in order to perpetuate subordination and annihilate female identity through physical or psychological subjugation, to the point of incarceration or death (Russell and Radford 1992: 6-7).

At its root, "femicide has many different forms and the concept extends even beyond legal definitions of murder to include situations in which women are even permitted to die as a result of misogynous attitudes" (Russell and Radford 1992: 7).[5] Yet, as Russell and Radford further imply, at the origin of femicide there is always a masculine need to deprive women of control over their lives and bodies. In making my argument, I draw on radical feminist theories that have regarded the woman's body as a starting point, considering it as the primary object of masculine violence. Indeed, the term femicide originated from the efforts of radical feminists that, as far back as the 1980s, aimed to denounce the issue of violence against women by asserting that women were systematically oppressed as a 'sex class' within a persistent patriarchal framework (MacKinnon 1989). Lea Melandri traces the cause of violence against women to an inherent failure to question gender relations. Taking up this thread, Melandri highlights how "since the dawn of time and even in modern times, man has continued to consider the woman 'an inferior subject' and at the same time the repository of a divine spark, threatening her continuity" (2011: 35, my translation).[6] In her study, Melandri maintains that love and violence tend to polarize to the point where the feeling of love and the violent act interpenetrate. According to Melandri, the 'masculinization' of public space functions as a new form of male domination. As she proceeds to argue, women have always suffered continuous expropriation of their existence, leading to a constant gender inequality that has always highlighted male dominance and placed women in a subordinate status (2011: 36-37).

In a recent study on the global resonance of femicide, Myrna Dawson and Michelle Carrigan underscore how one of the reasons behind the upsurge in attention given to the issue of femicide today has to do with the way in which "femicide should be defined and how it is distinct from homicide" (2020: 2). Femicide, in its many different forms, represents a mechanism of control and subjugation by man over woman and, even today, it often takes the form of a non-acceptance of women's freedom and independence. The man feels legitimized to take away the woman's autonomy the moment she 'rebels' and manifests a need to emancipate herself from male authority. It is precisely this aspect of femicide, well illustrated by

Dawson and Carrigan in their study, on which I will focus in order to begin the analysis of Alcott's story and the innovative facets of the narrative.

Another essential consideration concerns the issue of gender-based violence. Defining what is meant by violence is often very problematic, and there is a tendency to link the term to different phenomena. Historically, violence appeared to be the product of a certain type of culture that often stemmed from power relations, and which functioned as a natural discriminator of gender (Héritier 2005: 23). According to anthropologist Francoise Héritier, violence originates within the binary representation of masculine and feminine: in ancient times and in Western culture, it was exercised on the woman as a way to 'protect' masculine honor. Not surprisingly, in a male-dominated society, such as the one in which Louisa May Alcott sets her story, there was a use of violence against women that has been identified as a characteristic of patriarchal society, also due to the social construction of femininity as receptive and passive. As Russell and Radford maintain, "Patriarchal oppression, like other forms of oppression, may manifest itself in legal and economic discrimination, but like all oppressive structures is rooted in violence" (1992: 6), a definition that flawlessly reflects the situation envisioned by Alcott. It is precisely this form of masculine imposition and female deprivation that will allow me to read Alcott's narrative in these terms, considering its relevance within the current debate on female violence and femicide.

## 3. Louisa May Alcott as a Feminist Icon

As mentioned above, in her second anonymously published thriller, "A Whisper in the Dark", Louisa May Alcott illustrates the dynamics of domestic and psychological abuse against women in the 1800s. Although the writer presents a story that was often labeled under the genre of sentimental narrative, the tone and atmosphere recall those of Gothic fiction, and it surprisingly anticipates the feminist debate on physical and psychological violence within the domestic sphere. Alessandra Calanchi recently observed how it is not daring to claim that the story focuses precisely on gender issues, *including femicide* —real or attempted— well before the term was ever used (2020: 13, emphasis added).

In her compelling study, Elisabeth Lennox Keyser proves how, beneath the progressive feminism of Alcott's work, lurks a more radical image of women, which is evident in her Gothic thrillers "Behind the Mask" (1866), "A Marble Woman" (1865) and, eventually, "A Whisper in the Dark". In line with this perspective, Calanchi considers this text as the first piece of a symbolic trilogy illustrating femicide within the context of American literature and connecting this work to other canonical texts such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall

Paper" (1892) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). In both stories, as in Alcott's narrative, a woman is the victim of psychological violence by a man who accuses her of insanity (a theme to which I will later return).

Alcott's production shifted from Gothic thrillers, published under the pseudonym of A.M. Barnard (for the most part Gothic stories in which she explored themes such as madness, violence and revenge), to sentimental novels. However, Alcott's Gothic and 'domestic thrillers' —a term used pejoratively to diminish psychological thrillers written by women in comparison to traditional thrillers— focused on themes such as manipulation, murder and forbidden love, and were often published in anonymous form or under a masculine pseudonym. These works, including those of authors such as Edith Wharton and the aforementioned Charlotte Perkins Gilman, can be aligned with the genre of 'American female Gothic'.[7] In *The Cambridge Companion to the American Gothic* (2017), Diane Hoeveler maintains that "The subgenre of the female Gothic generally refers to the works written by women that use specific themes, tropes and conventions of the Gothic, to reflect and address female concerns such as marriage, inheritance, and patriarchal empowerment" (2017: 99). In her pioneering study *The Female Gothic* (1983), Juliann Fleenor argues that the female Gothic becomes a metaphor of female experience, and it is used to describe the condition of women within patriarchal society.[8] As literary critics have aptly shown, the American female Gothic has its roots in the work of female authors associated with the supernatural and set in New England. Narratives within the American female Gothic tradition generally articulate firm critiques of the patriarchal establishment, condemning masculine imposition in the domestic sphere. Overall, in the American female Gothic "the woman and her body becomes the ultimate embodiment of Gothic horror" (Hoeveler 2017: 111).

Teresa A. Goddu firmly includes Alcott as a relevant name within the Gothic genre (1997: 3-8), in which a recurring theme is the portrayal of the female experience and the challenges it entails. Over the course of her life, the author demonstrated a clear aversion toward the societal expectations imposed on women, particularly the requirement to adopt a submissive stance in the face of dominant male chauvinism. Alcott's Gothic thrillers, which skillfully integrate Gothic tropes with the female experience, unfold within only one setting: the domestic sphere, often depicting female tragedies, narratives of revenge, confinement, subjugation and rebellion, as exemplified in "A Whisper in the Dark". As the narrative unfolds, the young protagonist repeatedly pauses to describe the Gothic and grotesque setting of the domestic environment as "the blackened ruins of a house of horrors" (363). With remarkable consistency, Alcott's Gothic fiction encodes these scenarios by combining violence, perversion and madness —tropes I will grapple with in the pages ahead. As exemplified in the critical analysis of Alcott's Gothic fiction conducted by Madeleine

Stern, "A Whisper in the Dark" becomes not only an engrossing gruesome Gothic narrative but an interesting foray into the disorders of the mind" (1978: 429).

That said, it must be noted that the different narrative approach of Alcott's work reflects, in part, the writer's autobiographical experience. Louisa May Alcott was a precocious child: when she was only ten, she wrote plays for her circle of friends; at fifteen, she composed melodramas with her sister; and when she was only nineteen, after a brief period at the service of a wealthy family to earn money to emancipate herself financially, she published her first poems under the pseudonym of Flora Fairfield. Indeed, Alcott led an active and dynamic life. In the second half of the 1800s, the writer became a staunch abolitionist, helping fugitive slaves through the secret system of aids known as the Underground Railroad. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Alcott sewed uniforms for the soldiers of Concord and worked as a nurse at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown.[9] In the late 1870s, she became a steadfast women's rights advocate and encouraged women to fight for the right to vote in the state of Massachusetts.[10] Subsequently, Alcott wrote a series of letters —later published in the Massachusetts suffrage periodical, *Women's Journal*— in which she expressed her disappointment with the government of Concord and the State of Massachusetts for their lack of action in favor of women's rights. These aspects of Alcott's life prove the writer's interest in sustaining female emancipation, an ideology at odds with that of the official discourse of the time. Given her long support toward women's rights —a support Alcott inherited from her parents, who endorsed most reforms, including women's suffrage— Madelaine Stern posits that "She was a feminist because she was a humanist; she embraced the cause of women because she embraced the causes of humanity" (1978: 429). Not surprisingly, as critics have recently suggested, Alcott's intriguing mix of fiction and auto-fiction engages and intersects —as does Alcott's life— with domesticity, femininity and female emancipation (Sesnić 2022: 1).

## 4. Instances of Femicide in Louisa May Alcott's "A Whisper in the Dark": Thresholds, Boundaries and the Spaces of Female Control

Fitting into the historical frame mentioned above, "A Whisper in the Dark" reflects on male authority by showing how the protagonist resists patriarchal imposition despite the strong and obvious masculine intention to exert control and use violence and psychological abuse on the female protagonist. In her critical reflection on the condition of womanhood in the 19th century, Susan Cruea claimed that "Women were the continual victims of social and economic discrimination. Upper and middle-class women's choices were limited to marriage and motherhood, or spinsterhood" (2005: 187). Moreover, in the introduction to an Italian edition of Henry James's *Daisy Miller*, Donatella Izzo proceeds to argue that in the second half of the 19th century, the widespread dissemination of domestic ideology, as the social norm of reference, constituted a moral primacy that contemplated women exclusively within the framework of marriage. As such, the lives of women were entirely under the control and in the service of men (Izzo 2017: 20). In this sense, Elisabeth Keyser remarks on Alcott's frequent use of the verb 'to master' to accentuate the physical and psychological male subjugation of the female characters. Early in the narrative, Sybil admits "I was *mastered*. Yet only physically, my spirit was rebellious still" (Alcott 1996: 331, emphasis added).

Consistent with this I argue that the question of female victimization in the narrative revolves around three major themes: wrongful confinement as a representation of female reclusion; the threshold as a powerful metaphor for boundaries that may or may not be transgressed; and ultimately, madness as a pretext for violence and control. As we shall now see, it is on the basis of these tropes that we can read the novel in a contemporary frame and consider it a valid example of modern femicide. Along with the recurring use of the verb 'to master', closed spaces are equally relevant in contextualizing the female figure as an object of violence. As such, the asylum to which the protagonist is confined is not merely the concrete place in which Sybil is imprisoned, but also the psychological and familial one, in which she is subjugated and psychologically harassed by the masculine characters, that is, her uncle and the doctor. As Calanchi noted when analyzing this text, the home turns out to be a false domestic comfort, a symbol of female imprisonment inside which coexist explosions of violence, and fantasies of escape (2020: 15-16). The relocation of the protagonist within closed spaces, the carriage in which Sybil is introduced to the reader in the very first scene, the house, the bedroom in which she is often detained, and finally, the asylum, are the concrete representations of a persistent intention to subjugate and imprison the young woman. "I succumbed to despair […] even in my *prison-house*" (Alcott 1996: 354, emphasis added), claims Sybil. Again, when she is diagnosed by Dr. Karnac, the uncle "closed the door and locked it, having dexterously removed the key from within" (Alcott 1996: 350). Sybil then manages to escape by jumping out of the window and safely climbing down the trellis before she is brought back to her room. Although Sybil attempts to free herself, she remains relentlessly and physically confined to enclosed spaces and, as Keyser points out, "Sibyl escapes the prison of her room only to be imprisoned in Karnac's asylum" (1993: 7). Sybil's forced confinement should be read as essential to an analysis of the text as a case of femicide. In effect, the protagonist is forced into a double segregation: first, physically and psychologically; and then, at home and in the asylum. When Sybil wakes up in her room at the madhouse, the sense of imprisonment is evident: "The place was small, plainly furnished, and *close*, as if long unused […] A moment I started about me bewildered, then hurried to the window —it was *gated*!" (Alcott 1996: 351, emphasis added). At this moment, the protagonist discovers she has gone from the reclusion in her room to the internment in the asylum. Yet Keyser, in her reading of the text, further remarks how "Motivated by youthful rebelliousness and a fondness for manipulating others, Sybil fails to question patriarchal assumptions until, at her uncle's request, she pursues her father's will in which the terms of the compact are set forth" (Keyser 1993: 352).

The frequent recurrence of the threshold as a transitional space in the narrative represents a liminal boundary that limits what the female protagonist can do and what she is bound not to do. According to Calanchi, in the text the threshold illustrates the woman's 'condition of in-betweenness', as she is torn between the desire for emancipation, which will culminate in her refusal of marriage, and the psychological and material violence to which she is condemned: being accused of insanity and locked up in an asylum for the choice to rebel against patriarchal order. The masculine power over the woman lies, in fact, in the threshold, or rather, in the spaces where the threshold is never fully open: a window ajar, a half-open door, an antechamber —all narrative threads that lead to the protagonist's realization of a need to break free from her oppressor (Calanchi 2020: 18). It is therefore essential to consider this motif to understand the importance Alcott gives to this theme, which becomes a leitmotif in the narrative.

Early in the text, Sybil repeatedly describes the uncle leaning on the doorjamb, as if his position indicates an impenetrable boundary and, most importantly, male power over the limit the woman shall not pass: "Soon he came, and paused on the threshold" (Alcott 1996: 334), recalls Sybil in one of the numerous references. Later, when she is asked for the last time if she is still convinced to refuse the marriage proposal, while waiting to be diagnosed with feigned insanity, it is the doctor who stands on the threshold, once again to suggest the seemingly insurmountable limit to which Sybil is condemned: "I pointed to the door as I spoke; the women hurried out with scared faces, the doctor bowed and followed but paused on the *threshold* while my uncle approached me, asking in a tone inaudible to those still hovering round the door —"Do you still persist in your refusal, Sybil?" (Alcott 1996: 349, emphasis added). It is precisely through a partly open door that two of the most important narrative twists in the story occur: Sybil discovers the uncle's awful intentions, and, through the threshold, she overhears her mother's voice for the first time. As one of the text's central concepts, the threshold looks like an attempt to illustrate the female transit toward emancipation and her ability, in the end, to cross the limit and override the woman's exercise of male power. Such space in the narrative serves as a way to make visible and legible Sybil's way to liberation in her capacity to surpass that boundary.

## 5. Madness, Imprisonment and Hysteria

The construction of violence in the text revolves around the figure of the masculine oppressor, the uncle, who, after seducing his underage niece with a marriage proposal, accuses her of insanity to sequester her in a madhouse. The question of surveillance, in Foucauldian terms, and the manipulation the man exercises on the woman, become repetitive threads that will be passed on between the protagonist and her mother, imprisoned in the asylum and condemned to the same fate. Stern observes that in this text "the reader is regaled with the lowest form of psychological manipulation —an attempt for mercenary purposes, to drive the heiress heroine insane so that her inheritance will be denied her" (1978: 429). In conjunction with masculine domination, "imprisonment takes its toll on Sybil's physical and psychological health" (Carpenter 1986: 32). In this sense, the implications of femicide in the narrative become entangled with madness to provide an extensive critique of patriarchal culture, as the author denounces a misogynistic and patriarchal society that labels women who want to be free with madness and hysteria. As the story progresses, Sybil soon admits that "Madness seemed my inevitable faith" (Alcott 1996: 356)·. The narrative's gradual decline into madness suggests how, at the time, any deviation from the norm was considered a sign of mental instability. From this perspective, the tale is set against the backdrop of the 1850s, and explores the pre-conceptual view of madness as a gender stereotype or a gendered disorder. In fact, it is known that in the late 1850s, asylum statistics confirmed the perception that female inmates were likely to outnumber their male counterparts, so that madness soon became a pointedly gendered illness. This phenomenon cast women in a (gendered) imbalance that fed the imposition of a patriarchal structure.

Moreover, madness and the asylum are two pitfalls of the Gothic novel, whose purpose was to illustrate the immorality of women in patriarchal society, as well as female resistance to oppression (Keyser 1993: 4). In medicine, hysteria was originally attributed to women —a theory corroborated by a historical fraud by which the origin of the term was related to the uterus. Freud then traced hysteria back to the repression of sexual desire, referring to it as a distinctively female disease, since the repression of desire was associated with the societal role of women.[11] Scholarly work has often considered madness as a rather desperate form of rebellion and, more generally, an extreme condition that deprives the subject of the capacity to protest and of self-affirmation and thus can lead to a pressing need to break free from a condition of deviance.[12] In their seminal study on madness, women and Victorian literature, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar used psychoanalytic theory to explore female anxieties surrounding authorship and space. In their study, they explained how female writers and women in general "fated to inhabit male-defined masks" (2000: 19).

As a consequence, the woman becomes polarized in the binomial 'angel' and/or 'monster' —expressions of a dual personality. If monstrosity in Alcott's text develops in masculinity, the visible inner monstrosity of female violence —embedded in hysteria as a female problem— becomes visible in the ghostly whisper of Sybil's mother, her double. In the end, Sybil rebels against her condition, and her rebellion comes precisely from the encounter with her mother whom, in an almost Lacanian sense, she sees reflected behind a broken glass, as if to mirror her image, her alter ego. In "A Whisper in the Dark", madness becomes the excuse to trigger a mechanism of control and masculine imposition. Insanity, when officially diagnosed, is the element capable of preventing Sybil from accessing her inheritance and being free to choose her future. For Alcott, mental illness becomes the scapegoat for femicide, a decisive masculine pretext to manipulate and subjugate the female protagonist. If, as Keyser has argued, "In 'A Whisper in the Dark', Alcott directly associates female madness with patriarchy" (Keyser 1993: 107), the bogus diagnosis of insanity is more than 'just' a representation of illness, as it undermines the perpetuation of femicide as an intentional abuse with a gender-related motive. In keeping with this, the scene of the accusation of insanity turns out to be a moment of absolute violence:

> I was unused to wine. The draught I had taken was powerful with age, and though warm and racy to the palate, proved too potent for me. Still sitting before my fire, I slowly fell into restless drowse [...] whose motion gradually lulled me into perfect unconsciousness. Waking at length, I was surprised I found myself in bed with the shimmer of daylight peeping through the curtains. Recollecting that I was to leave early. I sprang up, took one step and remained transfixed with dismay, for the room was not only my own. (Alcott 1996: 351)[13]

As the scene makes clear, Sybil is subjected to real instances of physical violence: she is drugged, rendered unconscious and forcefully taken to the asylum, where she will wake up unaware of her fate and what has transpired. As Alcott illustrates, the young protagonist is placed in a position of vulnerability by male authority, leading to her confinement. This passage serves as a comprehensive representation of the Gothic horror depicted on the female body, as delineated by Hoeveler (2017).

In her analysis of Alcott's work through the lens of disability studies, Karyn Valerius observes that "Representations of mental health and illness might complicate and enhance established feminist readings of Alcott's fiction" (2018: 87).[14] By addressing this issue, Carpenter has claimed that "To suggest the fullest extent of masculine domination and to justify woman's anger as a response to that domination, would surely be inharmonious with the respectable traditions of Concord. For a cultured woman and an Alcott to do it might well be considered madness" (1986: 37). As such, the question of madness in the narrative is complicated by another intern living next door. Sybil is intrigued by this other individual, whom she will soon discover to be her mother (the origin of the title's whisper). The meeting between the daughter and her mother, who urges Sybil to save herself from their common fate, is an example of how Alcott transforms madness into a double suffering handed down from mother to daughter, a repetitive cycle of triumphant abusive male power and female victimization. From Carpenter's perspective, "Alcott takes great pains to develop an identification between mother and daughter, and even to intimate that their fates are parallel" (1986: 33). By incorporating women, madness and violence into the narrative, "A Whisper in the Dark" illustrates the interconnected construction of gender and mental illness within the 19th-century concept of female hysteria. By giving centrality to insanity as a significant trope that devaluates the woman as the irrational sex, Alcott triggers a path of rage and rebellion, as mental illness, from an element of submission and control, becomes a way of reacting to femicide and gendered violence.

Particularly of note at this point is Paige Clements's recent perspective on mental disorders. Focusing on the iconic figure of Brönte's madwoman in the attic —with which Alcott's tale shares numerous similarities, such as internment on account of purported madness as a symbol of patriarchal oppression— Clements relates madness to female emancipation and wonders: "If a patriarchal system causes mental illness, then why can madness not be a form of escapism and/or rebellion within that system? While mental illness should not be erased or overshadowed insofar as it is a true medical condition, does that mean we must disregard the pathologization of women's behavior in response to oppression?" (2021: 24).

This observation reflects, in part, the narrative twist of Alcott's story. Upon closer inspection, alongside the violence, which the author highlights in concrete images (e.g. the poisoned drink, cutting of female hair, forced imprisonment), Sybil's gestures of rebellion are numerous. Following a passage in which the protagonist is deliberately drugged by her uncle, so that she can lay on his knee for his pleasure, Sybil bites the man's hand, although she immediately realizes that it would have been better to surrender, since she fears her uncle's reaction: "I had better have submitted, for slight as the foolish action was, it had an influence on my afterlife as many others such as had" (Alcott 1996: 330). According to Carpenter, "The comment implies that her own physical violence marked the first in a series of rebellions, for which she would later be punished" (1986: 35). A further subversive attitude is evident in Sybil's clear decision to refuse marriage, a choice that leads the uncle to make an incestuous insinuation, aiming to become the "faithful guardian of her life" (Alcott 1996: 347) by proposing to be her husband. The female rejection takes the form of another obvious gesture of rebellion, as Sybil goes so far as to throw her engagement ring against a mirror, cracking it in the middle: "I flung the ring, case and all, across the room, it struck the great mirror, shivered it just in the middle, and sent several loosened fragments crashing to the floor" (347). Later in the narrative, the protagonist does not fail to stress how "[she] had never been subjected to restraint of any kind, it made [her] reckless at once, for this last indignity was not to be endured" (350). However, Sybil's personality is anything but fragmented —a term that usually evokes a neuropsychological disorder. The young woman is very firm in her decisions: she rejects marriage and is determined to free herself from her condition.

### 5.1. Whispers as Threats of Masculine Utterance

A useful point that relates whispering with madness, thus considering it as an additional parameter leading to the perpetration of femicide, can be found in Jimmy Packham's recent analysis of the fundamental role haunting voices play in Gothic fiction. According to Packham, "A Whisper in the Dark" offers an example of rebellion against the initial imposition of masculine voices. In effect, the masculine voice plays an essential role in the narrative, as Alcott entrusts it with peremptory and intimidating utterances to suggest the authoritarian and subjugating tone of man over woman. The importance of whispering in the scenario of violence we have delineated so far —as Packham reminds us— sets up the transgressive and troubling role voices play in Alcott's narrative. Packham argues the following: "Alcott's tale explores the extent to which a woman's voice is heard under patriarchy as 'raving', and the extent to which this voice is coextensive with an (in)visible body; it explores the silencing and erasure of a woman's voice in law and legal matters, and the frustrating of communication between women" (2021: 80-81).

The role that voices and sounds play in the construction of femicide and the consequent process of rebellion become evident when Sybil is confined to the asylum. The footsteps the protagonist overhears above her room, the low murmurs and the screams interspersed with cries of weeping —which will turn out to belong to her mother— are the first audible presence of a female rebellion. Then, this female voice resists madness and confinement as it transmits itself through those boundaries —previously discussed— that could not be transgressed, as sounds come from a keyhole, a locked door, distinctly labeled as places of prohibition. The trajectory taken in this section of the tale highlights "the bodily limitations imposed by the domineering masculine authorities upon the woman as agent and establishes a non-physical spectralized space as the space of agency" (Packham 2021: 82). The sonority of these rumors and the silence that precedes them is indicative of the position to which women were condemned: being silenced by patriarchal authority. At its conclusion, the narrative engages the reader through the clear and assertive voices of women (Sybil and her mother, the whisper that leads to the escape).

While initially playing a marginal role compared to the dominant masculine voices in the story, women become central figures in the latter part, both in their presence and as voices. In this way, Alcott uses the sanatorium as a space to re-orient the authority of speech on the woman.

If one reads the narrative within this frame, it can be seen how, as Packham additionally implies, “The acousmatic whisper poses a continual threat to the forms of masculine utterance” (2021: 87). In the first section of the narrative, Alcott exploits the tension between a voiceless female character —which from that whispering will make her voice heard, moving from absence to presence— decisively silencing and denying the power of masculine authority. Indeed, as the narrative unfolds, Sybil rebels and renounces silent isolation. Nevertheless, as Carpenter illustrates, the protagonist will prove to have inherited from her mother not madness but the spirit of rebellion that will enable her to save her life (1986: 31). In spite of Sybil sharing the same fate as her mother, the young protagonist, to whom Alcott grants a happy ending, is the only one capable of saving herself. As the story draws to a close, the mother dies in the asylum on the night of Sybil’s 18th birthday and leaves her daughter two letters urging her to flee, tying them on a dog’s collar with a lock of her blonde hair. The symbiotic mother-daughter relationship reaches a climax as Sybil observes the deceased body of the mother and she contemplates their similarities: “The face I saw was a pale image of my own. Sharpened by suffering, pallid with death, the features were familiar as those I used to see; the hair beautiful and blonde as mine had been, streamed long over the pulseless breast, and on the hand still clenched in that last struggle, shone the likeness of a ring I wore, a ring bequeathed me by my father” (Alcott 1996: 359).

Susan Williams further contends that Alcott’s mother-daughter relationship is an example of a sentimental bond that extends beyond emotions (2020: 53). As Carpenter explains, “Sybil’s mother might be described as ‘destroyed’ by madness leaving her daughter ‘motherless’ if not in actuality” (1986: 33). Hence, if the accusation of insanity becomes the starting point for committing a case of femicide, madness for Alcott later becomes an essential narrative climax to trigger a process of female emancipation. The behavioral escalation of the female character materializes in the unexpected happy conclusion: Sybil escapes from the asylum, finally gaining her freedom at the expense of an abrupt willingness to forgive her perpetrators.

## 6. Conclusion

Returning to Russell’s definition, as gender-based violence and femicide have different expressions, Alcott’s “A Whisper in the Dark” foregrounds the violence exerted on a woman who becomes a victim of psychological abuse that causes mental unrest and distress. Coercion, drug administration and forced confinement are the most obvious expressions of the atrocity of violence to which women were subjected. All these characteristics are also fueled by narrative patterns, that is, confinement, madness and the threshold as powerful metaphors, whose recurrence has allowed me to read Alcott's short story as an acutely topical text capable of explicitly denouncing the condition and the social system to which women were unconsciously condemned by patriarchal society in 19th century America. Yet, in this scenario of extreme violence, Alcott envisages a female protagonist who refuses marriage in the name of inspirational freedom. Indeed, the narrative strength of "A Whisper in the Dark" does not lie in Alcott's immutable victimization of the woman, as it offers her a chance to regain her liberty.

If the story departs from femicide to stage and denounce female abuse through a pessimistic tone, at least in the first section of the narrative, the ending suggests Alcott's intention to end on a positive note. As Calanchi recalls, the choice of such a positive resolution "is not a narrative device for an easy conclusion but a message of hope for abused women and an implicit invitation to react to physical and psychological violence without considering victimhood as a permanent state" (2020: 22, my translation).[15] At a time when gender-based violence and femicide as an act of violence that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm to a woman have taken center stage in the discussion on gender-based abuse, the importance of Alcott's tale lies in its moral: a current light of hope for all abused women.

Most 19th-century American female Gothic fiction, especially during Alcott's time, was motivated by the social emergency of violence against women that today is epitomized by femicide. To this end, "A Whisper in the Dark" anticipates the fast-growing attention on femicide and female abuse, a global issue prompted today by the increasing number of cases and the renewed international awareness on female violence. The exceptional modernity of Alcott's work is confirmed by its proximity to current events in the narrativization of violence, events that are as intimate as they are collective, thus taking a perspective that projects this tale into the future, leading up to our current awareness on female violence. From this view, Alcott's tale becomes a model for gender denunciation, revolt and the desire for emancipation of those women deprived of voice and authority. Along with Alcott, the heroine represents the female rebellion against violence, reclaiming her voice in the context from which women have been excluded.

As one of the most severe forms of violence against women, femicide has recently become an urgent and painful topic and a global phenomenon. As the problem stems from a culture based on patriarchal imposition and unequal power relations, there is a great need to shine a spotlight on femicide and increase awareness of its deeply entrenched nature, which extends beyond the current discourse advocating for change. To this end, "A Whisper in the Dark" proves how literature by the end of the 19th century already provided a platform for women to reject patriarchal abuse via imposition of their voice, a 'whisper' in that loud and sonorous masculine oppression we still deal with in our current society.

## Notes

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1. The term 'femicide' is often used interchangeably with 'feminicide'. The difference in terminology lies in the fact that femicide (the one I am about to examine) is the original sociological term associated with the phenomenon coined by feminist Diana Russell, whereas feminicide is the political term referring to the role of the state within the phenomenon and to the judicial structures that normalize misogyny.

2. See Hackman (2021).

3. For more on this, see Howard (2023).

4. The author's fame is mainly due to the publication of *Little Women*, which soon became a bestseller and was adapted into numerous films, as confirmed by Greta Gerwig's latest adaptation, *Little Women* (2019), and cinema's recurring interest in the novel.The novel was commissioned by Roberts Brothers publishing, despite Alcott's initial doubts as she felt that this kind of narrative genre was insufficient for her potential.

5. Femicide has 14 different subtypes, distinguished by relationship or motivation. For more information, see Dawson and Carrigan (2020).

6. *"fin dall'alba dei tempi e pure in epoca odierna, l'uomo, ha continuato a considerare la donna "una vita inferiore" e allo stesso tempo la depositaria di una scintilla divina, promessa e minacciosa allo stesso tempo della sua continuità"*.

7. The term 'female Gothic' was originally coined by Ellen Moers in 1976 to encompass Gothic stories authored by women.

8. For a fuller discussion on the American Gothic, see Weinstock (2017) and Hoeveler (2017). For more on female Gothic, see Fleenor (1983) and the more recent study by Wallace and Smith (2009). An excellent overview of the topic in Alcott's fiction can also be found in Madeleine Stone's introduction to the book *Plots and Counterplots: More Unknown Thrillers by Louisa May Alcott* (1976).

9. The experience as a Civil War nurse was an important part of Alcott's life, which led not only to the publication of *Hospital Sketches* (1863), but also affected her health when she contracted pneumonia and typhoid fever and was treated with inorganic mercury medication that produced an acute mercury poisoning, causing her chronic health problems (including vertigo).

10. Alcott was the first woman to register for election to a school board in Concord.

11. For more on this, see Freud (2013).

12. See Rüggemeier (2019) and Felman (1975).

13. Sybil's case is reminiscent of a very current phenomenon: so-called rape drugs.These are mostly narcotics dissolved in small amounts in drinks to sedate the subject (in most cases women), making the victim unconscious and vulnerable to sexual assault.

14. Psychiatric disability is a recurring feature in Alcott's fiction and especially in those works published anonymously, among which we find "A Whisper in the Dark".

15. *"Il lieto fine non è un espediente per una facile conclusione, ma un messaggio di speranza per le donne vittime di abusi e maltrattamenti e un invito implicito a reagire alla violenza - fisica e psicologica - senza introiettare la condizione di vittima come stato mentale permanente e inevitabile".*

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