The Evolution of Female Isolation in Literature

Introduction

Women's literature has often emerged from spaces of silence, confinement, or repression. This female isolation is portrayed as both physical confinement and psychological imprisonment, revealing the limits society places on women's autonomy and reflecting broader cultural attitudes about gender, morality, and mental health. In many ways, confinement has functioned as both a literary and metaphorical condition for female writers. Denied public autonomy, many turn inward, creating imaginative spaces where the self could be examined, divided, and ultimately reconstructed. Additionally, these writers use their isolation narratives to critique societal ideologies, such as the Victorian "angel of the house" ideal, by portraying the oppressed self alongside these ideologies. Over time, isolation evolves alongside culture, shifting from a moral punishment to a psychological condition, from social control to self-chosen protection, and finally to existential identity. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), and Jacqueline Harpman's *I Who Have Never Known Men* (1995) display this evolution, each text portraying isolation as both a reflection of women's oppression and a means of transformation. Read chronologically, these works trace the evolution of women's autonomy and society's understanding of the female psyche. To trace how isolation operates across time is to trace the evolution of women's selfhood itself, revealing how they are seen, confined, and how they learn to see themselves.

Spanning nearly 150 years, these four works chart how literary portrayals of confinement evolve alongside shifting understandings of women, morality, and mental health. This portrayal aligns with the Gothic literature tradition of the use of domestic imprisonment as a metaphor for

female repression, a theme that is present across these four works. Reading these works through a feminist and psychoanalytic lens suggests that the confinement depicted acts as a symbol for social control and also as a psychological mirror reflecting the female psyche in differing ways that reflect the era. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë's portrayal of isolation frames it as a moral punishment and test of virtue, reflecting Victorian expectation of virtue, humility, and faith and the belief that a woman's worthy lies in her moral integrity, restraint, and endurance under hardships. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", a late 19th century work, continues the theme of isolation while highlighting the absence of female autonomy and lack of mental health awareness of the time. In contrast, Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* depicts self-imposed isolation and blatant hostility towards male oppressors, highlighting mid-20th century post-war domestic anxiety and the female retreat from patriarchal society. Finally, Harpman's *I Who Have Never Known Men* displays isolation in its rawest form, where isolation becomes the defining human condition in the wake of postmodern societal collapse. Across these centuries, the nature of confinement changes; however, the central purpose does not. Each period uses isolation to test the boundaries of identity, morality, and sanity, revealing how women's selfhood is constantly changed by the forces which seek to contain it.

Historical Framework

In order to fully understand how isolation evolves in Women's literature, one must consider the broader history of English as a field. Robert Scholes' *The Rise and Fall of English* discusses the origins of English as an academic discipline, presenting it as deeply rooted in moral philosophy and rhetoric. Scholes states that the goal of early study of English was to cultivate morality and emotion rather than to perform literary criticism (Scholes 12-13). This early English tradition shaped how literature was both read and written, treating literature as ethical and moral reflection. This framework allowed women writers to explore the private realities and emotional

struggles that were otherwise silenced by society, their works both mirroring and challenging cultural beliefs.

Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* expands upon the origins of women's literature, tracing a continuous tradition of women's writing and highlighting how women worked within, as well as against the male defined moral and emotional ideals of their time. Showalter identifies three overlapping stages of this evolution, Feminine (1840-1880) which displays women's intimate and internalized dominate and moral artistic standards, Feminist (1880-1920) where women challenge standards and advocate for new social and artistic identities, and finally Female (1920 onward) where women turn inward, exploring selfhood separate from patriarchal definitions (Showalter). Her model of women's literature development helps to situate these works within broader cultural evolution. *Jane Eyre* presents isolation tests of female virtue within the boundaries of moral conviction, reflecting the "feminine" phase. "The Yellow Wallpaper", which reflects the "feminist" phase, transforms isolation into an act of protest of male control, while Jackson's and Harpman's respective works reflect the "female" phase, marking movement towards self-understanding. Taken together, these works trace the same progression identified by Showalter, from moral imitation, to rebellion, and finally to self-realization. This literary and cultural evolution establishes the groundwork for understanding how isolation operates across each of these works.

Jane Eyre

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* portrays 19th century isolation as both a punishment and also as moral education, mirroring English study's moral-emotional ideals (Scholes), recasting them through a female lens. The novel reflects Victorian morality and order such as religion, property, class-based hierarchy, and "the angel in the house," and idealized standard of women. Female virtue is defined by silence and endurance, mirroring the previously mentioned "feminine" stage of women's literature (Showalter). Through Jane's experiences at Gateshead,

Lowood, Thornfeild, Moor House, and Ferndean, isolation evolves from externally imposed discipline to an internal moral compass, shaping her psychological resilience and sense of autonomy.

Jane's earliest experiences at Gateshead frame isolation as a form of discipline used to enforce conformity and otherness. Mrs. Reed and John Reed both enforce Jane's silence and submission through violence and forced confinement, suppressing what they refer to as her "passion" and "temper", introducing fear, injustice, and the merging of physical and emotional confinement. This theme of her early life is highlighted when Jane details a moment where John Reed caught her reading and she spoke out against him, calling him "Wicked and cruel boy!" And claiming, "You are like a murderer— you are like a slave-driver— you are like the Roman emperors!" Enraged by her defiance, John attacks, "He ran headlong at me: I felt him grasp my hair and my shoulder: he had closed with a desperate thing. I really saw in him a tyrant: a murderer." (Brontë). Through these early experiences, Jane learns to associate isolation with moral correction, causing solitude to become a familiar condition that is expected. As part of her punishment Jane is confined to the Red-Room. The Red-Room scene transforms isolation from simple punishment into a psychological and moral experience, symbolizing how Victorian culture used confinement to discipline emotion and enforce female obedience. Locked away for defending herself, Jane is subjected to a space that merges physical confinement with emotional terror. The "crimson" light and oppressive silence reflects both her anger and her fear, while the room's association with death converts her punishment into a spiritual trial. Jane is expected to suppress her passion and learn humility, reflecting the 19th century belief that virtue is tied to emotional restraint. Brontë, however subverts this expectation, framing Jane's punishment as the source of the awakening of her ethical self. Through this awakening, Brontë positions Jane within Showalter's "feminine" stage of women's writing. Her rebellion remains contained within moral language, yet it represents a growing self-awareness that will later mature into

independence. The Red-Room thus serves as a punishment and early instance of isolation that functions as a catalyst for female consciousness.

Following the Red-Room scene, Jane continues to rebel against injustice, however her resistance is continually reshaped by the environments that seek to contain her. The moral discipline that began at Gateshead is continued in an institutional form at Lowood School. Mrs. Reed's conversation with Mr. Brocklehurst and the subsequent dismissal of Jane furthers her psychological conditioning to equate solitude with moral purification. In her conversation with Mr. Brocklehurst, Mrs. Reed depicts Jane in an inaccurate light "I should be glad if the superintendent and teachers were requested to keep a strict eye on her, and, above all, to guard against her worst fault, a tendency to deceit." (Brontë). By labeling Jane as deceitful and insisting that Jane not return to Gateshead even for holidays, Mrs. Reed ensures that Jane's isolation punishment continues at Lowood. Her formal dismissal from the household completes the severance of familial ties, dissolving Jane's few existing relationships entirely. Upon arrival at Lowood, Jane is given respite from her isolation, experiencing kindness and belonging from Miss Temple and Helen Burns, softening the strictness of the school and offering Jane's first experiences of moral authority rooted in kindness rather than cruelty. This new-found peace is shattered when Mr. Brocklehurst visits the school, publicly shaming her as a deceitful child and urging the other girls to shun her. She later describes her feelings to Helen Burns, "If others don't love me, I would rather die than live— I cannot bear to be solitary and hated, Helen" (Brontë). This scene mirrors Jane's earlier punishment at Gateshead, again condemning her to isolation as punishment while threatening to destroy the only sense of belonging she has ever felt.

In contrast of the environment of shame and austerity enforced by Mr. Brocklehurst, Brontë introduces forces which reshape Jane's internalized understanding of isolation in the form of Miss Temple and Helen Burns. Both characters offer models of virtue that are grounded in

compassion and religion rather than fear. Helen's quiet endurance teaches Jane that moral strength can exist alongside suffering, while Miss Temple's composure and kindness reveal that authority does not depend on cruelty. These religious displays include Miss Temple's charitable decision to feed the girls bread and cheese after Brocklehurst starves them and her public restoration of Jane's innocence directly, as well as Helen's explicit Christian teachings about loving one's enemies and acceptation suffering with spiritual calm. This directly contradicts the religious control Mr. Brocklehurst represents, giving Jane religious validation instead of punishment. Griesinger notes that Jane's religious faith functions as both constraint and liberation, "*Jane Eyre* raises awareness of the wrongs done to women when men of faith forget or fail to put into practice the liberating potential of the Christian gospel. Evangelicalism in the Victorian period had unique possibilities for liberating and empowering women in its emphasis on a private and independent, personal relationship with God, and its belief that men and women were equally called and gifted for works of service and love in the kingdom of God" (Griesinger 56) her isolation becomes a space where spiritual integrity allows feminist independence (Griesinger). These traits layer over top of the punishment and isolation of Jane's early life, softening its effects but not fully erasing its power. As a result, Jane learns to endure solitude with dignity and to treat others gently, while also fueling her internalized association between isolation and moral purification. These influences define Jane's moral character and establish her lifelong belief that isolation can purify wrongdoing.

Miss Temple's departure from Lowood makes a turning point in Jane's relationship to isolation, removing a stabilizing force and prompting her to seek employment as a governess. At Thornfeild, Jane finds community and connection that is different from the connections she experienced at Lowood. Thornfeild is emotionally warm; Adele, Mrs. Fairfax along with the other household staff welcome Jane into their lives and include her in their pseudo family. In her

interactions with Mr. Rochester, glimpses of Jane's younger, rebellious, and passionate self are revealed. She speaks candidly with him upon his request, answering him honestly but with mature and moral carefulness learned at Lowood. Jane feels emotionally safe at Thornfeild, allowing her to express herself freely, yet modestly, after years of moral restraint. Beneath this freedom and warmth, however, Jane's inner self begins to divide. The independence and self-respect she learned through years of punishment and solitude began to conflict with her feelings for Mr. Rochester. As Jane later affirms, "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself," (Brontë) revealing that self-reliance formed in isolation now resists Rochester's emotional pull. This growing affection awakens the passionate, rebellious nature she has long repressed, the moral convictions that once protected her now act as barriers. Jane no longer experiences isolation, but instead experiences internal conflict between long repressed passion and ingrained moral principle. This is evident in her reaction to Mrs. Fairfax's warning, which pulls Jane back into a more cautious mindset. This reignites Jane's moral isolation, and she instinctively separates herself from desire, only allowing herself to see Mr. Rochester at assigned times and refusing to dine with him. This reveals how deeply Jane has internalized the belief that solitude protects integrity.

Despite her internal conflict, Jane is truly happy to marry Mr. Rochester but remains cautious. This caution proves valid when the wedding is interrupted by the reveal of Bertha Mason. Bertha embodies the term "madwoman," portrayed as violent, animalistic, and in-human. As claimed by Gilbert and Gubar, Bertha represents Jane's repression and her divided psyche, stating "Jane's own imprisoned 'hunger, rebellion, and rage'" (Gilbert 339). Bertha's imprisonment in the attic mirror Jane's psychological restraint, her madness displaying the potential consequences of giving in to passion and desire. The attic becomes a second Red-Room, echoing female isolation as both a punishment and a warning (Gilbert). The discovery of Bertha forces Jane to confront the emotions she has spent her life suppressing. This realization,

coupled with the knowledge that she cannot be with Mr. Rochester in a socially or morally acceptable way, Jane flees Thornfeild, isolating herself to preserve her moral integrity.

After leaving Thornfeild, Jane finds herself destitute and utterly alone, returning to isolation. She wanders the moors in solitude, a physical reflection of her internal desolation. Just as in the Red-Room, Jane is isolated; but what was once forced isolation is now self-chosen. Just as she nears death, Jane is able to find refuge with the Rivers family. Stripped of pride and passion, Jane's recovery at the Moor House represents a moral and spiritual rebirth rooted in humility and gratitude rather than fear and punishment. Brontë redefines Jane's isolation not as a punishment, but as transformation and reclamation of autonomy. At Moor House, this transformation takes a definitive shape. Jane's isolation becomes the ground on which she rebuilds herself, not through pride or passion, but through humility, gratitude, and a moral awareness rooted in her own experience rather than imposed doctrine. What was once forced confinement evolves into a self-directed stillness that allows her to examine who she is when stripped of worldly attachments. This reclaimed interior freedom is precisely what allows her to recognize St. John's demands as yet another threat to her autonomy, even though they are framed as selfless Christian service. By redefining isolation as a space of renewal rather than punishment, Brontë shows that Jane's moral authority now comes from within, not from the institutions that once tried to discipline her.

Jane's peace at the Moor House is soon disrupted, threatened by a new form of confinement. St. John Rivers cold proposals of marriage confront Jane with a choice between what is framed as moral duty, and emotional integrity. His offer solidifies the pattern that Brontë has displayed throughout the novel, isolation as the price of virtue. St. John is devoid of the warmth and humility Jane became accustomed to at Thornfeild, mirroring the moral values and suppression enforced by Mr. Brocklehurst and the Reeds. Refusing further confinement, Jane

denies him, revealing full autonomy. This time, however, Jane chooses her own desires rather than obedience. The completion of this moral test gives Jane the conviction needed to return to Mr. Rochester as an equal. When she chooses Rochester freely, she narrates, “I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine” (Brontë 452), reframing isolation not as deprivation but as intentionally shared intimacy. Through this transformation, Brontë converts societal morality into a personal morality grounded in autonomy. The completion of this moral test gives Jane the conviction needed to return to Mr. Rochester as an equal, carrying with her the renewed, self-chosen isolation she forged at Moor House. This inward solitude, no longer punishment but principle, allows her to enter the relationship without losing the autonomy she fought to reclaim.

Across *Jane Eyre*, Brontë transforms the 19th century ideal of moral isolation into a process of female self-definition. What begins at Gateshead as punishment for emotion becomes, by Ferndean, a chosen stillness grounded in conscience and equality. Jane’s progression mirrors the moral-emotional framework that Scholes traces in the early study of English, virtue cultivated through feeling, but Brontë reclaims that framework for women, turning moral education into moral autonomy. Within Showalter’s “feminine” stage, Jane internalizes patriarchal ideals only to reshape them through empathy and self-knowledge, proving that isolation can generate identity and also suppress it. Her evolution completes the first phase of isolation’s history in women’s writing, preparing the way for later authors, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, to expose how the same moral system that refined Jane will later entrap other women.

The Yellow Wallpaper

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”, published in 1892, exposes the darker legacy of the female ideals present in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Set nearly 50 years later, *The Yellow Wallpaper* represents Showalter’s “feminist” stage of women’s literature where female

writers openly protest patriarchal systems (Showalter). Late 19th century America, the setting of *The Yellow Wallpaper,* tied feminine virtue to submission, piety, and domestic stability. Emotional expression was demonized and labeled as hysteria. As Vicky Long explains, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century psychiatric narratives often pathologized women's distress, reinforcing gendered moral judgments; as she notes, "patriarchal psychiatric profession diagnosed women who deviated from gender roles as mad" (Long 136–137). The response to these "female afflictions" such as the "rest cure" demanded total passivity and sensory deprivation for the afflicted in order to enforce "proper" womanly behavior. Gilman's short story critiques this "treatment," depicting the agonizing isolation and confinement, as well as their effects, from a woman's perspective. Gilman converts the 19th century association between morality and emotional restraint into a narrative of psychological rebellion. The same ideals of silence and virtue that shaped Jane's moral education now confine Gilman's narrator both physically and mentally, transforming isolation from a means of self-control into an act of annihilation and resistance.

The "rest cure" prescribed to the narrator echoes patriarchal morality, enforcing ideals of the still, obedient, and emotionless woman. John, the narrator's husband and physician, is entirely dismissive of the narrator's concerns yet simultaneously refuses to allow her any form of autonomy or self-expression, personifying male authority and control. At the start of the story, the narrator states "John is a physician, and perhaps (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind) Perhaps that is the reason I do not get well faster. You see, he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do?" (Gilman 2). Her tone of weary resignation reveals how deeply she has internalized her lack of agency. These early admissions show that what is presented as medical treatment is in truth a moral discipline designed to silence emotion. This secrecy extends to her writing, which she must hide because

John forbids her any mental activity: "I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman 3). The diary becomes her only private space, a covert form of expression that underscores the depth of her isolation, she is physically confined to the room and mentally confined to silence, with privacy attainable only in stolen moments.

The setting of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a direct reflection of the narrator's confinement and John's oppressive presence. The room in which she is kept is reinforced with barred windows, furniture bolted to the floor, restraints, and a locked door. The narrator perceives the room to be a nursery, although it is clear that the room is meant to house the mentally unwell, highlighting her lack of awareness of the intensity of her care. These features of the room, along with the narrator's perception of a nursery, reveal the infantilizing nature of the narrator's condition. John's infantilization of the narrator reinforces her regression, he refers to her as "little girl" and constantly dismisses her as foolish. In this sense, the narrator's earlier statement naming John as the reason for her lack of progress is correct. By isolating and confining his wife, John is able to exert full control over her, keeping her in a regressive state and not allowing her space to heal. Through this dynamic, Gilman exposes how these patriarchal treatments dehumanize women by transforming them into dependent children. The narrator's "nursery" becomes a metaphor for her social and psychological regression, which is not allowed space to grow and develop.

Within the confines of her "nursery," the narrator's secret journal becomes her only means of self-expression and rebellion. Because her writing must remain hidden, the diary becomes not only an outlet but a symptom of her confinement. The narrator is isolated physically in the nursery and psychologically in the secrecy of her own mind, with no socially sanctioned space for her voice to exist. Because she is forbidden to write or exert herself with thought, she must hide this outlet. She uses the journal as a confessional, revealing thoughts she would not dare speak aloud for fear of disappointing John and potentially intensifying her treatment. Each

secret entry suggests a quiet act of deceit against John and defiance of his authority, revealing her growing distrust of his control. Outwardly, she strives to please John, speaking delicately and reassuring him of her recovery, yet her secret words expose the widening gap between her outward self and her emerging private self. Zhang and Hu interpret the story's fragmented narration as a "gendered fracture of voice," a structure that both resists patriarchal authority and reveals the psychological toll of that oppression (Zhang 2–3). This tension mirrors Jane Eyre's inner voice of rebellion, moral, reflective, and self-contained, while also foreshadowing outward defiance as displayed by Bertha Mason. Like a child testing boundaries, the narrator's secret writing carries the tone of adolescent rebellion, both fearful and exhilarating. This duality reveals how patriarchal control forces rebellion as a sole act of autonomy, her rebellion is formed by isolation.

The most telling evidence of the narrator's mental decline is the wallpaper itself, a feature of the room where she is forcibly confined. She describes it early on as "repellent, almost revolting… a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others" (Gilman 5). Her disgust reflects not only the paper's grotesque appearance but also the psychological effects of being shut in a room which functions as a space of confinement. She immediately recognizes the environment as oppressive, remarking, "I should hate it myself if I had to live long in this room" (Gilman 5), directly linking the wallpaper to the isolation that deteriorates her sanity. As her confinement lengthens, she begins to perceive a woman trapped behind the paper, shaking the bars in an attempt to escape, a vision that arises as the result of a lack or external stimuli or human contact. The woman is mot simply an abstract symbol, but is also a projection shaped by the narrator's physical entrapment; without movement, choice, or privacy, her mind turns the room's features into companions and threats. Gradually, the narrator's identity collapses into the

figure she imagines, illustrating how prolonged isolation erodes the boundary between perception and reality. The wallpaper becomes not a general symbol but the oppressive environment itself, an unchanging, inescapable surface that reflects how isolation blurs the line between sanity and rebellion.

The narrator's merging with the woman in the wallpaper completes the transformation from moral discipline into psychological destruction. Much like Bertha Mason, the narrator's madness exposes the limits of emotional repression, what was once considered virtue becomes pathology. The narrator is reduced to an animalistic state, ripping down the paper and creeping around the room, no longer concerned with appearing well to appease John. Through this madness, she is able to gain freedom, no longer hiding unacceptable and unwomanly behavior. She states, "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman 29), feeling fully free from confinement. Through this collapse, Gilman shows that the narrator's only path to freedom emerges from the isolation that destroyed her; confinement becomes the very force that transforms repression into escape.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle

Shirley Jackson's 1962 novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* shifts female isolation from punishment and rebellion towards self-preservation and identity. Written over a century after Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and following Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper,* Jackson's novel depicts Showalter's "female" phase of women's literature. This period is defined by inward reflection and the creation of distinctly female worlds (Showalter). Isolation is no longer something strictly imposed by men or institutions but has become something consciously maintained by Merricat and Constance as a means of control. The sisters retreat from a society that has rejected and condemned them, transforming solitude into a sanctuary. Their home becomes a self-contained world in which the feminine ideals of moral obedience have been redefined and upheld by women themselves. Through the sister's retreat, Jackson reimagines isolation as a form of

survival, a form that has evolved from women like Jane Eyre and Gilman's narrator who transform moral confinement into autonomy.

The Blackwood home is a complex setting, functioning as both a refuge and a prison. The home is the physical manifestation of the sister's chosen seclusion, maintaining psychological stasis. The estate is marked by locked gates, high fences, and overgrown foliage, blurring the line between protection and decay. Unlike the physical confinement of the Red-Room, the attic, and Gilman's yellow room, the barriers at the Blackwood home are in place to keep others out rather than to keep the women in. Akçil argues that Jackson transforms the gothic home into "a metaphorical space of female solidarity and protection" (Akçil 28), suggesting that isolation can serve as refuge rather than punishment. The villagers surrounding the home are cruel and hostile towards the Blackwood's, reflecting mid-century anxieties towards women who defy domestic norms. The villagers surrounding the home are not merely unfriendly but threatening; Merricat admits, "Sometimes I wondered if they would kill us," underscoring the fear that shapes every interaction with the outside world (Jackson 25). Their hostility justifies the defenses around the home and clarifies why isolation functions as survival. In addition to the physical barriers, Merricat also employs additional reinforcement in the form of rituals and spells of protection. These safeguards preserve the illusion of stasis, the sister's daily rituals repeat endlessly without interference, keeping them safe from the hostile villagers but also trapping them in a cycle of fear and preservation.

Merricat's rituals of protection extend the safety of the home, protecting her and Constance while she ventures to town. Merricat describes her protective charms, a variety of buried objects, as "a powerful taut web which never loosened, but held fast to guard us" (Jackson 41), offering her a great sense of control and strength that is rooted in fear. Each act of protection becomes an act of confinement, binding herself tightly to her home and thus isolation. Jackson's

use of childlike language in Merricat's narration, including phrases such as "I was not allowed to handle knives" (Jackson 42) and her fixation on routine reveals regression and immaturity. Where Gilman's narrator regression and inability to heal is inflicted on her by patriarchal control, this aspect of Merricat's psyche is self-enforced, highlighting the shift in portrayal of female isolation.

Merricat's rituals and enforced isolation reveal a deep need for control, a need that drove her to murder her oppressive family. Although never explicitly stated, her fixation on protection and isolation suggests a history of domestic control from a patriarchal figure. This history is further supported by Merricat's reaction to Cousin Charles's intrusion, which reignites the same patriarchal authority she seeks to destroy. The poisoning and subsequent death of the Blackwood family members, especially the father, operates as both a literal and symbolic rebellion against male control and authority. Yet this rebellion is inseparable from isolation. In killing the patriarch, Merricat frees herself from the structure that confined her, but she simultaneously seals herself and Constance into a deeper, more permanent solitude. Merricat's violent fantasies and defensive rituals emerge as coping mechanisms formed by years of social ostracism, transforming isolation into both psychological refuge and psychological distortion. Her behavior also serves as a means of isolation, behaving in odd and violent ways allows her to maintain undisturbed distance from outside society. What she destroys in patriarchal dominance she replaces with self-imposed enclosure, revealing how resistance to male authority creates an isolation that becomes both refuge and prison. Through her acts of rebellion, Merricat seeks to create a female world devoid of male authority, directly in line with Showalter's "female" phase.

In contrast, Constance Blackwood embodies the "angel in the house" ideal. She is gentle, nurturing, and spends her days gardening and preparing meals for the family. Her refusal to leave the house stems from deep agoraphobia, but also presents the lingering influence of patriarchal

ideals even without the presence of men. Even after her father's death, Constance unconsciously upholds the patriarchal order by devoting herself to domestic caretaking. Together, the Blackwood sisters represent a paradox where women are free from male authority, yet still haunted and contained by the isolation it produces.

The arrival of Cousin Charles disrupts the female world the Blackwood sisters have built, threatening to destroy their safety. Charles is the embodiment of materialism, greed, and masculine intrusion, representing the return of social order the sisters have tried to escape. Merricat's blatant hostility towards him is a rebellion against the patriarchal control he tries to assert. He repeatedly attempts to control Merricat, insisting Constance restrict her wandering and discipline her for burring valuable items. His requests are directly targeted to stop Merricat's odd and unwomanly behavior, seeking to use control to shape her into a more ideal woman, reflecting reflecting mid-century expectations that women be domestic, compliant, and deferential to male authority, standards Charles attempts to impose on both sisters. In this way, In this way, Charles mirrors the moral authority of John in "The Yellow Wallpaper", as well as Mr. Brocklehurst and St. John in *Jane Eyre*, each of whom uses control to confine women to restrictive spaces. Their presence makes clear that patriarchal authority repeatedly manifests as a force that produces or deepens female isolation. Charles' arrival intensifies the Merricat's isolation by reinforcing a surveillance network that collapses her remaining autonomy; every male presence becomes another barrier between her interior, isolated world and the protection it provides. Ultimately, Charles's presence reveals that isolation cannot exist untouched by external systems of power.

The power struggle between Charles and Merricat culminates in the burning of the Blackwood home, a destruction set in motion by Charles's patriarchal intrusion but ultimately carried out, and intensified, by the villagers, whose collective violence confirms the sisters 'worst

fears and drives them into complete isolation. The collective violence of the villagers during the fire validates the sister's fear of the outside world, driving them deeper into isolation. The fire is both literal and symbolic purification, erasing the last traces of male authority and annihilating any possibility of a return to society. Merricat and Constance return to the ruins, which they still view as a sanctuary of solitude, and resume their isolation. This final return to the ruins marks the completion of the sisters 'retreat from the world. The closing scene confirms that their solitude is no longer defensive but fully embraced; Merricat tells Constance, "We are on the moon now… We have everything we need," reframing the ashes of their home as a sanctuary rather than a site of loss. Isolation has become self-imposed and absolute, a chosen reality rather than a condition forced upon them. In this final image, Jackson presents a form of isolation that is neither punitive nor resisted, but internalized, the culmination of female solitude evolving from external confinement to self-constructed refuge.

I Who Have Never Known Men

Jacqueline Harpman's *I Who Have Never Known Men* displays female isolation in its purest form, taking the concept of solitude farther than any of the previous works. The 1995 novel acts as the final evolution of "female" literature, depicting a society made entirely of women without male influence (Showalter). The unnamed narrator has lived her entire life in a post-apocalyptic underground cage with thirty-nine other women, guarded by silent men and cut off from any civilization. In Harpman's novel, isolation transcends moral or psychological experience and becomes ontological, the condition being itself. Stripped of history, gender expectations, and social identity, the narrator's isolation no longer functions as punishment, safety, or rebellion, but as the only way of being.

The underground cage is the starting point of the novel and is the only space the narrator has ever known. The imprisoned women are constantly monitored and physically corrected for

unacceptable actions, such as physical contact with each other, eliminating the possibility of intimacy and limiting connection. This setting of confinement echoes an extreme version of Brontë's Red-Room and Gilman's yellow room, a female prison, but now devoid of any discernible authority or moral logic. The imprisonment is unexplained, turning isolation into an empty ritual of control without meaning. The women are deprived of mirrors, contact, and their own memories. The narrator is even deprived of a name, erasing individuality entirely and transforming them into bodies without identity. The narrator experiences a double isolation; having no memories or knowledge of a life outside of the cage, she is unable to connect with the other women or engage in discussions. The women refuse to teach her things or explain life before the cage, asking "What point is there in your knowing, since it can't happen to you?" (Harpman 8), enraging the narrator. Unlike the previous texts, the narrator of *I Who Have Never Known Men* cannot even conceive of another existence. The deprivation of knowledge amplifies her physical isolation, which has become so absolute that rebellion itself becomes impossible. The narrator's anger reveals a spark of individual consciousness, suggesting a deeper drive to seek meaning.

The opportunity to seek meaning presents itself seemingly at random; in an instant the guards retreat, leaving the cage door open in their haste. The other women stand still, unable to move. This inability to act suggests a lingering obedience to authority, shaped by their faded memories of a world that required male permission for every decision. In this way, the narrator is at an advantage. She rushes towards the open door without hesitation, urging the others to follow. Her lack of social memory becomes a form of liberation, giving way to full autonomy. Her lifelong isolation preparing her to act without fear or dependence.

The women emerge into a barren landscape devoid of any sentient beings, again finding themselves in total isolation. Unlike Brontë, Gilman, and Jackson's respective isolation settings, Harpman' setting erases all social, moral, and emotional meaning, the outside world mirroring

the emptiness of the cage. For the narrator, however, this emptiness carries no fear or terror. In response to the other women's fear, she shouts "Then go back inside! The cage is still down there, if you're so frightened of being outside!" (Harpman 57). Having only known life in the cage, she experiences this new solitude not as a loss but with recognition. Her calm apathy contrasts with the other women, who grapple with the reality that the society they once knew is no longer accessible. In this new world, solitude is a familiar state that feels natural to the narrator who has never experienced another state of being. Unlike the other women, she does not experience the barren landscape as a loss, remarking "I couldn't understand why they weren't rejoicing wholeheartedly at the miracle of being outside… Perhaps, when someone has become accustom to day-to-day life that makes sense, they can never become accustom to strangeness. That is something that I, who have only experienced absurdity, can only suppose" (Harpman 56). This moment underscores the profound gap between the narrator and the other women, the narrator's life-long isolation enabling her to move forward without fear.

Though the women search for pockets of civilization, they only discover other underground cages, filled with deceased prisoners. Without existing society to assimilate into, the women create their own society without outside influence, much like the Blackwood sisters. Their community lacks formal hierarchy, conflict, and authority, qualities that once defined patriarchal systems. Their society is governed by mutual dependence; they share food and responsibility, even forming intimate relationships with one another. This all-female society represents the height of what Showalter defines as the "female" phase of women's literature, marked by women creating their own spaces, voices, and values (Showalter). The women live out the remainder of their lives peacefully, passing one by one until the narrator is the only living being remaining.

After burying her last companion, the narrator does not experience despair but relief, responding to the final withdrawal of human contact with the same calm acceptance that has

guided her since leaving the cage. In this moment, Harpman completes the transformation of isolation into the narrator's natural state of being, solitude is no longer something she endures but the only condition that feels coherent to her. Her decades of life afterward demonstrate this fully; she continues in silence and freedom, untroubled by the absence of others, and ultimately takes her own life not out of loneliness or fear but to escape the physical suffering brought on by illness. She states, "When the pain leaves mean peace I find it hard to believe that I will do it, when it rampages, my doubts vanish" (Harpman 165) revealing her desire to live on in solitude if only she were without physical pain. Her death underscores how entirely she has internalized solitude; isolation is not a burden she seeks to end, but the environment in which she has always known how to live. In this extreme form, Harpman pushes the theme of isolation beyond Brontë's moral solitude, Gilman's constrained rebellion, and Jackson's defensive retreat, suggesting a final stage where isolation becomes not a condition one resists or chooses, but an identity one inhabits.

Conclusion

Across 150 years of women's writing, isolation transforms from punishment to liberation. In *Jane Eyre,* solitude refines virtue, in *The Yellow Wallpaper,* it drives rebellion; *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* presents isolation as a form of protection; in *I Who Have Never Known Men,* it defines existence. Together, these works trace the evolution of women's autonomy and literature's reflection of it, moving external confinement to inner consciousness, and finally to a world beyond social definition. This trajectory mirrors Elaine Showalter's three stages of women's literary development, but also pushes beyond them. Brontë's moral solitude neatly fits within Showalter's feminine phase; yet by the time Harpman's narrator becomes one with her own isolation, female identity no longer seeks definition through rebellion or reflection. The self instead exists entirely apart from the systems that once confined it. This progression is

not only historical, but ontological. Tracing this evolution exposes how women's psychological landscapes mirror broader cultural shifts. As physical boundaries of confinement fall apart, isolation becomes increasingly abstract, internal, and self-directed. In this sense, women's isolation is not erased by social progress but is transformed and reclaimed. Ultimately, these texts affirm that isolation, once a means of control, becomes a language though which women articulate the complexity of self-hood. This allows them to speak when society demanded silence, telling their stories to advocate for all women. Each author writes from within a cultural moment that constrains women differently, yet all four reveal how isolation both reflects and resists those societal pressures, transforming it from punishment into a lens through which female interiority becomes visible.

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