

“I would have to be *mad* to leave this bed”: A Female Heterotopia of Self-confinement in Sue Townsend’s *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*

“Tendría que estar *loca* para dejar esta cama”: una heterotopía femenina de autoconfinamiento en *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, de Sue Townsend

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Abstract: What happens when a woman, housewife and mother, decides to take to her room and stay in bed for a whole year? This scarcely plausible proposition opens the last published work by the late British author Sue Townsend. This paper aims to explain the main coordinates of the narrative by using Foucault’s concept of heterotopia; an effective, theoretical tool when applied to the analysis of a contained, physical space which is eventually turned into a site of contestation by means of the protagonist’s self-imposed confinement. This implies further questioning on the degree of agency she displays within her environment and, in addition, raises doubts about whether the novel responds to a feminist stance on the part of the author or to a literary depiction of her unavoidable withdrawal from the outside world due to her personal circumstances.

Keywords: Sue Townsend; *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*; heterotopia; confinement; feminism and literature.

Summary: Introduction. A Room of One’s Own: The Creation of Heterotopia. Female Agency: Heterotopia as Contestation. The Potential Feminist Stance in *The Woman who Went to Bed for a Year*. Conclusions.

Resumen: ¿Qué sucedería si una mujer, esposa y madre, decidiera encerrarse en su habitación y permanecer en cama durante un año entero? Esta propuesta escasamente plausible desata la acción del último trabajo publicado de la autora británica Sue Townsend. Este artículo pretende explicar las coordinadas fundamentales de la narración utilizando el concepto de heterotopía acuñado por Foucault, una herramienta teórica muy útil si se aplica, como es el caso, al análisis de un espacio físico, contenido, que se trasforma finalmente en un locus de resistencia por medio del confinamiento autoimpuesto de la protagonista. Esto implica llevar a cabo una reflexión sobre el grado de voluntad que ella despliega sobre su entorno y, además, genera dudas acerca de si la novela responde a una posición feminista por parte de la autora o a un retrato literario de su inevitable retirada del mundo exterior debido a sus circunstancias personales.

Palabras clave: Sue Townsend; *La mujer que vivió un año en la cama*; heterotopía; confinamiento; feminismo y literatura.

Sumario: Introducción. Una habitación propia: La creación de una heterotopía. La esfera de acción femenina: la heterotopía como rebelión. El potencial feminista de *La mujer que vivió un año en la cama*.

INTRODUCTION

Sue Townsend, one of the most loved English writers of the twentieth century, is widely known for her comic creation of the Adrian Mole series of fictive diaries. However, her production includes other highly successful volumes (*The Queen and I* or *Number Ten* among them), as well as plays, theatrical adaptations, periodical columns in national newspapers, etc. *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, written in 2012, is the last of her works, published before her death in 2014.

Townsend's novel stems from the female protagonist's surprising and implausible course of action. Unexpectedly, after a particularly weary day, Eva Beaver takes to her bedroom, closes the door, and stays in bed for a whole year. In this way, the apparently common and unambiguous space of the marital bedroom sees its limits expanded and its functions redefined when turned into Eva's self-contained world from which different conflicting narratives of safety and provocation emerge, and it is precisely this transformation of the bedroom from an everyday space into an alleged site of contestation which favours the use of the Foucauldian notion of heterotopia.

Applied to a wide range of contexts (Johnson 791) and not fully defined by this author, heterotopia accounts for the somehow slippery formulation of those counter-sites which represent a "space within a space . . . absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about" (Foucault 24). Architecture, Marketing, Communications,

Education, Gender Studies, etc. are but a few fields in which heterotopia has been used. Likewise, it has also provided Literature with a useful analytic framework when dealing with the special characterisation of space as something built, lived, and perceived as shown, for instance, by Hwang’s contribution; a classical Heideggerian definition, not without contradictions (Young 190). Taking the above into account, this paper aims to describe the specific literary heterotopia created by Sue Townsend in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* also paying attention to other two key issues that influence the development of the narrative as a whole.

On the one hand, there is the fact that the protagonist’s confinement is self-imposed in the most natural way, with no previous reflection. No doctor’s recommendation or public health claims (sadly popular these days) are to be found, but Eva’s own will, resulting in the total transformation of the limited space of the bedroom into a global, transcendent and, despite her, rebellious realm. Therefore, we are not facing a literary construction reflected in a spatial disposition, both derived from forced confinement (Fludernik 225), but a different perspective based on Eva’s new bond with the space around her and the ways in which both interact under the theoretical umbrella of heterotopia.

On the other hand, the gender component is not to be missed, as it never is in Townsend’s narrative. The author had already dealt with the topic of the trapped woman but from the point of view of the pathological inability to leave one’s own closed environment, that is, agoraphobia, precisely the underlying issue of *Bazaar and Rummage*, written for the stage in 1982, one of Townsend’s first plays. This time, Eva does not suffer from any psychological condition which impedes her from leaving her room and continuing to perform her sacred role of homemaker. In light of this, and apart from the consideration of the heterotopic character of Eva’s new world, I will address the protagonist’s self-confinement from the perspective of female agency as well, in order to discover, eventually, whether the narrative responds to a feminist position on the part of the author or if there are other components which may inform both Eva’s attitude and Townsend’s writing in the gloomy period before her own death.

1. A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN: THE CREATION OF HETEROTOPIA

Almost forty years after his death, the influence of Michel Foucault remains unquestionable, and his works are still solid references and the basic foundations for research in different fields. Among all the constituents of his considerable theoretical corpus, the notion of heterotopia has proved very fruitful for critique despite being loosely formulated. However, these blurred, undefined limits are, precisely, the appeal, the “intellectual glamour” of the term (Palladino and Miller 2); a suggestive quality which has gathered both support, as the works by Knight (142) or Spanu (5) prove, and criticism, clearly stated by Soja (145) or Heyne (323), among other scholars of different disciplines.

The concept was stated in a lecture given by Foucault to the Circle for Architecture Studies, but it had been previously hinted at a year before in a radio programme about utopia and in the preface of *Les Mots et les Choses* written in 1976. Finally, in 1986, “Of Other Spaces,” an article appearing in the journal *Diacritics*, established the basic guidelines of heterotopia as a conceptual prism to examine the connections between space and, among others, power or identity. Foucault characterised heterotopias as those counter-sites where other real spaces can be subjected to different processes of representation, contestation, and inversion, conveying a nuance of opposition and conflict, and paying special attention to those spaces generated on the basis of otherness:

Among all these sites, I am interested in certain ones that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect. These spaces, as it were, which are linked with all the others, which however contradict all the other sites. (24)

This alternative understanding could be applied to a variety of spaces including those related to the everyday, either actual or fictionalised, as in the case of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* since “[d]omestic spaces present writers and characters with provident venues for dreaming and for locating and constructing an emerging interior self” (Rybczynski 82). Here heterotopia stems from the protagonist’s revelation of a hidden self which comes hand in hand with her personal redefinition of the limited space of her bedroom, both elements being unavoidably

connected, for there is no new Eva without her new bedroom, exemplifying the close link between self and space already described by Bachelard’s seminal contribution. Thus, her new way of re-shaping and living the space is contributing to the emergence of a self which, suppressed by the traditional rules and practices of homemaking, is as agreeable for her as it is disagreeable for the rest of her family. In the following lines, I will try to analyse the way in which this particular heterotopia is created and how its main characteristics, as enounced by Foucault, are recognisable in the narrative.

In the case of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, the physical conformation of this heterotopic space is totally unplanned:

She then went upstairs, into her bedroom and, without removing her clothes or her shoes, got into bed and stayed there for a year. She didn’t know it would be a year She felt an exquisite languor spread throughout her body and thought, ‘I would have to be *mad* to leave this bed.’ (2, 4)

Heterotopia is created the moment she closes the door of her room and subverts both her role within the family and the function of the limited space of the bedroom which has ceased to be the nuclear focus of marital bond, the space of family creation, thus exposing the contradiction of the situation; the space that exemplifies the lives of Eva and her husband as a couple turns into a single person’s space, with all the connotations conveyed by the term “single.”

On a second stage, the new space is improved and remodelled with the passing days, according to the protagonist’s self-acknowledgement of the inner changes she is experiencing: she gets rid of unnecessary things and paints the walls white in order to feel comfortable with herself and her new environment. Janz wonders about the connections between text and place from the point of view of hermeneutics: “there is no doubt that there are at least some textual elements to place. We read places. We write them, individually and collectively. They are not only meaningful, they are the structure of meaning” (27). In *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, the protagonist creates a new reading of a common space, this time defined as a whole global universe in which her own world, her bed, is inserted. That the narrative quality of this new space emerged out of Eva’s self-transformation is out of the question: a white space, similar to a white paper to write on the new lines of her new self. A space free from

distractions, reduced to the essentials, and perfectly suitable to just be. In this way, her personal metamorphosis mirrors the physical changes of the bedroom:

The wardrobe was empty The bedroom was huge now the wardrobe was gone He moved the radio, the television, the bedside tables, the phone, the seascape pictures . . . and last of all, Eva's Billy bookcase Eva was entranced by her all-white room. Alexander had worked all day into the evening, painting the ceiling, the walls, the woodwork around the window and the floorboards eggshell white. (87, 133)

The whole process of spatial creation is highlighted by another narrative component which has always played an essential role in Townsend's works; onomastics, and *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* is no exception. This time, the real space represented by both the bed and the bedroom matches the significance of the protagonist's married surname: Beaver, which recalls quite a metaphoric resonance, as a beaver is an animal able enough to modify its environment in order to create a safe and productive space for itself.

Despite the transformation applied to the bedroom and its newly acquired atmosphere of tranquillity, the remodelled space is not in the least a static environment. At first Eva's self-confinement applies only to her movements but the space *per se* is not closed to outer influences as it has got a door to the rest of the house and a window to the outside world. From the moment she closes herself in, these liminal elements are conferred a new functionality beyond their usual quality of being somehow trapped between two alternative—and often opposite—realms (Shortt 2). Liminality is primarily understood here as a spatial category that, nevertheless, echoes the transitional arena on which Eva is moving. The window turns into Eva's sole connection with the passing days, the coming and going of the seasons and, at the same time, with the madness generated by the word spread around the neighbourhood about her alleged sanctity. The door is the voluntary border to her confinement whose barrier is opened or closed at her will, and sometimes against it. When the painful experience of being exposed to both the mediatic demands of the people outside and the claims of her own family seems unbearable, Eva's solution is to erase those liminal components of her space which still maintain her links to the world in order to destroy almost any connection with it, carrying the building of her personal

heterotopia to the extreme: “Eva asked: ‘Peter, would you do me a favour? Would you help me to board the window up from the inside?’” (406).

Palladino and Miller (4) provide a very useful schematization of the six characteristics of heterotopia enunciated by Foucault that proves to be quite convenient when applied to the personal one created in *The Woman who Went to Bed for a Year*. These traits (namely universality, cultural specificity, juxtaposition, time breaking, selective accessibility and relation to the remaining space) form a sort of conglomerate of dichotomies that help us understand the multidimensionality of real and literary spaces alike.

To start, heterotopias are defined as having a universal quality in the sense of being present in all cultures. In the case of *The Woman who Went to Bed for a Year* this means to transcend the limits of the narrative as this universal appeal will, for sure, reach a number of female readers as it does with other women around Eva: “‘So, why are you still in bed?’ ‘I like it here,’ said Eva. She liked Julie but she already wanted her to go As she was walking down the stairs, Julie thought, ‘Wish it was me in that bed’” (34).

While acknowledging this universality, heterotopias are culturally specific because every culture builds its own which also applies to literary counter-spaces. How does this cultural specificity work in the case of Eva’s room? The cultural logic of the bedroom space provides it with certain traits that, in turn, regulate the behaviour of its occupants, even influencing their thoughts and feelings regarding that space. Beds are to be found everywhere, barracks, dormitories, hospitals, etc., but the marital bed is a space to share only with the person who is legally or sentimentally defined as “partner.” The couple is supposed to sanctify the space by means of reproduction which helps move forward through the creation of their own family as a productive and reproductive unit. In addition, the bed, as a metonymy of the whole bedroom and marital life stands out as something private of the couple where other people are temporarily allowed (children who cannot sleep or wake up the parents, doctors, etc.). All these culturally demanding requirements imposed upon the marital space are subverted by Eva’s new management of it.

Within the framework of heterotopia, juxtaposition operates by superimposing different layers of reality in connection to space that are, apparently, incompatible. In the case of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, at least three levels of subversion are to be found. To start, the

ontological opposition between public and private is nullified by the reactions to Eva's attitude from the world outside. She does not leave the room nor the bed so the rest of the world around her occasionally enters the space she inhabits, which loses its private character and turns into a sort of restrictive, "members only" public space: "When they got to the top of the landing, she called, 'Mum Mr Crossley is here.' Stanley stepped into a white space . . . 'Do sit down, Mr Crossley'" (192).

Furthermore, an ambit of calm and tranquillity turns into an active, almost working-like environment due to the mediatic construction of Eva's decision to stay in bed. The word of her confinement spreads around the neighbourhood and she sees herself forced to encounter people alien to her closest circle, who invest her with an almost thaumaturgical quality: "On New Year's Eve a stranger, a woman, called at the door and asked to speak to Eva . . . Bella said, 'I need some advice about the best and kindest way to leave my husband'" (237). Finally, what should be the shrine of marital love is also altered by Eva when she falls in love with another man who is allowed into her bedroom, thus altering the character of this allegedly private realm, created to be shared only with her husband.

When dealing with heterotopia, the concept of *heterochrony*, namely the link between space and time, is of great importance as it appeals to an interconnected system of relations between both dimensions, quite useful to illustrate the particular way in which literary time is conceived and perceived within the limits of heterotopia. In *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* Eva's resolution to remain in bed brings about a variation in her perception of time. Her day is not subjected to an exhausting schedule of chores and, therefore, the time elapsed seems to be longer: "It was in the afternoon of the fifth day that Peter, the window cleaner, called. Eva had slept on and off for twelve hours" (43). But she also feels apart from the house and family rhythms which follow a different (the usual) time pace as the members of the family get used to Eva's confinement. Time outside the room stays the same, inside, it is altered: "Hearing the voices outside, Eva pushed the sash up and poked her head out. 'Merry Christmas!' she shouted . . . There was a scandalised laughter as each of them realised they had forgotten her" (207).

2. FEMALE AGENCY: HETEROTOPIA AS CONTESTATION

According to Foucault, notions such as contradiction, conflict and contestation are activated by heterotopia as they are part of its own controversial nature. Those have been addressed and explained by several authors from different perspectives; Knight, Caleb or Palladino and Miller (5), among others, and constitute the basis of the approach I have favoured as the notion of a counter-site generated by a subverted treatment of a usual everyday space seems perfectly suitable for the analysis of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*.

Eva Beaver closes the door of her room and lies comfortably on her bed, taking what apparently seems just a momentary parenthesis in her busy life of wife, mother, and homemaker. The problem arises when the elapsed time in bed is considered “longer than usual,” when the rest period disrupts the traditional rhythm of the household, upsetting the rest of the family. In this sense hers is, by origin, an unnoticed contestation but it quickly takes shape and grows exponentially according to the others’ reactions. At this point, Eva’s degree of agency towards rebellion may be questioned but, as Eilan and Roessler state: “Once we acknowledge that intentions can be acquired unintentionally, we will no longer be baffled by breaches of the unity of agency” (10).

However, this introductory situation of the narrative poses further questioning on the nature of the protagonist’s agency. Shir-Wise approaches the issue of agency by taking into account a variety of critical perspectives: “[A]gency then, can be understood in temporal contexts, in terms of action, thought, conceptions of self, worldviews or resistance” (31), all of them implying an active role on the part of the subject, at a physical or psychological level. In the case of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, the protagonist’s agency develops progressively to provoke, eventually, a complete transformation of the everyday flows of the household, in a process that, in turn, evolves from a casual to a fully conscious course of action.

This whole process is narratively constructed around certain milestones. An early significant moment takes place between the spouses when Eva’s husband is banned from the marital bedroom in which constitutes a traditional way of female rebellion (Robinson 133): “At ten o’clock Brian Senior came into the bedroom and started to get undressed. Eva closed her eyes . . . then, with her back turned to him, she said, ‘Brian, I don’t want you to sleep in this bed tonight’” (19).

Unexpectedly, Eva has ceased to be the docile homemaker whose main activity, according to Young “consists of preserving things and their meaning as an anchor to shifting personal and group identity” (192). She has established her grounds for a different way to relate to her home and those who inhabit it, to her husband’s mounting distress: “She was no longer the compliant woman he had married, and he feared her mockery” (55). This new and surprising arrangement gives way to other alterations in the house dynamics as Eva rejects taking part in those chores which had absorbed her energy for years with little or no satisfaction in return: “On the evening of the 19th of December, Brian asked Eva, ‘What are we doing for Christmas?’ Eva said ‘I’ll be doing nothing at all’” (183). When asked if he wanted to take notes on how to organise Christmas, Brian readily accepts. Eva’s long list of activities labelled as “doing Christmas” stretches for six pages and the dialogue is then resumed: “‘So, that was Christmas last year. You may find it useful.’ Eva concluded. ‘And, Brian, I am. Never. Doing. Christmas. Again’” (189).

The fact that Eva does not have to fulfil all those duties anymore is liberating but highly distressing for those around her, who are hardly aware of the considerable display of energy and good will they imply. It all results in a power shift in the family life that used to rotate around Brian and the twins and that is now rotating around Eva and her warm, white bedroom, perceived by the rest of the family as a locus of resistance (Young 202). No chores, no mechanical sex, no imposed family life. Seamlessly, the protagonist’s agency and her self-awareness evolve linearly along the same path.

A further issue concerning female agency in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* relates also to heterotopia and its qualities as enounced by Foucault. One last trait of this construct is the possibility to be opened and closed in order to remain hidden or visible, which implies a certain degree of agency on the part of the creator. This fluidity applies both to actual and narrative spaces alike, Eva’s bedroom among the latter. Eva’s husband is forbidden to share the marital bedroom, but perfect strangers are more than welcome to come in and talk to Eva. This, eventually, leads to question the ultimate sense of the protagonist’s confinement, given the fact that an access control is strictly applied but it is still possible to enter the bedroom. The answer is hinted at by the narrator: “Then she remembered that she didn’t have to get up and make breakfast for anyone, yell at anyone else to get up, empty the dishwasher or fill the

washing machine” (27); that is, while in her white bedroom, Eva feels free from the constraints imposed by her role of homemaker. In this sense, her confinement does not abide by the sharp dichotomy between imprisonment and freedom as described by Kordela and Vadulakis (3). On the contrary, Eva’s perception of her own freedom while being actually confined to the four walls of her room contrasts with her feeling of enclosure when apparently free and moving around the house, because Eva has created, somehow forcefully, a world of her own contained within a single room, defining her limits and contents according to a mental construction that is progressively conformed.

This freedom-confinement duality is one of the basic referents of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, demonstrating the impossibility of establishing a sharp boundary between both. Eva is free in her clean space and only when her sphere is invaded to a painful degree does she bury herself within it, thus turning her heterotopia of freedom into one of imprisonment. Nevertheless, Townsend always gives way to hope; for her, there actually exist idyllic, closed places where a soul can be at liberty: “The Head Librarian . . . put up a notice advertising a vacancy for a library assistant . . . Eva loved her job. To unlock the heavy outer door and to walk into the hushed interior . . . gave her such a pleasure that she would have worked for nothing” (42).

As we see, the moving limits between the multiple layers of heterotopia give way to further consideration on how Eva’s personal one is progressively evolving, for not only does it change from freedom to confinement as its decisive characteristic, but it also experiences the transformation from a heterotopia of health into one of sickness according, this time, to the coordinates described by Caleb. The strange ways in which the protagonist is behaving require an explanation on the part of medical authorities, as Eva’s attitude seems to be unthinkable in a sane woman:

He opened the bedroom door. ‘There you are,’ he said.
‘Yes, here I am.’
‘Are you ill?’
‘No.’
‘It’s empty-nest syndrome. I heard it on *Woman’s Hour*.’ (4)

Brian’s clumsy remark is based on one of the most successful Western constructions around family and, particularly, mothers’ lives: the feeling

of unrest and loneliness on the part of mothers once the children have physically left the family home. It also brings echoes of another well-known and lasting myth, the bliss of motherhood. In her study *Motherhood, Women and Family in England*, Davies analyses the role of mothers within their families in England, in the last part of the twentieth century. She concludes that, in this period, (and the trend continues nowadays despite a certain degree of contestation) the debate turned around how *normal* women should behave (208) in order to abide by the global image of the perfect mother, clearly indebted to the Victorian idea of motherhood as women's highest achievement in life. In this sense Eva's reaction seems inconceivable and the logic of the social system requires further explanation as no woman in normal circumstances could act and speak as she does. If Brian expected his wife to explain her "unnatural" behaviour by means of his simplistic reduction, Eva nullifies his hopes with a scandalous counter-proposition: "'Admit it; you're distraught because the twins have left home.' 'No, I'm glad to see the back of them.' . . . Brian's voice trembled with anger. 'That's a very wicked thing for a mother to say'" (19).

Therefore, Eva's husband chooses wickedness thus exemplifying the traditional link between women's "deviation" from normality and evil (Birch 62; Kruse and Spickard 452).

Another possible explanation is illness. Doctors and nurses are called for diagnosis and the result is that Eva is not physically ill. There is a long tradition of defining women who oppose social conventions as mad, as the key works by Gilbert and Gubar, Köhl or Showalter prove, and the fact of rejecting their role as mothers and housewives—without otherwise devoting themselves to religion—has long been considered a symptom of madness, even indicative of moral decay, or a clear female anomaly of some kind. The solution is, as it has always been, medication, for only by using legal drugs could mad women's condition be cured, especially when taken in large patronising doses:

Nurse Spears said, 'I will go back to the surgery and inform your doctors that, in my opinion, you are having a breakdown of some kind We have some miraculous drugs now, and within few weeks you will be feeling your old self again. You will be able to get out of bed and rejoin the rest of us.'

'I don't want to join the rest of you.' (285)

Nurse Spears’s appeal to a nervous breakdown brings about inevitable connections with the issue of Victorian female hysteria and its treatment. One of the most popular prescriptions to overcome this—mostly female—condition was the rest cure popularised by the American doctor Silas Weir Mitchell around the 1870s. Forced seclusion was prescribed to female patients (King 70) who had to remain bed-ridden under the strict surveillance of a professional nurse instructed by the doctor in charge. No activity was allowed, and a special diet and complementary treatments were ordered to avoid muscle atrophy. Rest cure was even prescribed to Virginia Woolf well into the twentieth century and it was literarily portrayed by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Woolf herself in *Mrs Dalloway*, two of the less successful cases of the rest cure which, nevertheless, seems to have been less dangerous than other procedures to solve the “feminine problems” (Bassuk 245). On many occasions, husbands played a paramount role as the instigators of this rest cure in line with the exercise of their patriarchal role of watchful guardians of their wives’ composure (Villalba 275).

In *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*, Townsend subverts this topic of the Victorian rest cure by altering the part played by the alleged “patient,” as in Eva’s case the rest is not imposed but chosen; unfathomable, but requiring of an immediate and satisfying explanation fitting the traditional coordinates of women’s health. Therefore, the usual deviance labels are applied; either Eva longs for her children, she is a witch, or she is crazy and must be medicated. She resists all these definitions, but her circle perceives her as decidedly in need of control (McDowell 7), a control that should be applied by her husband. Thus, male reputation is affected by female deviation if the man is unable to discipline “his woman”—in any possible way—because her rebellion bluntly questions his manhood: “‘She’d soon get out of that bed if her arse was on fire,’ said Rubi to Brian. ‘You are too soft with her’” (151).

Finally, the official verdict on Eva is “madness,” which implies that measures must be taken. Those responsible for general wellbeing, namely policemen and healthcare personnel, arrive without being called: “Later when the doctors had gone, Ruby . . . went to Stanley Crossley’s house . . . ‘They’re taking Eva away,’ She could not bring herself to say Mental Health Unit” (430). Eva is declared mentally ill and needs to be confined in another closed space, an alternative heterotopia for the mentally afflicted in order to submit herself to a modern rest cure. Luckily, those around who still love her—neither her husband nor her children—open

the barriers she self-imposed a year before and bring her back to life by liberating her from her confinement.

In addition, Eva's alleged deviance provokes an unexpected counter-narrative in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*. The word of a strange, wise woman, confined within four white walls spreads all around her neighbourhood first and the whole city later. Eva's confinement is commented all over, particularly when she seems to have been possessed by a sort of clairvoyance with respect to other people's lives. Consequently, her personal heterotopia acquires a sanctuary-like quality and, while the rest of the family tries to cope with the situation, Eva cannot avoid going ahead with her assumed role of carer and is required to give advice to others who either force their way into the room or are summoned to her presence: "I seem to pick up on other people's pain and sadness. It's exhausting" (70). These characters include a man on the brink of suicide, a woman whose daughter has disappeared, an anguished housewife, etc., all of them sad characters in search of an answer to their own anguish. Little by little, a small crowd gathers opposite Eva's house. The media coverage of the story, in different forms, is eventually the main culprit of the distortion of Eva's situation which results in mounting absurdity: "The next day, when Brian was at work, Mrs Hordern come into his office and said, 'Your wife's on the front of the *Mercury*' The headline said: 'MAN SAVED BY "SAINT"'" (299).

Townsend masterfully portrays people's bewilderment at the beginning of the new millennium, the new ways of coping with the contradictions of their own existence, and the need for guidance through the disenchantment and void of their lives. Not only media but mass communication and social networks are working at full throttle spreading the voice of Eva's sanctity, thus exemplifying Bennett's statement that "[c]ontemporary culture is then a media saturated culture" (85), which gives way to the assimilation between reality and its textual or visual representation.

3. THE POTENTIAL FEMINIST STANCE IN *THE WOMAN WHO WENT TO BED FOR A YEAR*

According to Armstrong, "modern institutional cultures depend upon the separation of the political from the personal and they produce and maintain this separation on the basis of gender" (567). This implies that

both men and women traditionally occupy different spheres that operate separately and conform the cultural basis of a set of values related to the role played by both sexes. In this sense, within socially traditional coordinates, the woman is supposed to be the homemaker, the one responsible for creating a homely environment out of the four walls of a home, which bestows her with an active role as far as the domestic realm is concerned. Official discourses in the nineteenth century glorified this model of the perfect housewife and mother creating a highly stereotyped construction, completely successful and fully mirrored by political discourses well into the twentieth and even the twenty-first centuries that, when confronted, proved to be stubbornly resistant in the everyday sphere (Butler 529; McDowell 12; Johnson and Lloyd 1; Elias and Rai 204), and this is, precisely, the cultural context in which the narrative rebellion in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* inadvertently springs. In turn, from a socio-political point of view, contestation to women’s traditional roles within a patriarchal culture and society have been exposed by Feminism, which has articulated its claims in several consecutive, so-called “waves” which have turned around different conquests for women according also to different moments in history. The controversy on the metaphorical character of the term “wave” and its drawbacks as exposed by Molony and Nelson (12), does not impede, for the sake of clarity, to categorise some feminist authors’ production within the limits of these waves.

Scholars such as Banham (364) or Astor and Harris (87), who studied Townsend’s early works, the successful theatre plays *Womberang*, *Bazaar and Rummage* and *The Great Celestial Cow* among them, labelled Townsend as a feminist writer. Notwithstanding this alleged affiliation, Townsend’s feminist posture is never combative in its presentation to the reader, but is, somehow, distilled through her pages. This is particularly visible in her production during the eighties and early nineties, which reflects some of the dearest claims of second-wave feminism; from sexual relationships and reproduction to family and work or patriarchal institutions. All of them are present in the different volumes of the *Adrian Mole* series, mainly in *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 3 ¾*, published in 1982, and its continuation, *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole* which would see the light in 1984. In these novels, the feminist position is epitomised by Pauline Mole—Adrian’s mother—, a paramount character of the whole series and whose bedside book in the first two volumes turns out to be Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*,

launched in 1970; a significant reference for the feminism of the seventies.

Nevertheless, there are grounds for questioning whether Eva's position and reactions in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* do actually respond to feminist demands on the part of the author or they just reveal a deep feeling, a need to withdraw from the world. Thus, Eva's construction of her own heterotopic space may offer a double reading.

On the one hand, confinement saves her from the highly distressing and demanding tasks her role as a housewife requires, which leads to consider her new environment from the Foucauldian stand point related to heterotopia, that is, contestation and subversion of the traditional models she has been educated to follow, therefore stressing the dislocation between the generally accepted image of a housewife and the sad reality of her life, which takes her to open rebellion by means of closing herself in a room. This dislocation is, in turn, directly linked to Betty Friedan's foundational contribution in *The Feminine Mystique* on the discrepancies "between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform" (7). Taking this into account, it can be said that an underlying current of second-wave feminism may be detected running freely along the pages of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*.

On the other hand, when Eva realises that self-confinement is not enough, she closes herself physically and spatially up in almost total darkness. In the world inside, Eva grows more and more disconnected with the reality around her, almost to a point of no return when she expresses her wish to board up the bedroom door. Whether this image of cooping herself up without light from outside responds to the blind obscurity in which Townsend lived may be just mere speculation. The author had been registered blind in 2001 due to retinopathy, a side effect of her diabetes and, from that moment on, "wrote" the rest of her novels by dictating them. Nevertheless, the pain and sadness emanating from the last pages of the novel are so piercing that the reader is, undoubtedly, inclined to consider the possibility that Townsend's psychological condition might account for Eva's feeling apart from the world and the need to cocoon herself in solitary darkness. According to this possibility, feminism, although not totally off the menu, would be just a side dish in *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year*.

I am of the opinion that both notions are present and merge into the pages of the novel. Townsend’s feminist vision pervades her whole production, but her final years, despite her alleged good spirits, could have been certainly obscured by illness and, what was more painful for her, a voracious reader, the impossibility to read anything at all. This can be perceived through Hardy’s article on Townsend, for her mourning began with blindness.

CONCLUSIONS

The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year resists a clear-cut definition and can be approached from different points of view. The one favoured in the previous lines takes Foucault’s idea of heterotopia as a starting point and is analysed by considering the ways in which the protagonist’s self evolves together with the redefinition she performs of the self-contained, everyday space of her bedroom, resulting in the creation of a personal heterotopia. This heterotopia evolves and mutates as the novel progresses and, though broadly following the definitory characteristics of the concept as presented by Foucault, the narrative gives way to consider further issues as well.

First, it questions the extent to which female agency is possible once it clashes with the traditional discourses on motherhood and housewifery. The protagonist fortifies herself in a closed space where she operates without the usual constraints of her social role, but those around her react by resorting to the most conventional of explanations: madness, which results in an alteration of the personal heterotopia created by Eva, now based on sickness. This also relates to the conflict between freedom and confinement, another cornerstone of the novel. The protagonist has self-imposed a confinement which starts being curative for her as the new space she has created is a space of freedom, but the more she closes herself physically, the more her heterotopia evolves into real dystopic confinement.

In addition, the novel also deals with the moral confusion and vital disorientation generated by the advent of the new millennium, feelings mostly fuelled by media and social networks as creators of short-lived popular myths of healing and well-being, for the more modern and technologically advanced the society, the less able it is to cope with death, illness and deception.

Finally, the protagonist's attitude towards rejecting her alleged traditional role of housewife and mother may lead the reader to consider *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* as a feminist novel. Eva Beaver's personal heterotopia stands out against the fresco of the traditional assumptions about the role of women as homemakers and shows the disastrous consequences of challenging these well-established pre-conceptions ("the house was dead now that Eva had gone" [136]). However, this paper concludes that it is not a feminist novel as such, despite mirroring some feminist demands which were quite dear to the author. Neither is it a tragedy of a confined woman, for Townsend's unmistakable—and usual—touches of humour turn it more into a satire by means of the author's masterful control of the different possible connotations of every line. No sentence is innocent but is permeated with bitterness, love, humour, criticism, pity, or all of them at the same time.

These possible issues emanating from the reading of *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* are just but a few from all the assortment offered by a novel that has got the sad honour of being the last published by one of the most-loved English authors:

She was half asleep when surveyed her happy memories and found that cruel reality kept crowding in on them. (444)

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