



## The Icy Bride and the Invisible Husband: Shivering Solitary Pleasure in Horacio Quiroga's "El almohadón de plumas" (1917)

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Despite the extensive scholarship on Horacio Quiroga's "El almohadón de plumas," no study has established a direct correlation between the enigmatic illness of the sexually frustrated bride and prevalent nineteenth-century medical discourses on female frigidity and masturbation. When taking into account these treatises, the infamous deathly "parasite" found lurking inside of Alicia's feather pillow can be reinterpreted as a metaphor for her wasteful onanistic indulgences caused by sensual dissatisfaction.<sup>1</sup> Given the warnings in masturbation treatises surrounding the parasitical nature of feather bedding, Alicia's vampiric pillow not only points to her solitary pleasures, but she also displays several other characteristics that paralleled the causes, symptoms and consequences of masturbation in medical treatises of the time.<sup>2</sup> Alicia is described as a wealthy woman who spends each day in boredom and solitude in a desolate palace, highlighting the medical idea that idleness would lead one to indulge in solitary pleasures, which I will explain later in the article. The character is also a shivering blonde who feels coldness towards her husband on their honeymoon, hinting that she is suffering from the nineteenth-century pathology of frigidity which, according to physicians, would lead wives to masturbate for their inability to achieve arousal in coitus, a tenet present in medical discourses that I will broach in my analysis of the text. Alicia's frigidity and propensity towards self-pleasure is foreshadowed by the excess of white marble that adorns her chilly autumn-like home, hinting that she is plagued with *fluor albus*, a female disorder that physicians linked to masturbation. Spending her days alone in the wintery, palace-like abode, causes Alicia to suffer from inexplicable melancholy and fits of crying, behaviors that medical treatises also attributed to the guilty indulgences of masturbation. When Alicia's emotional and physical discontent with her husband intensifies, she permanently retreats to her bed to fulfill her neglected needs through what can be interpreted as autoerotic reveries. In addition to the idea that excessive sleeping was linked to onanism, there was also the belief that masturbation triggered anemia, emaciation, cerebral apoplexy, debilitation, pallor, delirium and nightmares, all of which are ailments that plague Alicia throughout her solitary time in bed.<sup>3</sup> Through what can be understood as Alicia's onanistic excesses and rejection of her sexually inept husband, Quiroga exposes a crisis of masculinity in fin-de-siècle society provoked by medical theories that stressed a woman's natural need for sensual gratification. Due to the wintery imagery connected with Alicia's corporeality, her marital erotic disappointment and subsequent masturbatory practices, I

claim that Quiroga molds her character as an incarnation of the frigid hysterical bride discussed in nineteenth-century medical treatises, a sexually insatiable woman who was often said to indulge in autoerotic pleasure to satisfy her desires left unfulfilled by marital coitus.<sup>4</sup>

In previous studies of “El almohadón de plumas,” scholars have interpreted Alicia as a submissive wife deprived of sexual agency, arguing that her body and desires are placed under the control of her stern husband and the vicious pillow parasite that slowly drains her life away each night in bed. In his recent book, *Pariah in the Desert: The Heroic and the Monstrous in Horacio Quiroga*, Todd S. Garth describes Alicia as a “frail and dependent bride” who suffers from complete psychological and corporeal suppression (101). In her article “El almohadón de plumas’ y el perjurio de la nieve, o la erotización de la agonía,” Marisa E. Martínez Pérsico describes Alicia as the decadent prototype of the “virgen enfermiza,” who loses her virginity through a sadistic copulation with the animal that drains her blood as a perverse form of sexual fulfillment.<sup>5</sup> In his article “Doctoring in Quiroga,” Normand S. Holland asserts that Alicia submits herself to the life-draining “parasite” as a form of self-inflicted punishment for her shameful inability to control her erotic impulses. In “Símbolos inadvertidos en ‘El almohadón de plumas’ de Horacio Quiroga,” Patricia Montenegro views Alicia as “una mujer frágil, angelical, soñadora, sumamente sensible, dependiente de su esposo, incapaz de expresar su necesidad afectiva, [que] queda reducida a un objeto de placer” (10). While Quiroga creates an illusion of dominance over a submissive woman in this text, the author covertly exposes Alicia’s character as a sexually untamable bride who rejects her husband to assume complete control over her own body, a transgressive action that leads the author to obliterate the threat of female power through a punishing death. I agree with Patricia Anne Odber de Baubeta’s thought that “perhaps the underlying suggestion is that Alicia, far from being the frightened victim of a predatory husband is herself the predator, unsatisfied and frustrated in her marital relationship” (32). Odber de Baubeta also suggests that Alicia is a frigid wife whose melancholic suffering throughout the story is attributed to Jordán’s erotic failure during the honeymoon and his “sexual demands on a shy, inexperienced girl” (28). In my analysis, I build upon Odber de Baubeta’s argument by showing that Alicia is rendered sexually cold on the honeymoon due to her husband Jordán’s tactless brutality in intercourse, leading her to reject his caresses and permanently retreat to her bed to play out her neglected needs through masturbatory fantasies. I argue that Alicia actually strips Jordán of his power by converting him into a mere figment of her nightly sensual dreams, in which she imagines that he possesses the skill to understand her intimate desires.

Although the ideal model for women in turn-of-the-century Latin American society was the “ángel del hogar,” a self-sacrificing wife and mother devoid of sexual desire, as Rachel P. Maines argues, nineteenth-century medical treatises on hysteria began tearing down this traditional notion of the “intrinsic purity of womanhood” by arguing that erotic satisfaction was essential to a woman’s well-being (9).<sup>6</sup> Two of the cures for female hysteria, a disorder that denoted an unhealthy build-up of sexual frustration, were marriage and intercourse, remedies that suddenly pressured husbands to satisfy their wives’ passions (27). This particular medical notion that women possessed natural sexual desires that needed to be tamed through marriage, can be evidenced in the short story “Vampiras” (1912), by the Peruvian author Clemente Palma. In this text, the male narrator has nightmares of his

sexually insatiable fiancé Natalia entering his bedroom at night and voraciously sucking his blood, as if she were a vampire, evoking the nineteenth-century medical connection between blood and semen that will be subsequently discussed. When the narrator consults his physician about these dreams, the medic tells him that Natalia is a woman with misguided erotic desires, that can be cured through marriage:

Son sus deseos, sus curiosidades de novia, su pensamiento intenso sobre ti, los que han ido a buscarte anoche [. . .] Si preguntas a tu prometida qué hacía anoche, a la hora en que tuviste la visión, te responderá que pensaba en ti, que soñaba contigo [. . .] Ahora he aquí el régimen terapéutico que te prescribo: cástate con tu novia. (Palma 226-27)

The sudden burden placed on newlywed husbands to satisfy the purportedly unquenchable passions of their “hysterical” brides drastically increased male anxieties of sexual performance, as they could no longer focus solely on their own erotic wants but were pressured to understand the mysterious complexities of female desire. In *El tratado de la imbecilidad del país* (1900-1902), Uruguayan writer Julio Herrera y Reissig exposes how these new standards of masculinity led several men in Quiroga’s country to avoid marriage and intercourse for their worries that they would be unable to successfully perform with women: “La falta del tamaño del pene y las escasas erecciones [impiden] a muchos individuos de efectuar el acto carnal y de [unirse] en matrimonio, temerosos de no dar a la mujer la complacencia suficiente en tales casos requerida” (258). Likewise, in her article “Los secretos para un feliz matrimonio. Género y sexualidad en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX,” Fernanda B. Núñez describes how marriage advice literature that infiltrated late nineteenth-century Latin America discussed similar husbandly insecurities such as having too small or too large of genitals, suffering from impotence or being too rough in bed.

To project these anxieties of being unable to properly pleasure their wives, many nineteenth-century physicians turned to the pathology of frigidity:

Belief in female frigidity or in women’s total indifference to sexual stimuli was popular with both physicians and the public. One theory was that in the hysteric, frigidity and insatiability were combined in women who went from lover to lover seeking the gratification that a supposedly normal female would have experienced in coitus with her spouse. (Maines 60)

Frigid hysterical wives were suspected of engaging in affairs to fulfill their unquenched sexual desires. They were also assumed to indulge in the forbidden practice of masturbation, as noted by Sheila Jeffreys:

It should be clear at this point that frigidity was not understood to mean a lack of sexual response. Lesbianism and masturbation were likely to include some sexual response and were cited as a cause and result of frigidity. Frigidity was quite simply woman’s failure to respond with enthusiasm to one particular sexual practice, sexual intercourse. (171-72)

Maines also argues that “one of the perceived health risks of unsatisfactory coitus for women was that it could lead to masturbation” and that “the most disquieting female masturbators, from the physicians’ point of view, were the married women, whose behavior raised doubts about the ideal of mutual bliss in coitus” (56). In Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct* (1904), the sexologist states that “Wives of impotent husbands who can only sexually excite, but not satisfy, [a] woman, thus producing in her unsatisfied desire, recourse to masturbation, pollutions of a woman, neurasthenia, nausea for coitus, and ultimately disgust with the male sex in general” (263). As will be shown in the analysis, in “El almohadón de plumas,” Alicia’s disenchantment with marital coitus is subtly illustrated by her bodily coldness on the honeymoon, Jordán’s hostile reaction to her need for a more “expansive affection,” the analogies to her untouchable marble body, and her final solitary retreat to the bed where she spends her days immersed in a world of private dreaming.

In his aforementioned *Tratado de la imbecilidad del país*, Herrera y Reissig specifically exposes the prevalence of masturbating women in Quiroga’s country of Uruguay, who rejected the caresses of men and pleased themselves in the silent secrecy of their bedrooms: “El onanismo mujerial ha tomado en nuestra tierra un incremento prodigioso. Tiene que ser así. Las mujeres, obsedidas por la honrita, con terror al embarazo, se rehúsan a los hombres, y prefieren ser devoradas en el silencio de la alcoba por vicios solitarios a que se entregan las calenturientas” (279).

In the same line of thought, the Argentine physician José Ingenieros highlights these male concerns surrounding female masturbation in his medical treatise *Histeria y sugestión* (1904), where he describes a young girl who excessively stimulated her clitoris to achieve orgasm, which would always result in outbursts of hysterical laughter (129). Similarly, in Bernardo Etchepare’s treatise “Desequilibrio mental, hiperestesia, e inversión sexual; safismo, hermafroditismo psico-sexual, morfinomanía, mitridatización, histeria” (1902), the Uruguayan physician presents a case study of a female patient addicted to onanism who could not experience “el más mínimo placer con el hombre,” preferring to seek alternative outlets of satisfaction such as masturbation with the hand or bottles, receiving cunnilingus from her pet dog and injecting herself with morphine (719). The particular autoerotic activities of bestiality and morphine abuse that this girl purportedly engages in are parallel to the behaviors of the self-pleasuring, man-rejecting female protagonists in Horacio Quiroga’s “Al autor de la dame seule” and “Estación de amor,” who also receive satisfaction through oral stimulations from a dog or doses of morphine. As noted by González Espitia, “A la señorita Isabel Ruremonde” also deals with a masturbating girl who shuns men, an idea evinced in the narrator’s description of the protagonist: “Quería estar sola:—ya de lejos para no avergonzar a la señorita, bajo los profusos encajes que ascendían a ratos, sus piernas tan delgadas llevaban consigo, como una promesa asaz melancólica, la sonrisa de los caballeros” (93). This story suggests Quiroga’s familiarity with the masturbation manual *Estravios secretos ó el onanismo en las personas del bello sexo*, published in Spanish in Madrid in 1831, but originally published in French in 1828 by the physician Jacques-Louis Doussin-Dubreuil. Doussin-Dubreuil’s treatise opens with a letter to a masturbating French girl titled “A la señorita en Francia,” an almost identical title to Quiroga’s work. Similarly, both Doussin-Dubreuil’s patient and Quiroga’s Isabel Ruremonde are interrogated about their

emaciation caused by clandestine onanistic addictions. In Doussin-Dubreuil's letter to his female patient the physician inquires "¿De dónde viene, señorita, el cambio que se ha verificado con tanta prontitud? ¿Ese enflaquecimiento tan estremado?" (6). In Quiroga's story, Isabel's mother worriedly inquires: "¿Sufres mi hija? ¿Qué sientes querida mía?" Although Isabel Ruremonde lies and insists that she is fine, there is no way for her to hide her extreme weight loss: "Y no obstante bien era su delgadez, y bien se notaba que mentía, la enferma señorita" (6). Alicia of "El almohadón" will display the similar behaviors as the Isabel Ruremonde character in Quiroga's earlier story, rejecting men, retreating to her bed and suffering from inexplicable weight loss, paralleled with a deadly consumption that wastes her body away.

Alicia's rejection of Jordán begins at the very opening of the story. The narrator describes how Jordán's indelicate treatment of his sexually naïve bride on the honeymoon shatters her long-awaited sensual fantasies, causing her to experience bodily sensations of coldness:

Su luna de miel fue un largo escalofrío. Rubia, angelical y tímida, el carácter duro de su marido heló sus soñadas niñerías de novia. Ella lo quería mucho, sin embargo, a veces con un ligero estremecimiento cuando volviendo de noche juntos por la calle, echaba una furtiva mirada a la alta estatura de Jordán, mudo desde hacía una hora. Él, por su parte, la amaba profundamente, sin darlo a conocer. (97)

While Jordán's rough comportment and amorous inexpressibility are covert indications of his brutish erotic behavior, Alicia's shivering incited by Jordán's phallic "alta estatura" reveals that her husband's lack of sexual talent has transformed her into a frigid bride. In *Frigidity: An Intellectual History*, Cryle and Moore present several strikingly similar examples of tragic wedding nights or honeymoons from nineteenth-century marriage manuals and works of fiction, while concluding that "the essential task on that night was not copulative or procreative: it was strictly sexual. The husband's role was to bring about his bride's transformation from girlhood to womanhood, to take her from a pre-sexual to a properly sexual condition" (147). These authors show how the intense erotic pressures connected with this special occasion led fin-de-siècle French authors of fiction to depict scenarios of husbands whose lack of sexual talent on the honeymoon would forever destroy their brides' innocent fairytale notions of love and sting their bodies with coldness. In regards to the husband's rough sensual treatment of his wife on the wedding night in Jane de la Vaudere's French novel *Le Sang* (1898), Cryle and Moore comment that "there is no gentle seduction here, and the young woman recoils defensively as her husband lays hold of her: 'a remarkable physical coldness, an increasing repulsion made her limbs go painfully cold'" (151-52). Not only do Alicia's shivers suggest a similar frigid condition, but so does her bloneness, a hair color that Herrera y Reissig inextricably links to sexual coldness and masturbatory pleasure: "La mujer rubia, de piel blanca, linfática, etc., tiene sus deseos casi apagados. Se necesita una serie grande de excitaciones para que llegue a sentir deseo (...) Por el contrario, la mujer morena, exuberante, que no se ha entregado a la masturbación ni está consumida por los excesos, siente violentamente el goce material" (258).

Alicia's need for this "serie grande de excitaciones" to awaken the dormant desires of her blonde temperament is illustrated by her longing for a "más expansiva e incauta ternura" when the couple returns from their honeymoon. However, Jordán continues to ignore his wife's threateningly complex erotic wants with indifference and severity. This fearful hostility that husbands experienced towards "frigid" wives who needed to be pleased with strategic delicacy and/or stimulations other than coitus to bring them to arousal is illustrated by Maines, when she states that the French physician Gilles de la Tourette saw this process as part of the cycle of hysteria: "the 'frigid' hysteric communicates her distaste to her husband. His resentment and rejection then contribute to the development of her pathology" (55). Jordán's rejection of Alicia's intimate needs does indeed contribute to her frigid sufferings, which is reflected through the description of the couple's untouched, wintery palace. In her article "The Metaphor of the Body as a House in 19th Century English Novels," Ioana Boghian argues how the house often served as a metaphor for the human body and psyche in nineteenth-century British literature, a tactic that Quiroga may have also employed to project an image of the bride's now frozen, impenetrable body that secretly burns with frustrated passion: "La casa en que vivían influía un poco en sus estremecimientos. La blancura del patio silencioso—frisos, columnas y estatuas de mármol—producía una otoñal impresión de palacio encantado. Dentro, el brillo glacial del estuco, sin el más leve rasguño en las altas paredes, afirmaba aquella sensación de despacible frío" (97)."

The impeccable condition of the highest interior walls can hint that Alicia has denied Jordán the right to penetrate her, as intercourse leaves her unsatisfied. Similarly, the descriptions of silence, chilliness, and marble can be seen as indirect metaphors of Alicia's sexual coldness towards her husband. For example, Cryle and Moore discuss how the French novel *Méphistophéla* (1890) by Catulle Mendès, an author known to Quiroga, uses parallel imagery of glacial frozenness and marble stillness to denote the frigidity of his blonde protagonist Sophie, who is also assaulted by her husband's erotic brutality on the wedding night, leading her to develop a disgust for male sexuality:

‘all he held in his arms was the resistance of a marble statue whose motionless sensitivity was made of hatred.’ This is where the husband's brutality, a typical cause of frigidity, meets the wife's cold, hatred, a radical, indeed pathological form of ill will. He makes her frigid by his brutal penetration of her, yet she is already determinedly frigid in her hatred of the male. (156)<sup>7</sup>

While Sophie's frigidity drives her to lesbianism, there are several clues in "El almohadón" to indicate that Alicia's discontent with her husband causes her to masturbate. The palace's chilly autumn atmosphere, immaculateness, and overabundance of whiteness conjures medical theories surrounding *fluor albus*, also referred to as leucorrhea or "white flowers," a pathology that caused viscous flows of vaginal discharge and was commonly said to be caused by masturbation.<sup>8</sup> In Fabre's medical treatise *Tratado completo de las enfermedades de las mujeres* (1845), the opening article titled "Leucorrea" specifically argues that recently constructed houses and the cold, moist climate of autumn were direct causes of this sickness, conditions that mirror the strange environment of Alicia's home that is analogous to her glacial, untouchable body:

Las casas recién construidas, hecha abstracción del sitio que ocupen, tienen también la funesta propiedad de provocar los flujos leucorréicos. La frecuencia de estos flujos es probablemente mayor durante las estaciones frías y húmedas. Leake asegura que, a lo menos en Inglaterra, son aquellos flujos mucho más comunes en otoño que en ninguna otra estación. (6)

Quiroga displays his knowledge of medical linkages between *fluor albus* and onanism in his previously mentioned short story “A la señorita Isabel Ruremonde” which, as González Espitia argues, deals with a young French girl whose tubercular state is a veil for her excessive masturbatory indulgences.<sup>9</sup> In this story, the narrator mentions how the protagonist begins to pluck the petals off of white orange blossom flowers after being exposed to the cool, humid air in Nice, an odd detail that highly suggests she is suffering from “flores blancas,” a term that Doussin-Dubreil uses to refer to the masturbatory symptom of *fluor albus* in his treatise.<sup>10</sup> The narrator of Quiroga’s story states: “En Niza cuando la estación enfriaba los teatros y el aire cálido eran los pañuelos más suaves en las bocas, su plácida agonía se acentuaba más, la dañaba ser vista, quería estar sola ... Sadie no tenía memoria, y enfermó del pecho deshojando azahares bajo el cielo pálido” (93-94). While Sadie develops “a sickness much like pulmonary tuberculosis,” that is described in terms of shedding white flowers, the descriptions of Alicia’s cold, white, autumn palace will be followed by her diagnosis of “inexplicable” anemia, a wasting disease parallel to consumption that physicians also connected to solitary pleasures (González Espitia 173).

The lavish extravagance of Alicia’s palace-like house also evokes the medical discourse that a luxury life of idleness would cause masturbatory temptation by sparking lascivious thoughts in the mind, an idea presented in the famous treatise that incited the masturbation panic *Onania or, The Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, and all its Frightful Consequences (in both Sexes) Considered*:

All of them (not being chaste) do expose themselves to the continual Danger of Temptations that way and cannot avoid being ever and anon overcome by them, and more especially if they indulge Idleness, and high living, which more immediately exposes them to lustful Thoughts, when Business chases them away, by employing the Mind to better Purposes. (77)

In Samuel Auguste Tissot’s well-known manual on onanism *Enfermedades nerviosas ó el onanismo* (1814), the French physician presents the same connection between idleness and self-pleasure: “nada es más perjudicial a los que son inclinados a entregarse a una sola idea, que la ociosidad e inacción. Sobre todo, no hay cosa que perjudique tanto a nuestros enfermos, y que con mayor cuidado se deba evitar, como el estar ociosos y abandonados a sí mismos” (107). Alicia’s afternoons of solitude and boredom cause her imagination to run wild with sensual fantasies, which is portrayed when she fervently attempts to stave off all thoughts until her husband returns each day: “En ese extraño nido de amor, Alicia pasó todo el otoño. No obstante, había concluido por echar un velo sobre sus antiguos sueños, y aún vivía dormida en la casa hostil, sin querer pensar en nada hasta que llegaba su marido” (97). Although Alicia gives up on her hopes that Jordán will understand her desires, she finds an alternative outlet to fulfill her sensual longings through dreaming. In the introduction to

*Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary, and Artistic Discourses of Autoeroticism*, Paula Bennet and Vernon Rosario describe how fantasizing provided nineteenth-century women with an outlet to satisfy their sexual desires, denied to them through strict patriarchal social regulations: “Nineteenth-century bourgeois women in particular—whose opportunities for exercising and publicizing the erotic imagination were socially bounded by strict rules of decorum—found in autoerotic fantasy a means to sexual and authorial autonomy denied them by the conventions of their society at large” (10-11).

These male preoccupations surrounding the female imagination can also account for suspicions surrounding women who spent excessive time sleeping, like Alicia. Doussin-Dubreil demonstrates this idea by stating that young women should have someone spying on them during their sleeping hours to assure that they are not pleasuring themselves:

A cualquier punto que vayan, dice este autor, deben tener un espía, ya sea en sitios de recreo, de necesidad o en fin, para acostarse; si una vigilancia tal no basta para impedir que se entreguen al vicio, es preciso recurrir al último extremo, que sería el ligarlas las manos de manera que no se puedan desatar durante el sueño. (161)

In *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de Siècle Culture*, Bram Dijkstra also explains how fin-de-siècle male artists used images of women peacefully sleeping as a metaphor for the masturbatory indulgences that left them in a state of exhaustion: “Woman’s indulgence in solitary vices inevitably led to exhaustion and hence to sleep. Turn of the century painters had a veritable field day exploring the autoerotic ramifications of the sleeping woman” (78). Another clue that Alicia’s continual sleeping may be a covert symbol for her masturbatory fantasies is her sudden, yet unsurprising weight loss, debility and pallor, all signs of female masturbation that can be observed in the following female patient described in Doussin-Dubreil’s treatise: “Encontré a la enferma, a quien no había visto hacia tres semanas, en una situación tan deplorable que me causó espanto; su demacración había aumentado mucho, su color lívido, los párpados amoratados y los ojos sombríos y apagados, como se encuentran por lo común en las personas que se entregan al onanismo” (11-12).

Alicia’s physical sufferings are also accompanied by a nervous crisis characterized by her secret inner turmoil that causes erratic fits of crying one afternoon as she strolls through the garden with Jordán. The protagonist’s torment is not only attributed to her intense sexual frustrations, which is evinced by her weeping upon feeling the slightest caresses from her husband, but also some secret that Quiroga labels as her “espanto callado.” This unspeakable inner turmoil combined with Alicia’s mysterious fits of crying evokes Tissot’s idea that the guilt that masturbators suffered from hiding their shameful secret led them to experience an incessant internal anguish that brought them to tears: “tienen una continua especie de inquietud interna, una angustia continua, un remordimiento de su conciencia tan vivo, que frecuentemente vierten lágrimas” (17). In a letter that a masturbating female patient wrote to Doussin-Dubreil, she also describes how she suffered from a horrible sadness that caused her to retreat to her bed: “no me hallo bien más que en la cama, pero apenas duermo dos horas durante la noche. Estoy poseída de una tristeza que me causa no tanto la proximidad de la muerte, como la enorme falta que la ocasiona” (18). Like this patient, Alicia can be

read as finding solace for her erotic sufferings in the privacy of her bed; however, her excessive self-pleasures cause her to develop a grave case of anemia. Due to the close connection between blood-loss and wasteful seminal emission in eighteenth and nineteenth-century medical treatises, anemia was cited amongst physicians as a cause of masturbation.<sup>11</sup> In *The Secret Vice*, Diane Mason mentions that “anaemia was cited by James Cantlie in 1883 as one consequence of masturbation,” while describing how the female protagonist Lucy of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* suffers from nocturnal “anemic” blood flows, which serve as a metaphor for indulgences in solitary pleasures (38). In relation to Stoker’s Lucy, Mason explains that her “weakness is brought about by the ‘horror’ of Count Dracula, leaching her life-force during the night, a time when the chronic onanist was most susceptible to temptation” (90). Like Lucy, Alicia’s anemic blood depletions solely occur during the night and are attributed to some mysterious vampiric force inside of her pillow that drains her body of vital fluids and causes her to wake up weak and colorless each morning: “Durante el día no avanzaba su enfermedad, pero cada mañana amanecía lívida, en síncope casi. Parecía que únicamente de noche se le fuera la vida en nuevas alas de sangre” (99).<sup>12</sup> There is also a vagueness surrounding Alicia’s “anemia,” further suggesting that the sickness is a coverup for her masturbatory indulgences. When her anemia worsens, the narrator states that “Hubo consulta. Constatóse una anemia de marcha agudísima, completamente inexplicable” (98). Later, the narrator highlights once again the elusive nature of Alicia’s blood loss by stating: “Había allí delante de ellos una vida que se acababa, desangrándose día a día, hora a hora, sin saber absolutamente cómo” (99). As previously mentioned, in “A la señorita Isabel Ruremonde,” Quiroga uses this same strategy of guising female masturbation under vague consumptive disorders, further supporting the hidden autoerotic symbolism of Alicia’s “inexplicable” anemia.

While Alicia’s life withers away, Jordán experiences a heightened pressure to satisfy her burning passions, but worries that he will fail again in his attempt to pleasure his bride. His inner turmoil and sexual anxieties are reflected through his avoidance of the bedroom and his seclusion to the living room, where he anxiously paces beneath the hovering bright lights: “Todo el día el dormitorio estaba con las luces prendidas y en pleno silencio. Pasábanse horas sin oír el menor ruido. Alicia dormitaba. Jordán vivía casi en la sala, también con toda la luz encendida. Paseábase sin cesar de un extremo a otro, con incansable obstinación. La alfombra ahogaba sus pasos” (98).

Jordán’s paces around the living room are described as inaudible, which is odd, considering that at the beginning of the story every sound could be heard as a resonating echo throughout the couple’s home: “Al cruzar de una pieza a otra, los pasos hallaban eco en toda la casa, como si un largo abandono hubiera sensibilizado su resonancia” (97). When Jordán enters the bedroom to spy on Alicia, these same details of his silent footsteps and undetectable presence appear: “A ratos entraba en el dormitorio y proseguía su mudo vaivén a lo largo de la cama, mirando a su mujer cada vez que caminaba en su dirección” (98). His invisible presence has a double significance in the story. On the one hand, Jordán’s silent circling around Alicia’s body and surreptitious glances towards the bed symbolizes his secretive vigilance of her behavior while “sleeping,” which as previously mentioned was deemed as a

transgressive activity linked to female masturbation. On the other hand, his silent footsteps around his wife's bed are a covert symbol for his feelings of worthlessness and rejection when he realizes that he has been shut out of his wife's inaccessible realm of imaginary pleasure.

After Jordán's secret entrances into Alicia's room, she suffers from fearful, yet erotic, hallucinations followed by sweating and palpitations, a phenomenon that Doussin-Dubreil attributed to female masturbation: "que las hay también que no pueden dormir, o que no tienen más que un sueño interrumpido con sobresaltos y agitaciones; que están al mismo tiempo fatigadas por frecuentes palpitaciones de corazón, acompañadas de sofocaciones, de una tos seca y corta, y de sudores escesivos" (40). Similar to this description, in her first sensual hallucination Alicia dreams of her husband pleasuring her the way that she wants, causing her to abruptly awake from her intense arousal bathed in sweat, while shouting his name:

Pronto Alicia comenzó a tener alucinaciones, confusas y flotantes al principio, y que descendieron luego a ras del suelo. La joven, con los ojos desmesuradamente abiertos, no hacía sino mirar la alfombra a uno y otro lado del respaldo de la cama. Una noche se quedó de repente mirando fijamente. Al rato abrió la boca para gritar, y sus narices y labios se perlaron de sudor. —¡Jordán! ¡Jordán!— clamó, rígida de espanto, sin dejar de mirar la alfombra. (98)

The stiffness of Alicia's body, as well as her loud screams and perspirations parallel an image of climax. The sexual nature of Alicia's dream is also illustrated when Quiroga states that "sus narices y labios se perlaron de sudor." In addition to the connection between the lips and the vagina, the presence of perspiration in the nose and lips brings to mind the work of nineteenth-century German doctor Wilhelm Fleiss, who worked closely with Sigmund Freud, and who defended the idea of a direct relationship between the structure of the nose and the vagina in his essay "The Nose and Female Sexuality."<sup>13</sup> When Alicia screams Jordán's name in the middle of her dream, on the surface it seems that she is summoning him to console her from a nightmare. However, this possibility is disproved when she expresses horror rather than relief upon seeing him in front of her: "Jordán corrió al dormitorio, y al verlo aparecer Alicia dio un alarido de horror" (99). Even though Jordán assures his wife that it is actually him and not a figment of her "nightmare," it still takes Alicia a long while to distinguish between her husband and the imaginary monsters that creep along the carpet: "Alicia lo miró con extravío, miró la alfombra, volvió a mirarlo, y después de largo rato de estupefacta confrontación, se serenó. Sonrió y tomó entre las suyas la mano de su marido, acariciándola temblando." When Alicia gazes at Jordán "con extravío," it can serve as a signal of the perverse nature of her dream of being satisfied by her husband. The masturbatory connotation of Alicia's dream is also projected through her vision of an anthropoid crouched on all fours, gazing straight into her eyes: "Entre sus alucinaciones más porfiadas, hubo un antropoide, apoyado en la alfombra sobre los dedos, que tenía fijos en ella los ojos." Tissot argued that onanism in women made them susceptible to a variety of ailments including uterine furor, which would deprive them of reason "poniéndolas al nivel de los brutos mas

lascivos, hasta que una muerte desesperada pone fin a sus dolores y a su infamia” (37). The horrifying, watchful gaze of this anthropoid can also symbolize Alicia’s fears of vigilance as she satisfies her “brutish” passions.

These hallucinations cause Alicia to lose control of her mental faculties and to fall into a state of delirium, while she emits monotonous moans that disrupt the agonic silence of the house: “Perdió luego el conocimiento. Los dos días finales deliró sin cesar a media voz. Las luces continuaban fúnebremente encendidas en el dormitorio y la sala. En el silencio agónico de la casa, no se oía más que el delirio monótono que salía de la cama, y el sordo retumbo de los eternos pasos de Jordán” (100).

The sexual symbolism of Alicia’s irrational screams has been previously demonstrated through the sweating on her “lips” and “nose,” the rigid tensing of her body and her visions of vigilant beasts as she screamed Jordán’s name. In this particular scene, Alicia’s persistent groans of delirious passion are directly contrasted with the muteness of her husband’s steps, symbolizing that he has been rendered dispensable by his masturbating wife. The muffling of Jordán’s footsteps by the carpet, the very place where Alicia’s hallucinations appear, may symbolize that his real presence has been erased and that he has been converted into an illusory object of his wife’s onanistic dream. Alicia no longer has a use for her sexually inept husband who will never satisfy her sensual needs in real life, as she has discovered that she can simply fulfil her desires by producing her own fantasies. When Jordán hears Alicia enjoying the pleasures he could never afford her, he is overcome with feelings of insignificance and rejection, which are reflected through the erasure of his physical presence.

Jordán’s emotions of impotence aroused by his wife’s possible masturbatory practices can be understood when taking into account Lauren Rosewarne’s argument in *Masturbation and Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self*, that claims that “masturbation showcases a woman’s ability to sexual pleasure herself without a man. That women can get themselves off without a penis—and in turn be sexually independent—can be read as threatening to men who attach value to their prowess as lovers” (13). According to Rosewarne, in present day popular culture, the threatening corporeal autonomy of the female masturbator often leads her to be punished through a gruesome death in the plots of present-day horror films, a similar strategy that Quiroga uses in his work of fiction to ease male anxieties of impotence and rejection. To end Jordán’s torment and restore him from his position of lack, Alicia is sentenced to an agonizing death in the midst of her autoerotic bliss. The narrator describes the bride’s death in a horrific manner that projects the male fantasy of taming this unruly body that has transgressed the limits of masculine power. It turns out that it was not Alicia’s anemia draining her life forces each night, but rather a parasitical force in her feather pillow that sucked her blood from her brain:

Sobre el fondo, entre las plumas, moviendo lentamente las patas velludas, había un animal monstruoso, una bola viviente y viscosa. Estaba tan hinchado que apenas se le pronunciaba la boca. Noche a noche, desde que Alicia había caído en cama, había aplicado sigilosamente su boca—su trompa, mejor dicho—a las sienas de aquélla, chupándole la sangre. (101)

In Samuel Gregory's treatise *Facts and Information for Young Women on the Subject of Masturbation* (1857) the physician establishes a direct link between feather pillows and wasteful expenditure of fluids: "Young persons should not be suffered to sleep on feather-beds, but on mattresses stuffed with horse-hair, straw or dried moss. Neither should their pillows be made of feathers, which are too heating to the head, and produce catarrhs, defluxions and apoplexies" (57). In *Masturbation: The History of a Great Terror*, Stengers and van Neck also highlight the dangerous ability of feather bedding to stimulate autoerotic arousal: "The bed, first of all must be hard: feather mattresses and soft blankets that incite lethargy were to be banned" (10). In his warnings on masturbation, the eighteenth-century German physician Freidrich Borner also cautioned against the dangers of feather bedding: "Under and beneath the feather mattresses, the emanations gather together and spread around the periphery of the body; the oil contained in the feathers evaporates due to the heat and enervates the body" (qtd. in Stengers 85). Not only does Alicia's feather pillow absorb her bodily fluids during her sleep, but the large amounts of blood emitted from her brain suggests that she was suffering cerebral apoplexy, a disorder that caused a harmful buildup of blood in the brain. Tissot describes how masturbatory addiction caused blood to rush to the brain, resulting in apoplexy: "Una razón que también contribuye a la debilidad del género nervioso es la cantidad de sangre, que mientras el acto venéreo se aumenta en el cerebro; aumento bien demostrado, y que muchas veces llega a producir apoplegia" (53). The fact that the blood is drained from Alicia's brain also reflects the idea that excessive venereal activity was regarded as a "brain drain." In *With the Hand: A Cultural History of Masturbation*, Mels van Driel explains that "coitus was regarded as a 'brain drain' and sperm was an abomination. Endless discussions were conducted on such questions as whether demons also produced sperm" (158). In his analysis of sleeping beauties in fin-de-siècle art, Dijkstra highlights this same thought: "Physicians explained to horrified husbands that as blood drained from their wife's brains to rush to their excited reproductive organs, their minds as well as their bodies weakened, and soul and body alike would trail off into a sleep induced by erotic self-stimulation" (75). In a similar fashion, in "El almohadón," Quiroga links the blood in Alicia's brain with her genital fluids by describing how the protagonist tries to prevent anyone from touching her sheets or her pillow in the moments before her death: "No quiso que le tocaran la cama, ni aun que le arreglaran el almohadón" (100). Relatedly, Stengers and van Neck argue that "a stain on the sheets was considered an obvious sign of masturbatory behavior" (158). At the end of the story, Alicia's servant does indeed find stains on her pillowcase that "look like blood;" however, given that the fluid inside of the parasite is described as viscous, the stains next to Alicia's head could be read as a reference to her genital secretions left on the bedding. In *Curso completo de patología interna* (1843), Gabriel Andral uses this same adjective to describe emissions from *fluor albus*, the masturbatory disorder that could have plagued Alicia before her death: "En cuanto a los caracteres del derrame que ocasiona la leucorrea son muy variables, unas veces es un líquido viscoso que tiene la consistencia de la clara de huevo" (405). Given these prevalent medical theories at the time, I argue that the "bola viviente y viscosa" with "patas velludas" found inside of Alicia's pillow is a way for Quiroga to refer to the abject conglomeration of the protagonist's vaginal fluids gathered amongst the furry feathers in her bedding.

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By depicting Alicia's masturbation as a disgusting, shameful practice and then stripping her of her sexual freedom through an agonizing death, Quiroga fictionally reestablishes the traditional paradigm of male dominance and female powerlessness. However, beneath this blatant misogynistic treatment of the female protagonist's natural sexual wants, the author inadvertently exposes widespread nineteenth-century male anxieties of impotence related to the inability to understand female desire. As shown in my analysis, when Alicia shuns Jordán to pleasure her own body, he desperately longs to unlock the mysteries of his wife's fantasies when he helplessly paces around the bed watching her, sadly envisioning himself as a dispensable being. While Alicia's death would have eased the preoccupations of male readers, the tragic, unresolved ending reveals that it would be impossible for husbands to dismiss their wives' desires to fulfill their own wants. The fearful reality of married men in Quiroga's society was that they were going to have to start understanding the mysteries of their wives' desires, or they could face being rejected and ending up alone, like the invisible Jordán.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Juan Carlos González Espitia has noted the theme of female masturbation in Quiroga's short stories "A la señorita Isabel Ruremonde" and "Al autor de la dame seule" (173). I will also discuss how the author guises the masturbatory pleasures of his female protagonists under mental and physical illnesses in several other works, while linking their masturbatory desires with the pathology of frigidity.

<sup>2</sup> Later in this essay, I provide examples from masturbation manuals that described the dangerous ability of feather bedding to provoke autoerotic temptation and to absorb corporeal fluids, evoking the ability of Alicia's pillow to drain her blood. I will also show that feather pillows in particular were said by physicians to cause the same cerebral disorders that plague Alicia.

<sup>3</sup> Sources consulted that mention these symptoms of masturbation include Samuel Auguste Tissot's *Enfermedades nerviosas ó el onanismo: disertación sobre las enfermedades producidas por la masturbación* (1814), Jacques-Louis Doussin-Dubreuil's *Estravios secretos ó el onanismo en las personas del bello sexo* (1831), and Diane Mason's *The Secret Vice: Masturbation in Victorian Fiction* (2013).

<sup>4</sup> I will later discuss discourses on the frigid hysterical bride presented in medical treatises of the time.

<sup>5</sup> Martínez Pérsico states that "en el cuento, el acto de succionar la sangre de la mujer adquiere un tinte erótico (similar a la pérdida de la virginidad) puesto que implica el traspaso de fluidos corporales de un cuerpo al otro, en este caso, del cuerpo de la jovencita angelical al del 'animal monstruoso, bola viviente y viscosa', acto no exento de cierta connotación perversa, de cierto aire zoofílico" (4).

<sup>6</sup> In their article "A Failure of Academic Quality Control: The Technology of Orgasm," Lieberman and Schatzberg criticize the main argument of Maines' book stating that "we found no evidence in these sources that physicians ever used electromechanical vibrators to induce orgasms in female patients as a medical treatment" (24). However, I will show that the particular arguments from her book that I reference are echoed by medical and fictional literature of the time.

<sup>7</sup> It is possible that Quiroga was familiar with this novel given that Mendès inspired his short story "Al autor de la dame seule."

<sup>8</sup> In Mason's *The Secret Vice* she explains that "the poor physical condition of the female masturbator was said to be aggravated by the 'draining' and system-lowering effect of leuchorrhoea or 'whites' and 'incontinence of urine was also cited as a symptom'" (43).

<sup>9</sup> In regards to this story and "A la señorita Isabel Ruremonde," González Espitia states "[t]he diagnosis of the illness that afflicts both protagonists is elusive. We only know that the problem originates in the relationship between the young women's hands and their bodies, seemingly from "the excesses" and "imprudence" of some unascertainable contact that creates a sickness much like pulmonary tuberculosis" (173).

<sup>10</sup> Doussin-Dubreuil states: "He visto con frecuencia niñas de cinco a seis años dirigir en algún modo a su pesar, aunque se las reñía y reprendía con frecuencia, sus manos inocentes a los órganos sexuales, y yo mismo he sorprendido a muchas, y casi todas tenían flores blancas" (32).

<sup>11</sup> This linkage can be observed in Tissot's treatise when the physician states that el licor seminal tiene tanta acción, y poderío sobre las fuerzas del cuerpo, y sobre la perfección de las digestiones que las reparan, que los Médicos de todos los siglos han creído de común consentimiento, que la perdida de una onza de este humor debilita más que la de quarenta de sangre" (2).

<sup>12</sup> In a similar fashion, Quiroga equates blood loss with masturbatory excess in "Al autor de la dame seule" and "A la señorita Isabel Ruremonde."

<sup>13</sup> In his book *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan*, Richard Boothby comments that

During the years of his correspondence with Freud, nasal anatomy and function constituted William Fleiss's primary research interest, which focused especially on the close connection he claimed to exist between the nose and the female sexual organs—an interest that found a certain resonance in Fleiss's correspondent. Only one month after the date of the Irma dream, Freud suggested that Fleiss turn his notes into a pamphlet on "The Nose and Female Sexuality." (106)

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