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The room will set you free  
A Feminist Reading of Clive Barker’s *The Hellbound Heart*

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Abstract

The enclosed room is in classic Gothic novels closely connected to its female characters, and often works as a mean to suppress them. Clive Barker, however, while working within the Gothic genre, uses the enclosed room in novel ways in *The Hellbound Heart*, creating a type of Gothic female character that is different from the classical stereotype. By comparing the enclosed room and the female characters in Barker’s *The Hellbound Heart* to the classical model, in particular as represented by Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, this essay will show how Barker uses the room in a new way: he breaks away from the classic motif of the room as a means of female sexual oppression and instead depicts female characters taking charge of the room and therefore of themselves and their own sexuality.
But there was something about the dark interior that gave her comfort; it was a womb of sorts, a dead woman’s womb. (Barker 38)

*The Hellbound Heart* (1986), written by Liverpool born Clive Barker is a modern Gothic horror tale that has already become a classic. The focus is on sexuality and on the two female characters, Julia and Kirsty. In true Gothic tradition, they are each other’s opposites. Barker is well known for his portrayal of female characters. Instead of choosing the often misogynist horror-path, he has created an anti-horror described as “useful for women” (Badley 82-83). While he does deal with the classic “woman in peril motif”, he completely deconstructs it (Badley 83). The enclosed room is in classic Gothic novels closely connected to its female characters, and most often threatening. Barker, however, while working within the Gothic genre uses the enclosed room in novel ways, and has created a type of Gothic female character that is different from the classical stereotype. By comparing the enclosed room and the female characters in Barker’s *The Hellbound Heart* to the classical model, in particular as represented by Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, this essay will show how Barker uses the room in a new way: he breaks away from the classic motif of the room as a means of for female oppression and instead depicts female characters taking charge of the room and therefore themselves.

The classic Gothic first saw the light of day in 1764 with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*. This first Gothic novel formulates the structure of a new genre: a mix of fairy tales, the supernatural, Faustian tales and medieval romances (Botting 14). The locus of the plot is often set in a remote castle or abbey, typically filled with secret passageways, vaults and rooms (Botting 64). There are also other motifs: “hallmarks such as demonism, occultism, necromancy and incest become prominent as the gothic genre progresses” (Wadenius 3). The genre flourished and developed and soon there were more locations added: a prison, a crypt, a graveyard, a large old house, a laboratory and so on. The main thing was that within this enclosed space lies a secret from the past that haunts the characters physically or emotionally (Hogle 2). Self-division is a major characteristic of Gothic fiction. It describes the duality of human nature (Fleenor 11). The main characters were often women, trapped between “contradictory pressures and impulses” (Hogle 8), women who seek to both please the men around them but also to free themselves from patriarchal dominance. The Gothic male villains
are usurpers, dominating everything around them while being a threat to the virtues of the women around them, and they are in the centre of the plot.

Authors such as Ann Radcliffe and Charlotte and Emily Brontë then developed the genre further into “female Gothic”, a term coined by Ellen Moers in 1976 (Punter and Byron 278). Female Gothic can be described as Gothic stories “written by women for women” (Fleenor 4) and the major focus is on women and female issues even though it might be very subtle and expressed in symbolism and metaphors. The female characters are often emotional, intuitive and, more often than not, morally superior, even though they are in a submissive position. They are often divided into stereotypes, such as the evil and the good woman. The good woman is chaste and pure, while the evil woman is corrupt and impure (Fleenor 9 and 15). But transgression can also be another central point in both Gothic and female Gothic fiction, since it is associated with the “mad or criminal female protagonist”. Transgression is a characteristic of the Gothic genre as well, but in female Gothic it is something that involves the female characters. The heroine often assumes both roles as heroine and monster so that it might be difficult to determine whether she is a protagonist or an antagonist. This is a sign of the deconstruction of gender roles and problems with double identity (Punter and Byron 27). Because of this ambivalence towards the female self, the woman has internalised the feelings into self-disgust and self-fear instead of fearing what is an actual threat to her (Fleenor 11). Heroines are often hunted, or haunted, by a malevolent male force. They are also overly emotional, bound to cry or faint when something happens (Botting 64-65). The self-disgust or self-fear that the female characters often face is often symbolised by the external threatening factor in rooms, such as the unknown presence in the red-room in *Jane Eyre* (Fleenor 12).

In classic Gothic horror, rooms therefore have a great importance, mainly as a tool to suppress its female characters. The room -whether it is a dusty attic, the gloomy dungeons of a remote castle or simply the unused bedroom- often has a woman as its inhabitant, locked up by a dominant male figure. The Gothic room can also often contain a secret. In *The Castle of Otranto*, the remains of murdered Alfonso lie in the crypt underneath the castle as a reminder of the sin of Manfred’s forefather (Walpole). Manfred’s grandfather killed Alfonso in order to take power over the castle and give himself and his heirs a better status. The room holds the key to the past.
But the room in the female Gothic can also be a refuge, a shelter from men and their sexual advances (Showalter 33). In Radcliffe’s novels the house and the room are at the centre of the heroine’s world. It is the place that defines them and forms them as a person. The room is the essence, which is where the heroine’s most inner secret and desires lay. It is her “retreat within a retreat” (Berglund 38). The décor of the room often has some metaphorical significance. It works as a reflection of the inhabitant of the room, mainly the heroine: an ascetic room can symbolise the chaste nature of the heroine. In fact, the room is often bare and empty and far from luxurious (Berglund 40). How a woman should act is the problem a woman faces everyday, while anxiety is the focal point. What are the demands, what can she do to live a happy life? As Birgitta Berglund argues, “The limitations, physical and psychological, of women’s lives, in one respect or another, are what almost all the women writers of this period are concerned with, and it is a concern that often shows in a preoccupation with space, and with the house as an important symbol” (234). The locked room, in female Gothic fiction, represents repression and the frustration of women in society: “Its [female Gothic fiction] favourite symbol, the enclosed and secret room, had been a potent image in women’s novels since Jane Eyre, but by the end of the century it came to be identified with the womb and with female conflict” (Showalter 33). So it is obvious that the room or the enclosed space has great importance within this genre.

As an example of how the enclosed room is used in classic female Gothic, I shall investigate Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, which is an English classic about a young orphan girl who grows up to be the governess of a young girl in a remote estate. She lives a hard life: her parents died when she was a baby and her uncle took instant care of her, but he died when she was very young and left the responsibility with his wife, Mrs. Reed, who does not want Jane in her home. Jane is bullied by her cousins and even assaulted by John, the only boy in the household. After John has thrown a book in the back of her head out of spite, she is locked into the red-room, an event that will be life changing for young Jane. After this incident, she revolts against Mrs. Reed and shortly afterwards she is sent to a boarding school for girls which is ruled by the tyrannical Mr Brocklehurst, after which she has no further contact with her relatives. Her life there is very ascetic and simple. After her education at Lowood School, Jane leaves to become a governess and it brings her to Thornfield Hall. Jane’s employer is the harsh and mysterious Mr. Rochester, and mysterious things happen in the gloomy halls of the mansion. People get attacked in the night and Jane senses a presence. It does not take long before Mr. Rochester and Jane fall in love with each other, but just before they are about to be
married it is revealed that Mr. Rochester is already married to a woman called Bertha who is locked away in a room in the attic. Bertha is the one responsible for all the mysterious attacks: she is the one that has been lurking around the mansion.

In *Jane Eyre*, locked rooms are important: we find Jane locked into the red-room and Mr. Rochester’s mad wife Bertha locked into a remote room in the attic. When Jane is first locked into the red-room, while she was very young, she reflects over it:

> The red-room was a square chamber, very seldom slept in, I might say never, indeed, unless when a chance influx of visitors at Gateshead Hall rendered it necessary to turn to account all the accommodation it contained: yet it was one of the largest and stateliest chambers in the mansion. [...] This room was chill, because it seldom had a fire; it was silent, because remote from the nursery and kitchen; solemn, because it was known to be so seldom entered. (Brontë 8)

The room is cold and seldom used, as Jane describes it, which might be an indication of its “virginity”. It does not even have a fire going. It is also interesting that it is the colour red since red is often associated with warmth and sexuality. So the room itself is an imagery of a dual nature: it is virginal and cold but it has something sexually dormant within the walls. It is after this particular encounter in the red-room that Jane revolts against her guardian Mrs. Reed. When she is left there she contemplates about her life and how unfair it is. But there is something else within this room: Mr Reed, Jane’s uncle, died in there (Brontë 9). As Jane is left alone in there she starts to think of the ghost of the late Mr. Reed, and when she sees a strange light she loses her nerve: she gets very frightened and starts to panic (Brontë 12). So within these walls there is a threatening male force.

Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is the precursor to Julia in *The Hellbound Heart*: she is almost the prototype for the mad woman, the antagonist, in Gothic novels. Bertha is Mr Rochester’s wife who he is still married too when he is about to wed Jane. Bertha is described by Jane as “tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging down her back. [...] ‘Fearful and ghastly to me – oh, sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face – a savage face’” (Brontë 250). Later, when the secret is revealed and Mr Rochester takes Jane to Bertha’s room another ghastly sight is before them: “The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. I recognised well that purple face – those bloated features” (Brontë 259). Bertha is described more as an animal than a human being. Her room is placed high up in the mansion, up in a hidden room in the attic. The entry to the room is...
concealed by a tapestry and the room is locked. Bertha’s room is more like a prison cell than an actual room: “In a room without a window, there burnt a fire guarded by a high and strong fender, and a lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain” (Brontë 258). When Jane enters Bertha’s secret prison cell in the attic, she is led there by Mr Rochester, who is holding her hand (Brontë 258). Mr Rochester points to the beast that is Bertha and says: “That is my wife”. He then lays his hand on Jane: “And this is what I wished to have” (Brontë 259). He clearly marks the difference between the two female characters. He is stuck with Bertha even though it is Jane he wants.

I will now take a look at The Hellbound Heart by Clive Barker, where the room also plays a major part. The plot of The Hellbound Heart is rather simple, Frank, a man who lives life to the fullest and is always on the look after a new way to please his hungry desires, gets hold of a puzzle box called “the Lemarchand configuration” (Barker 3) which promises delights beyond his imagination. But the promises were lies and the pleasure he expected turns out to be a twisted take on enjoyment. He gets trapped in another dimension governed by demons, called the “Cenobites” (Barker 4), forever subjected to their horrors. In his torment he has only one window back to the world he once inhabited: the damp room where he was taken. Time passes and his younger brother Rory and his wife Julia, who has had a sexual encounter with Frank, moves into the abandoned house. Julia is deeply unhappy in her marriage to Rory and she finds herself dreaming of Frank. During the move Rory injures his hand and his blood drips on the floor in the damp room where Frank disappeared. Through some twisted logic, the blood gives Frank a way back to the world of the living. In her heart, Julia desires Frank and when she finds him in the damp room, only a shadow of his former self, she vows to nurture him back to his old self. So she uses the power she knows she has, her sexuality and beauty. She brings him men that she has picked up at the local bar with the alluring promise of sex. But once they arrive in the damp room there is no time for lovemaking, only Julia slashing her knife and spilling their blood. Frank can then crawl out from his hiding place and feed on Julia’s victims: much like a monstrous human spider he sucks the nourishment out of them. She thus nurtures him back to life with her perverse take on motherhood. Frank later kills Julia by mistake when he is about to stab Kirsty: but instead of trying to save Julia, he starts to feed of her. Kirsty is a friend of Rory’s and she is also hopelessly in love with him even if she knows that Rory does not share her feelings. He is completely infatuated with Julia. Kirsty gets dragged into Frank and Julia’s business by accident when she witnesses one of the murders and she has to fight for her life not to become another one of Frank’s victims.
When she flees she takes the Lemarchand configuration with her, and while she is recovering in the hospital from the encounter with Frank, she solves the puzzle box not knowing what lies within. The Cenobites appear and Kirsty has to bargain with them in order to save herself. She offers to take them to Frank since they know he has escaped their clutches.

Julia is not your average female Gothic woman, locked in a room somewhere, just like the mad Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. She has not fallen in to madness completely. She is forceful and passionate, and she does not hesitate to get what she wants. She regards her male victim as a sacrificial lamb or as a piece of meat (Barker 68): she cannot see them as humans. She does not even give most of them names but superficial nicknames based on their appearance; “the man in the blue suit (Barker 68) and “White Tie” (Barker 84). But the last one, Sykes, she does mention by name.

Julia is beautiful, radiant, and when Kirsty looks at her she comes to the conclusion that Julia is not capable of being ugly. Even the simplest of gestures are full of grace (Barker 24). Her beauty gives her power, especially sexual power over men which makes her the archetype of a femme fatale As Eve or even Delilah from the Bible caused the downfall of man, the femme fatale will cause destruction around her. The femme fatale has always been a symbol for female independence and a breaker of traditional gender roles (The Femme Fatale Throughout History). For Julia, there is never any doubt that she will be able to take home a victim for Frank. But Julia is lost, in her life and in her marriage to Rory. She knows that her adulterous affair was not a good thing: she did loose herself during her sexual encounter with Frank (Barker 37). When she finds that the blood Rory spilt on the floor of the damp room has mysteriously vanished she has a vision that she is on the path of finding herself again (Barker 42). She might have lost herself when she was on the bed with Frank but she is definitely on her way back to finding herself when she is in bed with Rory (Barker 56). It is symbolic that she both loses and finds herself in a sexual context because Julia is a very sexual creature. In the last scene with Julia, Kirsty is first given the impression that Julia has somehow managed to put her wedding dress on even though she was given the kiss of death by Frank. Kirsty believes that Julia is asking her to help her but as she steps closer she realises that it is the female Cenobite, the leader, who has Julia’s severed head in her lap. She is the one dressed in Julia’s wedding dress (Barker 160-62). When Julia’s and Frank’s affair started they were alone because Frank wanted to see the wedding dress. It was an excuse, of course, but it is still also a very strong symbol since their affair was consummated on top of the wedding dress.
(Barker 37) and now when it is over, the embodiment of the sexual cravings –the Cenobite– is dressed in it and still carries Julia.

The biggest difficulty with the character Julia is that she can be a protagonist and an antagonist and she, herself, represents a double nature. In the first half of The Hellbound Heart she is more of a protagonist, the suppressed heroine, suppressed by both her husband who treats her more as a doll than an equal and by Frank who really does not care about her at all. But as the story progresses and Kirsty gets more room, she becomes the antagonist. Before Rory makes the call to Kirsty and asks for her help with Julia (Barker 82) Kirsty is not a major character in the story. Prior to this the focus has been on Frank and especially on Julia. It is hard not to sympathise with Julia despite of her gruesome actions because the reader gets to take part of her thoughts and emotions. The reader knows that she has lost herself and that she is deeply unhappy.

The scenery in The Hellbound Heart is classically Gothic: a deserted house with a mysterious, damp room, a house where the two main characters, the married couple Rory and Julia, move in. There are many indications that both female characters stay within the parameters created in earlier Gothic fiction. Julia, the evil woman is punished by her wicked actions since she is killed and Kirsty’s chastity is rewarded in the sense that she survives. What makes both female characters transcend the parameters created in Gothic fiction is that they are not dependant on men to rescue them, they are both in control of their destiny. Their wishes are not to be anybody’s wives. Jane, in Jane Eyre, was a modern female character for her time because she was independent, but she is nevertheless bound to Mr. Rochester. When he calls on her, she responds and ultimately she is rewarded by becoming his wife and giving him a son, thereby staying within the classic boundaries as a woman since she fulfils her female duties. Neither Kirsty nor Julia does this, or even considers their female duties: Julia only craves Frank as her “pet” (Barker 54), there is no thought about marriage or love. Kirsty fancies Rory from a distance but she does not picture herself becoming Rory’s wife.

Barker manages to involve the classic trope of the room but instead of a woman who is a victim of the room, he introduces a woman who embraces and takes control of the room. The damp room in The Hellbound Heart plays a big part in the plot: it is the centre. Julia refers to the damp room as “a dead woman’s womb” (Barker 38), something that is slightly paradoxical but it is also a proof of her ambiguous feelings towards herself. Even though Julia
refers to it as a “dead woman’s womb” it is much alive: when she delivers her first victim and spills the blood on the floor boards of the room, it pulsates with life: “As the blood started, she was certain the room flickered, the bricks and mortar trembling to see the spurts that flew from him” (Barker 73). So there is a clear sign that the room itself is alive and with it Julia gets a new life role as a mother since she is the one that brings the nourishment: the blood. Julia herself think of it as a “dead woman’s womb” (Barker 38) and the damp room actually works as a womb of some sort. There, Frank is reborn to his physical body from a weakened, almost infantile state and Julia is the mother that provides sustenance. Julia’s damp room is her womb, a cocoon that nourishes the monstrous Frank back to life. It is more of a living thing than just a room. When she refers to it as a “dead woman’s womb” she really is referring to herself, that her emotional state is “dead”. But it also serves as a symbol of her vagina, the ultimate symbol of female sexuality. This can also be an explanation why she hates the room at first sight since it is a proof of her life and how cold it is. When she sees Frank in there for the first time he only makes a brief appearance: “All it said, before the wall began to close on it again, and its wreckage was once more eclipsed by brick and plaster, was ‘Julia’ – and then simply: ‘It’s Frank’ – and at the very last end of the word ‘Blood’” (Barker 53). This is very symbolically sexual and emotional encounter: Julia feels dead and lonely, but when Frank breaks through, when he penetrates the room, she gets a new hope. Blood, the ultimate symbol of life and fertility is once again supposed to flow in her “room”. Here, the motif of incest, which often is depicted in Gothic fiction, is represented since Julia acts both as a mother figure and as a mistress to Frank.

If the room is a womb (or a vagina) then the locked room can represent the woman’s sexuality (Fleenor 13) and the fact that she is being forced to suppress it due to society’s norm. But in The Hellbound Heart, Julia is in charge of the key to the damp room, it is hers and hers alone. Even if she is uncertain about her feelings towards the room at first she soon finds out that the room is closer connected to her. She feels connected to it even though she does not at first realise why. But as she leaves the room after her first visit she feels a strange satisfaction when she locks the door. Even though she does not know it, she has found herself there and is on the path to being reborn. She is now a woman in control of her own sexuality. The key represents her power and that she controls it; she is now in control of her womb.

The rooms in Jane Eyre show some resemblance with the rooms in The Hellbound Heart. Both Bertha’s cell and Julia’s damp room are enclosed spaces with no light. The damp room’s
windows are boarded up and Bertha’s cell has no windows. So both rooms are sheltered and out of the publics’ eyes. But Bertha’s cell is “dead” even though there is a fire burning there. But the fire is the only sign of life: everything else has already been devoured by Bertha’s own madness. Her fertility and her sexual charisma are long gone while Julia’s have just been rediscovered. Mr Rochester was seduced by Bertha’s beauty and sexual charisma when he first met her. Before insanity completely grabbed her, her looks was just as radiant as Julia’s. But Bertha has not always been a frightening beast: when Mr Rochester first met her she was known in Spanish Town for her beauty. She was “dark and majestic” (Brontë 269). But when Mr Rochester talks about her he uses pejorative terms such as “unchaste” and “perverse” (Brontë 270). Julia never gets the chance to deteriorate in the same way as Bertha since she gets mortally wounded by Frank. But Bertha and Julia have a lot in common: their rage, their violent nature and their madness. Bertha repeatedly tries to kill Mr Rochester and she stabs her brother, Mr Mason, when he visits her (Brontë 183). The reasons behind the violence might be slightly different: Julia brings victims to Frank because she wants to nourish him back to health. Bertha uses violence because of her rage and her insanity, but with Julia, her violence is directed towards men. Bertha does not attack Jane when she is trying on her wedding veil (Brontë 250) and she does not attack her keeper Grace Poole. The real difference between Julia and Bertha is that Julia is in her prime, she is as beautiful as she can get, while Bertha has lapsed into madness after 10 years of imprisonment. Julia’s room represents her rediscovery of herself and her sexuality, and her room becomes very much alive.

In *The Hellbound Heart*, the heroine Kirsty has a similar relationship with the rooms to that of Jane in *Jane Eyre* because they deal with their relationship with their sexual emotions although the reasons why they are in the room are very different. Kirsty is exposed to two rooms: the white hospital room (Barker 127) and the metamorphic room that she gains access to when she solves the puzzle box. When Kirsty wakes up in the white hospital room after Frank’s assault she believes that she is in a blizzard because everything is blindingly white (Barker 127). Kirsty is a grown woman so her response and emotions are different from Jane’s: Jane is too immature to fully understand and deal with it. The second and most vital part is that Jane is locked in the room as a punishment and it is a way to suppress her rebellious behaviour: she stood up to a boy, the usurper of the Reed household. As Ferguson Ellis argues: “In the feminine Gothic the heroine exposes the villain’s usurpation and thus reclaims an enclosed space that should have been a refuge from evil but has become the very
opposite, a prison” (Ferguson Ellis xiii). Jane is a victim of John Reed’s tyranny and a room that is supposed to be comforting to her ends up being a scary prison cell. Kirsty wakes up in the hospital room but she stays there voluntarily, although oblivious to what she is actually doing, and she “opens” the second room. Both Jane and Kirsty are the maidens in peril, their chastity is threatened and they both have overwhelming experiences in the rooms. Jane comes face to face with womanhood early in the red-room. She knows that it is a life turning event. It is exactly the same for Kirsty in her rooms: it is a life turning event. But Kirsty’s rooms do not act as a mean to suppress her as the room from classic Gothic does. While Jane is supposed to suppress her sexuality and her rebellious nature, Kirsty is given the option to further explore hers, but she chooses to continue suppressing it. She is therefore in full control of her own destiny and her body. Her suppression is not the result of society’s demands or a man’s way of dominating her: it is her own choice.

Kirsty is the heroine in the story. However, she is not the typical heroine: she is not beautiful and radiant and most importantly, she does not sit around waiting for someone to come and rescue her. As Barker himself describes her: she is “the girl with the pale handshake” (Barker 24). Or as Frank thinks of her: “He had certainly set his eyes on more voluptuous creatures, but something about her lack of glamour engaged him” (Barker 92). So her physical appearance is not impressive in any way and that is a bit different from the fair maidens that usually are the heroines in Gothic novels, such as the “most beautiful virgin Matilda”, in The Castle of Otranto (Walpole 27). Jane and Kirsty are very similar when it comes to their physical appearance: Kirsty is described as boring and Mr. Rochester says to Jane: “you are not more pretty than I am handsome” (Brontë 115). Jane describes herself as “plain” (Brontë 368). When St John asks her to marry him, he says that he “claims her” and “not for his pleasure” because she is “not made for love”: she is “made for labour” (Brontë 356). It seems like both women are being valued for their diligence; they are trustworthy, but they are not regarded as sexual objects. Kirsty is a helping hand to both Rory and Julia. She is Rory’s friend and he turns to her when he wants help: she helps with Rory’s and Julia’s wedding (Barker 34), she helps with the move to the new house (Barker 22) and Rory turns to Kirsty when he notices that Julia starts to act strangely (Barker 82). She has a practical nature more than being a pretty object that is there to please others.

Kirsty is headstrong, though, and she is chaste like a true Gothic heroine. She remains true to Rory, even though he does not respond to or even acknowledge her love. He seems blind to it.
The only thing that Kirsty does that might resemble some sexual encounters, apart from Frank’s attacks, is during the housewarming party when she innocently flirts with Neville (Barker 44). It is as if her virginity is reserved for Rory and only he has the power to make Kirsty embrace and accept her own sexuality. But since he is killed, the path to her sexual identity is cut off forever and she chooses to live her life as pure as a nun. Kirsty keeps her virginity throughout *The Hellbound Heart*. Of course the reader cannot know any of her history that is outside of the pages of the book but within those parameters, she is a chaste maiden just as Jane is in *Jane Eyre*. Kirsty’s rooms are the white hospital room and the room within the puzzle box. These two are each other’s opposites. The white room at the hospital is chaste and clean, symbolising Kirsty’s chastity. But it is also in this room she solves the puzzle box and gets access to the room within it: she gets in touch with the side of her that she fears the most. This room is the opposite of the nurturing white room because this poses as a threat to her. One Cenobite appears and threatens to take her away with them and subject her to the same cruel treatment as they gave Frank: their warped view on pleasure. So the room becomes a threat to her virginity since the Cenobites are embodiments of sexual appetite and they belong to this room within. The Cenobite also says “I belong to you, Kirsty. And you to me” (Barker 135) which is an indication that the room is actually something within herself, the Cenobite is a manifestation of her sexual appetite: the thing she is suppressing the most. It is also interesting that only one Cenobite appear to Kirsty instead of a whole group. It gives the sense that it more intimate, more personal, than when the Cenobites went to get Frank. Frank did not care about who got him as long as they gave him what he wanted, his appetite is wide and he craves a lot. Kirsty is not like him at all: she is the careful maiden. The Cenobites are, as mentioned earlier, embodiments of sexual appetite. The fact that they are horrible to look at and brings a stench with them only shows the ambiguous attitude towards sexuality. To Frank, the smell the Cenobites bring with them reminds him of vanilla, something sweet: “the sweetness of which did little to disguise the stench beneath” (Barker 7). But Kirsty can only smell the “stink of it” (Barker 136). This is another sign of Kirsty’s rejection of her sexual self. While Frank embraces it, it revolts Kirsty. The room within the box represents the part of Kirsty that she suppresses and rejects: her sexual identity. She has only eyes for Rory, but even the dreamy infatuation she has for him is pure and chaste; she finds the ragged line of front teeth “irresistible” (Barker 25) and she comes to the party instead of sitting at home “thinking of Rory’s sweet face” (Barker 44). She knows that Rory does not feel the same way about her and that he is completely hexed by Julia, and she knows that she does not have any chance with him. But she accepts it and keeps her love for him as almost a form of worship.
She torments herself by thinking of Julia and Rory together in their bridal bed (Barker 26) so sex does not seem to interest her because she does not picture herself taking Julia’s place.

At the very end of the novel, while Kirsty is staggering away from the house on Lodovico Street, she is again given the puzzle box. She has symbolically been given back her honour, her virginity, with the box: her honour is now forever safe with her since she is in control of it. The first time she comes across the box she steals it from Frank, just to find something that will protect her from his sexual advances, a weapon of some sort. There is an irony to the fact that the box then also poses a threat to her, just as Frank. But when Frank is put out of action, the box does not pose as a threat to her anymore.

All the central rooms are connected to the women’s sexuality but they are also representations of their personalities. While Julia is in control of her room, Kirsty learns to control hers. But Julia’s carelessness and lack of restriction leads to her death while Kirsty’s chastity and her self-discipline make her the heroine. Her suppression of her sexual self makes her morally superior. Both rooms represent the place where both females find themselves, and although they are significantly different, the basic result is the same. Kirsty needs to step in deeper into herself, her room, to make the final decision about which path she will choose. But the rooms are central to both of them in their journey in the story. The room contains something that challenges them, turning their life around and changing them. This is the central difference to the Gothic tradition, since in both classic Gothic and female Gothic, the female characters are governed by men: both Bertha and Jane are controlled by Mr. Rochester, and even though Jane is locked in the red-room by her aunt, the reason behind it is John, the only boy in the household who is dominating all of them. Jane is also almost bullied into a loveless marriage with St John. In *The Hellbound Heart*, the women are in control.

In conclusion, Clive Barker has managed to let his female characters use the rooms in the plot to strengthen and assert their femininity instead of being oppressed by it, and therefore avoiding being oppressed by the patriarchal norms in society. Instead of being the objects that the male characters use to assert themselves as the dominant force, they use the male characters as objects: the men are actually not really important in this story. The female characters are not chased through a Gothic labyrinth or being actively locked up by the male characters. Their wombs are not the target of the men: instead they have full control of their own wombs. The men are not superfluous though: they serve a purpose but only indirectly,
through the female characters. The female characters break free from the stereotypical bubble that has held them in captivity earlier. When both females stop doing what is expected of them and instead stand their ground, they are truly free. It does not matter that Julia’s actions lead to her death because she dies as a free woman. It does not matter that Kirsty decides to reject her sexual self because it is her choice and therefore she is ultimately free.
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