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### Cultural and Social Norms Seen as Female Imprisonment in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, "The Yellow Wallpaper," elucidates the terrifying effects of cultural and social oppression on middle class women in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. With every detail of the story, Gilman portrays a woman who is imprisoned physically, mentally, and emotionally by male supremacy and social expectation. Gilman's narrator, John's wife, has no freedom of choice, no freedom of thought, and no freedom of expression.

In this story, told by the unnamed wife, we meet a young couple who have been lucky enough to secure a large country estate for the summer. The purpose of this relocation is to help the wife, who suffers a "temporary nervous depression-a slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman 75), regain her physical and emotional strength. As narrator, she presents herself as having a sensitive, artistic temperament which her husband believes is at the root of her condition. John, her husband, is presented as, on the surface, being loving and caring. It appears that his greatest concern is his wife's welfare. He is a physician "of high standing" (Gilman 75), a man of science who "has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly of talk of things not felt and seen and put down in figures." (Gilman, 74) It looks like they are a happily married couple. However, as the story unfolds it becomes obvious that things are not as they seem.

In reality, John is belittling, controlling, and superior in both his attitude toward and in his dealings with his wife. He chooses the room they will sleep in (against her wishes), controls her activities with a "scheduled prescription for each hour in the day" (Gilman 76),

and forbids that she work, i.e. write, at all. John's prescription, i.e. deprivation of all things stimulating and social, is only phase one of her treatment. If she does not improve, he will arrange a visit to S. Weir Mitchell, a renowned physician whose typical treatment, the Rest Cure, involves institutionalization, absolute bed rest, and complete inactivity. (Dorenkamp et al, 27) This is the exact opposite of the wife's belief that "congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good" (Gilman 75) and that "less opposition, and more society and stimulus" (Gilman 76) "would help her recovery" (Gillman's Commentary on Society 2). Clearly John, who embodies a "male dominated social system known as a patriarchy" (Gender Subordination 1), does not believe she knows how to care for herself.

John's attitude clearly demonstrates his belief that she is incapable of making adult decisions. Examples of this gender subordination are prolific. He regards her as a child, calling her a "blessed little goose" (Gilman 77) and "little girl" (Gilman 82). He makes statements such as "She shall be as sick as she pleases!" (Gilman 82) which insinuates that he thinks her condition is at least partially one of her own making.

Gilman's main character, the wife/narrator, is not immune to these cultural pressures. She judges herself by these same rules. She bemoans a constant lack of energy and accepts that her "condition" keeps her from being the "real rest and comfort" (Gilman 77) she wishes to be for John. She is grateful to Jennie, John's sister, who is "a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper," (Gilman 79) and who has assumed a majority of the household duties. She tries to believe these family members know what is best to help her recover. She tries, but she fails.

She fails because in reality Gilman is showing how these cultural and social restraints imprison a female. In fact, much of Gilman's imagery is that of imprisonment. The

design on the wallpaper in the bedroom John chose is by day ugly and random, but by night it “becomes bars” (Gilman 83). The pattern on the wallpaper “lolls like a broken neck” (Gilman 79), and “strangles” (Gilman 86) any of the women who try to climb through it. The color of the wallpaper is “a smoldering unclean yellow...dull yet lurid” (Gilman). It is “old, foul, bad” (Gilman), “and stains everything it touches.” (Gilman) The wallpaper also smells. It has a “peculiar odor” which is “quite subtle, (yet) most enduring.” (Gilman) Gilman’s wallpaper is a metaphor for the cultural and social oppression of women. The pattern imprisons and strangles those who want to escape. The color is old and foul. The smell is pervasive, hovering and creeping. It represents a social order that is rotten and rank, something that should be thrown out.

The prison metaphor does not stop with the wallpaper. There are bars on the bedroom windows, restraints attached to the bedroom wall, and a gate at the top of the stairs. The bedroom locks and must be opened by a key. John limits his wife’s contact with friends and family. He keeps her isolated, locked away. John, who represents male superiority and reason, and Jennie, who symbolizes a perfect female according to 19<sup>th</sup> century social standard, are her jailers. There is little hope for release.

It does not appear that Gilman believes that much with regard to these restraints will change. Her nameless main character, who represents all women as women have no identity, has no power to make changes to her environment. John, in this case male authority, entertained the idea of changing the wallpaper to appease his wife, and then thought better of it. “He said that after the wallpaper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so

on.” (Gilman 77) In other words, one change would lead to another. Like dominos, the pieces of the prison, i.e. the social order, would fall.

There was only one escape, madness. Gilman does not sugar coat the effect of these restrictions on her nameless narrator. We watch as the woman welcomes psychosis. She believes she has discovered someone within the wallpaper. She has “something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch.” (Gilman 84) She does “not want to leave until I have found it out.”(Gilman 84) Her goal becomes to dismantle her prison, i.e. strip away the wallpaper, and capture the woman behind it. This resolve, this purpose, confuses and unnerves John and Jennie. They are more comfortable with their captive when she is sick because at least then they control her.

Of course, there is no woman behind the wallpaper. All of the wife’s efforts to free her end in a horrible scene in which she becomes that woman; creeping, creeping, creeping by day, and believing that she must return to the wall paper at night. It might be said that she escaped by the only means available to her, a complete break with reality. When John bursts into the room, he sees her condition, and faints. His emotional reaction places his body directly in her path, where she physically climbs over him as she makes her way around the room. Although hardly a happy ending, he prevents her progress no longer.

Works Cited

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