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Narrator Gone Wild:

Animalistic Regression in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

During the turn of the 19th century, women did not have a large role in society. They were expected to stay in the house and care for the family while the husband would work. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a strong advocate for women's rights, published "The Yellow Wallpaper" in critical retaliation of the overbearing patriarchal society. In this story, the narrator is believed, by her husband-doctor, to be suffering from a "temporary nervous depression" (Gilman 609) and he orders her on the bed-rest cure. After several weeks of being isolated in the upstairs room of an old mansion and cut off from most social interactions, the narrator's mind begins to deteriorate and finally snaps. Many critics believe that the narrator was reduced to an infantile state by the patriarchal control of her husband, but the narrator's insanity actually turned her not into an infant, but an animal.

At this time period, most women were expected to stay and care for the home. The men left to go to their jobs, but the only "acceptable" jobs for women outside of housekeeping were sewing, washing clothes for wealthier families, or taking in the occasional boarder. All the while, they were "expected to like it, to be cheerful and gay, smiling and good-humored" (Lane 109) despite what their true feelings or ambitions were. In fact, there were many cases of intellectual women, including Gilman herself, who reported, through letters and diaries, that they were depressed, exhausted, and even hysteric over their situation. Cures used for this wide-spread

“nervous depression” included bathing in mineral waters, massages, and even electric shocks. After the birth of her daughter and sinking into a depression, Gilman was sent to Silas Weir Mitchell, who pioneered and implemented the new “rest-cure” treatment. Women who underwent this treatment were confined to a bed, isolated, and were not allowed to use their hands at all, even to feed themselves (Lane 117). This treatment is remarkably similar to the handling of an infant- they are fed by another person and are usually left in a crib for most of the day.

Gilman received this same treatment and was then ordered to “never touch pen, brush, or pencil” (Lane 121) for the rest of her life. Afterwards, she reported that she almost went insane and, on occasion, would play with rag dolls and crawl into closets or under beds to escape. This parallels the crawling infantile behavior of the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” after several weeks of the “rest-cure” treatment imposed upon her by her husband. She was forbidden to write, though she did it secretly in a journal, as John “hates to have me write a word” (Gilman 610). She admits that writing does make her feel better, and it allows her to think, even if quietly, since nobody in the house will speak with her, as it is believed that it will tire her (Post 177). The only mental activity the narrator found in the room was from studying the pattern of the wallpaper. “Her torpid brain is an irritated organ, but once she engages in the ‘gymnastics’ of following the paper’s pattern her neuroses calm into studious activity” (Scott 200). While the paper might be repulsive to look at, the mental relief it provides her far outweighs its nauseating appearance. She was able to lose herself in the random designs that do not follow “any laws of radiation... or repetition, or symmetry” (Gilman 613) and occupy her underworked mind.

The narrator is forced, by her husband, to remain in the upstairs nursery instead of the downstairs room that opened to the outside and provided a literal escape for her (Lane 125). This

room, while it has windows on all four sides, is on the second floor and she can only look out at the world she has been barred from. The downstairs room was not large enough for both her and John to sleep in, and he insisted that they share a room (Lane 125). This need for observance is similar to the watchfulness of a parent for a small child. Being in the nursery also puts her under constant and spontaneous scrutiny- "John can climb the stairs and find her" (Gaudelius 120) whenever he wishes. This room is covered with a "revolting...unclean yellow" wallpaper with a "sprawling flamboyant" (Gilman 610) design that the narrator finds herself drawn to. The furniture in the room seems to be more of a torture chamber than the nursery the narrator assumes it to be- the windows are barred, metal rings are attached to the walls, there are gnaw marks on the bedstead, which is bolted to the floor, and the wallpaper has been torn off the walls. The very fact that the room is a nursery reveals the narrator's impending mental regression back to the infantile state. She has switched places with her newborn child- while she remains in the nursery, he is somewhere else in the house, free from the room's imprisonment. The action of putting the narrator in the nursery has switched the mother and the child; he may one day be able to escape, but she will remain trapped in the upstairs room (Gaudelius 120).

John treats the narrator as if she is a child from the start. He babies her constantly, refusing to discuss her treatment with her, or to even acknowledge that there is actually something wrong with her, as if she is too much of an ignorant child to understand or know any better than him. He calls her pet names, such as "blessed little goose" and often cuddles her by taking her "into his arms" (Hill 150). One time, he physically carried her up to her room, as if she were a small child, put her on the bed, and read to her until she fell asleep. (Gilman 613). This behavior is incredibly parental: when children are tired, they are carried to bed by their parents and the reading of bedtime stories is a common pastime for parents to use to lull small

children to sleep. It is even suggested by critic Stephen L. Post that John could have babied her intentionally in order to keep her “dependent, trusting, sickly, childlike, admiring, and devoted” (178). By keeping her creativity and intellect under control, he will have complete power over her and can meld her into the caring, devoted, wife he wishes her to be.

At the end, the narrator’s mind has been destroyed and reduced her to nothing more than an infant. She crawls continually around the room, like a child who is unable to walk, and delights in the destruction of the furniture. At one point, when she attempts to move the bed, she bites it in her rage. This action compares the narrator to a “ravaging” child (Lane 127) that takes out its anger and frustration by physical means since it does not have the mental capacity to express its feelings otherwise. She takes pride in tearing off the wallpaper, telling Jennie “merrily that [she] did it out of spite” (Lane 618). Like a child who has no respect or understanding of authority, she performed her action without considering the consequences of the fact that they were renting the mansion and might not have had the right to change or alter the interior. From the beginning, the narrator was deprived of her own child, who was taken care of by Jennie, the housekeeper. By taking away her son, it is revealed that John finds her incapable of caring for the baby, as if she lacks the strength and mental capacity for to do so. She has violent mood swings and often admits that she gets so “unreasonably angry with John sometimes” (Gilman 609). These mood swings are similar to the temper tantrums infants have when things do not go their way. She claims that she was never so sensitive before, and assumes that it is her nervous condition that drives her to be so irritable. Instead, it really the beginning of her decline into the infantile state, brought on by her husband’s overbearing control of her life. With her mental decline, she is unable to express her emotions and feelings any way besides anger and aggression towards John.

However, literary critic Heidi Scott takes a different stance and compares the room to an “ecosystem” (201). The narrator initially fights her new surroundings, but soon comes to enjoy the room and attempts to integrate herself and become a part of it. The woman seen trapped in the wallpaper is an image created by the narrator’s mind so that she would have something to explore and engage in by night. Once she decides that she must “free” the woman from the wallpaper, she comes to view the rooms as hers, and even takes on animalistic qualities: “she acquires... camouflage by rubbing the yellow residue [from the wallpaper] on her clothing and grows suspicious of... her husband and his sister” (Scott 202). Wild animals frequently develop and implement camouflage so that they can survive in their environment, and are often territorial, as the narrator became when she came to view the room and the wallpaper as hers. Her “creeping by night” and “gnawing her bedstead” (Gilbert 208) bring to mind images of animal-like behavior- the creeping is like that of the nocturnal cat and the gnawing brings to mind a dog. These behaviors show the depredation wrecked upon her mind. After all those months spent in practically isolated from the outside world, she has been reduced to nothing more than a caged animal. When John finds her creeping around the room, she has fully assimilated herself into the yellow world of her bedroom, where her husband has no power over her. In fact, when he faints in her path, she physically has to “creep over him every time” (Gilman 619) she makes a lap around the room. These laps around the room bring to mind a caged animal pacing around the borders of its pen. Every time she climbs over him, she is physically mounting him and demonstrating that she has dominance over him while the two of them are in the upstairs bedroom.

Comparing the narrator to a cat brings another level of symbolism beside the reduction of the narrator to an animalistic state. During this time period, cats were not considered to be true

household pets, as were dogs and horses, since they were not easily trained. At this time, cats “were considered too independent and disobedient for subjugation” (Golden 17). The narrator’s independent tendencies and strong imagination make her cat-like in this sense, as her husband is unable to tame her and turn her into the perfect wife. Her desire to be herself and defy the expectations of being a traditional wife are qualities that would be frowned upon by society at that time, as cats were frequently condemned as pets for their resistance to being trained (Golden 20).

Besides having the mindset of a feline, the narrator performs several cat-like behaviors while enclosed in the room. The “smooch” the narrator continually rubs herself against is remarkably similar to how cats mark their territory. Cats will rub their faces along objects to cover them with their smell, a behavior known as “bunting” (Golden 24). The narrator’s continual rubbing against the wall is surprising comparable to that behavior. In fact, when a cat bunts, it will leave behind a “faint oily yellow secretion” (Golden 26) known as sebum. This color matches with the color of the wallpaper and draws another connection to the symbolic cat. Even the tearing of the wallpaper is animalistic. Gilman uses words such as “peeled” and “pulled” (Gilman 618) to describe the destruction of the wallpaper. Not only do these words bring to mind wild animals, but large cats, such as tigers, mark their territory by tearing the bark off of trees with their claws. By ripping off the wallpaper with her bare hands, the narrator is emulating this feral cat behavior and claiming the room as hers. Towards the end, when the narrator has begun her mental descent, she remarks that she “slept a good deal in the daytime... I don’t sleep very well at night” (Golden 21). Like a cat, she spends most of her day sleeping and napping, but is awake and active during the nighttime hours.

Many times during the story, the narrator remarks about the smell of the room: “it hover[s] in the dining-room” and “gets into my hair” (Gilman 616). This “keen attention to ...smell” (Golden 20) is a strong animalistic quality, as cats possess a much stronger sense of smell than humans. When she describes the odor, she depicts it as if it is a piece of prey for the cat. The scent “creeps all over the house,” is found “hiding in the hall” and “lying in wait...on the stairs” (Gilman 616). The choice of words Gilman uses creates the image of something trying to hide, as a mouse would from a hunting cat. The narrator, too, acts as if she is hunting and tracking the smell: “I turn my head suddenly and surprise it-there is that smell” (Gilman 616). At one point, she even describes the smell as “yellow” (Gilman 616). This description returns, again, to the cat, as the sense of smell would overrule sight and color in the sensory systems and the two would mix (Golden 24).

By taking the narrator as an animal, the ending takes a new turn. Instead of being degraded to a hapless, insane woman, capable of nothing more than an infant would be, she is instead seen as “a figure of independence, empowerment, and even defiance” (Golden 27). Cats themselves are more independent than most other house pets, and portraying the narrator as one gives her the appearance of being victorious over her husband’s control. In fact, at the end of the story, she crawls over John repeatedly, “marking him” and turning the former “patriarch into a part of her own territory” (Golden 28), nothing more than a lump in her path.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” reflects Gilman’s aggression towards the patriarchal dominance in her society and the possible damage it inflicted upon the women of the time. To her, patriarchy was a “social disease” (Gilbert 206) that “regulated women to a dependent, and hence, subservient position” (Knight 287) to men, despite what that woman would have wanted to do with her own life. She had her own misgivings about marriage in family, and soon learned that

her fears of being bound to the family were true. The narrator in this story suffers as Gilman did during her “rest-cure” treatment by slowly losing her grip on her sanity. Several critics compare this mental degradation to that of an infant, but I find that the narrator has become more animalistic, even cat-like, as she is trying to break free from the imprisonment of her husband and society.

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