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Argument/Conversation Essay
Spring 2015 Semester
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Control, Obsession, and Possession: Relationships in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

“The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is the story of a woman who is staying in a “get-away” house with her husband, who feels that getting away from reality and resting in the house will be good for her. The narrator finds an odd fascination with the yellow, patterned wallpaper, and studies it until she eventually starts to believe she is a woman who has been trapped inside the wallpaper. I am interested in the relationship between John and the narrator, and the possible correlation of that to the relationship between the narrator and the wallpaper. Within this topic, I am especially interested in the development of the narrator’s possessiveness over the wallpaper and whether there is a connection to the narrator’s relationship with John. My view on “The Yellow Wallpaper” is influenced by two scholars, Meryem Ayan and Todd McGowan. Meryem Ayan focuses on the female versus male aspects of the narrator’s relationship to John, and states how women are always thought of in relation to men. She believes that the narrator’s breakdown was a result of her treatment and of men’s attitudes towards women, specifically John’s attitude towards her. Todd McGowan talks about the significance of property throughout the essay, and the importance of the relationship between property and self. He argues that in the beginning of the story, the wallpaper possesses the narrator and continues to haunt her. John advocates self-possession: being in full control of your self, although McGowan believes that John struggles with it; we see that more and more as the story develops, especially as the narrator’s fascination with the paper increases. Eventually, it allows her to set her self free.

In my analysis, I would like to consider how the two relationships correlate. I find it strange that John repeatedly dismisses the narrator's opinions and suggestions. Upon analysis, it seemed like John has a controlling nature over the narrator and her life. It seems like a possibility that John's attitude towards the narrator is driving her to become possessive over the wallpaper because she is looking for something in her life that she can own and be in control of. Scholar Meryem Ayan explores this in her article "Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) *The Yellow Wallpaper*: The Feminist Identity Paper". Recall that her article was about the male versus female aspect of the story. She talks about feminism and gender roles playing into the relationship between the narrator and John: how women are always characterized in relation to men in male-dominated culture. Ayan feels that John drove the narrator to madness with his controlling mannerisms and that in the end the narrator expressed herself with actions instead of communicating with words. This is equivalent to the narrator trying to break out of the social norms and roles that society relates to women. Ayan claims "In Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' the wife's madness has something to do with her husband's attitudes, because it is he, who gradually drives her into madness with his limitations and orders" (Ayan 76). I agree that John's accumulating actions took a toll on the narrator and that he contributed to her madness because, throughout my analysis, my evidence confirms the relationship between the narrator and John and the decline of the narrator's condition/her focus on the wallpaper. John is very limiting in what he allows the narrator to do and what he prohibits her from doing, such as writing or staying in a different room in the house. My own view is that John's controlling attitude towards the narrator causes the narrator to become possessive over the wallpaper. Though I concede that his actions

correlate with gender roles and social norms of male behavior, I still maintain that he was very controlling in almost all aspects of the narrator's life, which drove her to her fascination/possessive attitude towards the wallpaper.

In the beginning of the story, the narrator has a very loving and appreciative view of John. She says how he is always so thoughtful to her and how he loves her and wants her to get better: "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (Gilman 320) and also "Dear John! He loves me dearly, and hates to have me sick" (Gilman 324). In these passages the narrator expresses how she feels that John feels about her. I noticed that it seems like she believes he has her best interest in mind and she seems very grateful of him. I observed that there were many phrases similar to those endearing expressions towards John in the beginning of the essay. The first quote seemed like it could be ambiguous, so I used the paraphrase times three toolkit to use synonyms to better understand the text. I came up with phrases such as: he is really watchful and affectionate and scarcely gives me consent to turn over without unique advice, he is tremendously wary and caring and barely permits me to fuss without distinct commands, he is extremely cautious and devoted and rarely allows me to move without particular instruction. When paraphrased, I noticed that the quote made John seem more controlling rather than caring. This is interesting because the narrator seems to be portraying John in a positive, caring light, but when paraphrased, this quote appeared to portray John as a more controlling figure.

Also, there is a quote from the narrator that appeared before either of the previous two quotes and seemed out of place in the writing with the way she feels about John at that point in the story: "I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never

used to be so sensitive” (Gilman 320). This seems contradictory to the admirable and appreciative comments she made towards him, and does not seem to fit with her loving attitude towards him in the beginning of the story. It seems to fit more with the first quote paraphrased as: “he is extremely cautious and devoted and rarely allows me to move without particular instruction” where John is portrayed as more of a controlling character rather. The narrator seems to put more of the blame/focus on herself in this quote, thinking that it was her becoming more sensitive that was the reason she was unreasonably angry with John. This is extremely interesting and goes along with the idea that Ayan explores in her source about women always being talked about in relation to men: “The world is explained primarily through [men’s] voice and power because the women are the ones pushed to the margins rather than being placed at the center of ideas, actions and meaning. They are defined in relation to men because they are not regarded as autonomous beings” (Ayan 75). Ayan discusses how, because of the male-dominated world we live in, women are always talked about in terms of men. I agree with this idea because in my evidence, the narrator was talking about her sensitivity in relation to John, and she was putting the blame of the anger on herself rather than exploring why the anger may be John’s fault. This was an interesting anomaly to this part of the story.

At this point in the story, the narrator is still just noticing the wallpaper; she thinks it is horrible and does not want to stay in the room: “I never saw a worse paper in my life... I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long” (Gilman 320). The narrator seems to find the wallpaper atrocious and does not want to stay and experience it. However, a few pages later, she is fascinated and interested in the wallpaper and what it is all about: “I’m getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps

because of the wallpaper... I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion" (Gilman 323). The narrator appears to be focusing on the wallpaper and decides that she is going to figure it out, and claims that she may be becoming fond of the room possibly because of the wallpaper. The only detail that does not seem to fit with this part of the story is the fact that, despite the fact that she feels like she is growing to like the room more because of the wallpaper, she still does not want to stay: "I wish John would take me away from here" (Gilman 324) and then she goes on to say: "I told him that I was really not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away" (Gilman 325). It is strange that the narrator became so interested in the paper and seemed to like the room more, yet she still wants to leave and talks to John about it.

It is also interesting to notice that John does not take her opinion or suggestions into account. He seems to keep giving the narrator excuses instead of speculating compromises to her suggestions: "The repairs are not done at home, and I cannot possibly leave town just now. Of course if you were in any danger, I could and would, but you really are better dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know" (Gilman 325). John is telling the narrator why they cannot go home and that if he felt she was in any real danger he would take her away. This is directly correlating to the controlling attitude towards the narrator. It appears that he is assuming that he knows what's best for her, and not taking her requests or opinions into account at all. He justifies this by telling her that he is a doctor, therefore he should know what is good for her. This also seems to be an issue of men versus women. Ayan is talking again about this issue, with a sub argument about women being at a disadvantage: "In comparison to men, woman have to struggle double time to be able to raise their voice and prove that they can

be as good as men if they have the same conditions as they” (Ayan 78). I agree that women have trouble making their voices heard and taken seriously by men and, in the narrator’s case, John, because my evidence confirms that the narrator attempted to express her requests and opinions to John, but he dismissed them quickly and gave her excuses rather than considering her ideas. The narrator, a woman, is struggling to have her voice heard by her husband, a man, who thinks that he knows what is best for her. McGowan also seems to notice this refusal, and talks about it more in terms of the wallpaper; he talks about the fact that John’s refusal to consider the narrator’s requests is actually causing the narrator to spend more time thinking about and paying more attention to the wallpaper: “On more than one occasion in the story, it is John’s refusal to renovate or to leave the house that triggers the narrator’s continually deeper attention to the wall-paper... The power of John to compel the narrator to remain in a situation that constantly horrifies her- the power of patriarchy itself- is simultaneously the impetus for her attempt to free her self from the wall-paper” (McGowan 43). I agree with McGowan’s views on this because John is always refusing to do what the narrator wants and leave the house, and he always seems to give her some sort of excuse. Since the narrator cannot get away, it seems that she focuses more and more on the wallpaper, which appears to make her more obsessed with it. This is also what pushes her to “get out” of the wallpaper at the end of the story: McGowan believes the wallpaper sets the narrator free and helps her find her self. All of this evidence supports the idea that John is enforcing a controlling attitude towards the narrator, and it provides the thought that he is actually pushing her to become more fascinated and focused on the wallpaper.

The next development in the relationship between the narrator and John comes on page 326, as the narrator is becoming suspicious and a little frightened of him: “The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John. He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look” (Gilman 326). The narrator claims she is beginning to be afraid of John and finds him a little weird sometimes as well as his sister Jennie too, and she thinks it is because of the paper: “It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis- that perhaps it is the paper! I have watched John when he did not know I was looking... and I’ve caught him several times looking at the paper! And Jennie too” (Gilman 326). This quote explains how she seems to think they are acting weird because of the wallpaper. She thinks it is affecting them in some sort of way. She seems to have similar feelings about John and Jennie throughout the story, initially love and appreciation and developing into suspicious. It seems as though she believes the wallpaper is having an effect on John and Jennie and she develops an increasingly stranger view towards them.

It is at this point in the essay when the narrator seems to become possessive of the wallpaper. Towards the end of the story, she appears to be becoming increasingly more possessive towards the wallpaper. She wants to be the first one to discover the secret that she believes the wallpaper holds: “...I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself” (Gilman 327) and then goes on to say “...no person touches this paper but me- not *alive!*” (Gilman 329). The narrator seems to become possessive of the wallpaper’s meaning, and then of the paper itself. She even goes so far as to suggest that no one else is allowed to touch the wallpaper or there will be consequences such as death; she acts extremely possessive. It is also interesting to note the word count of the word

“wallpaper” versus the word “paper” when referring to the wallpaper in the story. I counted and added up the total of each and found that the word “wallpaper” is used 13 times while the word “paper” is used 21 times in reference to the wallpaper. Paper appears a significant amount more than wallpaper does. John does not want her to write because he feels it will worsen her condition: “there comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word” (Gilman 320). The narrator is secretly writing and is hiding her writing from John because he does not want her to write and feels it will not improve her condition. However, it seems like it is one of the only things that she can control in her life. The narrator appears to be connecting her writing with the wallpaper and becoming obsessed with the wallpaper because the only thing she has control over seems to be her writing on paper and her ideas/obsession with the wallpaper. This suggests that John controlling almost every aspect of the narrator’s life, including attempting to prohibit the narrator from writing, not only drives her to become more focused on the wallpaper, but it causes her to become possessive over it as well.

The progression is very interesting and seems to correlate with the progression of the relationship between the narrator and John: as she becomes more obsessed with figuring out the wallpaper and more possessive over it, she becomes more and more hostile towards John. She says: “John is so queer now that I don’t want to irritate him. I wish he would take another room” (Gilman 328). This quote expresses that the narrator does not even want to sleep in the same room as John now. I noticed the progression of the narrator’s feelings about John and how towards the end of the story, the narrator seems to be changing her opinion of John: “He asks me all sorts of questions too, and pretended to be very loving and kind. As if I couldn’t see through him!” (Gilman 329).

She seems hostile or suspicious of him, and seems to think he is trying to trick her or work against her. This is opposite of how she originally viewed him, where she expressed how loving and caring he was. McGowan feels that the narrator's illness separates her from John, and his sister Jennie too: "The narrator's 'illness' - that is, her ability to feel reification as a crisis, rather than as a tolerable state of affairs- separates her from her husband and his sister Jennie; John and Jennie are content to live as things, without bothering to notice" (McGowan 38). I think McGowan's points are extremely interesting: he is making a point that the narrator is in a way disparate in relation to John and Jennie. He goes on to say: "Unlike John and Jennie, [the narrator] is not plagued by the illusion that she is, deep down inside, truly human. She sees herself as a thing- as a figure in the wallpaper- and is a constant threat to reveal John and Jennie as things as well" (McGowan 37). McGowan believes that John and Jennie are perfectly fine with living as things, and the narrator is not, and that is why she is "ill" and trying to find her self. While my interpretation of the evidence does not support McGowan's claim that the narrator is a continual intimidation to John and Jennie living life as "things", I do understand his point that the narrator is separated from John and Jennie in a sense that she perceives her situation differently than they perceive her situation/condition. I feel that this separation may be what is creating the narrator's sense of hostility and suspicion towards John and Jennie.

The progression of relationships between the narrator and John and the narrator and the wallpaper seems to be very unusual. It seems that the narrator becomes more and more interested and possessive of the wallpaper, and wants to be the only one to "figure it out" or "master it". It also seems that the narrator becomes more and more hostile and

suspicious of John because in the beginning she had a completely different attitude towards him than in the end. This may be related to the male versus female situation as mentioned in Ayan's article. I have considered the possibility that John's controlling nature is driving the narrator to becoming increasingly more obsessed with the wallpaper, which is explored in McGowan's writing. The subject is now more conclusive to me and it appears that there is a significant connection in the correlation between the narrator's relationship with John and her relationship with the wallpaper. After analysis and conversation with ideas of scholars, it seems that John's controlling attitude towards the narrator drives her to become increasingly more obsessed with the wallpaper, and as a result she seems to become more possessive over it. I feel as though taking my own ideas as well as the ideas of educated scholars has helped me evolve my ideas about "The Yellow Wallpaper", and I am interested in thinking about these ideas even more.

Works Cited

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