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The Significance of Otherness in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is about the life of an unnamed woman suffering with a "... temporary nervous depression¹" after the birth of her child. She is staying in a large country mansion with her husband, a physician named John, who has constrained her to a large, solitary room with yellow wallpaper in hopes of improving her mental health condition. Her condition deteriorates dramatically as the story progresses; a deterioration that can be ascribed to the nature of the treatment her husband subjects her to.

In this story, it is the protagonist herself who represents the 'other', with the treatment from John serving to further her otherisation.

One of the most immediately noticeable things John does to otherise the narrator is gaslighting², a form of psychological abuse where a perpetrator destabilises a victim's understanding of their world and surroundings through a persistent undermining of their thoughts, opinions, and self-concept.

One example can be seen within the quote "That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid; but I don't care—there is something strange about the house—I can feel it. I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a draught, and shut the window³." Instead of listening to his wife's fears and comforting her authentically, he simply dismisses and explains away her discomfort. Another significant example can be seen within an exchange regarding the titular wallpaper:

I suppose John never was nervous in his life. He laughs at me so about this wallpaper!

At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies.

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.

"You know the place is doing you good," he said, "and really, dear, I don't care to renovate the house just for a three months' rental."

"Then do let us go downstairs," I said, "there are such pretty rooms there."

Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he would go down cellar if I wished, and have it whitewashed into the bargain⁴.

¹ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gutenberg.org (1892; repr., Project Gutenberg, 1999), <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/1952>.

² "Gaslighting | Definition, Origins, & Facts | Britannica," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/gaslighting>.

³ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gutenberg.org (1892; repr., Project Gutenberg, 1999), <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/1952>.

⁴ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gutenberg.org (1892; repr., Project Gutenberg, 1999), <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/1952>.

This exchange can be considered gaslighting because John laughs at his wife's concerns (which, considering the state of her mental health, should be of note to him), and then undermines her request by unduly comparing it to something unreasonable (whitewashing the cellar), which serves to reframe her reasonable discomfort into something akin to the complaints of a petulant child. This infantile reframing is magnified by the use of the pet name "silly little goose"⁵; vocabulary that can be interpreted as far more diminishing and patronising than it is romantic.

This gaslighting greatly undermines her, attempting to turn her into a submissive figure under the complete control of the dominant and patriarchal John under the pretence that he is aiding her recovery. By insisting that she is wrong (and that her concerns are solely a product of her condition rather than reasonable requests), he is detaching her from the things she thinks to be true; her own lived experience of her condition, and the fears associated with it. He can do this because he is both male, and a physician; placing his status far above hers in the patriarchal cultural climate of the late nineteenth century.

John's gaslighting estranges the narrator from her own will, agency, and lived experiences; in essence separating her from herself. This separation is symbolically externalised through the narrator's fixation on the pattern of the wallpaper. At first, she is struggling to grasp the "uncertain curves"⁶ and "outrageous angles"⁷ of it; mirroring a slow coming-to-terms with what's been taken from her. But then she sees the image of the creeping woman within it; a fully realised externalisation of her disembodied will, who creeps when "...most women do not creep by daylight"⁸. Her tearing down of the wallpaper at the end of the story is a reclamation of this will, both literally (by defying her husband) and symbolically (by freeing the image of the woman).

The narrator seems to fear that the wallpaper woman will attempt to escape from her, which could represent a permanent loss of her agency. This is demonstrated in the quote; "I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!" But by the very end of the story, the narrator refers to herself as if she were the escaped figure from the wallpaper, indicated through quotes such as "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" This suggests a merging with the persona of the trapped figure in the wallpaper, confirming that the woman she sees is in fact a projection of her own suffering and struggles.

⁵ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gutenberg.org (1892; repr., Project Gutenberg, 1999), <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/1952>.

⁶ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gutenberg.org (1892; repr., Project Gutenberg, 1999), <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/1952>.

⁷ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gutenberg.org (1892; repr., Project Gutenberg, 1999), <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/1952>.

⁸ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gutenberg.org (1892; repr., Project Gutenberg, 1999), <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/1952>.

The use of the name Jane (the only use of that name in the story) within the quote is an interesting one, especially since the quote may indicate that the name belongs to the narrator herself. This would mean the narrator is referring to herself in third person, fully inhabiting the persona of the liberated wallpaper figure instead of the name she would go by in the external world beyond the confinement of the room. The absence of that name in the narration up until that point does suggest a disconnect from it, almost a rift between the person she is in the eyes of the external world versus the person she has become within the turmoil of her narrowed internal world.

This leads into the second way that John's treatment of the narrator serves to otherise her; her confinement away from socialisation, routine, and everyday work. This mode of treatment was inspired by a real-world mental health treatment at the time, the rest cure, a treatment that Charlotte Perkins Gilman was herself a subject of⁹. The alleged cure was devised by the physician S. Weir Mitchell (who personally treated Gilman, and is mentioned by name in the story within the quote "John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall¹⁰"), who detailed the treatment in his 1875 paper '*Rest in the Treatment of Nervous Diseases*¹¹'. He himself reflected on the almost infantilising nature of the treatment, saying "Sometimes I wonder that we ever get from any human being such childlike obedience¹²." He also noted the excessive length that such treatments could last for, far longer than the three-month treatment of the narrator in the story, with Mitchell recounting the case of a "Mrs. P", whose rest cure lasted for fifteen years, and had atrophied her muscles so significantly that she could no longer walk correctly¹³. In her journal article '*The Rest Cure Revisited*', Diana Martin describes the nature of the rest cure thusly:

The cure, which was prescribed almost exclusively for women, had three core elements: isolation, rest, and feeding, with electrotherapy and massage added to counteract muscle atrophy. The patient was instructed to lie in bed for 24 hours each day, sometimes for months at a time, with a special nurse who would sleep on a cot in the room, feed her, and keep her mind from morbid thoughts by reading aloud or discussing soothing topics. Visits from family and friends were forbidden¹⁴.

This treatment heavily isolates a vulnerable patient from the outside world. Though some degree of peace and rest would constitute a reasonable part of a treatment plan, complete and total isolation is more akin

⁹ Diana Martin, "The Rest Cure Revisited," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 164, no. 5 (May 2007): 737–38, <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.2007.164.5.737>.

¹⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gutenberg.org (1892; repr., Project Gutenberg, 1999), <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/1952>.

¹¹ S. Weir Mitchell, "Rest in the Treatment of Nervous Disease," ed. E.C Seguin, *AMERICAN CLINICAL LECTURES I*, no. IV (1875): 84–102.

¹² S. Weir Mitchell, "Rest in the Treatment of Nervous Disease," ed. E.C Seguin, *AMERICAN CLINICAL LECTURES I*, no. IV (1875): 84

¹³ S. Weir Mitchell, "Rest in the Treatment of Nervous Disease," ed. E.C Seguin, *AMERICAN CLINICAL LECTURES I*, no. IV (1875): 87

¹⁴ Diana Martin, "The Rest Cure Revisited," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 164, no. 5 (May 2007): 737–38, <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.2007.164.5.737>.

to putting a person out of the way of healthy friends and relations rather than a treatment expected to alleviate mental health issues. In fact, this antiquated approach goes against our modern understanding of mental health treatment, with the NHS recommending social contact, physical activity, and creative skills and hobbies as methods of improving a person's mental state¹⁵.

In the story, the narrator seems to recognise that the restrictive nature of her treatment is not beneficial, stating “Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?¹⁶” and “I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad¹⁷.” The latter quote is especially illuminating as an example of her internalisation of John's gaslighting, her stream of consciousness stopped mid-thought with an injection of John's thoughts and opinions.

The profound isolation inflicted upon the narrator others her by removing her from the normal rhythm and ritual of the outside world, including any and all routines she may have before experienced. Barred from socialising with people who could form a social support network, and un beholden from daily routines like work and hobbies, she is left only to sink into the depths of her internal world, and a state of hyperfixation and psychosis. She seems to intuit that the nature of her treatment is wrong, and that she should be absorbed back into the fold of society, socialisation, and routine rather than being pushed from it. But the treatment from her husband John has not only estranged her from the agency to change her situation, but gaslighted her to the point of stopping her own thoughts by causing her to feel guilty for feeling them.

All of the before mentioned factors exist against a longstanding historical backdrop of women's issues being unduly over-pathologised. This troubling attitude has been exhibited throughout the entirety of recorded history, from Aristotle referring to women as merely incomplete men¹⁸, to the concept of hysteria, which was historically used as almost a catch-all diagnosis for any mental health problem that a woman may experience during her lifetime¹⁹. The word hysteria is derived from the Ancient Greek word ὑστέρα²⁰ (hystera), meaning womb; giving the overall concept hysteria an immutable association with the female sex, and a way for society to otherise women's issues by seeing them not as issues to be regarded

¹⁵ NHS, “5 Steps to Mental Wellbeing,” nhs.uk, February 2, 2021, <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/>.

¹⁶ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gutenberg.org (1892; repr., Project Gutenberg, 1999), <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/1952>.

¹⁷ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gutenberg.org (1892; repr., Project Gutenberg, 1999), <https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/1952>.

¹⁸ Aristotle and Arthur Platt, *On the Generation of Animals* (Whitefish, Mt: Kessinger Pub, 2008), 22.

¹⁹ Cecilia Tasca, “Women and Hysteria in the History of Mental Health,” *Clinical Practice & Epidemiology in Mental Health* 8, no. 1 (October 19, 2012): 110–19, <https://doi.org/10.2174/1745017901208010110>.

²⁰ “ὑστέρα - WordSense Dictionary,” www.wordsense.eu, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://www.wordsense.eu/%E1%BD%91%CF%83%CF%84%CE%AD%CF%81%CE%B1/#:~:text=Noun.>

with care and interpersonal attention, but as a biological flaw inherent to a “wandering womb²¹.” This pathological approach serves to frame women not as full, complicated human beings with mental faculties and agency, but almost as biological engines that are liable to break down. This belief was still widespread in the era the story was written, such as within Sigmund Freud’s ‘*Studies On Hysteria*²²’, published three years after ‘*The Yellow Wallpaper*.’

It is this historical context that provides the reader with the reason that John treats the narrator the way he does. He does not gaslight and imprison her with true malicious intent, but rather treats her in line with multiple forms of contemporary medical consensus. He does not see her problems as issues that can be solved interpersonally, but as flaws inherent to an inferior female biology. He does not intend to make her into this figure of the ‘other’, and is perhaps truly invested in her making a recovery, but his treatment causes her decline; pushing her away from every facet of regular life and into her tragic decent.

In conclusion, ‘*The Yellow Wallpaper*’ is a story of the female other, represented within the narrator herself. Its significance lies in showing how medical attitudes from the era it was written serve to dehumanise and otherise vulnerable women, not only separating them from the stabilising influence of everyday life, but also estranging them from their own will and agency. It shows a woman’s symbolic attempt to re-attain the agency taken from her through the hallucination and liberation of an imaginary woman hidden in the pattern of the wallpaper, with her embodiment of that persona serving to stand up to her misguided and patronising physician husband.

²¹ The Royal College Of Nursing, “The Wandering Womb | Library | Royal College of Nursing,” The Royal College of Nursing, 2019, <https://www.rcn.org.uk/library-exhibitions/womens-health-wandering-womb>.

²² Sigmund Freud et al., *Studies on Hysteria* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

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