

SHE WANTED TO GET OUT: A PSYCHOLOGICAL READING OF GILMAN'S "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"

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ABSTRACT

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"¹ has been explored through the lenses of feminism, physiology, psychology and the like. The aim of this paper- by deducing various symptoms of schizophrenia from her narrative and thereby diagnosing her with the same- is to add a newer shade to the psychological analysis that constantly surrounds the aforementioned work. However, this paper does not seek to reduce the schizophrenic narrator to a mere individual patient who is divorced from the socio-political reality and also alludes to the patriarchal landscape as well as to the treatment of patients suffering from mental illnesses at the time. A Jungian analysis of her hallucinations further seeks to humanise her and her hallucinations which though not 'real', nevertheless constitute to be indispensable to the narrator's 'reality'. Her hallucinations add to the psychological realism in the narrative that permits the narrator to voice her view - thereby metaphorically 'getting out', and also represent a yearning for the archetypes reflected through her hallucinations to do the same. Such a 'getting out' of her hallucinations in turn would throw light on her subjugation- of the perturbing illness that veils her, the illness that is both created and sustained by society's marginalisation of women, the treatment of the mentally ill and that of the women who are unable to conform to the roles imposed upon them by the gender paradigm.

Keywords: Schizophrenia, psychological analysis, hallucinations, Jungian archetypes, hysteria

1. INTRODUCTION

Gilman, a prominent feminist thinker and writer- too found herself shunned from studying and writing following her first marriage due to her prescription to "Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time... And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live."² by her physician S. Weir Mitchell. Such a representation of the psychological disintegration and the ineffective cure is observable in "The Yellow Wallpaper"¹ which has fostered an interest amongst readers to subject the narrator's symptoms and her cure - and those of the author as well - to scrutiny leading to various diagnoses. The journey of the narrator's descent into madness following the imposition of her literal and metaphorical imprisonment by her husband and physician John and the society in a larger context- mirrors the author's journey of undergoing such a descent.

The diagnoses of the narrator of Perkin's "The Yellow Wallpaper"¹ often associated with disorders such as postpartum depression, nervous depression and the like, often eclipse various other symptoms experienced by the perturbed narrator. Therefore, this research paper seeks to focus on an alternative diagnosis of the narrator which centres on schizophrenia and a Jungian analysis of the same. These frameworks show how the literal and metaphorical confinement of women leads to their psychological disintegration.

2. MADNESS, WOMEN AND THE 20TH CENTURY

As focused earlier, critics and readers alike pick and choose certain symptoms experienced by the narrator and compartmentalise them to suit their diagnosis of the narrator suffering from disorders such as hysteria and nervous depression, neglecting other symptoms of her madness. Such diagnoses are often deficient as they involve twisting angles of analysis to suit theories and not vice versa and hence are much more vulnerable to preconceived notions and biases. These readings also fail to interpret the inferior positioning of the narrator as a woman and a patient due to which John subconsciously subjects her to physical and psychological abuse - which is the result of his training as a man and a physician - in the name of the rest cure that he administers to her. The narrator's inability to function per the gender roles associated with her sex allows the patriarchal norms of the time to further push her towards her ineffective rest cure, as also focused upon by the historian Mary-Ellen Kelm³ in her paper that alludes

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to the institutionalisation of women who were unable to conform to their prescribed gender roles. The kinds of restrictions that the narrator is subjected to are a microcosm of that of the mentally ill patients in the asylums of the time. The narrator is not the only one who is ill; the patriarchal and the doctoral constructs that dictate what she ought to or ought not to do are significantly ill and have also worsened her illness.

3. NOT 'A SLIGHT HYSTERICAL TENDENCY'

Perseveration refers to an abnormal repetition of a thought. This schizophrenic symptom is exhibited through the narrator's confession regarding her obsession with the fungus and several shades of yellow on the wallpaper and how she "lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern did move together or separately"¹. (Gilman 653)

Apart from this, the narrator's mention of her abnormal emotional outlets in her writing such as; "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time"¹ (Gilman 650) can be attached to her suffering from the inappropriate effect.

Moreover, the narrator, through the events of the story, displays the symptoms of Delusion. Delusions refer to irrational beliefs that have no concrete logical line of thought to justify them. The narrator displays two types of delusions- Delusion of Reference and Delusion of Persecution. Delusions of Reference involve attaching special meanings or associations to any object, person or event. This can be interpreted through-

"I verily believe she (John's sister) thinks it is the writing which made me sick!"¹ (Gilman 650). Furthermore, the narrator's desire to constantly tear the wallpaper to gradually free the woman trapped inside is an instance displaying the delusion of reference. Also, the narrator's act of tearing the wallpaper reminds one of Bertha Mason's tearing of Jane's wedding veil in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre⁴.

Delusions of Persecution, on the other hand, entail irrational beliefs such as being plotted against, being spied on and the like. This symptom is observed when the narrator also comments on how-

"He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind. As if I couldn't see through him!"¹ (Gilman 655)

Apart from this, the narrative throws light on the narrator's episodes of Derailment. Derailment refers to the inability to think clearly and consciously. The influence of this symptom on the narrator can be deduced whereby she states that-: "It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight."¹ (Gilman 652)

Avolition is yet another symptom which can be observed through the narrator's writings. Avolition entails the inability to complete a course of action. This symptom is recognised when the narrator comments- "Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able, - to dress and entertain, and order things."¹ (Gilman 649).

Catatonia involves engaging or maintaining strange bodily movements. The narrator's writings also possess a catatonic undertone, whereby she writes: "I always lock the door when I creep by daylight."¹ (Gilman 654) The story concludes with the narrator creeping over her husband's unconscious body which can be likened to the constant crawling of Bertha Mason in Brontë's Jane Eyre⁴, which in turn seeks to display illness as an instrument of rebellion.

The narrator's writing is both an instrument of defiance and a treasure trove of numerous symptoms through which she can further be read as a patient of schizophrenia, especially through her observation of how "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 window"¹ (Gilman 648) which reveals her experience of tactile hallucination while that of her auditory hallucinations is observable through how "that awful pattern began to laugh at me"¹. (Gilman 655) The supposed laugh of the pattern, apart from gothic symbolism, also carries feminist and psychological connotations whereby the laugh challenges the restrictions imposed on the narrator by her husband. The hallucinatory laugh also critiques the

competence of the physician and his act of involuntarily gaslighting the patient, both of which are microcosmic of the maltreatment that was subjected to the patients of psychosis. This is observable through the narrator's eventual descent into sheer madness and crawling over her physician which in turn subverts doctoral and patriarchal authority, of which John is an embodiment. The laugh also questions the very purpose of the 'cure' which in reality subjects the schizophrenic narrator to physical and psychological abuse by stripping her of any kind of agency- even barring her from writing and the garden in the mansion, dismissing her opinions from the cure prescribed to her as well. The inclusion of laughter in various gothic works by female writers has served as an instrument of rebellion against patriarchal and doctoral superiority, also presented through Bertha's laughter. In addition, the narrator's state of mind is similar to that of an abused Jane who is further punished by her confinement to the red room, whereby "I (Jane) suppose I had a species of fit"⁴.

The narrator's complaint "Whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here. It creeps all over the house"¹ (Gilman 654) incorporates the episode of her undergoing an olfactory hallucination. Moreover, certain excerpts from the narrator's secretive writing such as the mention of the "faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out"¹ (Gilman 652) throw light on her episodes of visual hallucinations.

4. JUNG'S THEORY OF PERSONALITY

Carl Gustav Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, best known for his work on collective unconscious, archetypes, and the process of individuation. Jung's theories have had a profound influence not only in psychology but also in fields like literature, anthropology, and philosophy. As per him, archetypes are universal, inherited patterns of thought or symbolic imagery derived from the collective unconscious. He proposed that these archetypes represent common human experiences and thought patterns. They serve as symbolic templates that influence human behaviour, dreams, and myths. In a similar vein, Jung states "I aimed to show that delusions and hallucinations were not just specific symptoms of mental disease but also had a human meaning"⁵. The 'she' that yearns to get out refers not only to the schizophrenic narrator but also to some archetypes that have possessed her and are manifested through her hallucinations as explored by Carl Jung. That is, the narrator's hallucinatory episodes when analysed through a Jungian lens, prove useful for a better understanding of her schizophrenic behaviour, contrary to the conventional view of the narrator as suffering from hysteria and other such disorders.

Firstly, the outlaw archetype is representative of independence, self-reliance and upheaval. The narrator acts per the values represented by this archetype, which is reflected through her writing about her symptoms and by expressing her opinions about her cure. A cross-textual analysis would further allow an interpretation of how the figure in the wallpaper is to the narrator what Bertha was to Jane- a reflection of a perturbed psyche. In Sandra M. Gilbert's words, "Bertha...is Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress"⁶. The possession of the Outlaw is also manifested through the narrator's secretive and rebellious writing through which she comments on her symptoms and expresses her opinions about her cure. In a similar vein, the American educator and scholar Lorelee MacPike states how; "The narrator's work threatens to destroy her status as a mere child by gaining her recognition in the adult world; this is reason enough for her husband to forbid her to work"⁷.

Secondly, the huntress archetype embodies strength, assertiveness, and courage - values that the narrator- due to her confining and abusive treatment, has been restricted from exercising. This archetype can be seen in the story in the form of the 'many creeping women'¹ that the narrator visualises in the garden. In contrast to the narrator's confinement, these creeping women signify an escape and a form of liberation.

Thirdly, the narrator's hallucinatory visions of such creeping women also reflect the mystic archetype which is considered an embodiment of self-awareness, the journey of self-discovery and independence in Jung's theoretical framework.

Therefore, this paper has explored an alternative diagnosis of the narrator in Perkin's "The Yellow Wallpaper"¹ which is centred on schizophrenia and the associated implications. A Jungian analysis of the same challenges her medical cure wherein the narrator's illness emerges as a form of critique of the social and medical convention of the time.

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