Absentee Motherhood

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The authors Gilman and Wharton take two different, but not conflicting, perspectives on the complexity of women’s standing in the male-dominated society of the Victorian age. Gilman suggests that, especially in the late 19th century, women who were deprived of maternal relationships, or whose relationships were so dominated by male influences, often found no solution for such circumstances except through madness, death, or isolation, or a combination thereof. Wharton supplements Gilman’s approach by exploring those women who surrender their voice entirely by investing their own identity in that of their husband’s; the voluntary lack of maternal relationships here leads to the same results: envy, overconfidence, and virtual slavery to one’s husband, or essentially madness and isolation of a special form. In both stories, the messages are clear that balanced maternal relationships are not only healthy, but are necessary for a harmonious family. Neither woman intends to demonize men, for in Wharton’s story, the women can be as wrongful in their own way, but they warn of the excess of male influence—whether it is voluntary or not.

Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* follows the internal conflicts and mental decomposition of the narrator, which seem due, at least partially, to her husband’s childish treatment of her, and partially to the acceptance of her own subservience to her husband. The language of the piece exposes many of the narrator’s contradictory feelings for John and his decisions. On the first page, she places male sentiments ahead of her own—literally—in her description of the setting—“John laughs at me…John is practical in the extreme…John is a physician…My brother is also a physician…”—before imparting her helplessness with “So I take [this]…and am absolutely forbidden to do [that]” (Gilman). She further embraces acquiescence by introducing her position with what she knows is a disqualifier: “personally” (Gilman). Some literary analysts say that “Personally, I disagree…” and “Personally, I believe…” simply allow her husband, who is practical and cares not for the opinions of his “patient”, to ignore his wife’s pleas, if she even vocalized them (Ford). It seems by holding John in higher esteem, by submitting to his prescriptions for her own wellness, and by failing to validate her own ideas through adamant discourse, that her only alternative to rebel against John is by internalizing her struggle. Silence and isolation, however, only contribute to the loop of insanity because as she allows John to challenge her logic, she begins to challenge and contradict herself in a spiral of madness. (Ford). In fact, John need not give orders to or constrain the narrator in any way by the end of the story, for she holds herself in bondage (again, literally) by being “securely fastened by my well-hidden rope—you don’t get me out in the road there!” (Gilman). By the time John faints, “and he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!”(Gilman). The only way she could “overcome” the masculine obstructions in her life was by literally crawling over him—showing that, in the author’s view, insanity is the alternative to patriarchal dominance, and that voluntary subjugation on behalf of the wife is its main enabler.

Curiously, it is easily overlooked that there may be a third reason for the inability to articulate her grievances. Besides John, besides the narrator’s surrender of autonomy, the lack of the much-needed mother to baby relationship could add to the trauma. Not surprisingly, details of the baby are imbedded in the narrator’s usual ramblings of the wallpaper, which lead the reader to assume that any hope for a maternal relationship is lost to insanity. But it does not mean she ignores its welfare, for she “wouldn’t have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds” (Gilman). However, there is no longing to see the baby, to live with it, to care for it, to even hold it; there is only a desire to “mother” the wallpaper. She watches it, talks to it, holds it, and then rips it, gnaws on the furniture, and so on. Despite—or maybe, more correctly—because John has forbidden her from being in contact with the baby, the narrator does not seem to want a relationship with it. Since John has destabilized all of her instincts—ignored them, contradicted them—and now that she has done so herself, it follows logically that the instinct of motherhood fell victim to the insecurities as well. As a topic of causality, the reason the family relocated to the mansion was because of the mother’s negative reaction to childbirth anyway, but that disconnect, whether a cause or an effect, only weakens the narrator’s incentive to resist madness. By being deprived first of her motherhood, then her validity as a wife, then her autonomy as a person, it fits nicely that maternal relationships are at the forefront of keeping patriarchy in check and balancing the family. Without the strength of “mother bear” instinct, a wife will feel outmatched and quickly fall into silence, and possibly madness. But as far as the reader knows, the two former aspects of motherhood and articulation were sadly missing when the story began.

The parallel lesson of maternity in Wharton’s “Roman Fever” was delivered not by Mrs. Ansley who is the star of the story, but by the representation of Mrs. Slade as a masculine figure, an anti-feminist. To begin, it is known that Mrs. Slade was rather uncompassionate towards daughters in general when she scolds a harmless slip of the mouth from one of them: “That’s what our daughters think of us” to which the more sensitive Mrs. Ansely counters “Not of us individually…” (Wharton). This relatively innocent jest became more revealing in light of the ending, which implies that Mrs. Slade’s parenting of Jennie was rather harsh, critical, and most of the time subordinate to Mrs. Slade’s priorities. Not only was Jennie second to Mrs. Slade, but Mrs. Slade (echoing the narrator in *Yellow Wallpaper*)is by choice second to her husband, but in a different way. Mrs. Slade relinquished her autonomy for one within her glorified husband, and then her son, and then, as a “compensation for her losses rather than a poor third choice,” Mrs. Slade unenthusiastically fostered Jennie (Bowlby). Exhausted from a life of tumult and failed aspirations, Mrs. Slade, once “slave” to *the* Delphin, had but “only her daughter to live up to…” and one that lacks “vividness” (Wharton). Mrs. Slade was deprived of motherhood, but unlike the narrator in the last story, consciously replaced her daughter with an esteemed reputation that is now six feet underground.

After 25 years of nothing but subservience to Delphin, the guilt of an undeveloped maternal relationship has caught up. Mrs. Slade

Wished that…Jenny might have to be watched, out-maneuvered, rescued. And instead, it was Jenny who watched her mother… (Wharton).

It is rather obvious why this is the case, but it is the effects of absentee motherhood from which the reader sees most clearly the need for a sound relationship. We can see the effects throughout the ending of the story:

And perhaps envy you…I always wanted a brilliant daughter, and never quite understood why I got an angel instead. (Wharton)

For Mrs. Slade, this reveals the convergence and primacy of envy and patriarchy as they fill the gap originally allotted for motherhood. Mrs. Slade currently envies Mrs. Ansely because of Jennie’s timidity, but she also envied Mrs. Ansely from childhood. It is repeated “Would she never cure herself of envying her! Perhaps she had begun too long ago…” (Wharton). But back “too long ago,” Mrs. Slade was also under the assumption that Delphin only produced Jennie. With Barbara’s origin in mind, the updated value of “envy” must certainly be much worse than Mrs. Slade gives herself credit for. Not only is she envious, in the very least, but with the upcoming revelation she is implied to be quite violent emotionally. Recall that the setting for the story is a terrace overlooking the Colosseum, a symbol for violence and hormone-driven reactions. Mrs. Slade mirrors the Colosseum in that she wrote the letter out of (hormonal) “rage” because she “hated [Ansely], hated her…afraid; afraid of [Ansely]…So in a blind fury [she] wrote the letter…” (Wharton). Again, by factoring in Mrs. Slade’s idolization of patriarchal relationships, it is clear that her jealousy and hatred of other women, and her neglect of Jenny, is a result. But maybe the cycle works the other way around as well. The abandonment of Jenny led to a less “vivid” daughter, which further inflamed the envy while Mrs. Ansely’s dynamic and outspoken Barbara, from the same Delphin, isolates Mrs. Slade as the wrongdoer—and she knows it. Therefore, “I had Barbara” proves Mrs. Ansely’s compassionate and active methods of motherhood while it discredits Mrs. Slade’s absentee motherhood, as it leads to jealousy, guilt, and hatred. Thus, the final meaning of “I had Barbara” highlights the significance of matriarchal relationships as a buffer against the instability of their removal, a source for strong upbringings of children, and a voice of feminism in society as a whole.

Works Cited

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