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"A Slight Hysterical Tendency": Ubiquitous Sexism in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Sexism is a cultural phenomenon that has historically created large differences in the view and treatment of men and women: "The Yellow Wallpaper" was created to highlight these issues, "bec[oming] a feminist text that indicted the men who were responsible for the narrator's physical confinement and subsequent mental demise" according to John S. Bak, a Professor of English at the University of Lorraine (40). In writing the piece, Charlotte Perkins Gilman highlights three areas of sexism that are perpetrated against and perpetuated by her narrator, which cause her to be treated differently (and worse) than men with a similar condition would be. These areas are domestic sexism, medicinal sexism, and intellectual sexism. Domestic sexism includes things like the idea of gender roles and marital duties, as well as the imbalance of power in marriage. Medicinal sexism can and has manifested itself in the way that women were receiving treatment that differed from the treatment of men only because little was understood about the physiological and psychological differences between men and women other than that women were "different;" it can also apply to the patronization and mistrust of women's reports of symptoms, and the misguided concept of "hysteria." Intellectual sexism is basically the idea that men are intellectually superior to women, and the biases and assumptions that stem from that prejudiced belief, such as the assumption that art or writing created by women is less meaningful or intelligent than that which is created by men. These three sides to the sexism that Gilman is trying to highlight in "The Yellow Wallpaper" coalesce to form sexism as the main antagonist of the story, being that which serves before and during the story to create situations which

exacerbate the narrator's condition and contribute to the vicious cycle of worsening condition and increasing sense of failure that she falls into.

For most of history, women have been viewed as intellectually inferior; this sexist angle was one of the main arguments against women's suffrage being voiced at the time that Gilman was writing, and is a major factor in the power imbalance that created and perpetuated patriarchal societies. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator is on the receiving end of this kind of thinking, and has internalized much of it. When the narrator voices her discomfort with the state of the wallpaper in their bedroom, and its negative effects on her mental health, her husband John "laughs at [her] so about [the] wallpaper" and ridicules her, saying that she shouldn't "give way to such fancies" (Gilman 334). This idea that women are frivolous or unreasonable is what eventually spiralled into the more medically sexist idea of hysteria; this idea stems from, as Jeanette King (a Professor of Social Sciences at the University of Aberdeen) and Pam Morris (an independent scholar, previously Professor at Liverpool John Moores University) say in their essay about the ways that critics misinterpret Gilman's story, the way that "women . . . have been subjected to a hermeneutic tradition which looks through the multiplicity of their actual beings to impose unitary meanings sealed with the authority of patriarchal knowledge" (23). This attempt to impose meanings that will apply to women as a whole (such as the idea that women are inherently unreasonable or have weaker nervous systems) is not so much stereotyping as it is defining: the all-encompassing ideas that our culture has for what women are and aren't define the limitations of what a woman who was raised on those ideas can be: "women . . . are imprisoned within an alienating interpretation, closed off from movement and exploration" (King and Morris 23). Later in the story, the narrator begins to hallucinate, "fancy[ing] [she] see[s]

people walking in these numerous paths and arbors," but, as per usual, "John has cautioned [her] not to give way to [this] fancy in the least" (Gilman 335). However, here presides a far more disturbing example of his patronization: he attributes these hallucinations to her "imaginative power and habit of story-making" (Gilman 335), making the leap from patronizing her for her lack of mental fortitude and denying her symptoms' veracity to belittling her entire career as an author, showing how little regard he has for the work that she does. This idea that she is less intelligent than him is not only reinforced by their unusual physician-patient relationship, but also by the ideas he grew up with that the husband is always right and that women are skittish and let their imaginations get the better of them. However, according to Beverly A. Hume, a Professor in the Department of English and Linguistics at the University of California, there is an element of ironic truth to what he is saying, as the approach that the narrator takes when interpreting the wallpaper, "a manner befitting an aspiring authoress," is eventually what cements her doom: "Gilman's narrator attempts to clarify definitively the meaning of the grotesque [wallpaper], merges into it, and, in effect, becomes it—as the woman in the wallpaper" (481).

The domestic sexism in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is perpetuated by both members of the married couple: while John's expression of its influence is more apparent, the narrator feels an acute sense of failure for being unable to fulfill many of the roles of a wife that she is expected to, stemming from the internalization of the values and beliefs that were imposed upon her growing up into a woman in this society. She shows this outright when writing that she was "meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort;" it "weigh[s] on [her] so [much] not to do [her] duty in any way" that she feels like a "burden already" (Gilman 334) due to her

not being able to meet the cultural expectations placed upon her. However, as much as Gilman emphasized the ways that she was trapping herself, it was her husband's act of constraining her within these limitations that really drove her over the edge: her breakdown is "caused by the repressive prohibition against any unwomanly activity imposed on the protagonist by her physician husband" (King and Morris 24). The narrator says that she "take[s] pains to control [her]self—before [John], at least" (Gilman 332), showing that his scorn of "unwomanly" complaining and tiredness has frightened her into hiding her symptoms from somebody who should be her confidant twice over: he's supposed to be her husband and her doctor, and yet she doesn't feel safe confiding in him in either sense. John is always in control of everything to do with her: she comments that "he is very careful and loving, and hardly lets [her] stir without special direction" (Gilman 333). Perhaps this need to control stems from his job as a physician, but it's more likely from the messages he has received over the course of his life that as a man, and as a husband, he should be the one in control, the one with the power in their relationship. Julie Bates Dock, an independent scholar and editor who has done extensive textual research on the "The Yellow Wallpaper," makes the distinction that "Gilman is bashing marriage in particular, not men in general" (55). In highlighting the nuances of marital sexism, Gilman takes the idea to a gothic extreme, where each of those nuances have a pronounced effect on the worsening condition of the one prejudiced against; her spotlight on domestic sexism shines brighter because it takes elements of then everyday life and shows how they play in to the not so everyday parts of the story.

"Hysteria" is a concept which is rooted in the woeful misunderstandings plaguing women's medicine at the time of the "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Gilman's experiences with it,

but its origins can be traced back thousands of years further. It has been a blanket term used to explain anything and everything that women could experience psychologically, from postpartum depression to hormone imbalances to simple curiosity, stemming from the peculiar concept that the uterus moves around the body, changing everything it touches (hysteria comes from the Greek for womb, *hustera*). In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator is diagnosed by John and his brother with this sexist, catch-all disease: "a slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman 331). However, John subscribes to an even stranger form of sexism in medicine: Dr. Mitchell's rest cure, which posited that "both companionship and work proved a detriment to a patient's recovery" and prescribed "locking [the patient] away . . . enforcing strict isolation, limiting intellectual stimulation to two hours a day, and forbidding [the patient] to touch pen, pencil, or paintbrush ever again" (Bak 39), was only this inhumane and nonsensical for women: the men's version of the Rest Cure typically involved sending them on an adventure to the West with instructions to journal their experiences. This dichotomy of treatments shows how prescriptions ("phosphates or phosphites;" (Gilman 332) phosphorus compounds were believed to repair "nervous tissue") and treatments born from an innocent misunderstandings of how human physiology works can serve to cause harm to those who receive it; this was the crux of the issue that Gilman was trying to bring to light in her work, as she elaborates in "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper'": "it was . . . intended . . . to save people from going crazy, and it worked" ("Why I Wrote" 351). However, John takes things a step further: not only does he prescribe an ineffective and harmful treatment, but he also gaslights the narrator, telling her that her disease is "not serious" and that "the very worst thing [she] can do is to think about [her] condition" while explaining that nothing she is experiencing is due to factors outside of her control, i.e. her disease, and that "if [she] feel[s] so,

[she] shall neglect proper self-control" (Gilman 332, 334). Because he "assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with [her]," when she "think[s] about [her] condition, it always makes [her] feel bad" (Gilman 331, 332). As John's repeated messages that her condition is nothing serious and that it is her fault for thinking about it begin to dig into her psyche, she contradicts herself: she notes her "lack of strength" before asserting that her "case is not serious" and that "of course it is only [her] nervousness" (Gilman 334). This mistreatment of her condition exacerbates it, paralleling Gilman's own experience of "[coming] so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that [she] could see over" ("Why I Wrote" 350). The medicinal sexism perpetrated against the narrator does nothing but worsen her condition, and Gilman's own experiences with the real thing inform the ways that it affects her character to create a disturbing vignette of a patient driven to insanity by her physician.

The aspects of sexism that permeate the narrative of "The Yellow Wallpaper" are intentionally presented by Gilman to highlight their prevalence in her contemporary society. As the narrator struggles to fit within the sexist ideas of women's intellectual capacity, marital duties, and physiological mystification that she has been entrenched in, they consume her with madness. As her situation worsens, the degree to which she is able to fit into these entrenched ideas decreases, and the feeling of not being able to fit into society's role for her tears her apart. The antagonist of the story is the sexism that surrounds her. It creates the conditions which allow her madness to ferment: these oppressive conditions not only weigh on her mind, causing her to feel "basely ungrateful" (Gilman 333) and guilty for being ill, but entrap her in the room with the wallpaper, the catalyst which spirals her into madness and ruin.

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