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Wallpaper of Manipulation

“What is one to do?” (307). This world has always been a male-dominated atmosphere. Men gave themselves the right to tell women what to do, to lay out certain expectations for them. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote her 1892 piece *The Yellow Wallpaper* to showcase her experience with misdiagnosis, a common practice for medical professionals at the time when it came to dealing with women. Perkin’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* critiques the social realities of women through the lens of her character’s steadily increasing debilitating madness.

The narrator’s husband works hard to convince her that the madness is simply a nervous disorder. When the narrator is introduced to the reader, it is clearly defined that she and her husband, John, have traveled to a “haunted house” isolated away from her home and family as a treatment for her mysterious “temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency” (307). Her husband is a physician, and believes he knows much better than the narrator about her condition. “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that,” she says, “he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do?” (307). John believes the illness is entirely in her head, and tells the narrator several times, “the worst thing I can do is think about my condition” (308). Using his doctor status as cause, John takes his wife on as a patient, making sure all her needs are met despite his disbelief in the seriousness of her sickly state. The narrator claims “he is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction...he takes all care from me, and so I feel ungrateful to not value it more,” suggesting that John is conditioning her to maintain a dependency on him, accompanied by a guilt to accept and appreciate it (308). At this time,

women were expected to let the men of the household perform their “manly” duty and take care of them, or rather, control them. When the narrator told John she despised the room she was set to stay in, she said “John would not hear of it” (308). He continuously discredits the severity of her condition, and while her “nervous troubles” worry her, the narrator follows suit, claiming, “I am glad my case is not serious,” and does not protest John’s views at first because he believes “there is no reason to suffer and that satisfies him” (309). In a way to control her, John begins to treat her like a child. In fact, the room she is placed in was originally a nursery and playroom, as she observes that “the windows are barred for little children” (309). In addition to the room, he verbally refers to her in a childlike way, calling her “a blessed little goose,” then making her feel like it would be a burden if she asked him to do something for her, claiming it would be “silly” as it was “just for a whim” (310).

In reality, the narrator’s illness is not simply a silly nervous disorder. The narrator is likely suffering from a form of anxiety and postpartum depression, as in addition to her nervous thoughts, there are references to her newborn child and extreme fatigue. She expresses disappointment in her condition, lamenting that “it does weigh on me so to not do my duty in any way,” as she has been brought up to believe her duty is to be a proper mother who is there for her child. While she is supposed to be taking care of her child, there she is, being cared for by her husband, being a “comparative burden” to him (309). She expresses gratitude, however, that her relatives are there for her to fulfill her motherly duties and care for her child instead.

The narrator gradually begins to resist her husband’s controlling nature. “Personally, I disagree with their ideas,” she claims, in reference to not being permitted to continue writing, as those around her felt her creative imagination and expression were what made her sick. “Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good” (308). Taking

away her ability to write was taking away her most basic human rights, freedom of expression. Her caretakers believe her “habit of story making” leads to her “nervous weakness” (310). The narrator starts to warm up to her cage, admitting the house is “the most beautiful place,” and reminds her of “the English places you read about” (309). She begins to perform around her husband, giving the impression of recovery. “I take pains to control myself—before him, at least,” she says, “and that makes me very tired” (308). John firmly believes his methodology is successful, insisting, “You know the place is doing you good” (309). “You really are better,” he says, “whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know,” continuing to gaslight her (313). The narrator retorts that she is merely physically better, having recovered from childbirth itself, but not the mental elements of her illness.

The primary premise of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, however, is Perkin’s use of the “horrid” wallpaper to represent the narrator’s relationship with her husband. She describes the wallpaper as “one of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin, sporting a “sickly sulphur tint” (309). She claims she can see a formless figure sneaking around behind the front design of the pattern, which troubles her deeply. She begins to say she gets through her days “in spite of the wallpaper,” treating it as some sort of barrier to getting better (311). To aid her own recovery, desperately wanting to get better, she attempts “a real earnest talk” with John, who she claims loves her dearly and wants nothing more than her wellbeing. She requests a visit to their relatives and is quickly shut down. She then compares herself to the furniture present in her bedroom. “I lie here on this great immovable bed—it is nailed down,” she says (312). The bed is not the only thing firmly restrained, and even though “John is kept in town very often,” often away and claiming to be taking on extra difficult patients, she is unable to leave the house (311). The narrator begins to liken the figure in the wallpaper to herself, often hinting that it is her

shadow. “There is one marked peculiarity about this paper,” she says, “it changes as the light changes,” but “by daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still” (314). The front pattern in the wallpaper slowly transforms into prison bars keeping her trapped in the room, much like her husband. She refers to the wallpaper as “unreliable,” much like the words of her husband that seem much more focused on keeping her contained than her health. “The fact is that I am getting a little afraid of John,” she says. “The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out” (314). She begins to question every element of her marriage, even wondering if the “front pattern,” her husband, and herself, the “back pattern really did move together or separately,” describing how this experience has caused them to grow apart (314). She begins to plan her way out of her husband’s control, trying to free the imaginary woman in the paper. She tears the room apart, taking note of the scary look in her husband’s eyes as she does so, claiming “that awful pattern began to laugh at me” (317). In her final escape plan, she is determined to “astonish” her husband using the hidden rope she found in the room. “I am getting angry enough to do something desperate” she said, as she hid the key to the house. She made her husband find her, tied to the ceiling by the rope. “I’ve got out at last, in spite of you...and I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” she yelled to him in her final moments before he collapses (319). By taking her life so dramatically, she saw it as her way out from her wallpaper prison and her toxic relationship with her manipulative husband.

So, what is one to do? Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* uses her narrator’s misdiagnosis and struggle to free herself from the “wallpaper” of her manipulative husband to demonstrate the unfortunate social realities of being a woman and subject to the control of men.