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Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a short narrative about a married woman who, by her husband's diagnosis of her mental illness, is kept cooped up in a scary mansion, causing her to see odd forms and people in her room's ugly yellow wallpaper and driving her to complete insanity. Upon its first publication in 1892, the text was anthologized as a horror story and later on as a psychological drama. Charlotte Bronte's 1847 novel *Jane Eyre* is an elaborate tale about an orphan who suffers through a torturous childhood and becomes a governess in the home of a wealthy man with whom she falls deeply in love and then leaves so she can attain equal status with him. This novel may seem vastly different from Gilman's story, but what appears to be is not always what is. In fact, Gilman's story makes many references to events and images in Bronte's novel. If "The Yellow Wallpaper" is understood as an allusion to *Jane Eyre*, then its settings, its relationships between men and women, and its descriptions of moonlight are not simply components of a horror tale or a psychological drama but weave a convincing tale about male domination of a woman, her sense of isolation, and her subsequent longing for freedom—and eventually, how that struggle for freedom is not yet over.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" takes place in a dark, mysterious, spooky mansion that, when viewed as an allusion to *Jane Eyre*, presents themes of male domination and female isolation.

The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" takes up summer residence with her husband in "a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, [...] a haunted house" (194). A mansion typical of the Gothic romantic genre, the female narrator sees it as being "quite alone, standing well back from the road.... It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people.... There is something strange about the house—I can feel it" (195). Without making any reference to *Jane Eyre*, this "haunted house" seem like a simple component of a horror story, and the sense of strangeness the narrator gets from it may just be a result of her mental illness. However, Thornfield Hall, the mansion in which Jane Eyre is a governess, also bears a Gothic, almost haunted quality. Jane says:

> I did not like re-entering Thornfield. To pass its threshold was to return to stagnation, to cross the silent hall, to ascend the darksome staircase, to seek my own lonely little room... was to quell wholly the faint excitement wakened by my walk—to slip again over my faculties the viewless fetters of a uniform and too still existence. (107)

She describes the place as a "gloomy house—[...] the gray hollow filled with rayless cells" (108).

Usually mansions of the Gothic genre were owned by a man, an archetypal "master of the house." Because of the mansion's size, the master would often hire servants to care for the home. These servants were often women, and that concept holds true in both texts. In *Jane Eyre*, the title character, Mrs. Pearce, and other women are the hired

hands; in "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator's sister-in-law Jennie and another woman named Mary fill the role. In both cases, it is a man paying women to obey his commands. Furthermore, the Gothic mansion is towering and bears a fear-imposing quality. It is much like a man to the women, frightening them at times. The female characters in subservient roles in "The Yellow Wallpaper" may seem to be just stock characters and the mansion just a haunting place, but when read in light of *Jane Eyre*, they take on the overwhelming sense of repression that Jane and the novel's other servant characters feel. Finally, the lonesomeness of the mansions—Bronte's is "silent" (107), Gilman's is "quite alone" (195)—symbolize the sense of isolation felt by the women who inhabit them. Again, Gilman's mansion takes on a meaning deeper than spooky because of its reference to *Jane Eyre*; it isolates the woman who lives inside of it, "slip[ing] again over [her] faculties the viewless fetters of a uniform and too still existence" (Bronte 107) .

The narrator's top-story bedroom in "The Yellow Wallpaper" takes on a sense of male domination when seen as a reference to *Jane Eyre*. Gilman's narrator explains, "I don't like our room a bit.... There was only one window and not room for two beds.... It was nursery first...for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.... The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it" (195). Without referring to *Jane Eyre*, the room may just be a scary element of a horror tale, and the narrator's distressed mind may just be playing tricks on her, making her frightened of the room. However, this room alludes to all sorts of rooms in Bronte's novel. It is reminiscent of the nursery and the red room in which Jane was impris-

oned at her aunt's home, Gateshead, and rooms at her boarding school, Lowood. In both places, Jane is locked away by men as punishment for "her worst fault, a tendency to deceit," when in fact, she is not being deceitful, but actually being deceived into thinking her innocent child self to be evil (27).

When read as an allusion to the rooms in *Jane Eyre*, Gilman's room takes on a new meaning. Just like Jane, Gilman's narrator is deceived and brainwashed by her husband into thinking that the room is a nursery, a place for children, when it is really more like a prison with its "bar[s]" and "rings and things" (195). In addition, the prison-like qualities of the narrator's room call upon another image from *Jane Eyre*—that of the attic room in which Bertha, the estranged wife of Jane's love Mr. Rochester, is imprisoned. Bertha's lonely, attic-like third-story room bears many of the same characteristics as the room of Gilman's narrator; it is a "tapestried room, with [a] great bed and [a] pictorial cabinet.... a room without a window..." (278). Readers know that Bertha was locked up for years in her attic room, her only visitor being Grace Poole, the maid assigned to watch after her and make sure she stays out of trouble. When read in the context of *Jane Eyre*, the room of Gilman's narrator is not just a scary place where a sick woman is kept; it takes on a presence of male domination and a sense of seclusion and loneliness.

The relationship the narrator has with her husband John in "The Yellow Wallpaper" becomes a negative sign of male superiority when viewed as an allusion to *Jane Eyre*. John has pet names for his wife, and this appears at first to be a sign of sweet, loving compassion for

her. When she is worried about her illness one day, he tells her, "Bless her little heart, she shall be as sick as she pleases" (200). He also "t[akes her] in his arms and call[s her] a blessed little goose" (196). However, this seemingly sweet affection takes another twist—one of male domination rather than love—when read as an allusion to *Jane Eyre*. The pet names echo back to Rochester's domineering treatment of Jane before she leaves him; among her many nicknames are "my little wife" (Bronte 242), "a very angel" (246), a "fairy" (254), and "you mocking changeling—fairy-born and human-bred" (419). At first, these nicknames, as do the ones given to Gilman's narrator, seem to be out of love and affection, but Jane begins to get annoyed with them. Perhaps Rochester viewed his lovers as mere playthings and fantasy objects. Jane even says, "I never can bear being dressed like a doll by Mr. Rochester" and must leave him to attain independence (255). By alluding to the use of childlike nicknames in *Jane Eyre*, Gilman expresses something far more complicated than love between husband and wife or care of a woman in mental distress. She suggests that her narrator will continue to be a "blessed little goose" (196) or, as Jane would say, a "doll" (255), until she escapes from the domination of her husband.

Viewing Gilman's narrator as an allusion to Bronte's Bertha in her relationship with her male dominator also helps the reader view the story as one of male domination and female longing for freedom. Jane, being the new love of Rochester, was probably one of the main reasons Bertha was kept locked away in the attic. Jane also attains a freedom by leaving an immoral relationship with Rochester, becoming inde-

pendently wealthy, and returning by choice to marry her love as his equal. But Gilman's narrator is in a different sort of obligation to the man with whom she is involved. Her vow is not one of voluntary servitude, but of confining marriage, from which there is not much chance of escape in her time.

Because her husband represses her, not allowing her to leave her room or write as she pleases, Gilman's narrator feels trapped, "securely fastened now by [her] well-hidden rope," (205), just as Rochester, "with more rope...bound [Bertha] to a chair" (279). They both "creep around" their prisons, "gnaw[ing]" on the bedframe (Gilman 205), "snatch[ing] and growl[ing] like some strange wild animal...covered with clothing" (Bronte 278). Gilman's narrator's wallpaper talks of "burning the house" (202) and "jump[ing] out of the window" (205), and the images she sees in the wallpaper "suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions" (196). Ordinarily these may be seen as the thoughts of a horrific character or a madwoman, but her thoughts are the same ones that the truly imprisoned Bertha has and carries out, when "she set fire" to Thornfield Hall and then "waving her arms above the battlements...she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement" (409-410). Also noted is the fact that the narrator's room, like Bertha's, is accessed by a master key, normally possessed by the male master of the house. It may be acceptable for husband John to confine his seemingly crazy wife to bed-rest. However, if the reader knows the reason why Bronte's Bertha was locked up in a similar room—because Rochester wanted to keep her and his past a

secret—, Gilman's room becomes less hospital-like and more imprisoning. Because of the allusion to Bertha, the narrator's thoughts are not just crazy ones of suicide—they are thoughts of freeing oneself from repression. When Gilman's narrator tosses the master key out the window at the end of the story, she is not just tossing away her husband's chance to unlock the door of a madwoman; she tosses away the sense of male domination and isolation she faced earlier in the story.

Even a component as simple as the image of moonlight in "The Yellow Wallpaper" takes on a deeper meaning when viewed in reference to *Jane Eyre*. Instead of being a merely descriptive device, moonlight becomes a symbol of the narrator's longing for freedom. In Gilman's story, the narrator sees the woman in the wallpaper most vividly when the moon is abreast. "By moonlight," she says, "...I wouldn't know it was the same paper.... At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars!" (201). At face value, one might think the woman is simply crazy, seeing figures on the wall just as a child hears monsters under his or her bed at night. However, when looked at in the context of *Jane Eyre,* the image takes on a deeper meaning. Jane often watches the moon in her room at night, and it serves as a sort of mother figure, "br[eaking] forth as never moon yet burst from cloud; [...] then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure" (304). Jane sees the moon right before she decides to leave Rochester, in her attempt to gain independence from their trapping, immoral love relationship. She says, "It spoke to my spirit [...], it whispered in my heart—'My daughter, flee temptation.' [I answered,] 'Mother, I will'" (304). When the moon

is out, Jane most ably recognizes her longing to be independent. Perhaps Gilman's narrator is not just seeing things in the night, but actually looking to a higher power and realizing that she too can be free of the constraints under which she lives. While "by daylight she is subdued, quiet," at night she comes alive, just as Jane comes alive and recognizes her longing for freedom (201). If "The Yellow Wallpaper" is read alone, the moon imagery may be overlooked as simply a descriptive device, and the shapes it casts on the wall may be phantasms of a horrific tale or illusions of a madwoman. However, if the reader views the story as an allusion to *Jane Eyre*, the moon is much more. When it emerges, it is the ultimate symbol of freedom, a mother figure helping the narrator see more clearly how much she wants to escape repression and isolation.

Throughout "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman makes many references to Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre* in order to provide deeper insight into elements of a text that seems to be merely half horror story and half psychological drama. By alluding to the novel in the story's settings, gender relationships, and moon imagery, Gilman presents a tale in which a woman who seems crazy is driven so because of the domination her husband has over her, the isolation she feels as a result, and the intense longing she feels to be free.

But what does it all mean? As the reader may note, in order to deepen the story's meaning, Gilman makes allusions to both Jane and Bertha, two characters who oppose each other in their relationships with the leading male character and who end their struggles for freedom in different ways. This conundrum is further complicated at the end of the

story, when the narrator mentions a Jane: "'I've got out at last,' said I, "in spite of you and Jane.... You can't put me back!'" (206). Unlike the two women in *Jane Eyre*, the fate of the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is unknown. Perhaps the forces of these two seemingly opposite women in the narrator place her in between their two fates—in a sort of entrapment between freedom in life and freedom in death. Perhaps Bronte's novel does not tell a completely poignant story by posing the extremes of a beloved heroine who lives and a wretched antagonist who dies. Gilman's story is more realistic; her narrator may escape like Jane and does not die physically like Bertha, but her mental destruction and the destruction of the wallpaper shows that some sort of spiritual damage was done.

"Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind [the wallpaper]," the narrator muses (203); "I don't like to look out of the windows even—there are so many of those creeping women.... I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?" (205). The question she poses indicates that the story's theme is not just about one woman's struggle for freedom. "The Yellow Wallpaper" tells a tale of repression of all women by men, the isolation they feel as a result, and the freedom they all long for and deserve. In alluding to *Jane Eyre*, Gilman also alludes to the concrete resolutions of her female protagonist, Jane, and antagonist, Bertha. Since the story refers to both of these characters as foils to her narrator, and since her narrator's fate is unknown at the story's conclusion, Gilman presents the reader with the proposition that the freedom struggle for her narrator—and for all women—is not yet over.

Works Cited

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