Killing the Angel in the House

Narrative Agency and Medical Patriarchy in Charlotte Perkin Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper

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***Abstract*—The nineteenth century witnessed the consolidation of domestic ideology alongside the emergence of women writers who began articulating the constraints placed upon female intellectual and social autonomy.**

The short story '*The Yellow Wallpaper*' by Charlotte Perkins Gilman provides a compelling case study to dramatize the silencing of women within late nineteenth-century domestic ideology. The female protagonist, Jane is patronised by her loving husband - who cares for her to the point of infantilisation - subduing her free will in the process to the point that she goes mad from having her freedom of will taken away. This paper examines how the woman behind the wallpaper breaking free symbolises Jane's reclamation of intellectual agency, and how the story can be read as an allegory to the Victorian woman's struggle to free herself from patriarchal confinement and reclaim her narrative agency through writing.

Although Gilman was writing in the American context of the 1890s, the domestic ideology she critiques was deeply informed by the broader Anglo-American Victorian doctrine of separate spheres.

***Index Terms*—The Yellow Wallpaper, The Rest Cure, Victorian Gender Roles, Female Gothic, Narrative Agency, Feminist Literature, Feminism**

I. INTRODUCTION

In the late nineteenth century, the lives of middle-class Victorian women were governed by the rigid ideology of 'separate spheres' - a social doctrine that confined female existence to the domestic interior while reserving the public world of intellect and commerce for men. To understand the concept of the 'ideal' woman of the era, one must be familiar with the concept of 'the angel in the house' - a trope that originates from a poem of the same title, written by Coventry Patmore.

In his poem, Patmore talks about how a woman's pleasure is to please her man, her heart should be predictable, without an ounce of cunningness and compares the ideal woman to the Kohinoor - mounting to the price that's put on her. The poem, rather than being celebrated primarily for its literary innovation, is often valued for its historical significance, particularly its nuanced depiction of Victorian middle-class domestic life and the entrenched gender hierarchies that structured it. The best way to describe the divide it creates and the expectations of the Victorian woman can be seen in this verse:

"Be man's hard virtues highly wrought,

But let my gentle Mistress be,

In every look, word, deed, and thought,

Nothing but sweet and womanly"

(Patmore, *The Angel in the House*)

Although not the best literary work to come out of the Victorian era, the poem highlights well how strong the idea of the 'separate spheres' for the two genders was during this age. Physicians would insist that women had a finite amount of 'vital energy' - which, if used on intellectual pursuits like writing and reading, could diminish their health significantly, affect their reproductive organs, or make them suffer a nervous collapse.

Even if it was not specified what illness Jane was suffering from in the story, the 'Rest Cure' that she was recommended by her physician was designed to treat hysteria. The injustice of it was that any woman who was unhappy, rebellious, or overly ambitious was often diagnosed as 'hysteric'. Hence, while these gestures may not seem radical by modern standards, Jane's clandestine writing and her deliberate act of locking herself in the nursery represent conscious forms of defiance. Through these acts, she metaphorically "kills" the Angel in the House, dismantling the ideal of obedient domestic femininity and reclaiming her autonomy.

II. DISCUSSION

Even before Gilman's protagonist Jane turned mad from her confinement in her nursery in the upstairs room, there was the concept of the 'mad woman in the attic' - a trope introduced by Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre*. In contrast to Patmore's angel, the 'ideal' feminine, she could be seen as a parallel to what Victorian women who did not conform to the norms of the society were viewed as.

While Gilman writes within an American realist tradition, her narrative echoes earlier British representations of the confined "madwoman," most notably in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. She was the first wife of Mr. Rochester who was locked by her husband on the third floor of Thornfield Hall after her gradual succumbing to genetic insanity. Once described as a beautiful and 'exotic' looking woman of upper class, the protagonist, Jane had described her looks as 'savage' and 'like a vampire' - indicating that years of being kept locked up had probably done her a lot of harm. Bertha also creeps and crawls, just like the woman in the wallpaper does, and if analysed deeply, Gilman internalizes the 'madwoman' trope, transforming it from a hidden figure in the attic into a psychological double within the narrator's own consciousness.

Even if these 'other' women were quite different from our protagonists, there is a feeling of compassion present in both the Janes, for their 'mad' counterparts. One breaks her marriage out of respect for the other, realising how she is a victim of treachery too, while the other literally tries to free the woman she sees - be the only one that saves her. In both cases, despite the fear, there is a feeling of understanding towards the mad woman, for they were just like them too - controlled and under the power of a more dominant man - their love interest. The origin of the madness can be best traced from keeping women restrained in a separate sphere away from intellectual activities, owning no properties, and being fully functioning adults under the care of their fathers and husbands.

In their foundational text *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar posit that the 'mad' female character often serves as a subversive 'double' for the protagonist's repressed rage against the society for not letting both exist as one. Quoting from *Jane Eyre*, it is this confinement which forces the female to break free from their passive routine, and desire to seek more:

> "Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and the embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex"
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> (Bronte, 1847)

The history of women being forced to busy themselves with 'light' and homely activities came from the Victorian medical theory grounded in physiological determinism. Influential figures such as Henry Maudsley, in his essay, 'Sex in Mind and Education (1874)' cautioned that rigorous intellectual activity could result in uterine atrophy, infertility, and a troubling masculinization of the female body. Within this framework, the figure of the educated woman appeared unconventional and biologically aberrant.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a response to her own treatment of a nervous breakdown and melancholia in 1877. 'This wise man', she quotes in the article, 'put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to "live a domestic a life as far as possible" and "to have but two hours of intellectual life a day," and 'never to touch a pen, brush or pencil again as long I lived. (*The Forerunner* (October, 1913)'.

This was perhaps why Jane, the utter 'little angel' as John often called her was so fearful of him finding her writing. He enforces a medicalised infantilisation (The Rest Cure) that treats the narrator's intellectual agency as a biological threat; he views her secret journal not merely as a hobby, but as a dangerous diversion of energy that threatens the Victorian ideal of the reproductive, domestic female body.

John's authority operates through paternalism rather than partnership. Though the narrator repeatedly asserts that he 'loves' her, her language reflects submission, not equality. He confines her to a former nursery with barred windows and a nailed-down bed, spatially reducing her to a child. He dismisses her opinions, regulates her movements, forbids her to write, and at one point physically carries her upstairs, reinforcing her enforced dependence. These details expose not care but control: the systematic infantilisation of a woman whose intellectual and bodily autonomy is steadily stripped away under the guise of marital protection.

He treats her desire for mental engagement not as a human right, but as a 'false fancy' that threatens the health of the family unit. By invoking his status as a physician, John effectively replaces her subjective reality with a medicalised narrative that demands her total silence, paternalising her in the process. He expresses this as such:

> "I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?"
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> (Gilman, 652)

While the narrator is physically confined to a nursery, her mental state aligns with the 'New Woman' - a term coined by Sarah Grand in her 1894 essay, '*The New Aspect of the Woman Question*.' Grand defined this figure as one who had 'proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere' (Grand 271). The narrator's secret journal is the vessel for this proclamation; it is where she analyzes her own 'condition' and rejects the domestic isolation imposed upon her.

It is symbolic how Jane actually emerges as a 'new' woman at the end of the story, when she is finally able to behave as she pleases - albeit it being personified as a crazy woman. The final scene of *The Yellow Wallpaper* serves as the ultimate realization of the Female Gothic 'double.' As the narrator tears through the paper, she is not merely destroying a wallcovering; she is, in the words of Virginia Woolf (1931), 'killing the Angel in the House' through a violent, psychological exorcism. However, this Gothic liberation is deeply ironic. By merging with the woman behind the paper and 'creeping' over John's fainted body, the narrator achieves a state of total narrative agency only at the cost of her sanity. She escapes the 'silence' of her Victorian condition by regressing into a non-verbal, infant-like state—proving that within the Gothic confines of the patriarchal home, the only path to freedom is through the total dissolution of the rational self.

Writing is a powerful tool to freedom in this short story - similar to how it was a source of living and income for all the women writers of the 19th century working under male pseudonyms. The pen was the primary weapon through which women negotiated the 'separate spheres' ideology - just as for Jane, the journal proves as a space where she always had narrative agency. Virginia Woolf, in her essay *Professions for Women (1931)*, identifies that the profession of writing was the first to be open to women because it was "cheap" and could be done in the cracks of domestic life, yet it remained the most dangerous because it required a woman to have a 'mind of her own.'

When Jane manages to finally free the woman in the wall, she 'kills' the Angel in the House within her - the submissive, silent version of herself that John demanded. The narrator achieves the 'mind of her own' that Woolf identified as the essential, if dangerous, goal of the female writer. Her creeping is an act of victory - one that scares the husband who once dominated her - as she physically and mentally out-maneuveres the Rest Cure, literally treading over the fainted body of patriarchal medicine to claim the room, the wallpaper, and her own narrative at last.

IV. CONCLUSION

The final image of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is often misread as a surrender to darkness, but in the context of the nineteenth-century struggle for agency, it is a moment of radical clarity. By the time John collapses on the floor, the narrator has successfully navigated the dangerous path Virginia Woolf later identified: she has moved beyond the cheap tools of her secret writing and into a visceral, lived truth. She did not simply lose her mind; she shed a social identity that was designed to kill her spirit. In the separate spheres of the nineteenth century, the only way to be a fully functioning adult was to adopt the masculine persona or disappear into the feminine Angel. Gilman's narrator rejects both, choosing instead a third path of total, albeit misunderstood, autonomy.

Her creeping is a refusal to stay still in the bed John nailed down; it is a declaration that her body and her mind are no longer subject to his medical or marital prescriptions. This ending serves as a brutal irony: John's attempt to preserve her health by silencing her intellect only succeeded in creating a woman he could no longer recognize or control. As she treads over the fainted body of the man who sought to cure her, she proves that the domestic ideal was always a fragile construction, easily toppled by a woman who dares to see through the patterns of her prison.

Ultimately, this is not a story of a woman who was defeated by a wall, but of a woman who used the wall to find a version of herself that the nineteenth century had no name for. The narrator does not end the story as a patient, but as a sovereign—a New Woman who found her freedom not in the world as it was, but in the world she had the courage to tear down and rebuild for herself. She has moved out of the margin of John's medical notes and into the center of her own terrifying yet self-authored reality.

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