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## From Imprisonment to Freedom: the Divine Sense of Madness

Charlotte Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" focuses on the slow mental degeneration of a young woman forced to undergo the "rest cure," examining both the causes and the nature of her madness. Shortly after moving into a new place of residence, the narrator of the story -- who remains unnamed throughout -- begins experiencing vivid fantasies and delusions focused on her surroundings, all extremely violent and disturbing in nature. Though such frightening visions may seem like undesirable indications of a severely disturbed mind, they are ultimately beneficial to the narrator. The violence depicted in her fantasies is a direct consequence of the violence that exists in her reality, as she projects the qualities of her husband, the dominant force in her life, into her environment. The delusions, which may appear harmful to most, are in fact a source of hope for the narrator as she moves through a painful existence. They serve as a way to help her escape the psychological violence inflicted upon her by her husband, literally providing her with a way out of the real world into an imagined world where she is, ultimately, the one in control.

The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" leads such a stifling, unfulfilling existence that she eventually finds herself turning away from reality and into herself. A woman living at the turn of the century would have inevitably felt some degree of societal oppression, but the single most dominant force in the narrator's life is her husband John. Although she describes him as "careful and loving" (5), his extreme attentiveness is a notable source of violence in the narrator's life. Although John never inflicts physical pain upon his wife, his brutality is evident in the psychological pain to which he subjects her. He imprisons her in a nursery both literally, with barred windows, and figuratively, refusing to let her engage in any activity whatsoever, "hardly let[ting her] stir without special direction" (5). He seems determined to stifle her artistic ideas, cautioning her that "there is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours" (12). From his repeated orders for the narrator "not to give way to fancy in the least" it seems that the narrator's creative instincts threaten John. The narrator possesses something of her own, something that John cannot touch, and he is determined to banish anything that competes with him for her full attention. He succeeds in doing so primarily by forcing the narrator to undergo the "rest cure," a medically questionable method of healing the sick by confining them to their beds and permitting them no activity whatsoever. Gilman clearly opposes the rest cure, since John's methods seem to be the most important factor in the degeneration of the narrator's mind from reasonably coherent into utterly mad (as shown by the narrator's increasingly disorganized syntax). John oppresses his wife both in mind, telling her "never for one instant to let that idea enter your mind!" (12), and in body, "hardly let[ting her] stir without special

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direction" (5), committing the most horrendous crime possible against his "little goose" (6) by literally stealing her life from her. Through his intense need to control not only the narrator's body, but also her mind, John creates a woman so stifled by her surroundings that she must resort to violent, delusional fantasies in order to escape him.

The narrator responds to the narrow life in which she finds herself trapped by beginning to utilize her delusions to escape the confines of her environment. Her surroundings, and most notably the wallpaper, provide her with a world far more diverting, and far less painful than the real world. She becomes so obsessed with the wallpaper, "watch[ing] it always" (13), that it seems her life would be empty without it. She spends hours attempting to decipher the swirls in the wallpaper's pattern, and stares endlessly at "mysterious deep-shaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees" (7) which, when given such adjectives, take on fascinating new lives beyond the commonplace. Even though in reality her surroundings are lifeless and boring, the narrator can escape into the world of danger and intrigue that lives in her mind.

The world that she creates in her imagination serves as a source of hope for the narrator, enabling her to create a reality that her husband cannot intrude upon. Though she is an invalid, entirely excluded from the lives of those around her, her fantasies provide her with something that is hers, and hers alone, something that nobody else in the house can see. "There are things in the wallpaper that nobody knows about but me, or ever will" (11). By creating her own private world, violent though it may be, the narrator is able to escape the psychological oppression that she experiences in her everyday life. She frees herself within her mind, creating a place where nobody can watch over her or control her, and thus takes the first step towards her eventual escape.

The delusions, though often frighteningly violent, serve to help the narrator come to terms with the real violence in her life. She imagines that the wallpaper "slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you," yet she seems almost excited by the idea of the wallpaper physically harming her. Although she does not state it directly, she becomes so entranced -- obsessed, even -- by the wallpaper that it seems to take on a certain allure for her. Perhaps she finds the idea of being hurt physically almost comforting, in contrast to the psychological damage being inflicted upon her by her husband. Although John does not literally slap her in the face or knock her down, he does, indeed, trample upon her identity and sense of self. The narrator's attempts to overcome the violence in her imagined world are a way for her to regain the power that she has lost by becoming a victim in reality.

The narrator creates numerous parallels between her delusional world and her real life, making her feel that by controlling her imagined world she also gains a degree of control over her reality. The narrator's surroundings and the wallpaper in particular are infused with a number of

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John's qualities. The wallpaper, "tiresome" and "perplexing" (14), moves and shifts to the point where the narrator can make no sense of its actions, and it demands from her all of her time and attention, yet gives little in return. Like John, the wallpaper dominates and controls the narrator's mind. When she later envisions that the wallpaper has "become bars . . . and the woman behind it is as plain as can be" (13), she is projecting her own qualities into her delusions, with herself as the woman, and John as the wallpaper, trapping her inside. By transferring the disturbing aspects of her real life into her fantastical one, filling her delusions with aspects of the people she feels threatened by, the narrator turns her focus from a person who she feels is unconquerable to an inanimate object over which she can exercise control. In her fantasy world, it is not John who is the oppressor, it is the wallpaper, which she is determined to conquer.

The narrator's transference of her real life into her imagined one is what ultimately gives her the ability to escape. When the narrator begins to see women "creeping" about outside, she identifies with those women and longs to be like them, free from the bars. It is with this development that she at last begins what is to be her final rebellion against her husband. Eventually, she begins to imagine that she herself is "creep[ing] smoothly on the floor." Although she has not yet, like the other women, escaped from behind the bars trapping her inside, she has become the aggressor. No longer is she being crept upon by John; now it is she who is creeping upon him. Through her fantasies, the narrator has found a way to escape, to reverse her role as a victim.

Although her delusions are uniformly violent and frightening in nature, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" becomes deeply involved with them in order to escape from the stifling reality of her life. The narrator even admits she has become "really fond of the room . . . perhaps because of the wallpaper." For her, the wallpaper offers a sense of purpose and a sense of hope. Not only does it give her creativity and imagination an outlet, it offers her a way to project the real world into an fantastical realm where she, and not her husband, is in control of what happens. The world that the narrator imagines around her, while violent, is quite beautiful in many respects, as it is a place where she can at last escape from behind the bars to creep with all the other women.

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