

## Postpartum Psychosis in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is a short story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Told in the first person as a series of journal entries, it tells of a woman, who has recently given birth, and her husband, a physician, after they lease a country estate for three months to provide the woman with doctor-ordered rest. Her husband determines they will use a large room on the second floor as their bedroom. The narrator immediately finds the house itself unsettling, and she does not like the room he selects, particularly the wallpaper, which she finds abhorrent. Over time the narrator, primarily confined to this room, begins to go mad, and she envisions the wallpaper taking on a life of its own. The text shows this deterioration as the author employs an increasingly manic prose. In any given work, without knowing the writer’s specific intent, we can only infer the meaning and attempt to support this meaning with elements from the work. Here, I suggest that the narrator’s mental state is a result of postpartum psychosis culminating in the worst possible consequence of infanticide.

Postpartum psychosis is an extreme form of post-partum depression, in which the new mother suffers from what has been dismissively called “baby blues” (Sit). The narrator displayed all the primary symptoms of postpartum psychosis. She experienced hallucinations and delusions. She became paranoid that John, her husband, and his sister Jennie were plotting against her. She was excessively agitated, and her sleep was disrupted as she lay awake most nights. She had obsessive thoughts about her baby, though these took a somewhat different form, and toward the end, she sought to harm the baby. Worldwide there have been cases of women, who had recently given birth and were suffering from postpartum psychosis, committing

infanticide and sometimes killing their other children as well (Brockington). “The Yellow Wallpaper” is suggestive of this.

The large room on the second floor, which John selected as their bedroom, was called “the nursery” by the narrator (Gilman, “Yellow Wallpaper” 512). She also indicated that, “It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.” It is interesting to note that all three of the room types pertain to children at play. We can’t know for certain if the bars on the windows and the rings in the walls are real or just a figment of the narrator’s unreliability, but if these items were part of the room, they further the idea that the room is a prison. There was a large, heavy bedstead that had been bolted to the floor, and the narrator commented that it looked as if it had been through the wars. Historically, women gave birth reclining in beds, though later this would be accomplished with a birthing chair (Dundes). Symbolically the immovable bedstead also functions as a prison for the narrator, one which emphasizes her role as a mother and her subsequent imprisonment by this role.

Also in this room was a yellow wallpaper which the narrator describes as having, “one of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin,” and “the color is repellant, almost revolting; a smoldering unclean yellow” (Gilman, “Yellow Wallpaper” 512-513). Yellow symbolizes sunshine and hope (Bourn). It is perceived as a childish color, but it is also disease and madness. She made little reference to her baby prior to and shortly after taking the room; however, her mentions of the yellow wallpaper grew to be near constant. She personified it, imbuing it with malevolence, convinced that, “It knew what a vicious influence it had” (Gilman, “Yellow Wallpaper” 514). She spent hours staring at the wallpaper, trying to make sense of the pattern, but it distorted and defied her. She began to see the paper move and was convinced it

was a woman crawling around behind the paper. She desired to tear all the wallpaper down, destroying it to free the woman.

The wallpaper is representative of the narrator's baby. In her state of growing postpartum psychosis, she comes to deeply resent the baby. It was the baby, after all, that put her in this position. She was trapped in this room with an immovable bed and a baby/wallpaper that tormented her. As the story progressed, she could attend to little else but the wallpaper, its movements, patterns, and color. She believed it had an unpleasant smell, a yellow smell. This is suggestive of the smell of a house in which there is a baby, a cloying, diaper-pail scent. Additionally, Jennie tells her that she had found yellow "smooches" on all their clothes, such as one might have with a baby that is spitting up. The narrator wrote that, "there is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down." She repeated a form of this near the end as she was peeling off the wallpaper, "All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!" Broken neck, bulbous eyes, strangled heads, and fungus, the symbol of death and decay (Stephens)—this is the baby's fate.

The creeping woman under the wallpaper first appeared to the narrator as, "...a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (Gilman, "Yellow Wallpaper" 515). Soon the narrator stated that she was quite sure it was a woman, one who remained still and subdued during the day, quiet in the bright spots, but in the shady places she, "takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard." At night, the wallpaper pattern seemed to resemble bars, and she could plainly see the woman. This is another mention of bars. The room is a prison with bars on the windows, the bed is a prison, and the wallpaper is a prison for the woman behind it, who is the narrator gone completely mad. Further,

she wrote, “And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so.” The woman beneath the wallpaper cannot escape because of the baby. The narrator said that, “There is a very funny mark on this wall, low down, near the mopboard. A streak that runs round the room. It goes behind every piece of furniture, except the bed, a long, straight, even *smooch*, as if it had been rubbed over and over”. This is the narrator, in a foreshadowing of what is to come, seeing the results of the woman behind the wallpaper, who is her, crawling along the edge of the room like a baby, encircling the area in which the narrator lived. Twice the narrator referred to being beneath the wallpaper with the other woman, showing that the narrator was becoming closer and closer to becoming completely mad.

Near the ending, the last day, the narrator stated that everything was gone. Jennie was gone, the servants were gone, John was gone, and the things were gone, except for the bedstead that is fastened to the floor. She was alone in the house, presumably with the baby. She locked the door to her room and threw the key out the window. She said she had work to do, and she peeled off all the wallpaper she could reach, with the strangled head and bulbous eyes shrieking at her. This scene is vividly depicted in the short film *The Yellow Wallpaper* by David Cain. He shows the narrator clutching shredded wallpaper to her chest as if it was an infant, thus creating a very striking image that is paralleled in the story. Once she had completed her work, removing every bit of wallpaper she could, she had effectively killed her baby, either strangling it or breaking its neck, and she had become one with the woman behind the wallpaper, freeing her and enabling the narrator and the woman, her madness, to become one. When John entered the room, after retrieving the key from outside, he was aghast and said, “What is the matter? For God’s sake, what are you doing!” The narrator replied, “I’ve got out at last, in spite of you and Jane! And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” Jane is the narrator

before she descended into psychosis. John then fainted, a peculiar thing for a doctor to do in that he would be well versed in the unsavory aspects of the human condition. However, the sight of his murdered infant and his wife crawling around the room, disheveled and on all-fours, was shock enough.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is a compelling fictional case study of postpartum psychosis. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’?”, detailed her inspiration for this short story, having endured a severe nervous breakdown and been prescribed absolute rest, which made her condition worse (Gilman, “Why I Wrote.”). She made no mention of a baby much less infanticide. This is an interpretive liberty I have taken in my reaction to “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The story, with its stream of consciousness narrative, its subject matter, and its manic prose, is highly suggestive of a woman who, in the throes of isolation, hormonal angst, and postpartum psychosis is driven to the unspeakable.

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