

“The Yellow Wallpaper” Torn Down: The Madness of Mitchell’s Rest Cure

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” illustrates not only the inefficacy of S. Weir Mitchell’s rest cure, but also its pernicious and counterproductive effects that make women more debilitated than recovered. In her short story, Gilman does more than simply challenge Mitchell’s misogynistic evaluation of women’s “nervous conditions”—rather, Gilman gives her audience a taste of Mitchell’s own medicine by allowing readers to journey into the mind of a woman who is given the rest cure and spirals into madness as she is deprived of her motherhood, artistic abilities, and social interaction. Gilman subverts Mitchell’s rest cure in “The Yellow Wallpaper” in that while the treatment is supposed to reorient women towards domestic duties and minimize their pain, it ultimately orients the narrator towards a collective female suffering and degenerates her image as a human.

In the beginning of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator adopts Mitchell’s language even though she is not convinced of its credibility. Just as Mitchell writes in “The Evolution of the Rest Treatment,” “I insisted on entire rest and shut out friends, relatives, books, and letters,” Gilman’s narrator is prescribed “phosphates or phosphites -- whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to ‘work’ until I am well again.”^{1 2} In Mitchell’s “Nervousness and its Influence on Character,” he refers to an “unreasonableness of temper,” “her sense of moral proportion becom[ing] impaired,” and “the intelligent despotism of self-control is at an end.”³ The narrator assumes Mitchell’s vocabulary in an attempt to try to convince herself of John’s diagnosis of her: “I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I’m sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition. But John says if I

¹ S. Weir Mitchell, “The Evolution of the Rest Treatment,” 148.

² Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” 1.

³ S. Weir Mitchell, “Nervousness and its Influence on Character,” 143-144.

feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself—before him, at least, and that makes me very tired.”⁴ The narrator engages in self-suppression in order to satisfy John, both as his wife and as his patient. Just as Mitchell discusses the feminine “nervous condition” from a masculine perspective, so too does the narrator take on a male solipsism in which she writes and thinks of herself through her husband’s eyes. Although she does so, readers get a sense for the disconnect she feels from herself and the force she must apply in order to conceal her personal thoughts and feelings. What is supposed to be a relief to her own mental health ends up being more of a strain on her as she is coerced into self-censorship for the sake of protecting her husband’s feelings.

Mitchell’s “rest cure” ironically creates a restlessness in the narrator as she departs from thinking of herself from a third person point of view and becomes absorbed in the mysterious wallpaper that confronts her with her own identity. Contrary to Mitchell’s idea of an unhappy and “nervous” woman as someone who is overworked and over mentally stimulated, the narrator’s depression grows more acute in isolation and as a means of coping, transforms the wallpaper into a character that resembles herself. At first she hates the wallpaper with its “flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin... they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.”⁵ The narrator’s agony is amplified through her description of the wallpaper, her inner conflict eats away at her from the inside out. The dark depths of her depression are suddenly thrown up on the wall in a ghastly yellow color, inescapable and suffocating as it surrounds her. It conjures up feelings of intense paranoia: “the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down...

⁴ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” 2.

⁵ Ibid, 3.

those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere.”⁶ The wallpaper shapeshifts into a kind of monster that sharpens the narrator’s anxiety of being under the close watch of her husband. These images emblemize the idea that Mitchell’s rest cure is a kind of rotting death. The wallpaper is simultaneously alive and dead through the narrator’s eyes, yet this is a death she suspects only she can see. Even though the narrator’s description of it is startlingly gruesome and morbid, it is just wallpaper in John’s eyes, indicating that her pain is a scotoma in male perception. Thus, the narrator hears John tell her that she is too sensitive and the narrator’s wallpaper croaks back that he is too blind.

Before the narrator even realizes it, she deflects the treatment she has received from physicians onto the wallpaper. The narrator takes on the role of physician when she diagnoses the wallpaper with her own diagnosis: “I determine for the thousandth time that I *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion. I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of... a kind of ‘debased Romanesque’ with *delirium tremens*.”⁷ The narrator takes on a confident tone that is reminiscent of when she defends her husband as a “physician of high standing” and when she subscribes him to a rational logic in which he determines “there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him.”⁸ The wallpaper’s pattern is devaluated in a similar way that John dismisses his wife’s pain and Mitchell devaluates women’s abilities: “To-day, the American woman is, to speak plainly, too often physically unfit for her duties as woman, and is perhaps of all civilized females the least qualified to undertake those weightier tasks which tax so heavily the nervous system of man.”⁹ The narrator assumes

⁶ Ibid, 5.

⁷ Ibid, 6-7.

⁸ Ibid, 1, 3.

⁹ S. Weir Mitchell, “Wear and Tear, or Hints of the Overworked,” 141.

the same discriminatory tone that discounts the wallpaper as being illogical and unruly, just like women according to John and Mitchell. The narrator projects her treatment onto the wallpaper and eventually learns to empathize with it while the wallpaper simultaneously takes on the function of a mirror as she begins to see herself in it. As the enigmatic pattern gives way to bars and creeping women, and the narrator's reference to the wallpaper transitions from "it" to "she" to "they" to "we," it is in isolation that she realizes her condition extends far beyond herself as an individual into a much larger cultural and social plight.

By the end of the short story, the wallpaper becomes less of a mirror and more of a panoramic view of female suffering. Despite one of the rest cure's rules to limit women's social interaction during this treatment, the narrator discovers a community of people just like her: "That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper."¹⁰ It is through the act of peeling back the wallpaper that the narrator becomes something of an activist and metaphorically frees women in a similar way that the New Women's Movement wanted to. The narrator herself transforms into a "new woman" by the very end of the story, but one that serves as a direct contradiction to the "new woman" Mitchell believed the rest cure would produce. The narrator becomes the epitome of unfeminine and even somewhat animalistic as she emphasizes how she "can creep smoothly on the floor."¹¹ It is at this point that Gilman flips Mitchell's rest cure on its head. When the narrator tells John, 'I've got out at last,' it is difficult for the reader to determine to what extent this is true as her madness and her liberation blend together.¹² Perhaps

¹⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper," 13.

¹¹ Ibid, 15.

¹² Ibid, 15.

the narrator refers to a mental liberation as she is still physically confined to creeping around the room. This mental relief comes with the knowledge of knowing she is not alone despite physically being alone in the bedroom; as Mitchell advocates for restraining women to their beds for months at a time, Gilman knew he did not anticipate having women rise up in a community. Part of the eeriness of the ending is that it feels like Gilman is speaking directly to Mitchell, so when the narrator says she cannot be put back in and she has to creep over her fainted husband every time, there is a haunting effect to her words as she tells Mitchell that she will not be detained and that she will not go away.