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Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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"Marriage had bastilled . . . [her] for life." (154–5) Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman: Or, Maria, A Fragment*

"The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians." (68) Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher"

Concluding his provocative 1989 essay delineating how Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" functions as a Gothic allegory, Greg Johnson describes Gilman's achievement as yet awaiting its "due recognition" and her compelling short story as being "[s]till under-read, still haunting the margins of the American literary canon" (530).[1] Working from the premise that Gilman's tale "adroitly and at times parodically employs Gothic conventions to present an allegory of literary imagination unbinding the social,

Notes

1 Johnson effectively echoes the words of Conrad Shumaker who said about “The Yellow Wallpaper” in 1985, “Today the work is highly spoken of by those who have read it, but it is not widely known and has been slow to appear in anthologies of American literature” (588). As my essay makes clear, Elaine Showalter's assessment of this story is distinctly different. Notably, in more recent years, Gilman's story has been much more widely read in general and readily identified as a popular work of Female Gothic. Joyce Carol Oates includes it in her literary anthology American Gothic Tales, and Allan Lloyd-Smith mentions it in two recent entries on American Gothic fiction. He deems it “the exemplar of Gothic fiction” in the late nineteenth century (Handbook 7) and “a powerful expression of the Gothicism inherent in the experience of patriarchal society” (Companion 120).

2 Literary critic Ellen Moers coined this term in her 1976 publication Literary Women, where she used it in relation to the works of Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley. Based on her interpretation of the latter author's Frankenstein, Moers defined the Female Gothic as characterized primarily by anxieties associated with childbearing and artistic creativity. As will be illustrated, Moers's rather succinct sketch of this genre is extremely applicable to Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The foremost studies of the Female Gothic are those by Ellis, DeLamotte, Fleenor (Ed.), Kahane, and Clery. For a brief overview of the genre see Milbank and Chapter 2 in Heller. For a history of critical approac vid Punter, editor) a n American Women'

3 Jean F. onse to Gilman's s (75).

4 I am a the lenses of the F liann Flee er society,” “lived he onably” (Gothic into the categor ependent mother/i aternal approva) tale enacts the narra nong other things, to deny the narrator's concern for the child from whom she is separated 682.

Further, this “maternal Gothic” interpretation entirely overlooks what I perceive to be Gilman's subversive, radical critique of a patriarchy that confines women to a selfless, maternal role and pathologizes such other creative drives as the intellectual and the artistic. In this viewpoint, therefore, I am in agreement with Kate Ellis who claims that the Female Gothic novel offers “an increasingly insistent critique of the ideology of separate spheres” (xv). Michelle Massé's classification of “The Yellow Wallpaper” as “marital Gothic” highlights “the central issues of authority” in that genre (29). Massé offers an astute ten-page close reading of Gilman's tale as a social indictment with which my interpretation is in uncommon agreement. Working from the premise that “The Yellow Wallpaper” speaks back, consciously and otherwise, to various established Gothic traditions—Female, British, and American—my essay endeavors to better contextualize Gilman's story, both critically and socio-historically, and thus to provide an interpretation attentive to this story's rich literary and cultural resonances.

5 This idea picks up on Mary Jacobus's claim that “Bertha Mason haunts this text” (201).

6 This inability to associate American women writers and the Gothic genre seems to have carried over to the Masterpiece Theater version of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” As Showalter notes, this adaptation was set in Victorian England instead of America. “The story,” Showalter writes, “may have been too Gothic to seem American” (131).

7 Gothic or Gothic and horr ne” and defined ublime objects it focused on encou 0 in Fred Botting's etween terror

8 See th e distinction between

9 Condu d the nature of prope t goal in life. Mary Wo of Daughte es of Life (1787) and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792). Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries

of Udolpho also seems to take issue with them by way of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Émile ou de l'éducation (1762), which delineates the proper education of a young boy. The proper education for Sophie, Émile's young female companion, is provided in the fifth book of Rousseau's work. It is implied that she is naturally incapable of reason. Radcliffe's choice of the name Emily (the feminized version of Émile) suggests that in Mysteries she is undermining Rousseau's gender ideology. Emily is introduced to the principles of Reason as a child and embraces them, alongside those of benevolence and sensibility, during her trials.

10 Sensibility was probably, as Janet Todd states in the best overview of the subject, Sensibility: An Introduction, the "key term" of the eighteenth century. This cultural movement had engendered a veritable cult by mid-century with a literature all its own that was "devoted to tear-demanding exhibitions of pathos and unqualified virtue" (8). Among other things, sensibility was considered to be reflective of a woman's sexual nature: when admired it "was assumed to imply chastity and only if denigrated was feared to denote sexuality" (8). Although sensibility began to lose ground in the latter part of the century, and the pejorative term "sentimentality" was coined in reference to "debased and affected feeling" some writers still upheld its precepts (8). Ann Radcliffe, for instance, promotes a tempered sensibility in The Mysteries of Udolpho through the mouthpiece of Mr. St. Aubert who advises his daughter Emily that while he "would guard [..

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Mysteries of Udolpho the protagonists […] [are] not Prince Manfred and Theodore, Montoni and the Chevalier Valancourt but the Castle itself with its courts and cloisters, the watchet-coloured chamber on the right hand and the galleries," or "the gothic magnificence of Udolpho, its proud irregularity, its lofty towers and battlements, its high-arched casements, and its slender watch-tower, perched upon the corners of tur[r]ets" (410–11).

14 While Claire Kahane maintains that the foremost female figure in the Female Gothic is "the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and allencompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront," I would suggest that this claim be expanded to include all foremothers given their prominent role in this genre (336).

15 While this message is generally covertly at play in most Gothic fiction, it has been occasionally blatantly mentioned. In the Preface to Nathaniel Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables (1851), for example, the narrator explicitly states, "the Author has provided himself with a moral—the truth, namely, that the wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief" (2).

16 Indeed, houses in general, and not just within the confines of the Female Gothic genre, h n Bachelard especial , "The house, e eproduced as it app y, and François made by children, to draw his house is is happi se which is well ne house bears tra wska organize children who had suff e child, who had bee w narrow, cold, clo

17 Radcliffe draws a crucial distinction between Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards death as expressed in various forms of memento mori in Mysteries. She suggests that Catholicism is a superstitious religion ruled by fear and the contemplation of horrifying images of physical death. Protestantism, on the other hand, is a faith marked by a more peaceful and accepting attitude towards death. The latter attitude is best exemplified in the death of Emily's father who says that he returns “in peace” to “the bosom of […] [his] Father” (81). St. Aubert's viewpoint derives, in part, from the mid–eighteenth century tradition of graveyard poetry, which includes such works as Edward Young's Night Thoughts (1749–51). Although this genre featured tombs, ghosts, and images of decay, its foremost message was that “[f]ears of mortality and associated superstitions are unwarranted if one has faith” (Botting 33).

18 The black veil is a hugely significant symbol associated with women in much Female Gothic fiction. It bridges secular and spiritual rites of passage and is a popular apocalyptic image (apokalypsis literally means the uncovering/revelation). The black veil is a central image in Radcliffe's The Italian and Matthew Lewis's The Monk, and is adapted, for a more complex, somewhat proto-feminist treatment of identity politics, in Brontë's Villette. Even the convent option, which involves a symbolic marriage to God, is also suggested by the black veil. Emily is threatened by her Aunt with confinement in a convent. As the dissenting Radcliffe suggests, such an option involves a type of imprison disallows the cont ofsky Sedgewi in the Veil: Imagery il in order to offer a c edgwick examine veil is “suffuse by critics who a n […] ‘clap sychology of depth as of Gothic conventi 140–1).

19 Miche s] rather than enc the very horror hi

20 At least one subsequent nineteenth-century Female Gothic narrative, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, played on the ambivalence of this term in relation to its principal setting. This cunning semiotic slippage is not, however, exclusive to the British tradition. In Charles Brockden Brown's Wieland, which is considered to be the first American Gothic novel, Clara Wieland refers to her house, which becomes a haunted house of terror, as her asylum (64).

21 It will be recalled that, while Rochester's first wife Bertha Mason (who also goes crazy like Gilman's heroine) vengefully burns down Rochester's house and then jumps to her death, the governess Jane Eyre, Rochester's second wife, gets her own back on her class-conscious, unchristian society by recounting the story of her life wherein her virtue is rewarded. Especially in the loaded image patterns surrounding the young Jane and the adult Bertha, Brontë intimates that Jane possesses an “inner Bertha.” While this aspect of Jane becomes more “civilized,” Jane's desire for revenge of a sort seems to be retained. On one level, therefore, Bertha and Jane may be described as sisters in arms. A parallel is suggested in Gilman's story in the “sisterhood” of the anonymous narrator and Jennie. In the sequence when Jennie is initially introduced, the narrator comments upon how Jennie polices her and then notes that a sub-pattern exists in the wallpaper. The juxtaposition of her detailed description of this sub-pattern as possessing “a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind t gence from outside s ly acceptal n's story and Brontë's bit of nighttim reach the smell” o ver, her brief thought is improper and m ent at this late one hand, from her e also notes that it m enseless act is actual n other words, t night be overlook

22 As th nount of attention to another feature of the wallpaper, namely its color. She calls it “repellant”

and “revolting” and associates it with “old foul, bad yellow things” (681, 689). Its foulness is reinforced when she describes it as “a smouldering unclean yellow” (681; emphasis added). Gilman's choice of color makes sense as applied to a wallpaper whose pattern indicts oppressive patriarchal institutions when one considers that yellow was identified, since the classical Greek period, with the choleric humor, which was associated with anger and irritation.

23 I would dispute Bailey's claim that Poe introduces this image. Charles Brockden Brown's novel Wieland provides an earlier precedent of the haunted house motif in American Gothic fiction. Adam W. Sweeting concurs, arguing further that “Dwellings and terror go hand in hand in early-nineteenth-century American fiction. From the decaying Gothic villas depicted by Charles Brockden Brown to the ‘putrefying fungi’ that eats away at Roderick Usher's house, psychological distress often accompanies architectural decay [….] Drawing on well-established Gothic tradition, Brown and Poe use architectural space to locate spatially and symbolically their investigations of terror. The spatial figures as the psychological in their works” (224).

24 For further details on Poe's concept of the Arabesque, see Ketterer 35–43.

25 R.A. Erickson charts this popular trope in Samuel Richardson's Pamela where a distinct connection is made between Pamela's potential defloration and her purportedly seductiv… …oregrounds the vario…

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