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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, domestic, and psychological confinements of a nineteenth-century woman writer," Johnson provides a fairly satisfactory general overview of "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a Gothic production (522). Despite the disputable claim that Gilman's story functions, in part, as a Gothic parody, he correctly identifies and aptly elucidates several of the most familiar Gothic themes at work in this study—specifically "confinement and rebellion, forbidden desire and 'irrational' fear"—alongside such traditional Gothic elements as "the distraught heroine, the forbidding mansion, and the powerfully repressive male antagonist" (522). Johnson ultimately overlooks,

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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 approaches to this genre, see Ellis's entry in A Companion to the Gothic (David Punter, editor) and Chapter 7 of Showalter's Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing, which is devoted to the American tradition.

3 Jean F. Kennard notes a significant shift from the original readership's response to Gilman's story as a tale of horror to late–twentieth century feminist readings (75).

4 I am aware of only two studies that read “The Yellow Wallpaper” through the lenses of the Female Gothic. By way of Gilman's autobiography, published in 1935, Juliann Fleenor issues the problematic claim that Gilman, “a woman at odds with her society,” “lived her life as a Gothic heroine might: impetuously, righteously, and reasonably” (Gothic Prism 241). Fleenor argues further that “The Yellow Wallpaper” falls into the category of Gothic that “convey[s] a fear of maternity and its consequent dependent mother/infant relationship as well as a fear of the mother and a quest for maternal approval” (227). Fleenor's largely unsupported claim that Gilman's (234–57) tale enacts the narrator's disgust with and punishment of her maternal body seems, among 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 literature was, fairly early on, classified into two major types—terror Gothic and horror Gothic. While the former was generally characterized as “feminine” and defined as engaged in expanding the soul by bringing it into contact with sublime objects of terror, the latter was said to be more “masculine” in its nature as it focused on encounters with graphically-detailed, physical mortality. See pages 71–80 in Fred Botting's introductory text on the Gothic for more detail on the distinction between terror and horror Gothic narratives.

8 See the introduction to Abel Hirsch, and Langland for further details on the distinction between the traditional and the Female Bildungsroman.

9 Conduct guides were popular eighteenth-century productions that outlined the nature of proper feminine behavior and promoted marriage as a woman's foremost goal in life. Mary Wollstonecraft denounced these books in Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct in the More Important Duties 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 […] [her] against the dangers of sensibility, […] [he is] not an advocate for apathy" (80). He warns further that "we become the victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them" (80).

11 The full sentence expressing this idea reads, "Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary." Milton and Radcliffe would disagree, however, regarding humankind's original state. Milton's view of Original Sin would clash dramatically with the portrait of Rousseauesque vision of Original Innocence that characterizes Emily's childhood in Mysteries.

12 This is the type of equal, loving partnership advocated by Wollstonecraft in The Vindication of the Rights of Woman.

13 In The Gothic Quest, among other works, Montague Summers makes the claim that the Gothic castle frequently assumes this position. According to Summers, "[…] in such romances as [Horace Walpole's] The Castle of Otranto and [Ann Radcliffe's] The

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, have a variety of psychic resonances. In The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard especially foregrounds their relationship to intimacy and security. He writes, "The house, even more than the landscape, is a 'psychic state,' and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy. Psychologists generally, and Françoise Minkowska in particular, […] have studied the drawings of houses made by children, and even use them for testing. To quote Anne Balif: 'Asking a child to draw his house is asking him to reveal the deepest dream shelter he has found for his happiness. If he is happy, he will succeed in drawing a snug, protected house which is well built on deeply-rooted foundations'. If the child is unhappy, however, the house bears traces of his distress. In this connection, I recall that Françoise Minkowska organized an unusually moving exhibition of drawings by Polish and Jewish children who had suffered the cruelties of the German occupation during the last war. One child, who had been hidden in a closet every time there was an alert, continued to draw narrow, cold, closed houses long after those evil times were over" (72).

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 imprisonment, a death-in-life existence and is, effectively, unchristian as it disallows the contemplation of nature's sublimity (472, 475). Chapter five of Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick's The Coherence of Gothic Conventions, entitled “The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel,” focuses on the figure of the veil in order to offer a corrective to popular depth psychology approaches to the Gothic. Sedgwick examines various readings of this object in the Gothic to illustrate how the veil is “suffused with sexuality” a vital aspect that has been regularly overlooked by critics who are “[…] impatient with its [the Gothic novel's] surfaces, […] label them […] ‘claptrap,’ […] [and] plunge to the thematics of depth and from there to a psychology of depth […] [and leave] unexplored the most characteristic and daring areas of Gothic convention, those that point the reader's attention back to surfaces” (143, 140–1).

19 Michelle Massé classifies Gilman's story as “marital Gothic” as it “begin[s] rather than end[s] with marriage, […] [and] the husband becomes the revenant of the very horror his presence was supposed to banish” (7).

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 that silly and conspicuous front design” and Jennie's sudden reemergence from outside seems calculated to suggest that Jennie also represses a less socially acceptable aspect of herself (684). Other connections exist between Gilman's story and Brontë's novel. The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” assumes Bertha's habit of nighttime activity and while she thinks “seriously of burning the house – to reach the smell” of the wallpaper, she ultimately resists the temptation (689). Moreover, her brief thoughts of suicide are also rejected because, she decides, “a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued” (692). A fundamental ambivalence is also evident at this late stage of the narrator's story: while she continues to regard herself, on one hand, from her society's perspective and deems the suicide option “improper,” she also notes that it might be misconstrued. This seems to suggest that this apparently senseless act is actually a rational act given her experience within a patriarchal society. In other words, the narrator is concerned that the fact that she is driven to suicide might be overlooked.

22 As the title particularly suggests, the narrator also pays an inordinate amount 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 seductive act of “flowering” her master, Mr. B., a waistcoat. Erickson also foregrounds the various significant flower and garden episodes in this novel.

26 In bringing the Gothic to bear on the Woman Question in America, Gilman also calls attention to what Frances L. Restuccia refers to as the “tunnel vision” of Fiedler's “Oedipal theory of the gothic” (246). Restuccia correctly identifies Fiedler's view of the Gothic “as a reservoir of strictly male desire, anxiety, neurosis” wherein the power of darkness is confined to the villain, thus overlooking the heroine (245, 246).

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