

“Women have been taught that, for us, the earth is flat, and that if we venture out, we will fall off the edge”. - Andrea Dworkin¹

By considering this quote, compare and contrast the ways in which Sylvia Plath and Charlotte Perkins Gilman present the female protagonists as intelligent women restricted in a patriarchal world in *The Bell Jar* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

In this statement, Dworkin argues that in a patriarchal environment, women are unable to fulfill their potential, and are thus confined to a life of constant repression. This idea is explored in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*² and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*³ when both female protagonists descend into a state of madness as a result of constant restriction. The masculine America in which both *The Bell Jar* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* are set in fails to appreciate the emotional complexity of the two female narrators, seeing their intelligence as a threat to patriarchal power. It is therefore my contention that both narrators are depicted by their authors as femme fatales, confined by men who feel emasculated by their intelligence. In an unconventional sense, their danger does not stem entirely from their sexual attractiveness, but instead, their intellectuality. This intelligence was perceived to be a threat to hegemonic masculinity, which explains The Narrator's confinement to the 'rest cure' in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Esther Greenwood's failure to pursue her independent ambitions in *The Bell Jar*.

Despite the differing time periods of the texts, both authors choose to present a gulf between the emotional complexity of the female protagonists, and the male characters' lack of empathy towards their pain. For The Narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* the effects of this are particularly jarring, and more explicit than Esther's experiences in *The Bell Jar*. Although The Narrator states that she “[cries] at nothing, and [cries] most of the time”, her husband John disregards this state of emotional turmoil, by stating that she is “unreasonably angry”. As King and Morris⁴ argue, by “using reason as his measure, John is armed with “knowledge”

¹ Reprise, F. (2004) *Catharine MacKinnon speaks on the work of Andrea Dworkin*.

² Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 1892

³ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 1963

which he can use to impose his version of reality on his wife". The use of regimented, scientific language such as "unreasonably" dismisses The Narrator's pain, disallowing her from thinking autonomously. John's dismissal of her emotions over-simplifies her disorder to mere "silly fancies". However, there is a sense of irony on John's behalf that Gilman makes explicit; the fact that he catastrophically misreads the extent of mental destruction his wife is enduring reveals his inability to comprehend the complexity of his wife's condition, which conveys The Narrator as misunderstood, restricted in a patriarchal world.

Similarly in *The Bell Jar*, Esther's ambitions of choice and freedom are denounced by her partner Buddy Willard, who describes her as having "the perfect set up of a neurotic". For Buddy, a fairly traditional young man who adheres to the social norms of the 1950s, the idea of Esther wanting more than a life comfortably fixed in the domestic sphere was to him simply incomprehensible. This belief is also held by John in *The Yellow Wallpaper*; Plath and Gilman both present the male protagonists as restricted to thinking in binary terms, which contrasts the intricacies of the minds of the two female protagonists. Esther's ability to reinvent the meaning of the word "neurotic" as something positive: "if wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell" is significant. This statement represents her independence and ability to see beyond a life of domestic drudgery, and is Plath's attempt to present her as more astute than Buddy Willard. It is through such honest, untainted remarks that Esther unapologetically makes throughout the novel that sets her apart from other women. She unashamedly admits that after Buddy's proposal, she had "an awful impulse to laugh". Similarly, The Narrator does not truly submit to her husband's orders in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and by the end of the novella, like Esther, she has a strength of mind that goes beyond the often fabricated, inconsequential jargon uttered by her husband.

⁴ King, J. and Morris, P. (2002) 'ON NOT READING BETWEEN THE LINES: MODELS OF READING IN "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"', *STUDIES IN SHORT FICTION*

Both Plath and Gilman use the female protagonists' creative and almost retrospective use of language to emphasise their intelligence. The Narrator uses the technique of paranthesis to create philosophical undertones to her thoughts, remarking almost existentially on the futility of her life. The Narrator's use of a hyphen in "- what is one to do?" after talking of how her husband "assures friends and relatives that there is nothing really wrong" can be perceived as an almost existential remark. This rhetorical form of rumination, which is isolated from the main sentence through the hyphen skilfully presents the helplessness of The Narrator's situation, and her inability to escape the all-pervading power of masculinity. Here, a link can be made to the work of Virginia Woolf, in 'A Room of One's Own'⁵. Her notion that there is "no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" has parallels to The Narrator's situation. John's attempt to physically confine his wife can only reach so far; her mind is still active and her words are still rife with cynicism, contradicting the archaic belief that women should remain submissive. John "hates to have [The Narrator] write a word" because he recognises how powerful her words can be. Similarly, Plath uses Esther to remark on the futility of life for intelligent young women, who like Esther, achieve "all A's" in college: "I could see day after day after day ahead of me like a white, broad, infinitely desolate avenue". Both female protagonists are stuck in a rather paradoxical situation; although they appear to be intellectually superior to their male counterparts, they live a life of infinite oppression.

The disintegration of the female protagonists' language towards the end of the texts also reveals how even for women with a strong sense of independent thought, their minds can be plagued by the patriarchal expectations of society. At the climax of Esther's mental demise, the pace of the novel reduces through alliterative phrases such as "stagnant salt", mirroring the cognitive breakdown of her mind. Esther's tenacity at the beginning of the novel when she believed that "nobody could stop me" has subsided into emotionless, vacant sounds. In both texts, the authors use the disintegration of the female protagonists language to reveal

⁵ Woolf, V. (2008) *A room of One's own*. London: Penguin Group UK.

the detrimental effects of male orders on the mind, enforcing the notion that both female narrators can be perceived as femme fatales, whose apt comments are a threat to patriarchal ideology.

Conversely, the disintegration of The Narrator's language towards the end of the novella also coincides with the climax of the text, when she "creeps over [John] every time", symbolically defeating her husband. Instead of denouncing phrases like "Why there's John at the door!" as simple and frantic, it could be interpreted as the contrary; reflecting to the reader the fast pace at which The Narrator processes information, thus revealing her intelligence. Furthermore, her use of synesthesia when describing in graphic detail the state of the wallpaper as "hanging over" her, with "the most enduring odor" emphasises this idea further. The intensity at which she can *feel* and relate to her surroundings juxtaposes the scientific nature of her husband, who abides by less instinctive, rote-learned facts, and emphasises her creative thought processes. The description of the odor as "enduring" alludes to The Narrator's restriction in this desolate, perpetual cycle of isolation. Her strong connection with the wallpaper is also intriguing, as critics have suggested that the "wallpaper which so disturbs the narrator represents the oppressive structures of the society in which she finds herself"⁶. It is no coincidence that The Narrator has an enduring, intense connection with arguably the most overtly political symbol in the text. Gilman uses the wallpaper to represent the futility of her situation; like the women in the wallpaper "shaking" on the bars, they want to escape, but are restricted by the unyielding force of patriarchal restrictions.

The use of symbolism in the two texts is influential in revealing how external pressures arguably act as the greatest restriction to the female protagonists' potential. The raindrops that "darkened the black mackintosh" Esther was wearing could be representative of the poisonous influence of Cold War America on the mind and identity of Esther. This is Plath's

⁶ Jeanette King and Pam Morris, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 1989

attempt to address the detrimental effects of consumerism on the thoughtful minds of women like Esther. The “white blouse” she is wearing underneath her black mackintosh; something that is pure and feminine, is no longer visible under the brooding presence of the large black raincoat. This is one of the many metaphors Plath uses to indicate the change in Esther’s mental state, and links to the Bildungsroman style of the novel. However, contrary to the traditional ‘coming of age’ style, Esther never really ‘comes of age’; she fails to reach a point of satisfaction with herself, which could be indicative of the impossibility of the task in a superficial, consumerist America, whereby educated, independent women were not appreciated. Plath does not shy away from commenting on the effects of popular culture on young women, for example Esther remarks that an article in “*Reader’s Digest*” sent from Buddy Willard’s Mother “didn’t seem to consider how a girl felt”.

Whilst Esther uses darkness to hide away from reality, The Narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* uses it to the opposite effect. By daylight the pattern on the wallpaper is “subdued, quiet”, but in moonlight it changes. This could allude to the fact that at night, when the male gaze is not looming over the woman, she has more confidence to be free and is not tied down by inequitable convention. In “moonlight”, The Narrator has the confidence to “[run] to help” the woman in the wallpaper, linking to the traditionally held view that women have a natural connection to the lunar cycle. The freedom The Narrator feels in this rare opportunity to act on her own instincts could be because she is not being policed by her husband or Jenny. Although the authors have differing approaches, the symbol of darkness in both texts is used as a form of protection against the rigid expectations of society.

The influence of external expectations act as a greater restriction to Esther’s potential than The Narrator’s in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. On a superficial level, Esther’s scholarship to New York; supposedly a city of the liberated and the avant-garde only complicates her life choices further, as aptly explained through Plath’s fig tree analogy. The figs hint at a “wonderful future” yet merely “beckoned and winked”, epitomising Esther’s agonising state. Due to the

binary nature of her male-dominated environment, Esther can not simultaneously enjoy a life of work and motherhood. This further supports the argument that the two female protagonists' are depicted as intellectual femme fatales. The idea of women having both domestic and corporate power would be too dangerous for men; it would dismantle their 'natural' place of authority. Plath's fig tree analogy, which shows one fig as "a poet", and the other as "a husband and a happy home and children" physically isolates her two life aspirations, thus reflecting the rigidity of the patriarchal world. It also clearly illustrates how ambitious women who have such potential are demoted to a docile life, or, in the case of Esther, descend into a state of mental ruin. Bridgford's interpretation gives light to this agonising situation: "while Esther Greenwood is tantalized by the array of choices stretching out from her personal fig tree, she is aware that society sees this tree as largely illusory"⁷. The use of "personal" deserves recognition, as, in a way similar to The Narrator the female protagonists' ambitions to write remain only in their minds, unable to be pursued in an environment where the female mind was seen as inferior. Although their ambition highlights their intelligence and their strength of mind to defy arbitrary convention, it more importantly illustrates how helpless their situation has become, causing the stagnation of their minds under such restriction.

Although at first it may seem as if Esther has more freedom than The Narrator, who is physically trapped in the "colonial mansion", the extent of their restriction is of similar intensity, it has simply evolved into something more subtle and nuanced than the overt restrictions of nineteenth century society. As Dewaard notes, "Esther and the narrator face the impractical reality of rebelling against traditional gender roles due to a long history of societal acceptance for these cultural norms"⁸. This contention is emphasised when Esther is in New York, and is described as one of the "the prettiest, smartest bunch of young ladies".

⁷ Bridgford, K. (2011) 'Interruptions in a patriarchal world: Sylvia Plath's the bell jar and Susan..', *Critical Insights: The Bell Jar and Girl, Interrupted*

⁸ DeWaard, E.M. and Kwon, D. (2014) 'The damaging effects of gender roles in the bell jar and The Yellow Wallpaper'

The oxymoronic use of the superficial term “pretty”, next to the word “smart” reveals the contradictory nature of American society, and it is this dichotomy that is at the crux of Esther’s mental demise. The darkness which Esther later encases herself in when she “curls up” with the “blanket over [her head]” is her attempt to hide away from the harsh expectations of motherhood. Such a dutiful and docile perception of female marital expectations is not dissimilar from the power imbalance seen through The Narrator’s almost flippant remark - “John laughs at me, or course, but one expects that in marriage”.

The restrictions on the blossoming of the female mind is portrayed in the Yellow Wallpaper in a more physical sense than in *The Bell Jar*, through the use of architecture as a reflective medium of nineteenth century gender values. As Farquharson states, The Narrator is confined to a “patriarchal house” that is “supplemented by hedges, boundary walls, and lockable gates, [which] brooks no negotiation”⁹. This unyielding environment, which is later symbolised through the “bars” the woman in the wallpaper tries to break, unequivocally emphasises how The Narrator has been outcast by society. Her inability to escape this environment further emphasises her femme fatale qualities; this restriction, coupled with her jaundiced view of her life; “I am too wise” and the way her defeat of her husband is done “in spite” of him suggests that such views were too dangerous for a woman to hold in a society keen to reinstate traditional Victorian values, and too revolutionary to escape the walls of this “colonial mansion”. This attempt to silence The Narrator relates to the effects of Esther’s shock treatment on her mind. The subtlety of Esther’s remark that her “watch had been replaced on [her] wrist, but it looked odd” hints at a more profound meaning. In the same way that The Narrator loses any form of power by not being allowed to write, and being confined to her bedroom, Esther’s unfamiliar watch is symbolic of the power she is losing; the sense of self and reality that is no longer there. The *male* doctor that enforces this barbaric act could represent how men dulled the minds of ‘mad’ women to assert their dominance. This idea is supported by Hedgcock, who believes the “education woman” was a

⁹ Farquharson, K. (2009) *‘The last walls dissolve’: Space versus architecture in “the memoirs of a S..*

“threat to bourgeois ideology”. The deadening of the minds of the two women, for Esther through the use of “shock treatment” and for The Narrator through the “rest cure” occurred in an effort to restrict their intelligence. Recognition must be given to the fact that it was only *men* who impose such harsh treatments on The Narrator and Esther.

In both texts, the female protagonists’ feel a shared sense of disdain towards the male characters, and use their intelligence as a way to defy their expected role as a submissive wife. The misanthropic tone Esther uses towards men such as Buddy Willard and Dr Gordon throughout *The Bell Jar* directly contrasts her feeling of “love” towards the female Doctor Nolan. It is important to note that the only character Esther feels such an intense connection to is a woman, emphasising how in a rather unorthodox way, she views men as an inferior species: “I hated the idea of serving men in any way” and quite bluntly, “he was stupid”. Furthermore, during her stay at Belsize, Esther takes note of the “sisterly silence” she felt between the female residents. Such a force could be deemed as extremely powerful; arguably a form of intellectual telepathy that Plath uses to communicate the idea of sisterhood; a Biblical concept still prevalent in twentieth century culture. This intense connection directly contrasts the primitive relationships made between male characters. The “great white bear skins” and “buffalo” horns that are ostentatiously placed in Lenny’s house present a more overt attempt to promote his masculinity. This materialistic representation of masculinity is simpler and more imposing than the emotional “tenderness” felt between the female characters. However in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this sisterly connection is more abstract; at points the narrator is fond of the woman in the wallpaper, but she is also “as plain as can be”. Whilst this does present the irrationality of the Narrator’s mind, it hints at her more prominent feeling of resentment; the woman in the wallpaper metaphorically teases at the prospect of freedom from male restriction, but the way she “creeps” rather than stands confidently reveals the difficulty of this task in a patriarchal environment. The jaundiced eye both The Narrator and Esther acquire is Gilman and Plath’s attempts to showcase their sense of anger felt when intelligent women are restricted from fulfilling their ambitions.

With this in mind, the perception that the female protagonists' *descend* into madness could be a misinterpretation. To some degree, their supposed insanity acts as a form of liberation from a divisive, patriarchal world, allowing them to create their own 'utopian' reality. The numb, emotionless tone Esther creates through long, factual sentences about "the fat bright faces of babies", and the plosive sounds that appear through the "bald babies" she describes adds a harshness to her tone, suggesting that life as a mother, with a "baby hanging over [her] head" is one of pointless limitation. Similarly, when The Narrator's husband "fainted", and she exclaims "I've got out at last!", she gains a sense of satisfaction from being independent and defying domestic expectations. Through this act of liberation, Gilman is not presenting a battle between the 'sane' and 'insane', but rather, a conservative society against an independent woman.

Both authors use their texts as a way of revealing the damaging effects of patriarchal restriction on the female mind. As leading feminists of their generation, Sylvia Plath and Charlotte Perkins Gilman attempt through their texts to speak for the silent majority, to communicate to the reader the extent of mental turmoil that is caused when one is not able to fulfill their potential. However inconsequential Esther Greenwood's and The Narrator's small acts of defiance may be, both author's present to the reader the exceptional nature of the female protagonists' mind, and their intelligence not to blindly conform to oppressive social norms. As Esther remarks towards the end of the novel; "I am climbing to freedom", and in a similar form of elevation, The Narrator "creeps *over*" her husband. However, in a rather frustrating, yet sadly inevitable way, neither The Narrator nor Esther as single, incongruous figures have a mind strong enough to dismantle a power structure so rigidly in favour of the male form.

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