

The Debate Between Reason and Passion in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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Abstract: Reason and Passion are two concepts that have been repeatedly constructed in Western tradition. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this Reason/Passion binary opposition is represented by Jane's physician husband John and the disordered yellow wallpaper. As the story progresses, Jane, who has repressed her passion out of her husband's patriarchal order, finally sides with the witch-like yellow wallpaper. Through endowing *the yellow wallpaper* with the power to impinge on reality, Gilman counters against the long-established inferior status of Passion, questioning patriarchal traditions that keep conceptualizing the Reason/Passion opposition in favor of their superiority.

Key words: *The Yellow Wallpaper*; binary opposition; Reason and Passion

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1. Introduction

Gilman's *The Yellow wallpaper* is one of the most discussed feminist works, relating the story of a 19th century woman who, under the influence of a disordered yellow wallpaper, gradually degrades into madness. This story is based on Gilman's personal experience of postnatal depression and her treatment by then well-known physician Dr. S. Weir Mitchell. Perhaps because of the deep linkage between the contents of the story and psychiatry, in some scholars' eyes this story is a well-fitted medical case of incipient insanity. However, such over-literal interpretations seem to ignore the prominence of *the yellow wallpaper* in this story, thus failing to explain the hidden social systems that bring about the protagonist's madness. Despite of such "diagnostic" interpretations, there are more scholars who concentrate their focus on the feministic significance represented by the wallpaper. In The

Madwoman in the Attic Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar portray "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" as symbolizing the "oppressive structures of the society in which [the protagonist] finds herself" (2000). Barbara A. Sues, based on Lacanian theories, observes that this yellow wallpaper signifies the Imaginary Order that counters against the Symbolic Order established by the narrator's husband John. Noticeably, in 1989 Susan L. Lanser discussed the yellow color of the wallpaper within the context of Westerners' xenophobia against Eastern people, providing a new perspective for the discussion of the story.

While trying to analyze the protagonist's madness based on the symbolic meaning of *the yellow wallpaper*, the present paper tries to interpret the novel against the background of Reason/Passion binary opposition in Western tradition, discussing Jane's mental transformation from repression of her passions to an

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emotional outbreak that approaches insanity.

2. The Opposition Between Reason and Passion in the History of Medicine

With the opening of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, readers are immediately invited into the inner world of the female narrator, playing the role of confidants who are permitted to share the diary with the narrator. The narrator Jane and her husband have moved to an “ancestral” mansion in a summer, with the intention of curing her postnatal depression. Perhaps because of her mental disease, the relationship between the couple goes beyond a simple husband-wife relationship, and yet is tainted with the subtle tension between doctor and patient. According to the diary, Jane’s husband is a physician. However, instead of helping with her disease, the fact that having a physician husband seems to be “one reason I [the narrator] do not get well faster” (Gilman, 1998). Despite Jane’s uneasiness, her husband simply doesn’t believe that she is sick. What is worse, it is even difficult for Jane to question his authoritative announcement, for as the narrator herself has realized, “[i]f a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression--a slight hysterical tendency--what is one to do” (Gilman, 1998). In this sentence, the sharp contrast between a “high-status physician husband” and a “slightly hysterical wife” shows that the narrator not only as a wife is unable to question her husband’s authority, but also as a patient is impossible to counter against a physician’s professional diagnosis. Here, the husband’s professional background as a physician manifests his intimate connection with Science, which is further related to the long-worshipped Reason in western culture. On the contrary, the wife is labeled as a woman with “temporary nervous depression” and “a slight hysterical tendency”, both of which refer to irrational sensitivity.

Reason and Passion are two concepts that have been defined as a binary opposition in Western philosophical tradition. The history of this artificial conceptualization can be traced back to ancient Greek times, when such philosophers as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle began to acquire prominence. Conspicuously, Plato’s philosophical ideas are grounded upon sets of interrelated binary oppositions such as Form/Matter, Soul/Body, etc. In these oppositions, there is always a party which ranks higher than the other one, as Form is regarded as upper graded than Matter, while Soul is given priority to Body. To them Plato also attached the dichotomy between Reason and Passion. In *Phaedo*, for example, Plato portrays Socrates as released from his prison-like body by his soul upon his approaching death. “The soul which cultivates Reason during life can expect at death to be released from error, folly, fear and fierce passions [my italics], living with the ‘divine, and the immortal, and the wise’” (Lloyd, 1984). As Lloyd has observed, in Plato’s eyes human’s soul and body should cultivate a relationship similar to that between a master and his slave, as soul is rational, intellectual while body harbors uncontrollable emotions (1984). Later, through works by Biblical hermeneutists represented by Philo and Augustine, the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis was interpreted as the manifestation of Reason’s connection with maleness and its opponent irrationality with female’s nature. “In Philo’s retelling of the Genesis story, woman, symbolizing sense-perception, is the source of the Fall for man, symbolizing Mind” (Lloyd, 1984). Philo’s interpretation forges an implicit connection between gender and the hierarchy of individual’s inner world; thus maleness is given a priority to femaleness. Hereafter, in the definition of rationality, femininity has been repeatedly identified as the object that is excluded, transcended and controlled. As a result, femininity on the one hand is labeled as the feature characteristic of women, while

on the other hand almost serves as the opposition to rationality that is deeply linked to maleness .

The influence of the dichotomy between Reason and Passion goes so far that it infiltrates every aspect of Western people's life, including medical arena. As for the story in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, it specifically hints at the relationship between depression and its implicit meaning of unreason. Historically, ancient Greeks, Romans, Babylonians, Chinese, and Egyptians all considered depression to be a sign of evilness, and thus people who were found to suffer depression would resort to priests rather than doctors. Later, Hippocrates, a Greek physician, suggested that depression (initially called "melancholia") was caused by four imbalanced body fluids called humors: yellow bile, black bile, phlegm, and blood. Specifically, he thought that a melancholia was caused by too much black bile in the spleen. Hippocrates' treatments of choice included bloodletting, baths, exercise, and diet. In 18th century, a time when the influence of enlightenment prevailed and brought about common worship of rationality and science, depression was believed to be an innate weakness. During that period, depression patients were often forced to receive confinement. As such, "depression" historically is a word with derogatory connotations, typically representing imbalance of humors and emotions. In 19th century (the temporal background of *The Yellow Wallpaper*), medicine developed rapidly and gradually matured into one independent science. With the growing medicalization of madness, there appeared a shift in the implication of depression from a sign of innate weakness to a medical condition that can be tamed and treated. However, instead of relieving the label of unreason from mental diseases, this huge progress in medicine in fact represents a step that further confines mental weakness such as depression to the state inferior to Reason, while in the meantime keeps it within Reason's (represented

by medicine) control. As Jennifer Radden has concluded, "during the first half of the nineteenth century, the 'birth of the asylum' on the continent of Europe, and various English Acts of Parliament such as the Lunatics Act of 1845, reflected the 'medical monopoly' on madness" (2009). In her distinguished book on melancholy and depression, Radden also points out two legacies of earlier psychiatry that gained significance in the 19th century. "One was the legacy from faculty psychology (and later phrenology), in which functional divisions had been reified and concretized", while the second was "a strong set of associations growing out of the earlier eighteenth century distinction between Reason and Passion" (2009). These two legacies, combined with the stereotypical idea that femininity is excluded from Reason, resulted in a new phenomenon in which women were deemed as more vulnerable to affective diseases, including nervous depression, hysteria, madness, etc (Radden, 2009). Within this context, the relationship between the husband and the wife is endowed with new significance: the physician husband is rational and calm, the depressed wife irrational and uncontrollable; the rational husband is respected by society, while the irrational wife has no voice in public domain.

Restrained in this continually unequal and smothering relationship, all of the wife's demands are received with ignorance or repudiation. She has to stay in an asylum-like room most of her time, faced with the scratched yellow wallpaper alone by day and by night. When encountering this wallpaper for the first time, the narrator writes:

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide--plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.(Gilman, 1998)

In later parts, the narrator again mentions that

“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” (Gilman, 1998). From the two depictions quoted above, it can be seen that in the narrator’s mind the most obvious feature of the wallpaper is its disordered and fragmented arrangement. This paper holds that the chaotic wallpaper symbolizes a kind of reified “unreason” integrated in the narrator’s inner world, which gradually manifests itself through the deterioration of the narrator’s depression and which appeals the narrator to the irrational world against her husband’s tyrannical realm.

3. Jane’s Changing Attitude Toward *the Yellow Wallpaper*

The narrator’s emotional attitude towards *the yellow wallpaper* has gone through three distinct periods: disgust at the wallpaper--gradually attracted by the wallpaper’s pattern--finally merge with the “woman behind the front pattern”. The following part of this paper will focus on the three periods one by one.

In the beginning part of the story, readers are immediately presented with a female protagonist who enjoys rich imagination and sensitivity. When moving into the “ancestral hall”, the narrator soon senses that the mansion is “a haunted house, and reach[es]the height of romantic felicity” (Gilman, 1998). Later, while describing the details of the house, the narrator repeatedly shows her fancies about its assumed history: the legal trouble about the heirs, transformation of the nursery, people walking in the garden, to list but a few. Besides, the narrator’s interest in writing can also be regarded as a token of her intimate relationship with the work of imagination and sensitivity. However, both the narrator’s whimsical fancies and her writing habits receive her husband’s severe repudiation. Based on her depiction, John (her husband) is “practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense

horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly [my italics] at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (Gilman, 1998). John’s practicality forges a stark opposition to the narrator’s sensitivity, and his open antipathy against his wife’s unreasonable thoughts functions effectively to put out the narrator’s passion toward her hobby. Noticeably, John’s frowning attitude towards his wife’s unreason always manifests itself in a public way. To the narrator’s depression, John’s speech is hard to counter against as his words seem to be well grounded on his concern about his wife’s health and his professional knowledge of medical therapy. As Treichler has observed, John’s paternalistic request, with the combination of a diagnostic language, has successfully created an overwhelming environment where the narrator finds it impossible to escape his control over her behaviors (1984). Within a context where Reason is commonly worshipped, the medical language used by John, “which had always had strong overtones of coercion”(Ehrenreich and English, 2005), serves as a “reasonable” crutch to deter his wife from seeking affective ideas, an institutional authority not only defines but also disregards women’s condition. Under the pressure of John’s paternalistic language, both the narrator’s words and actions have to shrink into a private and obscure domain. She has to conceal her journal writing, tuck away her true feelings, and manage to keep a poker face when faced with her husband. During this period, the narrator holds John’s words as her life conductor, faithfully obeying John’s requests about her daily routine. In the meantime, the narrator finds the disordered wallpaper a repugnant object. Her compliance with John’s diagnostic language and her disgust of the wallpaper both represent that the narrator at this time still chooses to (unwillingly, though) side with the reasonable world epitomized by John, failing to sympathize with the unreason that is embodied by the wallpaper.

The second period features the narrator's growing interest in the wallpaper's pattern. The turning point is that, after observing the wallpaper for a long time, the narrator one day finds that there seems a "woman stooping down and creeping about behind the pattern" (Gilman, 1998). This unexpected discovery greatly arouses the narrator's curiosity and draws her closer to the wallpaper. Interestingly, just upon the time when the narrator's world begins to be obsessed with the wallpaper, an irreversible fissure breaks out in the couple's relationship, resulting in the wife's voluntary staying away from her husband. As the diary shows, the narrator has more than once tried to persuade her husband to remove from the weird room, the consequence of which is always John's immediate refusal. One night, when the narrator's strange behavior is caught by her husband and she once again recommends leaving the room, the long-present disagreement finally breaks out. This time, instead of concealing her true feelings as before, the narrator shouts out her inner thoughts, hoping that the result can be different. However, John's repudiation increases as the narrator's bravery does. He emphatically demands that "for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind" (Gilman, 1998). This direct argument between the couple brings no help to the narrator's benefits--John still disallows his wife to triumph over his dominance. In earlier past John once states that "after the wall-paper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then gate at the head of the stairs, and so on" (Gilman, 1998). Here, the original structure of the house protected by John is a token of the paternalistic realm constructed under John's sole control. In John's mind, the narrator's fancy-induced fear toward the mansion risks changing or even destructing John's reasonable order/Order, thus having to be undermined with no hesitation (Suess, 2003). Out

of John's expectation, rather than taming his wife to comply with his paternalistic order, his warning against her irrational imagination finally precipitates her choice to join "the other side": merging with the wallpaper and becoming one of the women behind its front pattern.

After the heated argument between the couple, the narrator's obsession with the wallpaper leads her to a new discovery: she finds out that the women behind the wallpaper are confined by the bars-like front pattern. "By daylight she is subdued", "and she is all the time trying to climb through" (Gilman, 1998). The narrator's discovery of the restrained women reflects her awakened awareness of her own subjugated state. The result is, at this time the narrator voluntarily chooses to stay away from her husband's presence, totally giving away her time to analyze the wallpaper's changing pattern. Perhaps gaining its power from the narrator's indulgence, the magic of the wallpaper is no longer restrained in the small room, but even extends its influence into the arbor: the creeping women begin to appear in the garden. Gradually, the narrator's life is fully engulfed by the effect of the wallpaper. She is able to not only observe the wallpaper with her eyes, but also smell its odor with her nose and feel its unevenness with her hands. This great change indicates that the wallpaper's influence on her is not limited to her vision, but also extends to her olfactory and tactile senses. Her diary is filled with overuse of exclamations, implying that the narrator's sensitivity finally wins over her reason, stepping into the foreground. Eventually, the wallpaper takes over the narrator's life, and she at last becomes one of the women behind the wallpaper.

4. Gilman's Deconstruction of the Reason/Passion Opposition

The tension between John's diagnostic language and the weird yellow wallpaper in the narrator's mind actually reflects the contradiction between the masculine Reason and the feminine Passion in the battlefield of

the narrator's consciousness. Through her increasing indulgence in the wallpaper and eventual merging with it, the female narrator in this short story finishes countering against the paternalistic Reason by giving herself away to total madness.

When Gilman finished this story in the 19th century, the construction of the Reason/Passion binary opposition had been well established. What were attached to the two concepts were masculinity and femininity respectively. In effect, except for literal interpretations of Biblical passages that helped to build up the connection between the two sets of oppositions, in the 20th century psychologists represented by Sigmund Freud have also put forth scientific evidence to substantiate this connection. In Freud's psychosexual analysis of human's development, the formation of male's subject is set as the norm against which female's development is defined. With this mode of thought, women's nature is deemed as inferior to men's, as "deprived by nature of the impetus for a clear-cut Oedipus complex" (Giligan, 1982). However, just as feminist psychologist Carol Giligan has observed, femininity such as sensitivity and passion need not necessarily be seen as signs of weakness. "Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view" (Giligan, 1982). So rather than a sign of moral weakness, what appears as confusion and disadvantages from the perspective of masculine system can appear to be moral strength. Nevertheless, the reality is, under the influence of paternalistic discourse, the sensibility associated with femininity loses its neutral emotional value, and is reduced to the inferior state which forges a binary opposition with masculine rationality. Both the opposition between Reason/Passion and that between Masculinity/femininity do not gather its strength from natural logic but from the patriarchal

tradition that engendered it.

In this short story, Gilman presents readers with a couple comprising a rational husband and an irrational wife, the combination of which fits well the stereotypical images of a wise man and a mad woman in people's mind. However, rather than curing the mad wife and restoring her reason to satisfy the traditional expectation of eliminating irrationality, Gilman has *the yellow wallpaper* that represents irrationality invade reality, exerting its influence not only on a two-dimensional wall but on a three-dimensional space--the whole mansion. In the same way, Gilman makes the emotional wife embark on a road that totally departs from reason, achieving her resistance with madness.

5. Conclusion

Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* is based on her personal experience. With the resource coming from reality, this work has also exerted great influence on social reality. When the story first came out in 1891, a Boston physician protested that such a story ought not to be written; another physician in Kansas deemed the story as a medical case of incipient insanity (Gilman, 2011). Like the irrational narrator who is subdued by her practical husband, after publication the story itself also received scoff from "reasonable" people, indirectly reflecting the opposition between Reason and Passion in reality. However, just as Gilman herself has stated, the story "was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" (2011). Through presenting the inner world of a 19th century woman who is repeatedly defined, refused, and subjugated by not only her husband but the whole patriarchal society, *The Yellow Wallpaper* puts the superiority of Reason and maleness to Passion and femininity into foreground, questioning the dualistic mode of thought that helps to establish such binary oppositions and the patriarchal social institutions that generate these concepts in their favor. Although at last

the female narrator's triumph seems only provisional agitation against her husband's imperial realm, which fails to sway the deep root of the tradition, yet it is because of numerous resistances that our society is able to keep progressing.

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