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Something Queer about It: Queerness in “The Yellow Wall-paper”

“Still I will proudly declare there is something queer about it.”

--Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wall-Paper”

My engagement with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is informed by a great number of different and diverse methods of reading. First and foremost, to myself as a reader, is my queer angle on the story, informed by my own gay male identity as well as my readings in queer theory. Also, however, one cannot overlook the feminist theorists’ on this story, for the story is often proclaimed to be a founding work of feminism. Further, the historical and biographical contexts the story was written in can be enlightened by mentioning Gilman’s relationship with S. Weir Mitchell. And I can’t help but read the story and think of Foucault’s concept of Panopticism as a method of social control. Lastly, of course, there’s the psychological perspective on the story, although in my readings of psychology, particularly the psychological knowledge surrounding both women and queers, I find the discipline incredibly tainted with patriarchy and heterosexism.

At this point, I'd like to define a few terms somewhat precisely, at least as I intend to use them in the context of this paper. In this paper, I use the term "queer" for two reasons: one of which is in the spirit of reclaiming a word that has traditionally been used to verbally abuse non-heterosexual people for decades, and secondly because in the heterosexual mindset there are no differences between bisexuals, gay men, lesbians, transgendered and transsexual people. Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason write: "We have chosen to use 'queer' because it best characterizes our own personal beliefs, and it potentially leaves room for all people who are attracted to others of the same sex or whose bodies or sexual desires do not fit dominant standards of gender and/or sexuality" (5). One of the first questions that must be answered, of course, is why is it important to look at literature from a queer perspective? Is a reader, such as myself, always bound by his or her sexual identity when reading a text? Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin answers that in fact, at least in the case of homosexual males, sexual identity is capable of informing us about literature: "the homosexual reader, whether or not he denies psychologically and/or socially his identity-whether chosen or assigned-must read in a way, though not necessarily characteristic of his sexuality, that nevertheless incorporates it even if he is not conscious of it" (82). He argues that psychologists as early as Freud have determined the importance of a person's sexual identity in defining a person's psychological make-up and then points out that it is impossible for a reader to divorce their sexuality from a reading of any text, that a reader brings to a text the entirety of his experiences and identity and therefore, he brings his sexual identity to the reading of a text also. I use the male pronoun at this point in this paper because the author of the article examined

the homosexual male reader, which is separate from either the heterosexual identity and also separate from a lesbian identity because “the homosexual male, in spite of his ‘difference’ is still a biological man, and very importantly, he is a socially constructed man, with all that this implies for phallogentrism and patriarchy” (73).

Therefore, it can be seen, a reader can neither divorce their sexual identity nor their gender identity from a reading of a text; in fact, because these factors play a major role in a reader’s psychological make-up, they also play a major role in a reader’s interpretation of any particular text. Flannigan-Saint-Aubin argues that studying the homosexual reader is much more interesting than studying the homosexual writer because studying homosexual writers limits the field of gay and lesbian studies to a smaller set of authors, while studying the interplay of reader/author and their various sexual identities provides much more that is worthy of study.

Another important reason to examine literature from a queer perspective, by which most critics mean lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered, is because these points of view have been traditionally ignored by the academy in general, and unless sexual identity and gender identity are examined from every point of view, there will always remain pieces of a text that are misunderstood. For the longest time in the Western intellectual tradition, homosexuality was the subject of examination by heterosexual males, such as the turn of the century sexologists. With greater acceptance, bisexuals, lesbians, gay men, and transgendered people are taking a close look at both themselves and at the straight society they were brought up in, examining from the outside in, as it were, rather than being examined from the inside out. Queer writers and authors

are being rediscovered by queer readers and in new ways. Gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transgendered readers are examining how their own sexuality and identity influences the texts they read, and what contexts they give to sexual expression within texts. For the longest time, non-heterosexual identities were not brought up in the classroom in any positive light. If homosexuality was mentioned in connection to an author, it was connected to something sordid. Usually, however, an author's sexual identity was not brought up in class, and expressions of same-sex love and attraction within a writing would go ignored if possible, or labeled as a form of platonic or universal love if it were not possible to ignore the implications. William Tierney notes that "far too often queers are relegated to commentaries within parentheses, if at all, so that we are doubly silenced—by the mainstream and by those out of the mainstream who would rather not have to consider the messy topic of queer lives" (74). Queer theory gives critics the tools by which they can seriously examine works by these authors in a way that is much more meaningful than the traditional views that any same-sex love expressed in literature, especially literature within the canon of accepted texts, must be a fraternal feeling of good will rather than any form of homosexual attraction.

So, what is queer about Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper?" And how would one queer the text? Jonathon Crewe suggests that "following Sedgwick, then, queering *The Yellow Wallpaper* or any other text would mean more than identifying a definitively homoerotic subtext or mode of repressed desire in it" (279). But I shall go ahead and identify some of the homoerotic subtext in this text, such as the narrator's relationship with the woman in the wall-paper. One

might use Adrienne Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality in looking at portions of this story, and further her notion that all women are essentially lesbian, essentially woman-centered. "And it is like a woman stopping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder— I begin to think— I wish John would take me away from here!" (Gilman 293). Probably the standard reading of the line, "I don't like it a bit," is that the narrator dislikes the woman behind the pattern creeping. However, another interpretation, a queer one, of the line could be that she doesn't "like it a bit," but, Crewe suggests, that she likes "it far too much" (280). This is what frightens the narrator, this realization of the homoerotic, and she wishes her husband would take her away from this temptation. Another homoerotic element in the story is when, on her last night in the room, "Jennie wanted to sleep with me— the sly thing!" (Gilman 298). Of course, once again, a heterosexual reading of this line would not imply any homoeroticism in the situation. However, the narrator's appending of "the sly thing" indicates to me, as a queer reader, that the narrator believed there to be more than simply Jennie's sleeping in the same room to comfort her. The narrator, once again, refuses to accept the homoerotic temptation and tells Jennie "I should undoubtedly rest better for a night all alone" (Gilman 298), although at this point, we as readers know that the narrator is anything but alone. "That was clever, for 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" (Gilman 298). Then the pair of them shake and pull at the wallpaper, alternating who's doing the shaking and who's doing the pulling, essentially becoming same-sex partners in a very physical act of destruction which has some

undeniable homoerotic elements to it. Crewe writes that “every denial or ‘clever’ ruse on the part of the narrator thus backfires, the implications betraying themselves in an ‘interior’ scenario of sexual bondage and same-sex object-choice” (281).

The Foucauldian aspects of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper” are fascinating, particularly if one applies Foucault’s concept of Panopticism (195-228). In fact, this story could be held up as an almost perfect example of what Foucault was getting at in his theories about social control, particularly in this case involving how patriarchy manifests and makes women complicit in their own oppression. John S. Bak writes that:

Gilman’s narrator, once placed in a similar dubious environment, supports Foucault’s contention that the individual is more ill-served by the surveillance of the Panopticon than by the unhealthy or unappealing environment of the prison or mental ward he or she would have typically encountered. (n. pag.)

The Panopticon, as designed by Jeremy Bentham, was intended to be a humane alternative to the dank and dirty dungeon-like prisons of the time. It involved a wheel-like structure, where the cells of the prison were like spokes coming out from a central tower, which contained the prison wardens. This central tower could observe, at any given time, any particular cell, but none in these cells were aware they were being observed at any given time. The idea was that there would be less work for wardens to do because the prisoners would regulate their own behaviors, fearful that they might be being watched. This concept got extended to mental wards, to schools and to hospitals as well. In more postmodern times, one can see examples of it in hidden cameras or

other surveillance monitors in stores and workplaces, in attempts to regulate behavior. However, Foucault indicates that it doesn't necessarily regulate behavior and create a more well-behaved community, but that instead it possibly causes problems for the individuals in the cells.

While there is much debate in the criticism about the nature of the place John has taken the narrator to, there are some strong indicators that it is a sanitarium of one sort or another. "It was a nursery first and then a playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls" (Gilman 291). Furthermore, we find out that the narrator believes the bed to be nailed down to the floor. Eventually, the narrator, captive in the room, begins to see the shadowy figure of a woman inside the wall-paper watching her, much like the shadowy surveillance of the central tower of the Panopticon, and it is this which drives her to distraction rather than the outer pattern of the bars, not unlike the rings on the walls or the bed that is nailed down, a further indicator of the narrator's imprisonment. Bak suggests that "she can deal with the outer-pattern . . . because, like the external restraints that confine her in the mansion, it only represents imprisonment of the body and not of the mind" (n. pag.). The woman inside the wallpaper, the narrator believes, is occasionally outside walking in the garden, which indicates that the apparition is free, unlike the narrator, even though she shakes the bars. She tears at the wallpaper in order to remove the surveillance, but some of it always remains, in fact, covering her in pieces of itself. Eventually, she is reduced to creeping along the walls, at this point completely mad. What does this imply, however, for the power of patriarchy? After all, John, the representative of patriarchy who has subjected her to this treatment, faints

dead away in her path upon seeing her in this condition. Has the narrator reached a kind of vision unable to be reached without this panoptic surveillance? Or is she simply mad? Does this, as Foucault would suggest, destroy the narrator or does it free her?

Feminists indicate that this story is one of a woman who breaks away from the traditional bonds of patriarchy, including patriarchal language structures. The story is told as a series of journal entries, written by the narrator, as she slowly becomes more and more insane, or at least, that would be the patriarchal reading of the story. A feminist reading of the story shows how what is perceived as a descent is actually a woman coming into her own voice, a woman who learns to write from her own body rather than from men's language, and this is what truly frightens John in the end of the story, causing him to faint dead away. In the beginning of the story, the narrator accepts her husband's diagnosis of her condition as mental illness. Lisa Kasmer notes that "in order for the narrator to accept her husband's ideas concerning her health, she cannot merely incorporate the content of her husband's language. She must also take on the form of his discourse" (5).

His language, however, cannot possibly represent her, for excludes her existence altogether. He denies her writing, he denies her speaking with other people besides those he's carefully selected. Kasmer states that "the hierarchical system within his language, created by a male-dominated society and placed on the founding principle of man necessarily excludes woman and makes rigid distinctions between what is acceptable and what is not" (6). In the beginning, the narrator does take on the form of his discourse and is trapped by it, as Kasmer

notes: “Navigating her thoughts through John’s phallogentric discourse is debilitating, making her writing the ‘dead paper’ she refers to it as” (7). Eventually, however, she begins to break out of his discourse and into her own, what Helene Cixous terms the “*écriture feminine*,” a mode of “writing that inscribes femininity by surpassing patriarchal representations of woman” (Kasmer 8). Of course, we as readers brought up in a phallogentric, patriarchal world, using its discourses are going to find this “*écriture feminine*” of the narrator’s to be strange, weird, queer, frightening, bizarre.

How does this all queer “The Yellow Wallpaper?” Naturally, the homoerotic elements of the story have been pointed out, and these are almost by their nature to be considered queer. But Panopticism? Feminism? Perhaps its my queer mind which ties all of these disparate ideas together. However, I might note that Michel Foucault was queer himself; not just homosexual, but heavily into sado-masochism and what is referred to as leathersex in the gay community. I find that his identity as a queer leatherman informed his ideas relating to power, and in particular panopticism. Homophobia and heterosexism are two other forms of panopticism that oftentimes, people cannot see their way out of. But once they do see the tower and the cells, oftentimes they realize their position in it and can act. That leaves the question of how does the feminist perspective relate to queerness? First of all, it’s particularly important to look at the language structures and the male-dominated discourses and how they relate to women. Just as importantly, however, it is imperative that we look at straight-dominated discourses and how it relates to gay, bisexual, transgendered and lesbian persons.

Secondly, queer theory adopts quite a bit of the feminist perspective, for much of it is useful in looking at the existence of queer people in our society. In this particular text, “The Yellow Wall-paper,” the diagnoses of perceived women’s mental illnesses coincided often with diagnoses of inversion, which was oftentimes used to describe homosexuality, transgendered experience, or transvestitism. And like the patriarchal diagnoses of hysteria, heterosexist diagnoses of inversion were often misinformed because the doctors had no direct experience themselves. Equally, they simply codified misogyny and homophobia into scientific discourse.

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