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Narrative Studies

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Women: Controlled or Crazy?

As a young woman in today's world, it can be hard to not feel like a caged animal. Every day we are forced information in which we are told to change our appearance to a certain way, what ideas are acceptable versus not, and how to act. We are pressured to conformity, yet when we break free of the spell of society, we are deemed crazy. It is hard not to feel cornered, with no idea of how to live freely. Yet, these same feelings were exposed through two famous writings. Even though "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and "Eight Bites" by Carmen Maria Machado are written many years apart and are found within two very different cultures, the same feelings of being controlled and pressured to conformity are present in the narrative. These two stories bring to life the pressures and battles woman have fought through many decades and environments concerning their body and mental health.

Throughout the late 1890's women were often put away to fight mental illnesses which they endured after childbirth. The women would be depressed, anxious, delusional, or confused and would thus be hidden away until they were able to overcome their ailment. "Gilman, who recovered from her own nervous condition this way, explains that she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" to "carry out the ideal" of her narrow escape: "not to drive people crazy, but

to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked” (Roethle). During this time period, husbands or close family would have to care for and nourish the poor woman back to normal health. In today’s standards, this ailment would be considered postpartum depression.

“Postpartum depression may be mistaken for baby blues at first — but the signs and symptoms are more intense and last longer and may eventually interfere with your ability to care for your baby and handle other daily tasks” (“Postpartum depression”). However, it may be thought that the main character had postpartum psychosis, which includes symptoms of: “Confusion / disorientation, Hallucinations and delusions, sleep disturbances paranoia, attempts to harm yourself or your baby” (“Postpartum depression”). These symptoms can become known after childbirth because of physical changes occurring within the body: “After childbirth, a dramatic drop in hormones (estrogen and progesterone) in your body may contribute to postpartum depression. Other hormones produced by your thyroid gland also may drop sharply — which can leave you feeling tired, sluggish and depressed” (“Postpartum depression”). Because of the limited knowledge we used to have about medicine in the early 1980’s, there was limited knowledge on how to help the women. “The rest cure was a strictly enforced regime of six to eight weeks of bed rest and isolation, without any creative or intellectual activity or stimulation. It was often accompanied by massage and electrotherapy, as well as a fatty diet, rich in milk and meat...Weir saw the rest cure as particularly suited to treating women, partly because he thought women tolerated a lack of stimulation and inactivity better than men. He also saw it as a corrective for women who were overly active, socially and physically” (FROM NERVES TO NEUROSES”)

“The Yellow Wallpaper” was a story which brought to life how unjustly women were treated in these positions. Gilman was able to show how these practices were wrong and how women were feeling in their position. “The Yellow Wallpaper” was able to bring to light a descriptive idea of what happened when the woman was treated for postpartum depression. Some women were hidden away to their rooms, where they would spend a majority of their time. They were in some cases deemed not even fit to leave the house: “I take phosphates – whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to “work” until I am well again... He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction” (Gilman 2-3). As we read within the story as well, the main character was granted very little sources to cure her boredom, she was not even allowed to have paper: “There comes John, I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word” (Gilman 4). From the description of the room around the woman, we know that this was not a spacious or cozy space for her to heal, but rather there was very little furniture or luxuries. This was because the husband wanted to keep the wife safe from harming herself in anyway “I lie here on this great immovable bed – it is nailed down...” (Gilman 7). With these descriptions in the book, we are able to understand that this truly was not a place for healing but was rather almost like a cage in which she was trapped. In the narrative, we slowly are able to watch as the unnamed woman starts to see images within “The Yellow Wallpaper”, images she describes to come to life: “And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern...” (Gilman 9). These accounts show the affect this treatment was having not only upon her physical health, but her mental health as well.

Although our treatments for postpartum depression are much safer and kinder towards modern day women, there are new struggles in which woman face daily. Woman collectively as a whole are able to relate to the idea that they feel pressure since a child to conform to a certain standard or idea that has been widely accepted throughout society. This idea was heavily shown in “The Yellow Wallpaper”: Though not crazy to begin with, the narrator is driven crazy by gender constraint and patriarchal medical/social structures. This makes the haunting not just a genre trope but a stand-in for the narrator’s deepening knowledge of her (and all women’s) confinement by male texts and institutions” (Roethle). Whether it is about your appearance, how much you weigh, what you wear, or how you laugh, woman are consistently reprimanded for even the slightest of things. These pressures are not a new issue, for this overall problem has been shown through many decades and cultures. For modern day woman, we can see how the ideas concerning weight, body proportions, complexion, and much more have been magnified and contorted to an unrealistic standard. For example, the unhealthy “trend” of having a thigh gap became very popular in December 2012. This ideal (compromised of making sure your thighs do not touch when you are standing straight) was popularized almost as a trend, in which young girls tried to be “beautiful” to social media standards. As a whole, this mindset and dangerous thinking has affected so many young woman and children as they grow. Statistics show that “9% of the U.S. population, or 28.8 million Americans, will have an eating disorder in their lifetime” (“Eating Disorder Statistics”).

This is why “Eight Bites” is such an accepted and understood story. We can see within the narrative how our main character is shaped by unrealistic standards brought from her mother and sisters: “She [Her mother] always said eight bites are all you need to get the sense

of what you are eating. Even though she never counted out loud...after one she would set her fork down, even if there was food left on her plate... Eight bites let her compliment the hostess. Eight bites lined her stomach like insulation rolled into the walls of houses" (Machado 152). Even within the story, we follow along as the narrator starts to believe that she will be happier if she changes her body: "" I feel so good," they all said. Whenever I talked to them, that was what always came out of their mouths, or really, it was a mouth, a single mouth that once ate and now just says, "I feel really, really good."" (Machado 151).

As we follow our main character through her surgery and recovery, we are introduced to a certain "character" or in a sense monster: "The ghost, with its soft body and interrogating vision, is the fat that the narrator has gotten rid of. It haunts her, just as the residue of her self-hatred and the disappointing effects of her surgery haunt her. And it reproaches her for not having found a way to love herself" (Jones). In relation to the story, it seems as if every young woman is able to relate or have their own "skin monster": "Life is a gift, and life includes our mortal bodies, with their capacity for pleasure. The narrator and countless women eschew this capacity, denying aspects of their vitality, aspects of their being. By rejecting herself and her birthright, the narrator has rejected love, the healthy love of self-incarnated by the ghost" (Jones). It can often appear to the reader that this monster can represent the resentment or hate against one's natural body. The skin almost represents the weight and skin that the main character shed in her surgery. With this character, along with the influence of her sisters and mothers, there is an unrealistic standards and unhealthy thinking that gravitates towards the main character. From this, stems the degrading mindset our main character has towards food. In the story, we are told how the woman's mother would only limit herself to eight bites, hence

the title of this story. As the woman remembers this unhealthy habit, which comes to haunt her in her adulthood: "At home, I cook a very small chicken breast and cut it into white cubes. I couldn't the bites and when I reach eight I throw the rest of the food in the garbage. I stand over the can for a long while, breathing in the salt-and-pepper smell of chicken mixed in with coffee grounds and something older and closer to decay. I spray window cleaner into the garbage can so the food cannot be retrieved" (Machado 161). Thus, we can see the unhealthy relationship and attitude the author has towards food and eating.

As we navigate through the emotional and psychological harm found in the character's thinking, we are introduced to a type of "devil's advocate", the woman's daughter Cal. Throughout the brief interaction with her daughter, we are able to see the disbelief on the daughter's part towards her mother's actions and thinking: "" ...occur to you that you're never going to be able to eat like a normal human being... Mom, I just don't understand why you can't be happy with yourself..." (Machado 158). Cal pleads and pleads with her mother that her natural body is acceptable and almost becomes angry that she wishes to change. Her mother is her role model, she is a reflection of her mother as well, so how could her mother abhor something that her daughter shows as well? Our main character does not realize the way this hurts Cal, for she sees it as: "Why didn't Cal understand? Her body was imperfect, but it was also fresh, pliable. She could sidestep my mistakes. She could have the release of a new start. (Machado 158). In this narrative, I understand it as the daughter is the healthy mindset towards one's body and eating habits. It feels as if the daughter is the force of reason which many women and men can battle when viewing their bodies.

The woman is finally “captured” by the skin monster at the end of her life. We are shown how the woman has different feelings towards this entity than before: “” I’m sorry,” I will whisper into her as she walks me to the front door. “I’m sorry,” I will repeat. “I didn’t know.”” (Machado 168). The woman has come to see in her long life that she feels remorse for abhorring against her body and actually apologizes to the entity: “I will die the day I turn seventy-nine...I will look where her eyes would be. I will open my mouth to ask but then realize the question has answered itself: by loving me when I did not love her, by being abandoned by me, she has become immortal” (Machado 167). This moment is the time when the woman has come to the realization of how precious her body truly is. She apologizes to the monster as an apology to herself for all of the hardship and trauma she placed her body through. This is such a powerful and emotional scene as this can represent for so many women the time when one can truly accept and love the body, they are in. The idea of acceptance and love for your skin can be such a hard topic and idea to come to terms with. A woman’s acceptance towards her body can be such a monumental moment and I believe that this story is able to show the importance and tenderness within this occasion.

When looking at “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “Eight Bites”, it can feel like both stories are so different in culture, time, subject, genre, etc. These stories however may be closer in relation than one may first see. Both authors within these stories brilliantly were able to paint pictures of the physical and psychological challenges women have faced throughout time. Although the challenges our main characters faced in the narratives, women in general are able to relate to the challenges and ideals which society as a whole place upon us. In a sad sense, we are able to read these stories to understand what can happen to us when we become

overwhelmed within these psychological and physical battles. Within "The Yellow Wallpaper" we the reader are given a very vague sense of what becomes of the main character: "I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does not get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her... But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope- you don't get me out in the road there! "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jennie. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" (Gilman 18). There is much speculation and questioning towards the meaning of the fateful ending in "The Yellow Wallpaper". Some believe that the woman has destroyed her room and had gone mad. Others believe that the text hints at the idea that the woman committed suicide. The text alludes to the fateful ending for our main character through the description of the women in the wallpaper: "Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision" (Gilman 17). Within the end of the story, we can see how the woman's exile and poor treatment caused great mental and physical harm. Gilman really hits home that this was not the right way to treat woman and is able to effectively urge to find a better remedy to the situation. In a sense, the same fateful ending occurs within "Eight Bites" as well. Unlike the character in "The Yellow Wallpaper" the mother is able to live a long life after her surgery. We the reader are shown the last moments within her life when the skin monster appears to her on her death bed and holds her lovingly. In this scene we can see how the woman apologizes greatly to her past self. She is finally able to see what she had done and in a sense is fully able to come to peace with organic self. This incident is not as shocking and

gruesome as the ending of "The Yellow Wallpaper", yet there is still a resolution in which the character is able to finally be relieved of all the pain and suffering she was living.

As a reader, very different emotions and thoughts can be felt after reading these two stories: anger, sadness, confusion, hope, doubt, etc. Many different people may perceive each meaning and story differently, but one common theme is resilient in both stories, that woman have been pressured and mistreated through history, and continue to into the present day. One story teaches of societies misconceptions on how women should be treated: "As Gilman writes, the point of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not to drive people crazy but to save them from being driven crazy (Roethle). The other shows the pressures and unfair goals which society pressures women to meet. It is so important for woman to see these influences from society are unrealistic, harmful, and that one is to break free from the chains of these misconceptions.

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