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Silence, Violence, or Insanity: Rejections of True Womanhood

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Abstract

The Victorian Era (1820-1914) was a period of change and innovation as industry and technology rose exponentially. One of the more pervasive ideologies that arose during this era was the expectation of white, upper and middle-class women to follow the values of “True Womanhood.” This ideal expected women to be domestically dutiful, pious, submissive, and considered them angels of the home. This role came with its costs—women were barred from working or being involved economically in society at all. They were expected to remain solely in the home, and they must act as the moral authority to their male counterparts. As they were expected to live with very little social or intellectual stimulation, bourgeoisie women turned to domestic hobbies such as reading.

Two stories in particular focused on women and featured subversions of these gender roles that suppressed nineteenth century women. The first is a short story; “The Yellow Wallpaper” written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The second is a play titled *Hedda Gabler*, written by Henrik Ibsen. These two works feature female protagonists who make intentional choices to subvert the gender roles of True Womanhood. Each of these pieces gained support from the women who engaged with them, and began the first steps towards the formation of the feminist political movement.

The purpose of this research is to identify the ways that the characters in these two stories pushed back against True Womanhood, and the impact that reading and viewing characters like Jane (the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper”) and Hedda Gabler had on bourgeois women. I argue that these characters are explicit subversions of True Womanhood, and their characterizations provided a sense of solidarity within nineteenth century women. Through the representation of women who struggled against domesticity, women were able to identify with both the characters and each other, thus contributing to the evolution of the New Woman in the twentieth century.

Nineteenth-century Victorian society witnessed a rise in innovation and technology, a rapid growth in industrialization, and an increased emphasis on women's domestic dutifulness. Middle and upper-class white women were considered rulers of the domestic sphere, where they were expected to care for the house and the family.¹ These women were morally superior—perfectly suited for caring for the home, her children, and her husband. The principles emphasized in women's magazines,² religious literature, and social circles, came to be known as “True Womanhood.” Becoming a wife and a mother was deemed women's divine calling, one that embodied nobility and virtue. Anybody who dared push back against True Womanhood was considered a threat to the very fabric of society itself. Yet, even with the risk of social isolation and ridicule, many authors did so anyway, refusing to bend to the patriarchal ideals of industrialized society.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”³ artfully represents the injustices women were facing as they endured early mental health treatments for conditions like insomnia, anxiety, or, in this case, postpartum psychosis. The story is told through the narrator's journaling, against the wishes of her caretakers, John (her husband), and his sister, Jennie. She rejects the notion that her writing and imagination are the reasons for her suffering, as John suggests. The narrator remains unnamed until the very end of the story, the moment where she restores her independence through insanity. Similarly, *Hedda Gabler*, a play written by Henrik Ibsen in 1890—two years prior to “The Yellow Wallpaper”—features the morally gray protagonist, Hedda. Hedda slings pistols, lies to further her agenda, and views others—especially men—as intellectually below her. Hedda rejects femininity through her conversations with other characters, always attempting to maintain control by using her language. But no matter how intelligent Hedda is, she still deeply fears scandal, and wants to maintain her position as a high society woman. At the end of the play, Hedda chooses to silence herself through suicide, thus liberating her from male oppression, while keeping her fate in her own hands. By looking at these two texts in conversation with one another, we can understand how these characters impacted the women who read and watched them, creating space for them to question the values of True Womanhood. Representations like these of womanhood in literature contributed to the transformation of the “True Woman” into the “New Woman” at the turn of the twentieth century.

In “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” Barbara Welter explores the pervasive nature of True Womanhood ideals. The four attributes that represented the True Woman were piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—traits that women's magazines held above all else, for “without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power” (Welter 152). These values gained significant popularity in upper and middle-class white communities, expecting upper-class women “to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand” (Welter 152). Designed to keep women in the

¹ Judith Rowbotham explains that “while a man needed a career to justify and bolster his masculinity, being a woman was a ‘career’ in itself.” (*Good Girls Make Good Wives*)

² Examples of popular women's magazines during the Victorian era: *The Lady's Own Paper*, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, *The Young Ladies Journal*, and *Godey's Lady's Book*.

³ Originally published as a short story in *New England Magazine*, January 1892. Later published as a stand-alone book in 1999.

home, and submissive to their husbands, these ideals forced women into domestic servitude. Looking at each of the four cardinal values, and how they impacted the women who followed them can shed light on how ingrained True Womanhood was in Western bourgeoisie society. The source of her moral superiority and the beacon of her divinity in the home was women's devotion to God, also known as her piety.

The virtue of piety was considered to be women's greatest strength, since according to religious literature, women were given a unique susceptibility to religion. Christianity placed the family and home at the center of its structure, and created a natural hierarchy of God, husband, wife.⁴ Religion made for convenient social control for women, as Judith Rowbotham points out, "it was easy to interpret Christianity in emotional terms, and to suggest that religion demanded of them sacrifices to self" (57). Self-sacrifice was a particularly feminine aspect of religious virtuosity, and men found it to be an attractive trait in potential wives.⁵ Through piety, women could ensure "the world would be reclaimed by God through her suffering" (Welter 152). In order for the True Woman to embody piety, she must be devoted to guiding "erring men back to Christ," and remember that "it is better to pray than think" (Welter 152). Though piety was expected of men as well, it was women's holy responsibility to keep them on the path of Christianity. Though it was acceptable for men to have their faith shaken, women were socially ostracized and were seen as having given up their divine calling.⁶ Rowbotham clarifies that "the intellectual discipline of theology" was considered a man's position. Conversely, "the emotional reaction of simple piety" was the province of the feminine (57). Because of this division in religious duty, women were unable to hold leadership or scholarly positions within the church. This type of religious hypocrisy kept women in servitude to their husbands. Piety closely relates to the value of purity, since it is through devotion to God that women were compelled to remain pure before marriage.

Purity refers to the practice of abstaining from sex until marriage, and was particularly expected of women. If a woman was unmarried and not a virgin, she was considered a fallen woman. Gretchen Braun's exploration of the fallen woman explains that Victorian culture would "equate female sexual fall with an irretrievable loss of both virtue and agency" (343). In popular novels and short stories, loss of purity would bring madness, death, social isolation, and perhaps worst of all, scandal.⁷ In bourgeois Victorian society, scandal was the fear of any upstanding woman, and there was no worse scandal to be embroiled with than becoming a fallen woman. The fallen woman had no shame, no modesty, and her very presence in society was seen as a social infection. The fallen woman can try to save her soul in the eyes of God, but "the socially respected, economically secure position of wife and (legitimate) mother is forever closed off to her" (Braun 352). Hand in hand with piety, purity too expects women to be the moral guides of men. In an excerpt from *The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated*, Branagan implores women to be stronger than men, and not allow their purity to be taken. He states that "if you do, you will be left in silent sadness to bewail

⁴ For example, see KJV Colossians 3:18-3:23

⁵ Rowbotham cites Victorian novel *The New Sister* by Evelyn Everett Green as showcasing self-sacrifice as a trait that men found desirable; viewing the female characters with "something very like adoration, in the thought of her self-sacrificing nature." (*The New Sister*)

⁶ For examples, see *Good Girls Make Good Wives* pp. 83-85

⁷ Examples of novels that focus on the fallen woman include *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) by Thomas Hardy, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and *Ruth* (1853) by Elizabeth Gaskell.

your credulity, imbecility, duplicity, and premature prostitution" (Welter 155). Men are uncontrollable when it comes to their sexual desire, but if a woman could hold off the advances of a man (advances that are often in the category of assault) then she has demonstrated her level of strength and purity over him. As Braun explains, "a woman who lost her virginity through forcible rape would garner sympathy, but would nonetheless be regarded as "fallen": fundamentally altered in spiritual character as well as bodily state" (353). However, the refusal of male desire goes directly against the value of submissiveness. This placed women in a precarious moral dilemma, as she "must preserve her virtue until marriage and marriage was necessary for her happiness. Yet marriage was, literally, an end to innocence" (Welter 158). Balancing between being submissive and pure was an act the True Woman knew all too well.

Submissiveness was a value held strictly over women, since "men were the movers, the doers, the actors" (Welter 159). Men were expected to engage in the economic sphere—making the money and creating social bonds out in the world. Because the men worked so hard, the True Woman was expected not to feel or act for herself, and should feel weak and timid; in need of a protector. Any work performed by women was to be unseen and unheard, and she should "work only for pure affection, without thought of money or ambition" (Welter 160). The True Woman was devoted to her husband and bolstering *his* life and career, without a thought for her own desires. The submissiveness that was expected of them made middle and upper-class women afraid of the world, which kept them getting married quickly, and then safely secluded in the home.⁸ Since many of these women were likely to live with their parents until marriage, they often had very little engagement with a world outside of the Victorian family structure. Constant isolation and very little social stimulation led to a generation of women afraid of the world around them. A True Woman should feel lucky that she is loved and protected by a man, and to expect anything more than that would be ungrateful (Welter 162). Therefore, women were encouraged to participate in morally uplifting tasks that made the home a more pleasant place. At home, the True Woman would perform her domestic tasks with cheerfulness and understanding, and it was from the home that woman brings man back to God. These expectations made sure "brothers, husbands and sons would not go elsewhere in search of a good time" (Welter 163). Becoming a wife was seen as a woman's highest calling, and a way to raise her value in society. Once she was in total submission to her husband, it was time for women to become mothers—the pinnacle of the domestic sphere.

Feminine domesticity in the Victorian era was popularized by the era's namesake herself; Queen Victoria (1837-1901). Victoria was a mother to nine children, and although personal records indicate that she felt less-than-thrilled by the concept of motherhood,⁹ she recognized that her image relied on her holding up the picture of domesticity. She popularized the white wedding dress—with its implications of purity and girlhood—and her vows to King Albert focused on her role as a submissive wife and caring mother.¹⁰ Victoria's popularity reached beyond the borders of England, and her

⁸ See *Victorian Women* by Joan Perkin pp. 51-56

⁹ In a letter from Queen Victoria to Marie of Würtemberg after Victoria has discovered she is pregnant (June 4, 1840): "I have always hated the idea and I prayed God night and day to be left free...I cannot understand how any one can wish for such a thing" (Charlot, *Victoria: The Young Queen*).

¹⁰ Monica Charlot, *Victoria: The Young Queen* pp. 188-208, pp. 275-276

role as the domestic, dutiful wife became popular all over the Western world. If the Queen herself could find joy in the domestic sphere after marriage, surely bourgeois women could as well. In order to combat any dissent towards domestic life, women were encouraged to engage in household tasks and hobbies. Joan Perkin's *Victorian Women* explains that a middle-class woman would spend her time with "needlework and knitting" or other needlework activities like sewing and crochet (102). In addition, the Victorian woman would "spend several hours a week in regular letter-writing," since these letters to friends and family were often "special confidences about their marital relations" (Perkin 102). She may sketch or draw, or learn an instrument—classic drawing room activities. These hobbies were believed to keep women focused and able to more readily engage with their housework tasks.

Even with their permitted sources of entertainment, many women found the day-to-day toil of domesticity to be rather boring.¹¹ Of all of the domestic hobbies women picked up at this time, reading was one of the most popular. However, many promoters of True Womanhood tended to find reading problematic—especially with the rise of novels written by women. The True Woman "should avoid them, since they interfered with 'serious piety'" (Welter 165). As readership in women rose, social stigma around reading "exciting and dangerous books" (Welter 166) too began to rise, worried that educated women would disrupt the balance of society with the ideas gained from them. The most sensational of these novels portrayed marriage as a cage, and families full of hatred and contempt (Perkin 104). In one review of *Society in America* by Harriet Martineau, the reviewer argues that "such reading will unsettle them [women] for their true station and pursuits, and they will throw the world back again into confusion" (Welter 166). The message was clear—revolting against True Womanhood was a direct attack against the family and marital structure that high Victorian society was built on. Much of the fear around women readers grew from the growing popularity of novels featuring the "New Woman," which were often written by women, for women, and featured women who organized women-driven movements and questioned the necessity of marriage.¹² Despite the controversy, women readers pushed forward, continuing to read and publish works that featured female protagonists breaking out of their expected role. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one such writer, her lived experiences compelling her to write "The Yellow Wallpaper."

In line with the typical feelings towards female-centered stories, reviewers—especially men—were appalled by Gilman's representation of the entrapment through domestic duties women were bound to.¹³ However, Charlotte Perkins Gilman explains the necessity of her controversial work. She'd received one question more than any other from readers, and that's *why* she would write such a dark, visceral representation of womanhood. She explains her purpose in a follow-up piece titled "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper'." Explaining that she wrote the story "to save people from being driven crazy," (524) as her experience with this devastating and inhumane rest-cure had nearly cost her own sanity, and had done so to countless other women. Dozens of literary critiques, research papers, and feminist study has been

¹¹ See Judith Rowbotham, *Good Girls Make Good Wives* pp. 221-230.

¹² A.R. Cunningham, "The New Woman Fiction of the 1890's" pp. 178-181

¹³ See National Endowment for the Arts, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman Did More Than Write One Classic Short Story," an article by Alyson Foster.

devoted to the impact of “The Yellow Wallpaper” on feminine psychology and medicine. However, Gilman’s work does more than just focus on the medical misogyny that women continue to experience—it showcased a woman who chose her own path. The narrator chose insanity as a refuge to protect herself from the pervasive and suffocating ideals of True Womanhood. Through her narrator, Gilman illuminates the desire for a life with purpose outside of domestic duty.

In one of the final lines of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the hitherto unnamed narrator declares, “‘I’ve got out at last,’ said I, ‘in spite of you and Jane! And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!’” (Gilman 656). Some have argued that this use of the name Jane is simply a typo, a missed mistake on the part of Gilman that shouldn’t be looked into further. After all, John’s sister—the caretaker of the house—is named Jennie, so the spelling isn’t too far off from this mysterious Jane. However, close reading reveals that Jane is the narrator, and it is purposeful on Gilman’s part that her name isn’t stated throughout the majority of the story. The narrator is torn between two conflicting halves of herself; Mrs. John, the wife, mother, and patient who wants to fulfill her gendered role; and Jane, the creative, questioning, verbose writer—the woman trapped in the yellow wallpaper. In this final moment, Jane reunites these two halves of herself in a rare show of agency, deciding that insanity by choice is better than being driven to it through the rest-cure. But how did the narrator reach this point of no return, and what has caused her suffering in the first place?

Contemporary readers of “The Yellow Wallpaper” have speculated that the “nervous depression” the narrator is experiencing is likely postpartum depression that eventually becomes psychosis,¹⁴ a condition that we are very familiar with now, but one that was still largely a mystery in the 1880’s. True Womanhood left no room for something like postpartum psychosis or depression, since after all, becoming a mother should be the peak of a woman’s life at this time, as she is able to fulfill her domestic role. The narrator herself even speaks to this, as she explains how she “meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already” (Gilman 649). Her inability to create a comfortable, inviting home for her husband violates the expectations of being the cheerful partner demanded by True Womanhood which causes her to feel like a burden. She also briefly touches on her feelings around her baby, who readers are never introduced to; “it is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous” (Gilman 649). Gilman italicized the word “cannot,” emphasizing Jane’s anxiety and stress around even the thought of being with her baby. Desperate to feel better again, she goes to her husband, John, who calls in the help of Dr. Mitchell and his rest-cure.

Silas Weir Mitchell was the physician who pioneered the “rest-cure,” a treatment for patients who came to him with a condition known as neurasthenia, which was similar to what we now know as nervous breakdowns. This breakthrough cure was originally designed for women in rural areas who lacked stimulation in their day to day lives. The regimen was simple, six to eight weeks of bed rest, a high-fat diet, massage and electroshock therapy, and as little intellectual or creative stimulation as possible. Mitchell

¹⁴ According to the National Health Service, symptoms of PPD/PPS include: hallucinations, confusion, delusions, low mood, and mania. These symptoms are showcased at varying degrees of severity throughout “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

was already a well-respected doctor in his field, and his notes acclaim the rest-cure as a success.¹⁵ The narrator makes it clear that this is the treatment she is receiving, even mentioning Mitchell by name— “John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall!” (Gilman 650). She mentions frequently how John doesn't want her to write at all, and that she is “absolutely forbidden to “work” until I am well again” (Gilman 648). She pushes back against their conclusions, revealing to readers that “personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good” (Gilman 648).

Gilman writes from her own experience, having been sent to Dr. Mitchell for a rest-cure treatment herself shortly after the birth of her daughter. She explains that Mitchell “concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to ‘live as domestic a life as far as possible,’ to ‘have but two hours’ intellectual life a day,’ and ‘never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again’ as long as I lived” (Gilman 524). As a writer, this was a devastating prescription to be given, and this treatment forced Gilman “so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over” (Gilman 524). Just like Jane, she recognized that writing brought her joy and a sense of purpose. She says that “work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite” allowed her to “ultimately recover some measure of power” (524). As a middle-class white woman, who has just had her first child, Jane is discouraged from having any sort of vocation of her own. Like many women of the time, she struggles with gaining her sense of self, and writing gives her a chance to look further inward. We can see that the narrator finds writing enjoyable, “if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me” (Gilman 649). However, even knowing that writing makes her feel better, she is still more inclined to listen to her husband, who frequently insinuates that the narrator would get better if she would simply exert her “will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me” (Gilman 652). Several times in the story, she has to hide the fact that she is keeping a journal from John and Jennie; “There comes John, and I must put this away, he hates to have me write a word”; “There comes John's sister...I must not let her find me writing” (Gilman 650, 649). Despite knowing that writing is helping her, she falls victim to the ideologies of True Womanhood, believing that her husband must know her wellness better than she does. The submissiveness expected of her creates a dynamic where she is discouraged from expressing her pain to her husband, and doing so makes her a burden. The constant denial of her mental pain, and refusal to allow her any intellectual stimulation is likely what led her to eventually become lost in the wallpaper.

Rula Quwas, a scholar at the University of Jordan, explains in her essay “A New Woman's Journey Into Insanity: Descent And Return In ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” that the prescriptions given in the rest-cure created “the very set of expectations that caused many of them to become neurasthenic in the first place” (42). When women are forced into insubstantial and insufficient roles, it's no surprise that they begin to feel isolated. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, disenchanted with the Victorian ideal of the True Woman, sought to shed light on the price women were being forced to pay in order to live in domestic servitude to their husbands. She broke a long tradition of writing about women

¹⁵ S. Weir Mitchell M.D., *Fat and Blood: An Essay on the Treatment of Certain Forms of Neurasthenia and Hysteria*, pp. 9-11.

by giving her narrator the agency to *choose* insanity, therefore choosing her own path forward. Quwas asserts that “in an era that discouraged or was even hostile to female candor and self-expression,” Gilman is “bold in her authorial/narrative voice and in her delineation of female characters” (38-39). She sought to bring into the light a different idea for the American woman, and through Jane she represented the New Woman, one who has liberty in her assertion of herself, one who chooses herself over her role, and one who focuses on her *own* perception of the world, rather than the perception of others around her (Quwas 49). Most notably, she separates herself from the desires and demands of her husband, John.

The narrator Jane’s characterization sheds light on how ‘hysterical’ women were viewed, while her husband John gives us insight into how True Womanhood ideals impacted men’s expectations for women and the home. John is a personification of men exercising tyrannical power in marriages, his main goal throughout the story is to re-shape Jane into the ideal wife, mother, and most malicious of all, the ideal patient. He serves a unique role in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” as both Jane’s husband and her physician. In line with the indoctrination of True Womanhood, we sometimes see Jane write about John as a man who is just caught up in the norms of society, thinking that he is truly doing the best thing for his wife—“Dear John! He loves me very dearly and hates to have me sick” (Gilman 651). Other times we see a neglectful, dismissive physician, and a husband who rejects his wife’s pain— “the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition” (Gilman 648). John regularly asserts that “you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not” (Gilman 652). Anytime the narrator tries to question his methods, he is quick to infantilize her and insist that she is “his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I [Jane] must take care of myself for his sake, and keep well” (Gilman 652). Their complicated relationship is the crux of the identity crises experienced by the narrator.

The essay “Who is Jane? The Intricate Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,” William Veeder dives deep into the relationship between the narrator and John, and the implications of Victorian marriage ideals in general. Veeder investigates the various ways John infantilizes the narrator in order to force her into the submissive, domestic role he expects from her. He “forbids excitement—professional, social, and sexual,” (Veeder 47), which can be seen when Jane suggests going to visit with her cousins. “But he said I wasn’t able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there” (Gilman 651). He then scolds her for crying, telling her that she “did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished” (Gilman 651). He constantly calls her desires and imaginations “fancies,” — “John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least” (Gilman 649). He warns her often to tamp down her imagination, which is seemingly one of the reasons he doesn’t want Jane to write at all. “He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency” (Gilman 649). These ‘excited fancies’ are things like wanting to go outside and socialize, to see her family and friends, or even to rearrange the furniture. John does everything in his power to keep Jane as submissive as possible, perpetuating the male dominance that was rampant in True Womanhood culture.

The True Woman is expected to be “like little children” (Welter 161) so John’s infantilization of his wife molds her into the submissive, childlike ideal. To further

demean her, he seemingly attributes her “nervous depression” to an affliction of her own creation— “you see he does not believe that I am sick” (Gilman 647). He frequently reminds Jane that “there is no reason to suffer” (Gilman 649). According to Veeder, John uses this language so that the narrator is “implicated in the dilemma of her life. She is no mere victim” (42). John believes she is creating her illness, and that her “excited fancies” were the source of this suffering. This places the blame for the difficulties faced by Jane onto Jane herself, and demands that she fix them, or risk being a disappointment as a wife and mother. John's infantilizing doesn't stop with his opposition to the narrator using her imaginative mind. Throughout the entire story, John never once refers to his wife by name, further dehumanizing her and stripping her of an identity of her own. He frequently calls her “my dear” or “little girl” (Gilman 652), and even “blessed little goose” (Gilman 649) at one point. The use of the word “little” plays into the innocence and childlike submission expected by True Women. John is especially quick to use one of these pet-names when the narrator dares to ask a question or when she begins to show a growing awareness of her plight. In the second half of the story, Jane is in the throes of suffering from hallucinations. She expresses to John that she really isn't feeling any better than when they arrived, but John is quick to infantilize her, effectively silencing her line of questioning; “‘Bless her little heart!’ said he with a big hug, ‘she shall be as sick as she pleases!’” (Gilman 652). Here we can see him utilize the word “little” again, and he speaks to her as if she is a child instead of his partner.

As a physician, John is quick to use his medical authority over Jane— “There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating as a temperament like yours. . . Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?” (Gilman 652). Jane is more inclined to believe him when he tells her that her suffering is all in her own control due to his authority as a physician. The only time we see him speak to her like an equal is at the very end, at the moment the narrator has freed “Jane” from the wallpaper. “‘What is the matter?’ he cried. ‘For God's sake, what are you doing!’” (Gilman 656). This change in his attitude marks the end of Jane's domestic identity in favor of the liberation of being insane, but at least being herself, on her own terms. If our narrator had never pulled Jane out of the wallpaper, and instead followed the advice of her husband and her “physician of high standing” (Gilman 648) would she have gone on to be the happy, submissive housewife that John was hoping for?

John's desexualization of his marriage in order to continue to keep his wife in this infantile, oppressive position is also a way to keep Jane in her submissive role. The couple hardly sleep in the bed together, and we never hear about them having sex. At one point, John appears to initiate a moment of passion, but quickly turns the situation around— “And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head” (Gilman 652). Being carried upstairs and thrown on the bed is a common image associated with sex, and John flips it to a parent-child dynamic by reading her to sleep (Veeder 47). There are several times where the narrator references John embracing her, however, these embraces are never framed in a romantic way, but instead “his physical embraces manifest not a mature eros but a double manipulation of his wife” (Veeder 47). He enacts further power over her by taking away the ability for her to engage in her expected gender roles. Veeder's essay discusses what he says are the four roles of the

orthodox wife: “breeder, nurturer, home-manager, bed-partner” (48). John has reduced Jane’s purpose to just one—breeder, a role she has already fulfilled by giving birth. He has his sister Jennie to care for the home, the nurse Mary to care for the baby, and with his frequent overnight trips to town for “serious cases” one can infer he has found someone to fulfill the role of bed-partner as well. By taking away so many facets of Jane’s expected domestic role, he forces her into a space where she can neither meet the expectations of a good wife or be an independent person—a paradox that results in Jane’s mental decline.

Gilman subtly changes her writing as the narrator falls deeper into hallucinations. As Jane fixates more and more on the woman she sees trapped in the yellow wallpaper, we see her increase her use of “I”, particularly in the last four paragraphs— “I wonder if they all came out of the wallpaper as I did?” (Gilman 656) This is a significant change from the beginning of the text, where she refers primarily to others and only to herself through the lens of others. “But John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself” (Gilman 648). The buildup to the resurrection of Jane and the madness that the narrator falls into helps us to see her gaining her sense of self back, while at the same time reconfirming what Veeder calls “the traditional equation of women and illness” (51). By lashing out towards John and causing him to faint, she becomes the illustration for “a warrant for perpetual vigilance—a female penchant for violence” (Veeder 51). Jane’s becoming the stereotype of the violent, hysterical woman allows her to break free from the roles of wife, mother, and domestic servant.

In a world that dictates everything women do, constantly exploits their biosexual processes, and forces women into the box of domesticity, Jane chooses insanity as a sort of rebellion, an act of protest to her expected role. She lets go of the expectations and opinions of the people in her life, and chooses to assert her own identity. She resurrects the half of herself that has been killed, the half that is imaginative and artistic, that cares little for the domesticity expected of her. Freeing her from the “strangling” patterns of the wallpaper, just as she has freed herself from the strangling patriarchy of True Womanhood. Gilman has said that this characterization mirrors her own experience in many ways; and that while she was lucky enough to be “helped by a wise friend” (524), many women who endure the rest-cure weren’t as lucky as her, and would be inevitably forced to choose between suicide or insanity. Jane even mentions this herself, in an incredibly self-aware moment where she notes that jumping out her window is something that “is improper and might be misconstrued” (Gilman 656). Here, Gilman seems to be nodding at the fact that many women who are deemed hysterical are often driven to suicide, and end up written off as not being strong enough to overcome her illness.¹⁶

Jane chose liberation through madness, and she chose to be Jane instead of Mrs. John, and she chose to fit the feminine stereotype of violent hysteria. Charlotte Perkins Gilman gave us “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a message—that she will not sit idly by while women are forced into lives they didn’t choose for themselves. Quwas points out; “the very act of writing for women, who had no rights, no identity or existence, was

¹⁶ Suicide was frequently associated with the “fallen woman” stereotype. Though female suicide was often romanticized in novels, in Jane’s case she would have been viewed as a hysterical woman who lacks self-control. See Jeffery Berman, *Surviving Literary Suicide* pp. 46-66.

basically an assertion of individuality and autonomy and often an act of defiance” (41). The fact that the story is told through Jane's writing is in itself an act of defiance. Just like Gilman had been told during her treatment, Jane was advised against writing, but did so anyway. Jane exemplifies the exact reason the rest-cure doesn't work—that it further deprives women of their identity and puts them in an environment that only exacerbates the condition of helplessness that perpetuated the male dominance in marriage and society as a whole. Jane literally peels away the bonds that hold her in the yellow wallpapered room, and thus peeled away the ideals of True Womanhood that held her there. Though she was driven to insanity, at least Jane was able to discover her true self under the yellowing, “endless convolutions” of the pattern in the wallpaper (Gilman 653).

Although Jane may not have escaped the fate of so many women in the rest-cure, she certainly served to open the eyes of many who read Gilman's work. Gilman proved this, stating that “it has, to my knowledge, saved one woman from a similar fate—so terrifying her family that they let her out into normal activity and she recovered” (524) Her story showcased that women not only can *write* engaging, important literature, but also that women will *read* this literature. However, the novel wasn't the only place women could experience “the bold ravings of the hard-featured of their own sex” (Welter 166). The theater proved to be an extremely influential location in the building of community for women—and one particular playwright drew in crowds of women left and right to witness the tragic tale of *Hedda Gabler*.

Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright in the late 19th century pushed back against the status quo of gender norms through many of his female characters. Susan Torrey Barstow discusses the importance of Ibsen's plays, as his characters “live not in a fantasy realm, but in the spectators' own world...they struggle against the thralls of domesticity and the confines of traditional femininity” (389). These plays were most often shown as matinees, when men were usually working, which made women the majority of the crowd.¹⁷ *Hedda Gabler* is arguably one of the most progressive, and most famous, of these ‘women plays.’¹⁸ Ibsen utilizes his writing through stage directions and Hedda's dialogue in *Hedda Gabler* to portray the feelings of isolation and suffocation felt by the bourgeoisie True Women of the late nineteenth century. Through the language used throughout the play, Ibsen showcases the link between words and reality. Hedda's language is her only weapon, and she uses it to attempt to shape her own destiny, an action that goes against the submissive, domestic ideals of True Womanhood.

The play centers around Hedda Gabler herself, who has just married Jörgen Tesman, a scholar studying “domestic crafts of the middle ages” (Ibsen 206). Hedda is, in appearance, a perfect middle-class wife: beautiful, domestic, and charming. Ibsen describes her artfully in stage directions, “*her face and figure are aristocratic and elegant* (Ibsen 179). Despite having the right look, Hedda rejects being related to domestic femininity at nearly every turn. She constantly talks about how bored she is, and craves intellectual stimulation. When confronted with the idea of motherhood,

¹⁷ Susan Torrey Barstow, *Hedda is All of Us: Late Victorian Women at the Matinee*, pp. 387-388

¹⁸ Ibsen's plays often featured women stepping outside of their expected or intended role, particularly with characters like Hedda Gabler, Nora Helmer (*A Doll's House*), Mrs. Alving (*Ghosts*), and Hilda Wangel (*The Lady from the Sea*).

Hedda is appalled at the thought: “I’ve no aptitude for any such thing, Mr. Brack. No responsibilities for me thank you!” (Ibsen 213). Hedda longs for a life that she has agency in— “a glimpse into a world that she isn’t supposed to know anything about” (Ibsen 223). Hedda wants access to a man's world, where she has power and value outside of her womanly role. She longs for entrance into the social, economical, and political sphere that men are so easily able to enter. This desire for power is why she married Tesman, a man she believed would be easy to control, hoping that she would be able to “get Tesman to go in for politics” (Ibsen 212). However, by the end of the play Hedda is driven to suicide, since, as a bourgeoisie woman, she has no real power to change her situation, either socially or physically. Ibsen’s unique position as a playwright allows readers to witness this change in Hedda through both her dialogue and stage directions.

Henrik Ibsen’s stage directions provide perspective on who Hedda is and what her motivations are. In Act 1, it’s within the stage directions that we get our first glimpse at Hedda’s unhappiness in her seemingly perfect life. Alone in the drawing room, the stage directions have Hedda “*walk around the room raising her arms and clenching her fists as if in a rage. Then she draws the curtains back from the door, stands there and looks out*” (Ibsen 183). At this time, the reader isn’t sure what is so upsetting to Hedda, but upon close reading we can identify the cause of her annoyance. It’s no accident that she stands in the drawing room, which was the home's pinnacle of domestic work, and where Hedda spends the majority of the play. She stares out the window of her domestic prison, and seethes about the performativity of being the submissive, gentle wife that she is expected to be. Just before these stage directions, there were a few insinuations from Tesman and his Aunt Julle that Hedda may be pregnant, boasting with her nephew about how much she’s “filled out” (Ibsen 182). In addition to that, Julle appealed to Hedda that she “keep Hedda Tesman for Jørgen’s sake” (Ibsen 182). Rarely throughout the play does Hedda go by her married name, usually being referred to as Hedda Gabler, or asking people to use only her first name. Both of these moments implicate Hedda as the housewife she will now be expected to behave as, since she is married and returned from her honeymoon. Hedda resents this label, and from this point onward in the play she strives to change the way people view her, primarily through using manipulative language.

There are many moments where Hedda is described as “*smiling slightly*,” and in Act 1 as she tries to extrapolate information regarding Eilert Løvborg from Thea Elvstead she’s “*smiling almost imperceptibly*” (Ibsen 192). This kind of subtle body language is frequently written into Hedda’s stage directions—always clueing the audience in on her intentions. Hedda’s quick changes in tone and emotion are also evident in the stage directions. In Act 2, for example, in order to keep Tesman from suspecting anything of Hedda being alone with Eilert Løvborg, she pretends that she’s enthralled by the photo album from her honeymoon trip. With Tesman out of earshot, she speaks quietly to Løvborg, and as Tesman comes into the room, the stage directions have Hedda “*look warmly up at Tesman*” (Ibsen 220). This is the only time in the play where Hedda is described with warmth. Many of her stage directions describe her with “*cold and collected*” (Ibsen 195) or “*coldly in control*” (Ibsen 255).

Hedda’s ability and willingness to manipulate others goes directly against the expected submissiveness of True Womanhood, since Hedda is holding the power in the

conversation instead of acting meekly and fragile. A True Woman “does what she can, but she is conscious of inferiority, and therefore grateful for support” (Welter 159). At no point in the story does Hedda feel inferior or dependent on Jørgen Tesman. In fact, she often speaks about him in an infantile and condescending way. Hedda doesn’t even hold any true romantic feelings for Tesman, confiding in Judge Brack that she met Tesman “and after that it all followed. The engagement, the marriage, the honeymoon and the whole lot...as one makes one's bed, one has to lie in it” (Ibsen 211). This contempt for marriage and middle-class womanhood has followed her for years, even before her relationship with Tesman. In Act 3, Løvborg asks her if there was any love in the relationship they shared. Hedda’s response, for the first time in the play, seems completely genuine— “for me it was like we were two good comrades, really sincere friends. [*Smiling*]” (Ibsen 222). Hedda’s true desire wasn’t to be married to a respectable man, but to be level with them, socially and intellectually. She enjoyed her time with Løvborg because she felt, for the first time, like she was being treated as an equal. However, eventually Løvborg too became romantically attracted to her, causing her to end their companionship “because there was an imminent danger that the game would become a reality” (Ibsen 222). Eventually resigning herself to her gendered expectation in order to continue living the bourgeois lifestyle, Hedda married Jørgen Tesman, a man she believed would be easily manipulated by her language. But, even the most malleable of men couldn’t save her from the way she’s viewed by society at large.

One of the biggest changes in Hedda’s character throughout the play is her growing distrust of the power of her language. Tanya Thresher explains that Hedda’s fear of scandal “reveals her preoccupation with the spoken word and her awareness of language as a constraining, disciplinary mechanism” (Thresher 78). Hedda sees the expectations of silence and compliance from women all around her, and understands that this is what is expected of her as well. Welter discusses the expectation of silence from women by quoting *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, “To suffer and to be silent under suffering seems the great command she has to obey” (162). Through marrying a more submissive man, and surrounding herself with men who are involved in social life (Judge Brack for example), Hedda believes herself to be safe to reject these norms. Hedda’s refusal to be silent directly rejects the popular gendered expectations of submissiveness and obedience during the time period. This awareness of the power of words can be seen in her dislocation between words and reality, as she makes “a series of linguistic attempts...at controlling reality” and slowly realizes that “the relationship between language and reality is conditioned by the dominant ideology, in this case patriarchy” (Thresher 74).

Throughout her life, Hedda has been able to carefully control whatever conversation she’s in through her words. She convinces Løvborg to take a drink after being sober for months (Ibsen 227), threatens to burn off Thea’s hair (Ibsen 190), and is very deliberate with her words around Tesman’s family, so as to not lose her place in high society (Ibsen 180). In Act 4, Hedda’s words hide reality when she convinces Tesman that she burnt the manuscript for him—“I did it for your sake Jørgen” (Ibsen 255). Here she uses his first name, a rarity in this play, and a clear manipulation tactic. Just like in the rest of the play, Hedda only takes on the role of the submissive, dutiful wife when it works in her favor. In this same conversation, she insinuates her own

pregnancy as a way of maintaining control over Tesman (Ibsen 255). Motherhood is the highest calling of the True Woman, and one which gives her power at home, a fact which Hedda is all too aware of (Welter 171). Hedda has no desire to be a mother, and seems almost afraid of the idea in private— “[*angrily*] Be quiet! Nothing of that sort will ever happen!” (Ibsen 213)—but when she needs leverage to keep Tesman under her thumb, her womanly duties suddenly become of the utmost importance to her. Her manipulation is able to successfully keep Tesman from suspecting any ulterior motives to her burning of the manuscript, and through the power of her language she can continue to hold some semblance of power.

By the end of the play Hedda is forced to realize that no matter how masterful she is at manipulation, she still has no real power in the world outside the drawing room. Her plans fall apart, threatening to embroil her in a scandal that would surely cost her place as a member of high society. Judge Brack utilizes her plans and language against her as blackmail, agreeing to stay quiet about the pistol used to kill Eilert Løvborg belonging to Hedda: “Well. Fortunately you have nothing to worry about as long as I keep quiet” (Ibsen 266). This silence will place Hedda in Brack’s power, which he intends to use for sexual exploitation— “I am in your power nonetheless. Subject to your will and your demands. No longer free!” (Ibsen 266). It is at this moment that Hedda recognizes that no matter how well she utilizes language, she can still never gain any real leverage against a society that is built around patriarchy. Hedda’s silence through suicide is her final autonomous decision as she realizes that even her ability to manipulate others through her words lacks adequate power to change her life. Regardless of whether she can influence others or not, she will always be trapped in a position of silence as a wife, a mother, and as a woman in general. After Brack threatens his power over her, she comes to understand that she can never escape the silence she will always be forced into. She tells everyone that “from now on I will be silent,” (Ibsen 267) meaning that she has lost the only power she held over her destiny, and now only has her silence to weaponize against the patriarchal systems of control.

Hedda loses her sense of control and power in this play, showcasing the complete loss of control over one’s own life that bourgeoisie women experienced in the Victorian age. Hedda would have been driven to silence one way or another, either through being cast out of high society from a scandal, or the impending role of motherhood and domestic dutifulness that is implied throughout the play. Acts 2 and 3 send Hedda down a winding path that lands her in the middle of the sexual desires of three men, Tesman, Brack and Løvborg. Being pregnant with Tesman’s child, she wouldn’t ever be able to escape her expected domestic role in True Womanhood. Hedda refuses to “live with the inevitable” as Brack suggests (Ibsen 266), and refuses to allow him to hold sexual power over her. Ibsen’s language in his stage directions and in Hedda’s dialogue emphasize the way he characterized Hedda as a subversion of gender norms, particularly pushing back against the True Woman. He created a character that is described as “*aristocratic and elegant*” (Ibsen 179), living in “*a large, pleasantly and tastefully furnished*” (Ibsen 171) home. On paper, she is the perfect picture of the True Woman; a shining example of domesticity. And yet, we are introduced to a character who is “so desperately bored,” who rejects the expectations of her gender, calls love “a syrupy word,” and has just one way to entertain herself: “Oh I just stand here and shoot at the sky” (Ibsen 203). Hedda searches for power in a world

that makes her powerless, and when her intellect and language are no longer enough to save her from the oppression of patriarchy, Hedda ends her own life to spare herself from it. Her suicide is an intense ending to this play, one that stuck with women as they left the theaters.

Ibsen's matinee plays brought in swaths of women from all walks of life, and created a sense of camaraderie and community that was sorely lacking for nineteenth century women.¹⁹ Being forced into the domestic sphere, women had few avenues to socialize with their fellow ladies, and would end up isolated from any sense of community. Susan Torrey Barstow looks into the role of these matinee showings, and how they impacted their women audiences. She includes male reviewers' critiques of both the show itself and the audience watching it to emphasize how difficult it was for women to find spaces truly designed for them. Male reviewers showed deep contempt with the "hundreds of girls sitting in the theater, and, with open mouths, literally drinking in remarks and conversations to which no young girl in her teens should listen" (Bok 16). Yet, Barstow explains that the women viewing Hedda had a "sense of identification with Hedda" and this relating "is itself transformative: she notices and implicitly acknowledges her own unhappiness, perhaps for the first time...not only her own similarity to Hedda, but that of "all of us" (402). With a life constantly inundated with advice from women's magazines, books on becoming a proper wife, and the expectation of being the perfect woman (the True Woman), the chance to see a woman on stage who demanded agency and respect was enthralling. Hedda gave her women audiences a mirror; the chance to look at their own desires, and to reckon with how they disagree with True Womanhood in their own lives.

Women who left the theater "were thrust imaginatively back into the very domestic confines they had just quitted" (Barstow 394), and for the first time had the sense that their unhappiness wasn't just theirs alone. Seeing Hedda on stage, sharing in the desires, frustrations, and ambitions of the audience gave women space to consider their own struggles with the domestic sphere. This shock of reality had a profound effect on the women who attended *Hedda Gabler*. Actress and suffragette Lena Ashwell praised Ibsen, stating that "his women are at work now in the world, interpreting women to themselves, helping to make the women of the future. He has peopled a whole new world" (Barstow 398). *Hedda Gabler* didn't only serve as a mirror held to the individual women in the audience, reflecting Hedda back—but also as a mirror that reflected back the whole of the audience. Women didn't just identify with Hedda, they "also horizontally identified with one another" (Barstow 402). At Ibsen's matinee, every woman in the theater could look around and see other women reacting just the same as they were. Rich or poor, class divides began to fall away as they all looked to the stage and related to a sole character—to Hedda Gabler. In this way, the women of the matinee shows all shared the same sentiment; "Hedda is all of us" (Barstow 402).

In their own ways, both Jane and Hedda found their ways out of patriarchal oppression, and away from the trials of True Womanhood. Jane through her writing and eventual descent into insanity, and Hedda through her manipulative language and ultimately, her suicide. Gilman and Ibsen used their own writing to give us a grim

¹⁹ Middle-class Victorian women had less time for social activity, resulting in most social time being through visits and calls from women in their neighborhoods. See Joan Perkin's *Victorian Women* pp. 101.

glimpse of reality—there was no escaping Victorian womanhood, there was no *real* way out, not while staying completely intact. Jane had to lose her mind, Hedda lost her life, and the alternative to both would've been the loss of themselves outside of the roles of wife and mother. True Womanhood held women in their place through assurance that submissive, docile behavior was their divine gift—not something that could be changed or refused, but a higher calling. When women were unable to meet these intense expectations and standards, they often blamed themselves, believing that something must be wrong with them. However, years of challenge against True Womanhood began to open many women's eyes into the reality of their gendered oppression. Many began to wonder, if women are supposedly God's angels on earth, capable of such divine love and care, then why do they have nearly no role in society at large (Welter 174)? Criticism of gendered roles, and the growing popularity of radical female characters created by the likes of Ibsen and Gilman, called True Womanhood into question. Thus, the New Woman was born into the cultural zeitgeist.²⁰ The New Woman was educated, and independent both economically and socially. She is a woman who demands agency and respect, and expects to be regarded for her personhood rather than for her sex. Middle and upper-class women recognized themselves in Hedda and Jane, and this recognition empowered them to challenge the status quo of gender norms. The earliest feminist writers of the twentieth century consider themselves New Women, heavily inspired by works like *Hedda Gabler* and "The Yellow Wallpaper." New Women brought about change, securing education, suffrage, and domestic rights for women in the twentieth century.

Hedda Gabler glimpses into the discontented mind of the New Woman, but one who remains trapped in the social confines of Victorian True Womanhood. Hedda's aversion to motherhood, her anger at her lack of power over her own life, and her desire to "control a human destiny" (Ibsen 230) all cement her as a strong rejection of the True Woman. Her characterization empowered the middle-class English women who watched her "protesting against the constraints of Victorianism and gesturing toward the development of the New Woman" (Barstow 389). These women too wanted to control human destiny; they wanted to be able to change their own destinies just as Hedda sought to do. Jane too, in many ways, is a New Woman, though she still is indoctrinated to the conservative ideals of True Womanhood. However, Jane frequently asserts that she'd feel much better if she was allowed to work, and continues to write in secret. In addition to this, she avoids interacting with her baby, which makes readers wonder whether she ever wanted to be a mother at all. Jane's fear of losing herself drove her over the edge of insanity, but it freed her from the burden of True Womanhood.

Whether it's Hedda shooting pistols from the window of the drawing room, or Jane pleading for a life of activity, these fictional women gave a sense of solidarity with hundreds of real-life women. While simple representations of this suffering didn't end the oppression of women, it gave women a chance to look at their own lives from the outside. Barstow concludes that "the practice of identification remains integral to the creation of a collective" (402). Jane's yellow wallpapered prison remains a vivid image in the mind of whomever reads her story, continuing to remind readers that intellectual

²⁰ A.R. Cunningham's, "The 'New Woman Fiction' of the 1890s" discusses the emergence of the New Woman, "the heroines depicted by the popular novelists were New Women in the sense that all rejected some features—though by no means always the same ones—of the feminine role"

stimulation and purpose are the driving forces of one's own humanity. For decades, "The Yellow Wallpaper" was lost to the cultural collective, until the 1970's when it was rediscovered. Since then, it has been regarded as an early feminist work that rejects the patriarchal roles expected of women.²¹ And Hedda, who's drastic actions "embodied protest against the strictures and banality of conventional femininity" (Barstow 406), became a picture of the unspoken, unrecognized, and unvalued anger that seeped from cracks in the domestic sphere. Peeking into her life, and her death, she was a figure of power for the rising ranks of suffragists in Europe and beyond. Years later, in a march for women's suffrage, the leader of Actresses' Franchise League was guided by a woman on horseback, dressed as Hedda Gabler. Hedda and Jane gave their viewers and readers a chance to look inward, and to recognize all of the places within themselves that didn't align with the idea of True Womanhood. By reflecting the New Woman in their works, Ibsen and Gilman both did their part in breaking down the pillars of the Cult of True Womanhood.

²¹ See Alyson Foster's "Charlotte Perkins Gilman Did More Than Write One Classic Short Story." in *Humanities*.

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