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The Unbecoming of Women: Sexuality and Punishment of the New Woman in Gothic Literature

American Gothic is known to be a staple in literature for feminist writing. Popular Gothic female writers in the 19th century co-exist with popular Gothic male writers; where you may find a Nathaniel Hawthorne, there is a Shirley Jackson soon after. Protagonists in female Gothic are often sexualized New Woman archetypes who challenge gender norms in an effort to break societal expectations. However, paralleling and serving as a critique of the 19th century, a time where independence, sexual expression, and New Womanhood was oppressed, female Gothic writers wrote their woman main characters as suffering and punished under the rule of an oppressive patriarchal society to demonstrate the stifling nature of the era. Three short stories in 19th century gothic prominently present these ideas: "A Whisper in the Dark" by Louisa May Alcott, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and "Her Story" by Harriet Prescott Spofford. All the women in these works are at various stages of New Womanhood; by challenging 19th century gender norms through testing the boundaries of their sexuality and identity, and attempting to metamorphose into New Women, each of these female protagonists are punished under patriarchal rule, causing them to be permanently damaged as a result of trying to escape the societal expectations impressed upon them.

Gothic literature often features strong women who are not necessarily masculine, but powerful through their own femininity. In Alcott's story, Sybil is a representation of that strong

feminine identity without having to be masculine as symbolized by her hair. In various sections at the beginning of the story, Sybil narrates her appearance in lengthy paragraphs:

I surveyed myself in the long mirror as I had never done before, and saw there a little figure, slender, yet stately, in a dress of foreign fashion, ornamented with lace and carnation ribbons...while blond hair wavy and golden, was gathered into an antique knot of curls behind, with a carnation fillet, and below a blooming dark-eyed face, just then radiant with girlish vanity and eagerness and hope. (Alcott 173)

Through this narration, the audience sees that Sybil is not shy, passive, or soft-spoken, but confident; that same confidence acts as her mode of survival when her femininity is taken away from her later in the story. Yet, in this scene, Sybil is also trying out the other gender, like a new dress: she is not only admiring herself, but sexualizing herself - as a man might do (and which happens soon after). In the privacy of her own space, Sybil is experimenting on what it is like to be masculine by exerting a sense of power via male gaze. Further, this act seems to be an exercise of ambiguating the borders of her gender, highlighted by her stating that she had never looked at herself like that before in reference to practicing male gaze (Alcott 173).

As if to punish her for experimenting with masculinity while being exceedingly feminine, Sybil is stripped of her prized femininity. After manipulating prominent male figures by using her sexuality, Sybil is chastised by patriarchal society for her disobedience; the patriarchy asserts its dominance through punishment via the alpha male of her household, her uncle. As an attempt to make her asexual and powerless, she is taken to a nunnery by her uncle where she is secluded from society and her hair is completely shaved off. However, this transformation sparks a new fire in her—the ambiguity of her gender and the privacy of her own space, similar to the function of her room earlier in the story, allows her to openly use her cleverness and wit (which she

always had) for survival without having to rely on her beauty and sexuality. She has become, if anything, androgynous because of her hairless head.

While slightly dated in its terminology, in Claire Cahane's article, "The Gothic Mirror," she talks about the topic of ambiguity and hermaphrodites. These concepts apply to Sybil's baldness and loss of identity through her own femininity. Cahane says that, "for my response to the hermaphrodite as a literary image derives from ambiguity: from what is visually obscure yet demands to be seen, from what is impossible but true, from what is wished for and feared" (347). If Cahane's use of sexual identity (hermaphrodite) were to be swapped with gender identity, this is the same transformation that Sybil follows—her assigned gender becomes ambiguous to society when she loses her hair; therefore, Sybil transforms into bi-genderism, which grants her power to leave isolation from society. She is no longer combatting masculine and feminine attributes against each other, but rather harmonizing them. She is visually obscure because of her baldness, which her has negative reaction to that develops into pity: "I saw my uncle start and turn pale; I had never seen myself since I came, but if I had not suspected that I was a melancholy wreck of my former self, I should have known it then, such sudden pain and pity softened his ruthless countenance for a single instant" (Alcott 189). Echoing Cahane when she states "from what is wish for and feared," it seems as if her uncle felt a sort of terror as well, for he had stopped visiting her from then on out (347). Without being defined by the borders of a gender binary, a social construct, Sybil gains the power by being not one, or the other - without her beautiful hair defining her a woman, she's physically harboring both masculinity and femininity, giving light to her subconscious need for power and giving her the tools for her to survive 19th century America.

In the end, Sybil has money and freedom, but she cannot transgress past her female expectations: though she's emerged as a New Woman to an extent, in order for her to survive the patriarchal society, she has to conform by marrying and being brought to safety by a man. There, she suffers the effects of challenging the patriarchy and her prescribed gender role: "but over all these years, serenely prosperous, still hangs for me the shadow of the past, still rises that dead image of my mother, still echoes that spectral whisper in the dark" (Alcott 193). Sybil is haunted by the image of her mother, who was forcibly committed to the same nunnery as Sybil for her New Womanhood tendencies, as a reminder of Sybil's failed quest towards independence. It's a reminder of what could have been if Sybil remained androgynous and did not fall back into the patriarchal trap of the 19th century.

The narrator of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" by Gilman is quite the opposite of Sybil. Where Sybil is independent, the narrator is passive and childlike, seemingly asexual especially in the presence of her husband, but comes alive when she is expressing herself creatively. In Rula Quawas's article, "New Woman's Journey into Insanity: Descent and Return in The Yellow Wallpaper," she says the narrator "is the embodiment of the New Woman who is in the process of becoming, struggling to assert her individuality and to construct her own identity in a society where the prevailing intellectual and ideological issues of the age are inimical to the very existence of women" (40). At the beginning of the text, the narrator struggles between remaining the passive wife and pursuing New Womanhood because she exists during a time where women were becoming more assertive in wanting to claim their own identity; she represents an in-between transition period. However, the narrator's passivity at the beginning allows her to survive her household, but at the loss of her individuality and freedom. Like Sybil, this balance is her mode of survival; the narrator says, "So I take phosphates or phosphites - which ever it is,

and tonics, and journeys...and am absolutely forbidden to “work” until I am well again. Personally I disagree with their ideas. Personally I believe that congenial work...would do me good... But what is one to do? I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal” (Gilman 166). Her internal struggle is apparent by this chaotic sense of writing— she wants to listen to her husband and her brother because they are physicians and dominant male figures in her life—she wants to obey and survive, but she also is defiant and wishes to be more independent. Though this is early in the story, the narrator already seems manic, represented by the interruptions in her thought process-as well as her repetition and abruptness of her sentences. As the narrator inches closer to independence and New Womanhood, this balance between a traditional woman and New Woman is harder to maintain - ultimately, since she’s tied to both almost equally, she does not possess the necessary survival skills to come out as a successful New Woman; she, essentially, argues with herself in trying to appease both opposing sides. The narrator knows, as a nineteenth-century woman, obedience to her husband is expected of her, especially since he is a physician and therefore a high-standing, authoritative figure in society - but her real desire lies in wanting to free herself from his burden. Because it is impossible to fulfill both roles, and because of the strong male presence throughout her secluded life pressuring her to be traditional and her initial desire to obey them, the narrator’s defiance, internal struggle, and manic thought-process foreshadows her punishment of being outcasted as a madwoman.

In order to harbor a patriarchal household and maintain traditional womanhood, the narrator’s husband, John, not only talks to the narrator as if she were a child, but treats her as one as well, further infantilizing the narrator. For instance, John calls the narrator “blessed little goose” and “little girl” both to put her underneath him and control her (Gilman 169, 174). He

further subjugates his wife by quite literally treating her as a frail, sickly child: “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 173). The narrator feels resentment towards this treatment, as noted by the sarcastic tone in how she describes his behavior, which is highlighted by the overuse of the word “me” right up to the end of the sentence. Further, the audience knows that reading and writing are important to her as the short story is essentially her hidden journal, so it is hard to believe that such activities would “tire” her mind. Like Sybil, the narrator wants to express her sexuality as an emerging New Woman, but John suffocates her desire by smothering her with so much asexual affection. Not only is John imprisoning his wife, but he is also imprisoning her sexuality, growth, and betterment by denying her adulthood and autonomy. However, to combat how her husband treats her, the narrator retaliates by creating the woman who needs to escape from the wallpaper, which is simply a projection of her former self.

When the narrator writes and documents her isolation prescribed by her husband, who “hates to have [her] write a word,” it not only shows her development towards New Womanhood, but also her resistance to patriarchal society (Gilman 168). The act of writing in her hidden journal allows her to refine her creativity and individualism, which she projects onto the wallpaper: “I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin” (Gilman 168). Further, Quawas says that “the narrator rejects the Victorian adjuration to the female, ‘suffer and be still.’ She recognizes her power and the fact that she can refuse victimization and demonstrates that she possesses the courage, strength, and inner sources to stand alone in her preservation of self. She awakens from a male-defined world to a world defined by her own feeling and judgment” (49). When the narrator seemingly sets the woman in the wallpaper free using the imagination refined by her writing, the projection of

herself in the wallpaper, and her desire to escape the patriarchal world she's forced to live in, she is allowing herself to make the decision to be free from patriarchal control. Using the very space that is meant to isolate her from society, the narrator uses that privacy as a cocoon to foster New Womanhood ideology. By thinking she emerged from this wallpaper, she defies the very face of patriarchal society:

I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did? ... It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please! ... He stopped short by the door. "What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing! " I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder. "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! " 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 181-182)

John fainting is similar to how Sybil's uncle is disgusted in seeing her as a New Woman - with the power shifting from one sex to the other, John is threatened and afraid because his once passive wife now aggressively embodies New Womanhood by unbecoming her former self. This, however, has a detrimental effect on the narrator; by believing that she let the woman free and that she *is* that woman to the point of denying her former self, it's as if she essentially killed that part of her and suggests that the narrator's transformation is incomplete. The little rationale the narrator once had is gone, the balance too tilted once again. She may have metamorphosed into a New Woman, but it cost her sanity; suggesting that the process of transformation, when interrupted by male influence/pressure, and with the seeds of patriarchal ideology already rooted within her, as demonstrated by her earlier conflicting thoughts, has devastating effects. The

narrator's punishment lies in the fact that, despite becoming a New Woman, she also becomes a madwoman.

Lastly, in "Her Story" by Harriet Prescott Spofford, two different types of women are pitted against each other in order to receive patriarchal acceptance: a traditional woman, the wife, and the New Woman, the Other, which creates a space that breeds internalized misogyny and rejection of New Woman ideals. The very presence of the Other woman is a threat to the traditional woman's role, and acts as a symbol of the social changes that were in the process of occurring. All the traits that are described about the Other woman signals the nature of a New Woman: she "had a small fortune of her own...had a rare intelligence" as well as having various gifts—which according to the narrator were "unnatural in abundance" - such as drawing, singing, beauty, and having knowledge in architecture and cultures alike (Spofford 198, 200). She was plenty more progressive than the wife, and the aspects that the wife points out quite aggressively demonstrates her convictions against New Womanhood - the idea of a woman being progressive is so completely foreign to the wife that she belittles the Other woman's gifts as being unnatural, as if trying to solidify her Otherness and deny her womanhood. However, only once the wife loses her own sexuality does she feel threatened by the Other woman, as well as the representation of New Womanhood.

The wife's strength rests in her femininity: the symbol of her sexuality is her voice, but her femininity and sexual energy are sapped once the sexual power is shifted to the New Woman. Every morning, Spencer had placed fresh flowers in the bedroom for his wife, but once the Other woman placed a flower in her hair, the wife "went down to dinner for the first time without a flower at [her] throat" (Spofford 202). The wife's sexual power diminishes after she sees the flower resting on the Other woman's hair as flowers often represent sexuality; without

the flowers resting on her own throat, the wife's traditional feminine energy falters. The husband sees her as asexual, which leads him to deny her womanhood: "One day at last he told me that his mind was troubled by the suspicion that his marriage was a mistake; that on his part at least it had been wrong; that he had been thinking a priest should have the Church only for his bride" (Spofford 201). Further causing tension between the wife and the Other woman, the patriarchal attention shifts over to the Other, because she exudes sexuality. This solidifies the wife's internalized hatred towards New Womanhood, which gives way to her obedience towards her husband and his order of isolation, since her function as a woman is no longer productive in his household due to her forced asexuality.

Despite being an established New Woman, the Other woman suffers the harshest punishment. She is independent, intelligent, sexual, and modern, and because of these gifts, she is a threat to patriarchal America. Given the opportunity to travel to Europe in her youth, the Other woman was spared the trauma American women had to endure in order to become a New Woman. However, the Other woman's very presence in America's patriarchal society inevitably breaks her. Eva Gold and Thomas H. Fick's "A 'Masterpiece' of The Educated Eye¹: Convention, Gaze and Gender in Spofford's 'Her Story'" suggests that "a piece from the phallic steeple thus seems the befitting medium of chastisement for one whose great intelligence can be a threat as well as a convenience" (520). The Other woman's mind is altered by a 'phallic'-like steeple that fell from the highest point of the church - she is targeted by the very symbol of masculinity and male dominance, unironically, stemming from a predominantly male-run institution. Furthermore, juxtaposing the two different descriptions of the Other woman starting with the earliest description versus the description at the end of the story demonstrate her decline. She is introduced as "a little thing - a little thing, but wondrous fair...such perfect

features, such rich and splendid color, such great soft eyes - so soft, so black - so superb a smile... [she] had a rare intelligent” (Spofford 195, 198). In contrast, at the end of the story,

She is a little woman, swarthy as a Malay...A stone from a falling spire struck her from her horse, they say. The blow battered her and beat out reason and beauty. Her mind is dead: she remembers nothing, knows nothing; but follows me around like a dog...I think there is a gleam of intelligence, but the doctor says there was once too much intelligence, and her case is hopeless. (Spofford 205).

Once a New Woman without having to go through the trauma in an attempt to break her, the Other woman’s punishment is much harsher - she not only forcibly loses her intelligence, but her sexuality, modernity, and independence too. She is originally too progressive for America, and because she successfully manipulates a high-standing priest and male figure in society, Spencer, she is deemed too threatening to American society. She loses everything that the wife resented in New Womanhood, and is reduced to a dependent, childlike woman as to not threaten American society any longer.

In each of these three works, the women are punished for challenging the patriarchy via New Womanhood during nineteenth-century America. In an era where women struggled to have their voices heard, through their writings, Alcott, Gilman, and Spofford channeled unique female narrators with a strong sense of feminist ideals. In Alcott, Sybil is intelligent and a survivor, not allowing the men in her life dictate how she should live. In Gilman, no matter the cost, the narrator refuses imprisonment or victimization - she does everything in her power to break free of the patriarchal ideals she is forced to live with. While Prescott’s work may serve as a warning that New Womanhood is a dangerous ideology to pursue, it also demonstrates that both women in the story lose their power, regardless of whether they are traditional or progressive. All four

characters are scarred from the traumatic events that happen in their respective stories: Sybil in “A Whisper in the Dark” is haunted by the dead image of her mother, who suffered patriarchal punishment and died labeled as a madwoman because she did not successfully transform into a New Woman despite having all the tools to do so; the narrator in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” decides that in order for her to be free from patriarchal control she must lose herself in the process; the wife of Spencer in “Her Story” is committed to an institution because her function as a woman without her sexuality defining her was not useful for patriarchal society; and finally, despite her success as a New Woman, the Other woman forcibly losing her mind and independence suggests that no matter if a woman is traditional or an established and stable New Woman, America’s patriarchal society can and will punish threatening women who hint at societal reform. While these stories may seem skeptical of feminism, they serve more as a warning to women as well as encouragement: if one is not satisfied with their living situation, no matter how oppressed they are, the first step to change is action, but it does not come without sacrifices. While fourth wave feminism is still emerging today, women, and all those oppressed by society, must understand that personal trauma and sacrifices are expected in order to move forward towards change; thus, Alcott, Gilman, and Prescott seemingly encourage challenging the system, and offer varying degrees of consequences of doing so. What would women’s rights look like today if not for the voices of women in nineteenth-century America who challenged societal norms, as witnessed in these American Gothic stories?

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