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An exploration of narrative perspective in relation to the protagonist's descent into madness in *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a significant early work of American feminist culture that uses a homodiegetic fictional female narrator in order to critically examine nineteenth century attitudes towards women's mental health. When the story was first published in 1892, critics saw it as a 'detailed account of incipient insanity' (Gilman 1935: 119), almost like a medical textbook. It was only in the 1930s when her autobiography was published that it began to be seen as a great work of feminist literature. Stylistic analysis therefore reinforces the reappraisal of the work. Narrative perspective relates to 'the distinction between *what* is described and *from what perspective* it is being described' (Short 1996: 256). Analysing point of view therefore allows the reader to develop greater empathy and understanding for a character, which is important in this novella as it is a social and political commentary on the rights of women, examining the way their lives were controlled and limited by men. The fictional text is a collection of first person journal entries written by an unnamed woman. Her physician husband named John rents an old, remote mansion for the Summer and, as a form of mental treatment, the character-narrator is forbidden from working, staying in the mansion to recuperate her 'temporary nervous depression' (Gilman, 2012: 2). The narrator's descent into madness is evident as she is hindered from any intellectual or creative invigoration. With no stimulus other than the wallpaper in her bedroom, the patterns become increasingly intriguing and she begins to believe that there is a woman hiding behind the pattern. This image plagues her to the point that the narrator rips off the paper and convinces herself that she too was once trapped.

This essay will compare the female protagonist's narrative perspective before her mental breakdown, during, and the highest stage of her insanity. Before her breakdown, the character-narrator is more aware of the outside world, which will be analysed through spatial deixis and 'locative expressions' (Fowler 1996: 157). Her psychological perspective is evidenced by epistemic modality, revealing her worries and uncertainty about the treatment she must go through. As the protagonist is not allowed to exercise her mind, she focuses entirely on the imagery of the wallpaper, which is repeated over the course of the novella, mirroring the repeated pattern of the wallpaper's design. The narrator therefore shifts from having a broad perspective of life within her narrative 'camera angle' to becoming trapped in a closed off bedroom whilst going mad. Emotive and evaluative expressions highlight her disgust towards the wallpaper, and she begins to believe there is a woman stuck behind it. An analysis on social deixis emphasises the enigmatic character coming to life within the perspective of the protagonist. The coherence of the character's narrative then breaks down as sentences become disjointed, and the previous emphasis on epistemic modality shifts to a focus on deontic modality, verifying her incessant desire to embody the imaginative woman. Even at the end of the story when her husband uses interrogative constructions, the protagonist ignores him, stressing the height of her insanity.

As this novella is written in first person, there is a distinct limiting of point of view to that of the individual character within the narrative. The narrative of *discours* is an experiental style that uses an eyewitness account of the story. The internal, homodiegetic narrator, who is on the 'same' plane of exegesis as the narrative, allows us to fully understand and conceptualise the inner workings of the character's mind. As the narrator is also the hero of her own story, the narrative can thus be defined as 'autodiegetic' (Genette 1972: 253). Who speaks is who sees, and there is no escape from the single perspective. The reader is therefore restricted to the cognitive perspective of the character-narrator. This 'consistently restricted' mind-style

(Fowler 1977: 105) brings us psychologically closer to the central character. This 'focalised ignorance' (Hardy 2005: 374) demands the reader to look beyond the restricted world-view of the character-narrator at the bigger picture, which is that the speaker gives voice to all oppressed woman.

Stylistic cues about the viewing position that Gilman privileges includes the semantic principle of spatial deixis, which works by positioning the speaker within a physical space. A deictic centre is formed by the reflector of fiction, an 'origo' around which objects are situated in relation to their distance or proximity to the reflector. Before the protagonist experiences the height of her madness, she is more aware of her surroundings, the garden and her bedroom, and does not obsess solely over the wallpaper:

> 'Out of one window I can see the garden, those mysterious deepshaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees.

Out of another I get a lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf belonging to the estate. There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there from the house' (Gilman, 2012: 8). The reflector of fiction is in her bedroom looking out of the window, exposed through the repetition of the locative expression 'out of'. The narrative camera angle moves from one window to the other as the narrator peers between both. She looks out onto the garden, which is described through positive lexis including 'lovely' and 'beautiful'. The distal spatial deictic markers, '*those* [mysterious deepshaded arbors]' and '*there* [is a beautiful shaded lane]', exposes the distance away from the speaker. Additional locative expressions include the description of the 'lane that runs down there from the house'. spatial deixis is heightened within the text as the protagonist is forbidden to do anything that exercises the brain. Spatial deictic markers, 'runs down' and 'from the' reflects the narrator's wandering eye and healthy state of mind. Further emphasis on spatial deixis is depicted through the movement of the character-narrator:

> 'So I walk a little in the garden or down that lovely lane, sit on the porch under the roses, and lie down up here a good deal […] I lie here on this great immovable bed – it is nailed down, I believe – and follow that pattern about by the hour.' (Gilman 2012: 13)

Temporally, the character moves quickly from place to place. Locative expressions help the reader to keep up with the movement of the character, expressing how the narrator is not yet confined to the happenings of the wallpaper. Prepositional phrases indicate the place and directionality of the protagonist. These include, 'on the porch' and 'under the roses'. These phrases mark the character's position in relation to other objects. Further locative verbs include 'I walk', 'lie down', 'lie here' and 'nailed down', indicating the movement of the character around the scene. Demonstrative words including '*that* [lovely lane]' and '*that* [pattern]' express the physical orientation in language by indicating where the character-narrator is positioned in relation to other objects. The demonstratives in this instance propose that the narrator is located some distance away from the referents, the 'lovely lane' and 'pattern'. The deictic relationships are therefore distal as they are some distance away from the speaker. The demonstrative word '*this* [great immovable bed]' implies a proximal relationship to the referent. She is lying on the bed reflecting her spatial actions. By foregrounding a spatial point of view, Gilman suggests that the female character is aware of her surroundings, revealing her healthy mind.

In addition to physical viewpoint are additional stylistic markers, including references to the reflector's thoughts, feelings and senses. Uspensky (1973) describes how 'the authorial point of view relies on an individual consciousness (or perception)' (81). The nameless narrator must therefore be scrutinised on the psychological plane of subjectivity. Before her ensuing madness, she is a more passive character. She passively accepts her imprisonment and her surrender reflects how she increasingly looks inside the room including the happenings of the wallpaper. Her passivity is foregrounded through the use of epistemic modality:

> 'I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me […] But I find I get pretty tired when I try [...] I wish I could get well faster.' (Gilman 2012: 9)

Rimmon-Kenan explained how narrative perspective relies on 'the cognitive and the emotive orientation of the focalizer towards the focalized' (1983: 79). The psychological narrative perspective of a character is therefore of great importance in grasping the meaning of Gilman's narrator. The narrative is rich with what Uspensky (1973) calls *verba sentiendi,* words expressing perceptions, thoughts and feelings. This is exemplified in mental cognition processes, 'I think', 'I find' and 'I wish'. These hedges reveal the narrator's degree of thought, reinforcing her own opinions on the treatment. She is completely aware of her psychological state at this point, 'wish[ing]' to get better. The grammatical system of modality, which represents expressions of obligation and belief must also be closely probed. The modal verbs 'would' and 'could', which describe epistemic modality, reveal the narrator's efforts to understand and make sense of her situation. The text is rich in 'words of estrangement' (Fowler 1996: 177), reinforcing the speaker's degree of ambiguity and uncertainty. Negative shading is therefore of prominence emphasising her 'bewildered' personality. Although the narrator is uncertain about the effectiveness of her treatment, she is obliged to acquiesce. This passivity is reinforced by her husband, a proxy for the paternalistic and misogynistic society of the nineteenth century.

Despite the narrator's spatial awareness of her environment and the focus on epistemic modality, she frequently returns to describing the wallpaper through emotive and evaluative expressions. The repetition of the wallpaper throughout the narrative is representative of the fragility of her mental state and resulting madness. The emotive, evaluative expressions reveal the narrator's perceptions of the wallpaper as disgusting, initiating her desire to rip it down:

> 'The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.
> It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.' (Gilman 2012: 5-6)

Descriptive adjectives, 'yellow' and 'orange' are typically symbolic of brightness, sunshine and happiness. This directly contrasts the negative affective adjectives, 'revolting', 'smouldering', 'strangely' and 'sickly'. The affective adjectives reveal the altered perspective of the speaker who views the wallpaper with such disgust, so much so that she cannot stand it. However, for someone who despises it, she cannot stop talking about it, continually returning to its description, and essentially driving her insane. The more she describes the wallpaper, the more it comes to life, and she begins to believe that there is a woman trapped in the wallpaper. The enigmatic woman however is only a figment of her imagination, metaphorical of the trapped female condition of the late nineteenth century. The speaker also describes the wallpaper as having a 'yellow smell' (Gilman 2012: 25), which is an unusual way of expressing a particular odour. This abnormal description uncovers her deteriorating mind; her perception of the senses are blurring and she cannot identify the differences between them.

Before the speaker's height of madness, she would 'lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately' (Gilman 2012: 19). The description of the pattern is therefore additionally ambiguous for the reader who follows the point of view of the narrator. The narrator explains how she 'didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern' (Gilman 2012: 20). The point of view of the character has therefore become limited. The attenuated focalisation of 'the thing' expresses an impeded, distanced visual perspective, and the reader is temporarily limited to the visual range of the character. Like the narrator, we wish to find out what 'the thing' is. However, her perception changes and essentially becomes 'clearer' when she becomes more mad, realising later that:

> 'The front pattern *does* move – and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!
> Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.
> Then in the very bright stops she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.
> And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so'. (Gilman 2012: 25)

The character's perception change, indicative of her on-going madness, is emphasised when realising that the pattern in the wallpaper '*does*' move, the italics further highlighting the narrator's sudden recognition. Exclamatives additionally determine the perception change of the character, emphasising the importance of a particular statement and therefore the narrator's mind. The female narrator exclaims, 'no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!' stressing her realisation and shift in consciousness. Although the narrator is adamant about the reason for the shaking wallpaper, she also uses 'words of estrangement' (Fowler 1996) highlighting uncertainty, including '*Sometimes* [I think there are a great many women]' and '*sometimes* [only one]'. Although she cannot determine the number of women behind the wallpaper, she is positive there is someone. This level of ambiguity accentuates her deteriorating state of mind. The metaphor of the woman or women stuck behind the patterns comes to life further through an emphasis on distal deictic markers. The distal social deictic marker 'she' reveals the speaker's viewpoint as she watches the enigmatic woman in the wallpaper. The distal temporal deixis 'then' and the distal spatial deixis 'crawls around' and 'climb through' highlight the movement of the imaginary woman. The progressive verbal aspect 'crawling' and 'trying' indicates that the character is 'in progress' (Huddleston 2009: 74), bringing the woman to life. The progressive aspect 'implies that it is conceived of as taking place, thus as having a more or less dynamic character, rather than being wholly static' (Huddleston 2009: 74). The woman behind the wallpaper is therefore depicted as dynamic and more 'real' to the narrator. The metaphor continues as the speaker begins to rip the wallpaper down to free the enigmatic woman stuck behind:

> 'I got up and ran to help her.
> I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.' (Gilman 2012: 28)

The spatial deixis 'got up' and 'ran' determines the speaker's urgency to rescue the metaphorical woman. The repetition of 'and' emphasises the haste and panic of the character. The proximal social deictic marker '*I* [pulled]' and '*I* [shook]' corresponds with the social distal deixis, '*she* [shook]' and '*she* [pulled]'. The imaginary woman is personified into what the character-narrator believes is real life. The first person pronoun and second person pronoun then morph together to form the plural personal pronoun 'we'; evidence that the speaker and the enigmatic woman appear to have become one entity. They work together to fight against the metaphorical patriarchal male oppressors that confine them. After the sense of cathartic release depicted from ripping down the paper, the speaker is not only relieved but is also at the height of her madness. The speaker's lexis then begins to break down, and it is as if she is more freethinking and liberated when mad. This is emphasised through Gilman's use of disjointed sentences:

> 'I quite enjoy the room, now it is bare again.
> How those children did tear about here!
> This bedstead is fairly gnawed!
> But I must get to work.' (Gilman 2012: 29)

An issue of cohesion in the expression of the character-narrator's point of view is revealed. The coherence of the speaker's language shifts as sentences become fragmented and

random. The change in the character's syntactical expression proves the sporadic mind of someone who has gone insane. As she can no longer fixate on the wallpaper which has been ripped down, she begins to jump from sentence to sentence in an uncoordinated manner. Her mind is racing, depicted through the short, chopped sentences. The exclamatives additionally stress the character's erratic emotions. The disjointed sentences and exclamatives therefore evidence her independent and liberating mind, which contrarily goes hand-in-hand with her psychosis. Moreover, deontic modality is of focus as the speaker describes that she '*must* [get to work]'. The modal verb 'must' indicates how she is required to do so but it is ambiguous as to why. Perhaps it is her hindrance from intellectual work under her strict 'treatment' that her mind is rebelling from, forcing her to 'get to work' and the auxiliary verb 'must' accentuates this further. Transferring to deontic modality from the previous instances of epistemic modality highlights her incessant desire to use her brain and actually do something with her time - which drove her mad in the first place.

There is an overall shift in modality across the course of the novella from epistemic to deontic. According to Saeed (2003), deontic modals may convey two kinds of social knowledge, including obligation and permission. Obligation is concerned with 'what a person must do' and permission deals with 'someone's authority to permit somebody else to do something'. (Saeed 2003: 136) Obligation is heightened in *The Yellow Wallpaper* as the protagonist's embodiment of the imaginary woman becomes enforced through deontic modal verbs. Control over herself and her identity is lost. It is instead a necessity for her to embody the ghostly, creeping woman. Deontic modal verbs are foregrounded when the speaker describes that 'outside you have to creep on the ground' (Gilman 2012: 31), and also when the husband arrives home and faints, she 'had to creep over him every time!' (Gilman 2012: 32) 'Have to' and 'had to' are deontic modal verbs, establishing her compulsion to embody the woman behind the wallpaper. Her perceptions are warped by her madness – she is obliged to do as her mental state overcomes her. Despite her internal obligations, she does not listen externally to her husband John when asking the female protagonist direct questions:

> ''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!'' (Gilman 2012: 32)

The interrogative constructions, including the direct question, 'What is the matter?' would usually change the perspective of a character, however for the female protagonist it does not and she ignores him, highlighting her broken mental state. The interrogative construction, 'what are you doing!' which uses a exclamative rather than a question mark stresses John's sudden fear and worry over his wife. The questions fail to change the perceptions of the protagonist, and instead she 'kept on creeping'. The progressive aspect 'creeping' exhibits how she still has not stopped, emphasising further her disregard of John's direct questions. She emulates the enigmatic, imaginary woman she created in her mind who crept behind the wallpaper, and this is confirmed as she states, 'I've got out at last […] And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!' The modal verb 'can't' evidences permission, a form of deontic modality – the speaker has gained an element of control over her husband at the height of her madness.

To conclude, the experiental style and subjective narration of *The Yellow Wallpaper* allows the reader to delve deeper into the mind of the unnamed female narrator. Before her mental breakdown, the female speaker is someone who is more aware of her environment and physical surroundings, examined through spatial deictic markers. She is also more attentive psychologically; she desires to get rid of her illness and also questions whether her treatment would really succeed, surveyed through epistemic modality. Despite her broad awareness, the recurring imagery of the wallpaper is ever-present, which leads to her insane outburst. The repetitive imagery of the wallpaper plagues her, evidenced through emotive, evaluative expressions. Over time, she begins to believe that there is a woman stuck behind the wallpaper, and her spatial perspective therefore becomes limited to it, even personifying

the imaginary woman through distal social and spatial deictic markers. The coherence of the speaker's lexis and syntax begins to break down, describing how she is losing control over her mind. At the height of her madness, she is obliged by her mental state to embody the imaginative, creeping woman behind the wallpaper, evidenced through deontic modality. She has become, or so she thinks, the woman trapped behind the wallpaper, ignoring the interrogative constructions given by her husband/doctor. It is important to analyse point of view within this novella as it allows the reader to place themselves within the position of a female driven mad by the restrictions on her intellectual growth, implemented by her husband. As we follow her descent into madness at first hand, we are compelled to empathise with her character. Despite gaining an element of freedom at the end of the short story, the protagonist's mental state has completely deteriorated, highlighting the detrimental effects of patriarchy on the female condition.

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