

Mad Monster(ress): Hysteria in women in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and *Hedda Gabler*

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Abstract

Hysteria has been represented variously in the arts. The disease had essentially a female face that was created in order to understand female behavioural issues. Feminist intervention through fictional creations, stand formidably against this kind of representation. What it does is to reclaim the very disease and use it as a tool for female self expression. The two literary works, Henrik Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* (1891) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892) choose to navigate through the complex psychological trails of women’s minds and exhibit pertinent issues of women’s suppression and oppression. Though these texts are of different genres, they tend to address the major feminist issues of the times, exploring the psychology of women and their social standing.

Keywords: Hysteria, Women, Feminism, Psychology.

Hysteria has been an elusive malady for psychologists and clinical neurologists to analyse. Even when used colloquially it is something that signals excessive fear and frenzy. Decoding the subtle mysteries of hysteria was never an easy task, and several able authorities have failed to properly address this idea.

From the archaic times, Hysteria as a disease was attributed to something that is related to the female body. The word ‘hysteria’ is derived from the Greek word ‘hysterikos’ or ‘hysterika’ which means ‘of the womb’ or simply uterus. Hysteria was said to be caused by the wandering uterus inside the female body. Both Plato and Hippocrates were of the opinion that the uterus was an independent animal which wilfully wandered about the woman’s body and caused diseases.

Over the historical ages, the cause of Hysteria was also assigned to blockage of vaginal fluids, indicating a lack of sexual activity and even demonic possessions. Until the mid 1900s Hysteria was dealt with vibrators and/or high-pressure showers which were said to be effective in curing women of their ‘womanly-maladies’. The American Psychiatry Association dropped the term female hysteria as late as 1950.

With the advent of the advancement of psychoanalysis and medical research however hysteria gradually was associated with the brain rather than the uterus. This further meant that

hysteria could affect men as well. Very strangely, however this transition was not seen. Even in the present times hysteria is seldom seen in men by clinical practitioners. It was only in the post-war period that men came to be diagnosed with hysteria, which was also another term to describe shell-shock. Freud's theses on hysteria also came to be linked with a sexual lack or an effect of sexual fantasies.

Julliet Mitchell's Psychoanalysis and Feminism showed that the psychoanalysis rather than being the enemy of feminism was, in fact, essential to it. As Henry Ellenberger declares in the *Discovery of the Unconscious*, the discussion on Hysteria acted as a springboard for the discovery of the unconscious in psychoanalysis¹. Over time the diagnosis of hysteria has been broken down by feminist scholarship which has aimed to demystify the concept of hysteria as merely a medical concern to show more interest on it its social and cultural implications. Lillian Feder talks of a 'persistent psychological urge' which is actually the 'need to give external expression and symbolically valid form to the impulses of reckless physical self-assertion which are hidden in all of us, but which are normally kept under control'.² This anticipates feminist struggle which combats against androcentric language that reigns over the arena of language and self-expression. Psycholinguists and psychoanalysts have looked at the language-gender dimensions of contemporary hysteria and in its semiotic groundings.

Hysteria In the Yellow Wallpaper

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is a semi-autobiographical account of the author's findings during the period of rest cure. Gilman wrote in the article, 'Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper'³:

"For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia--and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still-good physique responded so promptly that he 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."

In her autobiography, '*The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935),' she further details the prescription where she was told to, "have your child with you all the time. . . . Lie down an hour after each meal"⁴

Gilman is critical of S. Weir Mitchell's method of treatment of neurasthenia and in the same article says that she wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper' so that several others could be rescued from such treatment and stopped from 'being driven crazy'. Gilman argued that this method of rest cure worsened her case of hysteria and brought her to the 'borderline of utter mental

¹ (Ellenberger)

² (Feder)

³ (Gilman, Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper)

⁴ (Freud)

ruin'. 'Studies on Hysteria'⁵ suggests that in early psychoanalysis the role of the doctor treating nervous diseases underwent a huge change: previously more attention was invested in the details of a patient's physical symptoms, however now the attention was directed towards the content of her speech. // Weir Mitchell also used this method in a few of his cases, where he was more interested to note the daily activities or the family background of the patient. In Gilman's report, this close attention to the patient's details did not have much positive effect. Weir Mitchell asks for Gilman to embrace her natural feminine duties and activities of wife and mother from which she swayed.

Anna Stiles describes in her essay, 'The Rest Cure 1873-1925'⁶ about the severe abusive effects of the treatment pioneered by Mitchell in several cases. She says that, "The rest cure was highly regimented. Mitchell strove for an atmosphere of 'order and control' that would serve as 'moral medication' for coddled or selfish invalids (*Fat and Blood* 41)"⁷. She further says, "Noticing that many nervous women looked thin and anemic, Mitchell assumed that their physical *and* mental health would improve once they gained weight and red blood cells. The function of the rest cure was to help patients gain fat and blood as rapidly as possible, through a rich diet and minimal exertion. Mitchell typically weighed patients every day, and counted any substantial weight gain as a clinical success. He also saw a woman's reproductive function as an index of her overall health. Mitchell's successful case studies often ended when the patient got married, resumed menstruating, or carried a pregnancy to term. He saw these external indicators as virtually infallible evidence of a cure, regardless of what the patient might say about her mental state."⁸ Stiles also mentions other literary examples like 'Mrs. Dalloway'⁹ where Woolf showcases the harmful effects of the rest cure. Here, the shell-shocked veteran Septimus Warren Smith goes on to consult Bradshaw, a psychologist who advocates this rest cure. Bradshaw asks him to "rest, rest, rest" and retire to his country house in order to combat his hysterical hallucinations. However, in the end, Smith jumps off the balcony and commits suicide. Woolf herself was on the receiving end of the rest cure, "when she alternated between suicidal depression and 'wild euphoria'"¹⁰

Modern clinical psychology may but term it as a sort of mental breakdown caused by post-partum depression. However feminist reading of it shows it as a severe cultural and patriarchal oppression that caused a hysteric situation over an existing hysteria and reinstated the woman into its traditional space of the domestic, invoking all the nurturing qualities of the mother. The text of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain, illustrates well the "anxiety-inducing connections between what women writers tend to see as their parallel confinements in texts, houses, and maternal female bodies."¹¹

⁵ (Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography*)

⁶ (Stiles)

⁷ (Stiles)

⁸ (Stiles)

⁹ (Woolf)

¹⁰ (Stiles)

¹¹ (Sandra Gilbert)

Gilman does not use her own name, and the story is told by a nameless narrator who but mentions other characters like her husband John, Jeanie, her sister-in-law, and also Mary, her nanny. This device is very ritualistic of portraying not a particular character but a sort of an everywoman character. Gilman records not only her plight but as a representation of her own sex that suffers in the hands of patriarchy. However she may also be canvassing the idea that during the period of her rest cure she is reduced to a vegetative state, where she lacks not just an agency but all sorts of vocal or physical authority. The fictive woman trapped in the wallpaper is thus, a stark reflection of the trapped narrator and the action that happens inside the wallpaper mirrors the inaction in her life. In the end of the story when she exclaims, "I've got out at last...in spite of you and Jane"¹², she points out to the fact that the woman (or women) encaged in the wallpaper is in fact she. Her speaking out at last also shows that she has managed to break the vocal barrier and re-establish her authority while John falls unconscious. Here it is also interesting to note that John was a physician himself who upholds the patriarchal discourses of traditional clinical psychology. He becomes a motif for the portrayal of the masculine, virile and hegemonic authority that snubs the protagonist and relegates her to the confines of an old nursery of a colonial mansion where the only active component is of the yellow-wallpaper. However despite this fact, the nameless narrator makes it a room her own. Her confinement is her empowerment as she creates art and picks up pattern from that old, torn wallpaper. The wallpaper is thus a site for her amusement as it is only enlivened through her active imagination. Her mental journey akin to feminist aspirations is something which only she has control over. She was refused the necessities of pen and paper and thus denied the freedom of expression; however through her hysterics she achieves a psychological space which is inaccessible by her husband John. She had previously tried to include John in her ideas, and thoughts. She had asked him to change the peculiar pattern of the wall-paper, but John refused saying that she would further want other things to be changed: "after the wall-paper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the hand of the stairs, and so on."¹³ Thus when the narrator rejects any help or companionship of her husband she is successful in creating a female utopian structure that is encapsulated in that yellow wallpaper of her secluded room. The ending scene shows the narrator circling the wallpaper and creeping around the room: the sight of her deformed, deconstructed body is both a sign of the deformity of language and the triumph of the female body over strong patriarchal ideals. The articulation of the failure of speech is constructed along the same lines of the deconstruction of language as we see in psychoanalytical expression.

Gilman's use of syntax in the articulation is also indicative of the fact. She begins in a controlled manner using her words in a lucid and coherent manner; however towards the end the sentences become short and erratic. This is also indicative of establishing an alternative order, an alternative body, one that shuns the suppressing power of culture and blooms through her imagination. The deformed body is thus an empowered body. Moreover as the woman inside the wallpaper is an extension of the hysteric female body of the narrator, the author figure is also an extension of the narrator figure. The semi-autobiographical nature of the story is also empowering for the author who gains authority and voice as opposed to her

¹² (Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Short Stories*)

¹³ (Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Short Stories*)

previous inexpressibleness. This reminds us of ‘écriture-feminine’ as coined by Helen Cixous who is of the opinion that:¹⁴

“Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement”.

Phallogocentric ideologies control the recognition of the female as only an element of the society by the power of language.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman committed suicide with a dose of chloroform soon after she completed writing her autobiography. In ‘Human Work’¹⁵ 1904 – she argued that it was possible for women to have both work and marriage. She advocates the need for women to be employed in socio-economic work and the lack of it may hinder the evolution of society as women would forever be trapped in a space that forced them to remain without access to the public space and enjoy its privileges.

Hysteria in Hedda Gabler.

An interesting instance of hysteria occurs in Ibsen’s drama ‘Hedda Gabler’¹⁶ (1890), where the titular character commits suicide at the end of the play. Hedda is newly-wed, bored wife of a loving and caring husband who is unable to adjust to the struggling bourgeois lifestyle which is in contrast with the aristocratic background she comes from. Joseph Wood Krutch in his description considered Hedda as the first-fully developed neurotic female protagonists of literature¹⁷. The troubled female mind is something that Ibsen had explored in several of his works. Since the publication of ‘A Doll House’¹⁸ in 1879, Ibsen’s social dramas have dealt with recognition of women with a gendered identity that differs vehemently from the existing norm: a femininity that puts them in a conspicuously different position than the corresponding society. Several critics were of the opinion that Hedda presented a convoluted gender identity, one which is not typically female, an unnaturalness that was hard to accept. It was received with utmost confusion as it was produced simultaneously in English, Dutch, German, French and Russian. A critic in *Morganbladet* called Hedda, ‘a monster’ of a woman who had no other counterpart in the whole world¹⁹.

A close Freudian psychoanalytical study of the hysterical protagonist of Hedda Gabler is interesting. Kate Taylor stated in an article published in *The New York Times* that Freud learnt Norwegian to study Ibsen’s plays in the original language²⁰. In several instances the play anticipates certain important key points of Freudian psychosis.

¹⁴ (Cixous)

¹⁵ (Gilman, Human Work)

¹⁶ (Ibsen, Hedda Gabler)

¹⁷ (Krutch)

(Ibsen, A Doll's House)¹⁸

¹⁹ (Nilsen)

(Taylor)²⁰

The relationship between Hedda's father, General Gabler and her can be explained through Freudian terms. She has been instilled a sense of strict discipline by her paternal family. The handling of a pistol, which is significant symbol for Hedda's hysteria and which also ultimately, brings about her death, has been taught to her by the General. The pistol could also be seen as Freudian phallic symbol, which eventually is owned by her and thus in her suicide she gains fulfilment. Moreover Hedda's dissatisfaction with the men she has in her life can also be seen under a Freudian lens. She has a loveless, boring marriage where it is certain that she agreed to the alliance because of the bright prospects of her husband's academic career. Even before her marriage she refused the advances of Ejlert Lovborg, a genius and in fact the greatest academic competitor of Jurgen Tasman, Hedda's husband. She is dissatisfied with the men surrounding her as none could rise to the standards of General Gabler and suffers from the Electra complex as stated by Freud/Jung. Hedda suppresses her sexuality as none could satisfy or attract her. Her suppressed sexuality and lack of expression may be a cause for her hysterical neurosis. She has rejected her femininity where she wants to indulge in the flirtations of men at parties and resents her pregnancy. Freud's notion of Transference, which is an unconscious redirection of feelings from one person to another, can also be seen in Hedda. Hedda's suppressed sexuality gives in to her overburdening sense of dissatisfaction that she wishes harm for others. She is jealous of the men flirting at parties, jealous of Mrs. Elvsted who has considerable control over Lovborg. When Lovborg is frustrated that he has misplaced the manuscript of his theses, Hedda instead of returning it back, hands over her father's pistol asking him to have a 'beautiful suicide'. Karl Stern the psychiatrist considers Hedda as the depiction of a 'phallic woman' who refuses normal female 'desire to receive, to hold and to nourish.'²¹ He thinks that she burns the manuscript because it is exclusively for the masculine domain. Hedda's idiosyncrasies are also similar of the different case histories of hysterical female patients that Freud had to deal with. Ibsen articulates Hedda's nervousness through her "constant pacing of the floor, crossing the room needlessly, drumming her fingers, clenching her fists, 'as if in a frenzy'. Her 'flinging back' the curtains suggests a sense of confinement, of intolerable pressure, such as plagues all the hysterics described in Freud's 'Studies on Hysteria(The Newly Born Woman)'"²²

What Freudian analysis does not address is a sort of a enfranchising that Hedda achieves at the end of the play. A deviant female body, Hedda is not the typical domesticated marital heroine. She even kills herself in the end refusing to conform to her motherly duties and performing an exit from the mundane shackles of marriage reclaiming her place as an emancipated individual. She is not a person who is a victim of the psychosis of Hysteria, but a multilayered character who discloses every aspect of it and thus establishing her autonomy. Ibsen aimed at creating Hedda as an 'unwomanly woman' who shows masculine attributes of 'horse-riding' or 'pistol-shooting'. Despite such affinities for traditional masculine traits inherited by her father, she is also disciplined into a patriarchal order of the day where she had to be in a heterosexual traditional, marital union. Hedda, though initially follows the wishes of her father, she is ultimately able to pull out of her father's regimented instructions. Hedda's performance speaks aloud in place of her speech. She speaks of her mental frenzy, as she states, "Well, you see--these impulses come over me all of a sudden; and I cannot

²¹ (Templeton)

²² (Finney)

resist them. [Throws herself down in the easy-chair by the stove.] Oh, I don't know how to explain it."²³ Hedda can identify the bouts of insanity and hysteria that grips her over and she cannot explain it. Her inability to speak is compensated through her performance where she discloses a much better view of her person. Her creative and sexual autonomy is 'unspeakable' but a powerhouse of emotions which are waiting to be unleashed. 'Hedda Gabler' uses "the subtle theme of the imaginary child to explore what it means to live creatively."²⁴ When Ejlert has left her alone, Hedda burns the manuscript of his book, which for her is the representative of Ejlert and Thea's love child. She will terminate her pregnancy by killing herself later. Hedda disapproves of all sorts of generative continuity. This symbolizes that Hedda's growth of power shuns away all other kinds of germane knowledge that is emblematic of a patriarchal generation. She convinces her husband later that it was for his own good, however she does such a deed because she derives particular pleasure from it: "Now I burn – I burn the baby." Gail Finney says that Hedda is "the personification of the hysterization of the female body, or the reduction of the woman to her status as a female."²⁵ Finney comments on Hedda's relegation of her status in carrying out her maternal functions. In fact, Hedda's pregnancy is the most unnerving part that torments her. She says, "Oh it is killing me,-it is killing me all this!"²⁶ It's her pregnancy that is the eventual cause for her death. She loathes heterogeneity, so much that she is ready to take her own life. The play never overtly talks about her pregnancy but is evident throughout the text. It is almost as if the uterus moves and pervades the terrain of the script indicating a sort of classic female hysteria. Thus her hysterical speaking body communicates via symptom that cannot be expressed in verbal language.

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²³ (Ibsen, Hedda Gabler)

²⁴ (Hand)

²⁵ (Finney)

²⁶ (Ibsen, Hedda Gabler)

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