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FEMALE DOMESTIC HORROR THROUGH THE LENS OF THE CONTEMPORARY

WORK OF CARMEN MARIA MACHADO

Female Domestic Literary Horror through the Lens of the

Contemporary Work of Carmen Maria Machado

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines domestic female horror literature by looking both at classic works such as *Jane Eyre*, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and the short fiction of Shirley Jackson as well as the current day work of author Carmen Maria Machado. I use these texts as well as historical and societal context to understand horror as female, and further, horror as feminist. Machado’s work is used as a reflection of 21st century society, and other works reflect on how we got here. I look at the literature itself, comparing works to each other, to other literary scholarship, and to contextualizing historical texts. I used physical and electronic sources from the Denison Library and Ohio LINK to compose my research. This paper faces female horror as comprising of three parts (which the paper is divided into): body horror, physical space horror, and relationship horror. These three sections contain a total of five shorter essays. These elements ultimately reflect female reality in horror, and horror in female reality.

Introduction

To understand domestic female horror, we must understand its context. General horror is often defined within the confines of slasher horror, without the appreciation for various subgenres of horror and all the ways that the disturbing can be portrayed. Ken Gelder's analysis allows us to take a step back. In his introduction to *The Horror Reader*, Gelder explains that the word horror itself comes "from the Latin *horrere*, to shudder" (2) as well as that "horror, its rhetorics, its narratives, the paradigms and discourses it provides for imagining and classifying the world inhabits that system – our system – for better or worse" (1). He goes on to say that "Horror can sometimes find itself championed as a genre because the disturbance it willfully produces is in fact a disturbance of cultural and ideological categories we may have taken for granted" (Gelder 3). Horror is not just blood for blood's sake. Horror can cause us to understand the world a little bit better.

My interest in female domestic horror comes from the narrowing in on Gelder's understanding of horror, and looking at the female domestic sphere, particularly in literature. Women in particular were brought into the horror sphere by the Gothic, which traditionally takes place in "the castle" and disturbs it. Norms are disrupted by a villain, causing the family structure to be disrupted. Angela Wright in her essay "Heroines in Flight" explains that "Gothic writing of the 1790s teaches its readership about both the values of maintaining virtue, and the perils of shedding that self-same commodity" (19). Wright continues on to explain how these lines become blurred throughout the Gothic era, especially pertaining to how women are betrayed.

Ellen Moers coined the term "the Female Gothic," shining a spotlight onto not only Gothic work but the women behind much of it. She explains, "What I mean by Female Gothic is easily defined: the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, sicne the

eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic. But what I mean—or anyone else means—by ‘the Gothic’ is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear” (Moers 90). Moers highlights that these are female authors speaking on female issues, using Gothic horror as an avenue to explore these topics.

I’ve decided to use the term domestic female horror as a way to encompass the work I speak on without strictly defining it as Gothic. Like Moers, I am concerned with female authors speaking on female issues, often within domestic spaces. I extend the definition to include more current work, like Machado’s, though Machado does write with Gothic elements, just without a Gothic structure. Ultimately, I am looking at Gelder’s assertion that horror examines and disturbs the system we live within, particularly, the system of patriarchy – where men have ultimate societal power over women.

Domestic female horror has a three-part structure: body horror, physical space horror, and relationship horror. These elements are expressed by many female Gothic and horror authors in stories that are shocking not due to vulgarity, but instead for the realism they depict. Female horror is not about creating new fears in the reader; rather, it is about expressing women’s greatest fears, which have already been realized. Within this three-part structure, I explore themes of control, confinement, the home, standards for women, and the medical system – all under the umbrella of patriarchal society.

Domestic female horror underscores that no place is safe for women, not even within their own skin. Carmen Maria Machado’s work expands on these fears and embraces the trope of the madwoman in the attic, encouraging women to recognize the horrors in their world and the patriarchal systems that put them there. Female horror has always been political, but Machado’s

unconventional storytelling and fresh perspective encourages readers to reflect more and more on their daily lives.

PART ONE: BODY

The Body and Control in Female Literary Horror

“Control, again, is the real issue here. Our bodies are our homes, and their internal weather is our climate: we’re influenced by how we physically feel, whether we’re trying to ignore those feelings (of pain, or nausea, or whatever) or trying to cure them. [...] When our bodies are out of control, our world becomes chaos, no matter what may be happening on the other side of the skin.” - Kathe Koja, qtd by Steffen Hanke in *Horror* (306).

Female horror highlights the control of women’s bodies and the power struggle over the body. As people, our bodies are one thing that is inherently ours—material possessions can go away, but we will always remain in our corporeal form. However, for women, bodily autonomy is not a guarantee. Ask any feminist. During my research period, the Supreme Court of the United States overturned *Roe vs. Wade* in the *Dobbs vs. Jackson* case, ending 50 years of precedent for bodily autonomy—a period that was made even more difficult by conservative legislators attempting to block access. This paper is not about abortion or *Roe vs. Wade*. I bring it up to highlight the context within which I am writing this paper and that, though many of my texts are from past centuries, institutions of patriarchy have proven time and time again that the struggle for control over the female body will always remain.

I began this section by highlighting a quotation by female horror author Kathe Koja, who was prompted by interviewer Steffen Hanke to speak on control over the body. He asks about

why her work often includes “bathroom fiction,” where her characters are often depicted urinating, being nauseous, and experiencing hunger. Readers, according to Koja, understand these sensations, as well as the need to have control over their own bodies (Hanke 306). In “The Husband Stitch,” Carmen Maria Machado shows how easy it is for these barriers to be broken down and for women to lose that autonomy.

“The Husband Stitch” is a retelling of a children’s horror story that is often spread by word of mouth about a woman who will not let her husband touch the green ribbon around her neck. When the two are together on their death beds, she finally lets him pull it, and her head tumbles to the floor. Machado changes the ending, where the woman instead decides when to let him pull the ribbon, when she has decided she is through with life. The narrator describes her vulnerability to her husband, as she engages in more sexual acts for him, allowing him to go further and further, sharing her body with him. He constantly pushes her boundaries, and we see this especially relating to the ribbon.

He startles me then, running his hand around my throat. I put up my hands to stop him but he uses his strength, grabbing my wrists with one hand as he touches the ribbon with the other. He presses the silky length with his thumb. He touches the bow delicately, as if he is massaging my sex. ‘Please,’ I say. ‘Please don’t,’ (Machado 12).

It doesn’t matter how much the narrator is willing to give her husband, he always wants more. He always wants more control, he wants to take, and he uses his power to get what he wants. Eventually, he relents, and the narrator is able to step away with her ribbon intact. But he shows here how easily he could just pull it off, how he could take away her control, how the relationship is not an equal exchange but instead a power dynamic. Machado uses physical

language here, “presses,” “touches... delicately,” “massaging.” Male control connects to eroticism seamlessly.

The story gets its title from a medical slang term for a stitch given to a woman after she gives birth. In Machado’s story, the narrator gives birth to a baby boy, and the doctor must cut her vaginal opening in order for her to push the child out. The doctor, afterwards, stitches her up. “‘How much to get that extra stitch?’ [my husband] asks. ‘You offer that, right?’ ‘Please,’ I say to him. But it comes out slurred and twisted and possibly no more than a small moan. Neither man turns his head toward me. The doctor chuckles. ‘You aren’t the first-’” (Machado 17). Female horror is terrifying because it happens every day. The husband stitch is a real occurrence where doctors sew women’s vaginal openings up tighter in order to give the husband more pleasure in sex, and they do it without the consent of the woman. Sometimes the husband asks for it, like in Machado’s story, or sometimes the doctor does it without asking anyone, considering it a favor. This is horrific. It takes place in a horror story about a woman whose head comes clean off. And yet the decapitation is not the scariest part of the story. Female horror centers around these real patriarchal institutions that exist to please men and control women, and while the addition of supernatural elements might add to the horror, they mostly amplify what is already in place.

Women in Shirley Jackson’s work more subtly reveal patriarchal institutions as a sort of indirect control over women, where the female characters act as a result of their influence. Shirley Jackson’s “The Daemon Lover” (within her short story collection, *The Lottery and Other Stories*) is about a woman who believes she is getting married and is waiting for her groom to arrive at her apartment so they can go to the courthouse and elope. This man never shows. The

woman maintains her faith, deluding herself not only that he will turn up, but likely deluding herself of his existence. The story begins with her obsessing over the appearance of her apartment as well as what to wear. “Anxiously, she pulled through the dresses in the closet, and hesitated over a print she had worn the summer before; it was too young for her, and it had a ruffled nick, and it was very early in the year for a print dress, but still...” (Jackson 9). The woman goes back and forth on her dress decision, changing several times, trying to decide what is bridal and what would be age-appropriate, and she eventually chooses the print dress that she wanted in the first place. Later in the story, as she traverses throughout the city looking for her groom, it rips.

Jackson depicts here how, though this woman theoretically had agency over what she decides to wear, there are various factors going into that decision. She wonders what is expected of her, as a woman in her 30s getting married, and Jackson spends several pages of the narrator agonizing over her appearance, making sure she looks perfect for James. She goes through every detail he could focus on, worrying that if she wears a print, he will believe she is trying to look young, which would then lead him to believe she is being deceptive (Jackson 11). Although we readers only hear her internal monologue, it is obvious that societal standards have an impact on her.

The woman in “The Daemon Lover” agonizes over every detail of her appearance because that is the only part of the situation she has control over. She cannot make her groom show up, but she can change her dress several times. Jackson shows that even this control is an illusion when the woman’s dress rips twice; first when she is going back and forth changing, and later while she is in the city. It didn’t matter how much thought the woman put into her

appearance and how she would present herself, in the end, her dress still ripped, and she was unable to find her beloved.

We see in both Machado's and Jackson's work how control is taken from women, whether in a big or a small way. Machado's narrator is given access to whatever her husband decides, and he holds her fate, literally, in his hands. Jackson's character attempts to assert her control over a difficult situation by honing in on her appearance, but she fails. The woman is overly concerned about her marital situation and her age, things she doesn't have control over, and by extension cannot control her appearance despite her efforts. These unnamed women are confined within the patriarchal institutions of medicine and of marriage, and they are trapped by their standards.

“Eight Bites” is an *Unbearable Weight*

Appetite is a bodily function that indicates when it is time for us to fuel our bodies with energy. This is scientific, yet for women in a patriarchal society, appetite has been linked to morality. Eating less is seen as proper, disciplined, a way to be in control of your own body. When society, or companies that exist and make money within that society, makes these decisions, they come to the quiet understanding that these standards aren't going to be necessarily achievable for the average woman. When this happens, they must sell cures for the problems they create.

Carmen Maria Machado's short story “Eight Bites” explores a narrator whose three sisters all had bariatric surgery in order to suppress their appetites and lose weight. The narrator, ashamed that her body is permanently changed after giving birth to her daughter over 20 years

ago, decides to get the surgery too. The narrator's discomfort in her own body does not arrive organically, it comes from the influences around her that inform her of all of her flaws.

Susan Bordo's book, *Unbearable Weight*, was first published in 1993 yet so clearly connects to Machado's 2017 story as well as 21st century ideals of the female body. Bordo explores the body not only as being, but as a statement. In the chapter "Hunger as Ideology," Bordo explains an advert where two little girls watch one of their mothers, excited at how thin she is. Her daughter explains that her secret is a diet drink, the center of the advertisement. Bordo analyzes,

Far more unnerving is the psychological acuity of the ad's focus, not on the size and shape of bodies, but on a certain subjectivity, represented by the absent but central figure of the mother, the woman who eats, only "not so much." We never see her picture; we are left to imagine her ideal beauty and slenderness. But what she looks like is not important, in any case; what is important is the fact that she has achieved what we might call a "cool" (that is, casual) relation to food. She is not starving herself (an obsession, indicating the continuing power of food), but neither is she desperately and shamefully binging in some private corner. Eating has become, for her, no big deal (Bordo 100).

This thin mother is the ideal. Effortlessly thin, not obsessive, but with a secret she hardly has to think about.

In "Eight Bites," the narrator's mother similarly has a weight-loss secret that causes her to be the envy of her daughters.

She always said eight bites are all you need, to get the sense of what you are eating. Even though she never counted out loud, I could hear the eight bites as clearly as if a game show audience was counting backwards, raucous and triumphant, and after one she would set her fork down, even if there was food left on her plate. She didn't mess around, my mother. No pushing food in circles or pretending. Iron will, slender waistline. Eight bites let her compliment the hostess. Eight bites lined her stomach like insulation rolled into the walls of houses. I wished she was still alive, to see the women her daughters had become (Machado 151-152).

Just like the advert mother, the narrator's mother is "absent but central." Despite her absence, the narrator's mother is the image of discipline to her daughters, so much so that they decide to go through with permanent surgery to suppress their appetites forever. Unable to achieve the discipline of their mother, they decide to take an expensive and painful shortcut. They too could have it all, it would only cost them a simple surgical procedure and part of their vital organs.

Bordo gives various examples of food advertisements, diet foods, desserts, food geared towards men, food geared towards women. At the heart of these examples, she iterates, "As gender ideology, the ads I have been discussing are not distinctively contemporary but continue a well-worn representational tradition, arguably inaugurated in the Victorian era, in which the depiction of women eating, particularly in sensuous surrender to rich, exciting food, is taboo" (Bordo 110). Bordo shows an advert where an ice cream sundae is labeled "TEMPTATION" and a "70 Calorie Alba Fit 'n' Frosty Shake" is labeled "SALVATION" (116). In a Christian patriarchal society, giving into temptation is assigned a moral value. Choosing a different route, whether it be diet food, food restriction, or appetite suppressing surgery, is the salvation that saves the woman from temptation. This was true in 1993, and it is just as true today. The

imagery we see in advertisements as well as in our upbringing is paramount to how we feel about ourselves. The narrator in “Eight Bites” watches her mother, and later her sisters post-surgery be given large plates of food and not feel the need to finish it.

When we went out, they ordered large meals and then said, “I couldn’t possibly.” They always said this, always, that decorous insistence that they *couldn’t possibly*, but for once, they actually meant it—that bashful lie had been converted into truth vis-à-vis a medical procedure. They angled their forks and cut impossibly tiny portions of food—doll-sized cubes of watermelon, a slender stalk of peashoot, a corner of a sandwich as if they needed to feed a crowd loaves-and-fishes style with that single serving of chicken salad—and swallowed them like a great decadence (Machado 151).

Machado compares the small amounts of food eaten by the sisters to the Christian story of Jesus feeding a crowd with only a few loaves of bread and fish. Though nobody is eating but them, the food that will ultimately be wasted is a sacrifice, and it holds a positive moral value. With the assistance of surgery, these women are finally able to copy their mother, and this is decidedly a good thing.

After the narrator in “Eight Bites” gets her surgery done, she begins to hear noises throughout her house. Something new, bigger than mice, more haunting. Her sisters say that after their surgeries, they felt a new presence too. They all describe it differently, one thinking of it as her joy, another thinking of it as her inner beauty. One of them tells her, “My former shame slunk from shadow to shadow, as it should have. It will go away, after a while. You won’t even notice and then one day it’ll be gone” (Machado 162). It does not go away for the narrator, and

the story ends with this person-like mass eventually cupping her face as she passes away at the ripe age of 79.

Machado flips the script on the idea of temptation and salvation of food. This creature that she can always hear below her floorboards, a tell-tale heart of body mass, represents her body standing up for itself. Appetite keeps us alive. It indicates when we need energy. With the surgery, the narrator takes away a part of who she is. She is no longer able to enjoy food, instead eating is only seen as necessary for sustenance every once in a while. But with her attempt to control her temptation, her temptation is set free to roam within the walls. The narrator, just before she dies, apologizes to the mass of body-shaped, boneless, dripping fat. She cut up her body to satisfy some sort of urge she thought would be able to go away, giving into the peer pressure of her sisters and the legacy of her mother. But she could not get rid of her self-loathing, her temptation, her female rage. Though she got rid of the weight, it is also “absent but central.”

Bardo and Machado both show that a patriarchal society creates problems for women, and then they try to sell them cures. Bardo’s chapter title, “Hunger as Ideology,” sums up this idea of morality of food succinctly. There is no way to win when you are surrounded by a system that is pointed against human urges of hunger. Either you give into temptation, or you buy into their salvation. When hunger equals morality, women are backed into a corner to face horror.

PART TWO: PHYSICAL SPACE

Angels and Devils

“If a woman’s place is allegedly in the home, the Gothic has been the mode of writing which has perhaps most brilliantly articulated and symbolized the terrors of that domestic space.

Possession, confinement, penetration, loss of identity are all shadows which haunt the home for women, particularly those who inhabit - or fear inhabiting - the roles of housewife and mother.” -

Diana Wallace in ““A Woman’s Place”” (75).

The home should be a safe haven, not *for* the woman, but *created* by the woman. This idea of a woman as homemaker has pervaded a patriarchal culture for centuries and was articulated famously by Coventry Patmore in his poem “The Angel in the House.” The angel in question is his wife, who he saw as the perfect homemaker who created and kept peace for the home and family. This poem is composed of four books full of prose, all praising Patmore’s wife for upholding the home and being the picture of a perfect wife. One passage that sticks out is in Canto II, entitled “The Changed Alliance.” Patmore speaks of a caged bird that is confused at its newfound freedom when the cage is opened. He compares the bird to a maiden, writing,

“The maiden so, from love’s free sky

In chaste and prudent counsels caged,

But longing to be loosen’d by

Her suitor’s faith declared and gaged,

When blest with that release desired,

First doubts if truly she is free,
Then pauses, restlessly retired,
Alarm'd at too much liberty;
But soon, remembering all her debt
To plighted passion, gets by rote
Her duty; says, 'I love him!' (Patmore 129-130).

Patmore explains that a woman gains freedom not by a literal opening of a cage, like with the bird, but instead when her suitor's faith is "declared and gaged." Instead of flying, a woman gains freedom by residing in the home her husband permits her to occupy. She must remember "all her debt" - that which she owes the man for providing for her. It is "her duty" to declare her love for him. This declaration "gets by rote," meaning it becomes routine to have this duty to her husband, something she does not need to think critically about.

In this almost 200-page tome, Patmore fills each passage to the brim with expectations of devotion by the wife to the husband, their children, and the haven she creates - making the house into a home. In her journal article on the poem, Joan Hoffman looks at the poem with a 21st century feminist lens, saying,

the social order being supported here by the angel-wife's place within it is most assuredly a conservative hierarchical one grounded in sexual repression within the patriarchy. By providing well-defined and religiously sanctioned social roles for both husband and wife,

[...] marriage creates and endorses a dichotomization of the sexes, [...] that upholds as ‘natural’“ (265).

Hoffman reveals what Patmore ultimately achieves in authoring “The Angel in the House:” continuing to uphold gender norms with the husband as above the wife. Author Virginia Woolf spoke of the angel-wife in her speech “Professions for Women,” explaining that the angel haunted her, and that she must put an end to this woman that attempted to infuse patriarchy into every word of her writing. Woolf asserted, “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.”

Domestic female horror centers exactly what Woolf emphasized as part of her craft: the killing of the Angel in the House. The woman writers and their texts that I have examined each carry their own types of destruction. Whether it be the damaging of relationships, property, or people, domestic female horror burns everything down (either figuratively or literally). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar coined the term “the madwoman in the attic” by co-teaching a course and later co-authoring a book of the same name. The madwoman in the attic trope originates with Mr. Rochester’s wife Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, who is a literal madwoman whom he locks in his attic. Bertha eventually gets her revenge; Jane hears the story told as gossip by another local woman. Bertha sets fire to Thornfield Hall, blinding Rochester in the process. Jane’s interlocuter describes her as ““a big woman, and had long back hair: we could see it streaming against the flames as she stood. [...] We saw [Rochester] approach her; and then, ma’am, she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement. [...] afterwards the house was burnt to the ground: there are only some bits of walls standing now”” (Brontë 385). Bertha is described as a villain, almost terrifying, with her back to the flames in anguish as she faces Jane’s romantic interest before falling to her death. Yes, Bertha is a

madwoman, but in a way, she is also a martyr. She destroys the house that she was locked in before finally ending her life on her terms, gaining a type of control she never was given by Rochester. She burns down Thornfield Hall, burning any notion of the angel with it.

Bertha is only a side character in Jane's story, but she acts on her own terms. Gilbert and Gubar take this a step further, asserting, "Bertha, in other words, is Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead" (360). Jane's child self has been repressed throughout her life, especially when she is sent to live at Gateshead in order to become a proper woman. Bertha has also been locked away, but instead of repressing her anger, she has allowed it to boil over. Both women become residents at Thornfield Hall, but only one is able to destroy it, cleansing away Rochester's abuse with fire.

In a similarly destructive story, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" depicts the largest intersection of body, relationships, and physical space, with physical space at the very center. (I will cover the history of this short story in more detail in Part Three: Relationships.) Our unnamed narrator is trapped in a summer home to treat her hysteria, with her doctor husband containing her to a single room. The narrator abhors the wallpaper, but he refuses to change it for her. Like Bertha, our narrator is contained to a single location and disallowed from exiting, which only heightens her instability. The story ends like Bertha's story ends; with the narrator destroying the room in a fit of madness, ripping all the yellow paper off the walls. Her husband eventually gets into the room, where he is confronted by the destruction she caused. "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 [your sister]. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'" (Gilman 36).

Over the course of her treatment for hysteria, the narrator developed actual psychosis by believing first that there was a woman trapped in the wallpaper, and by the end of her tale, that the woman was her.

Both women were faced with confinement by their husbands, expectations to be quiet and fulfill their individual roles. Bertha and the female narrator are both shown destroying the houses in which they were held captive and killing the angel. These texts, with *Jane Eyre* being published before “The Angel in the House” and “The Yellow Wallpaper” being published after, show that the home is not a safe space in the way that Patmore desires. Both these stories show the irony of home as a haven. Bertha and the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” fall outside marital expectations and standards, so they are met with punishment. When punished with confinement, these women turn from angels to madwomen.

In her own battle with the angel, Woolf says,

My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must--to put it bluntly--tell lies if they are to succeed. Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her.

Like Woolf, these characters - and perhaps, the authors that created them - struggle with being able to have their own opinions and being allowed to think without the angel (or the man that created her) hovering over their shoulder. There is no compromise when it comes to the angel, just as there is no compromise in the marriages of Bertha and the narrator. There must be destruction.

PART THREE: RELATIONSHIPS

Hysteria in “The Yellow Wallpaper:”

How a Patriarchal Medical System Takes Away Women’s Autonomy

Our narrator is ill. Her husband is sure of it, and he must be right, because he is a physician. Physicians know these things. I am referring to the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a short story about a woman who is locked away in a room and finds interest in the wallpaper, as there is nothing else to do. “The Yellow Wallpaper” was originally published in 1892, the year before the death of Jean-Martin Charcot. Charcot was a champion for the techniques applied to our narrator, but Charcot is – unfortunately – as real as they come. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a piece of autofiction about the disease hysteria, which is the disease our narrator is implied to have. We can connect Charcot and Gilman as opposites – the antagonist and the oppressed, as Gilman herself was a hysteria patient and Charcot made his harmful practices known. “The Yellow Wallpaper” fills in a historical gap; Gilman gives a perspective for modern day readers of what the women diagnosed

with hysteria had to go through – and the power that the men in their lives (both husbands and physicians) had over them.

To fully define hysteria is impossible. Hysteria is anything that a woman does that men do not like or understand. In her book chapter on hysteria, Mary James says that dating back to the 17th century (and we see this go into the 19th century), doctors have been unable to pin down a single definition for the diagnosis. She further explains, “Many doctors, through the generations, diagnosed hysteria as any ‘nervous’ malady, especially if associated with fits or convulsions or a feeling of strangulation,” (James 78). James goes on to give a laundry list of reasons a doctor might diagnose hysteria, including various physical symptoms and odd female behavior (78-79). Odd according to whom? Why, of course, the men that are unable to comprehend women outside of societal norms.

Gilman, and as an extension of herself, the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” fall outside these norms heavily. Our narrator writes,

So I take phosphates or phosphites— whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to “work” until I am well again. Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, 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— having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition (Gilman 10).

Middle- and upper-class white women are not meant to work normally in 19th century society, which I speak about in Part Two: Physical Space. The narrator’s desire to – especially against the orders of her husband and brother (who are both physicians) – is abnormal. Why would she want

to work anyway? She is a woman, after all. It is important to note here that Gilman and her narrator are both writers, both wanting to work but also being constrained by patriarchy.

Men's misunderstanding of women was not just limited to their behavior, but they also did not understand female biology. Terri Kapsalis gives information on one reputed cause of hysteria, explaining that

The uterus was believed to wander around the body like an animal, hungry for semen. If it wandered the wrong direction and made its way to the throat there would be choking, coughing or loss of voice, if it got stuck in the rib cage, there would be chest pain or shortness of breath, and so on. Most any symptom that belonged to a female body could be attributed to that wandering uterus.

Since hysteria was only diagnosed in women, the male doctors defined this disease through what they saw as uniquely female: the uterus. They believed women to be out of control of their own bodies, particularly because the uterus is unable to be seen (as opposed to male reproductive organs, which are external). The comparison of the uterus to an animal is especially telling; men believed women to be so complex and incomprehensible that their reproductive organs were likened to a creature with which men could not communicate.

Enter Jean-Martin Charcot. Though Charcot was French, and Gilman American, and he died before her work came into renown, his influence on the medical field traversed the western sphere of women's medicine. (This is medicine performed *on* women, not *by* women, for that would be preposterous.) Charcot's life's work was the medicine he performed at the Salpêtrière, which was an asylum in Paris, France. Charcot was by no means the founder of the hysteria – the asylum's women's wing had been up and running for over a century before his arrival. In his book, *Invention of Hysteria*, Didi-Huberman critically describes the Salpêtrière as the “mecca of

great confinement [...] It was another Bastille, ... with its 'courtyard of massacres,' 'debauched women,' Convulsionaries of Saint-Médard, and 'women of abnormal constitution' confined all together" (13). Georges Didi-Huberman goes on to explain that this hospice, the largest in all of France, was large in not only its size but of its beauty and its administrative prowess. "It nonetheless," he states firmly, "resembled a hell" (15). This is where Charcot researched these "debauched women," who were all diagnosed with hysteria.

At the Salpêtrière, Jean-Martin Charcot took it upon himself to conduct research on hysteria by having photographs taken of women like the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," who ends the story ripping the paper off the walls convinced that a woman is stuck inside. Many of these women are in clear states of distress, and he was obsessed with how they looked and how they reacted. He published these pictures in a work entitled *Iconographie*. Charcot's imagery is both medical and artistic, for he obsessed over the "uniformity of the hysterical attack" (Gilbert 136). Charcot could not understand hysteria, and he attempted to categorize it and place labels on it. This was hard to accomplish fully, for hysteria has a myriad of symptoms and not everything would look the same. Charcot's work is only a facet of what men did to women during the hysteria craze – men attempted to define women according to patriarchal standards while only focusing on their differences. In a patriarchal society, men are dominant as well as the template. Women only differ. They are meant to differ in specific ways, by being demure, taking up less space, being seen and not heard.

In Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator is sent to her own version of the Salpêtrière – a summer house her husband rents out. Even within the house, with its garden, beautiful halls, and servants' quarters, the narrator is confined to one room: the room with the yellow wallpaper. The narrator is quickly disturbed by the wallpaper, thinking it unattractive, and

she tells her husband. Gilman writes, “I suppose John never was nervous in his life. He laughs at me so about this wall-paper! At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies” (14). John is both the narrator’s physician and her husband, and she treats her as 19th century men would their female patients and their wives. The narrator’s needs are ignored, and even blamed on the disease that John is meant to be treating. Her comfort means nothing to him, and as her husband he sentences her to live in a room and won’t even change the wallpaper that she explains numerous times that she dislikes.

Gilman herself was a hysteria patient, under the care of S. Weir Mitchell. Mitchell, like Charcot, was renowned for his work with hysteria patients. Mitchell treated Gilman in 1887, just five years before “The Yellow Wallpaper” was published. Jane Thraikill explains that Gilman, as one of Mitchell’s patients, was prescribed his famous “rest cure.” She continues, “Mitchell submitted Gilman to his celebrated rest cure that, in calling for isolation, physical inaction, massage, mild electrical stimulation, and fattening, centered on the body as the site of health and disease” (Thraikill 526). Ellen Bassuk expands upon this, explaining how exactly Mitchell would “fatten” his patients: “Once under Mitchell’s care and confined to bed, the patient was started on an exclusive diet of milk, administered in four-ounce doses every two hours” (248). Mitchell also took it upon himself to reeducate his patients, explaining to women how to be less emotional, keep themselves under control, and generally be less expressive (Bassuk 249). Mitchell took away the autonomy of his patients – he isolated them, badgered them with odd “cures,” and attempted to refigure them according to his own patriarchal standards.

We can compare the work of Charcot to that of Mitchell, as they both were interested in hysteria, but were unkind to the actual women they treated. Charcot and Mitchell overlapped

historically and were not only aware of each other but met once, at a “Parisian sojourn” (Thraikill 532). Thraikill goes on to explain Mitchell’s disregard to his patients’ opinions, saying “Mitchell’s own lack of interest in a patient’s assessment of her condition is completely consistent with his physiological perspective; he trusted instead his own expertise and powers of observation. Why would one consult a layperson’s opinion about complex neurological questions?” (532). Ultimately, he believed hysteria to be an issue of the body, not of the mind. Therefore, he treated it accordingly with his rest cure, focusing on the body and ignoring anything psychological the patient had to say. Charcot’s main focus was on the body as well, believing the nervous system to be directly linked to psychic symptoms of hysteria. He later came to the conclusion that physical or psychological trauma could cause these as well, though he more so focused on the physical (da Mota Gomes and Engelhardt). This emphasis on the physical wellbeing in the treatment of hysteria gives way to Gilman’s reaction to her treatment, one that only worsened her emotionally.

Mitchell being Gilman’s doctor was significant enough to Gilman that she mentioned him by name within “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The narrator explains to the reader that she is getting tired, day by day sitting in isolation. She says, “John says if I don’t pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don’t want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!” (Gilman 18-19). We see a glimpse into Gilman’s real-life perspective through fiction here – she equates her own experiences with Mitchell to what the narrator is put through. She even eludes that Mitchell is worse than the narrator’s oppressive husband and brother. We do not know exactly what Gilman went through, though we do know that she experienced Mitchell’s rest cure. The rest cure was more demanding and hands-on than what the narrator speaks of, where she is left alone and

succumbs to her delusions. Gilman could be inserting herself into the story as similar to the narrator, or even as the “friend” the narrator refers to that had to be in the hands of Mitchell. In any case, Gilman is giving a warning to her reader about the treatment of the rest cure and the dangers of isolation, whether by the family, a local physician, or even the famous Weir Mitchell and his bottles of milk.

On the surface, the wallpaper seems to be the downfall of our narrator. Night after night she watches it, and she becomes convinced that there is a woman living inside it trying to escape. After some time, sitting in the room in solitude (where she is supposed to “get better”), the narrator explains, “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 spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard” (Gilman 30). This woman fascinates her, to the point where she does not sleep at night, just watching the paper. By the end of the story, we can conclude that the narrator believes herself to be the woman trapped in the wallpaper. What really has trapped her is her husband, and if he had listened to her repapering the room in the first place, maybe she would not have been driven mad. Her husband/physician prescribed “rest,” but the rest only made the narrator more tired, more anxious, and ironically, more hysterical.

Each woman that came to the Salpêtrière had their own reasons for being sent there. Some of them came to the Salpêtrière already mad, some were just showing homosexual tendencies, read too much, or didn’t want to sleep with their husbands. Charcot’s *Iconographie* showed many women in compromising – even sexualized – positions. In her article on Charcot’s work, Iona Gilbert explains “The *Iconographie* was part of a project to legitimize a complex and

questionable disorder, presenting through photographs a clearly defined sequence of movements and expressions that supposedly constituted the hysterical attack. The photographic inclusions would, however, undermine Charcot's research" (132). Gilbert argues that Charcot's publication of the *Iconographie* sexualizes hysteric women more than it allows for scientific advancement. Her argument makes sense: the lack of clothing on the women, their far-off stares, and the fact that most of them are conventionally attractive (that is, white and thin) can lead to a sexual portrait. We do not see the same portrait of hysteria in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Though it is possible that our narrator could look like these women Charcot photographed, Gilman does not describe her physically. Charcot thought that the imagery of hysteria was the most important thing to study. Gilman shows us that instead we must listen to the perspectives of women undergoing treatment before assumptions that it is successful or not.

I struggled with which section of my research paper I ought to put this essay in. I suppose that "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the diagnosis of hysteria in general fits into all of the categories: body, physical space, and relationships. I ultimately put it into Part Three: Relationships, though this isn't the most obvious section to place it into. Hysteria was a diagnosed medical condition, one that is seen to afflict the body and mind. Therefore, body seems to be the place "The Yellow Wallpaper" should go – the narrator loses her bodily autonomy to "help" her. Perhaps physical space makes the most sense, as the narrator is trapped in a room, and it is the physical space that contributes to her madness. I ended on relationships because it is her husband as well as the narrator's relationship with the system of medicine at large that takes away this autonomy and locks her in this yellow wallpapered room. Most of all, Gilman confronts her relationship to the self by writing on her own experience with fictionalized elements.

A quotation from Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House* sticks out as a modern connection to Gilman's narrator and the disease of hysteria. "A doctor says to you, direly, that you need to lose weight. You bawl your eyes out and miss the punch line entirely: the weight you need to lose is 150 pounds and blonde and sitting in the waiting room with an annoyed expression on her face," (Machado 103). *In the Dream House* is in a series of vignettes, with this one entitled "*Dream House as Diagnosis*." The doctor is supposed to be the authority here. This interaction between doctor and female patient shows that, like in the days of hysteria, a patriarchy of medicine sees what they dislike in women and calls it diagnosis instead of treating her holistically. Machado's doctor did not attempt to fully uncover what was making her feel ill, just as the people in the narrator's life made an assumption about her based on her gender. We see more themes of medicine in Machado's short stories "The Husband Stitch" and "Eight Bites," where doctors permanently alter women's bodies to serve the desires of a patriarchal society. The relationship women have with medicine is not an unbiased one – no matter how many tests are run, blood is drawn, vitals are taken, there can never be an objective view on the female body.

The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" asks an important question, one that Gilman answers. "If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression— a slight hysterical tendency— what is one to do?" (Gilman 10). In the time of Charcot, there wasn't much that one *could* do, besides be sent to the asylum, sent to Weir Mitchell, stay in bed, and drink far more milk than any human should be allowed to. Gilman went through the terrible treatment that was prescribed to her, and she came out on the other side wronged by those who put her through it. So, what did she do? She wrote a story about it. Fiction is one way that women

who were given very little way to voice their own experiences to do so, with enough deniability so they couldn't be questioned. Gilman didn't speak directly, but she was able to speak through the narrator about the dangers of hysteria treatment. She used her platform as a writer to speak about something she experienced without directly saying as much, emphasizing specific themes and ultimately making a piece of classic Gothic literature. This real-life interaction with medical abuse became horror literature.

CONCLUSION

Horror takes many forms. If horror means "to shudder," it isn't too far of a jump to express that everyday life can take on many forms of horror. For women, the domestic can become a space of horror easily. For some women, freedom comes in destruction. For some, it comes in escape. And for others, it comes in telling a story. Whether fiction, memoir, or somewhere in between, elements of horror expressed through writing provide an outlet not only to express horror witnessed or experienced, but it also passes the torch to the reader to understand – and even to relate.

In my research, I read many heavy works. Machado's memoir really centered on literature, with tropes and motifs of fiction referenced throughout, even citing a book of motifs in footnotes. In the vignette "*Dream House as Haunted Mansion*," she writes, "What does it mean for something to be haunted, exactly? You know the formula instinctually: a place is steeped in tragedy. Death, at the very least, but so many terrible things can precede death, and it stands to reason that some of them might accomplish something similar" (Machado 127). Machado never shies from narrative and metaphor, and she shows the reader how her everyday became horror.

In a male dominated system, female horror holds ultimate importance as a way of storytelling and connecting. I have always believed that narrative opens us up to the world, sentence by sentence. In the understanding of one subgenre, we begin to understand the system we reside in.

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