Contents

Acknowledgements 3

Introduction: Gender Fluidity and Mental Health 5

1 "Angry Enough to Do Something Desperate": Social Protest and Self-Actualization in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "Dr. Clair's Place" 17

2 Madness and Motherhood: Gendered Mental Illness and Rage in *The Babadook* 49

3 "Successful Camouflage as a Human Woman": Utilitarian Gender Fluidity and Social Trauma Recovery in *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* 73

Coda: Gothic Horror as Social Commentary 106

Bibliography 110

I came to explore the wreck.

The words are purposes.

The words are maps.

I came to see the damage that was done

and the treasures that prevail.

I stroke the beam of my lamp

slowly along the flank

of something more permanent

than fish or weed

……………………………………

This is the place.

And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair

streams black, the merman in his armored body.

We circle silently

about the wreck

we dive into the hold.

I am she: I am he

– Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck"

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Introduction

Gender Fluidity and Mental Health

We all may have our homes in joy and peace
When woman's life, in its rich power of love
Is joined with man's to care for all the world.
– Charlotte Perkins Gilman[1]

In the early twentieth century, three strapping male explorers landed a biplane in a remote jungle area, fully intending to "Take up the White Man's burden—" by edifying a savage country that had had no contact with the outside world in human memory.[2] They were surprised, however, to find a utopian nation with technology that rivaled their own, an erudite knowledge of science and literature, and immaculately clean streets and buildings. The country was so devoid of the ideas of war and conquest that its inhabitants had no concept of competition. Every citizen's needs were fully met because the community used its resources to benefit all. The people were well aware of the carrying capacity of their small territory: they avoided overpopulation because they prioritized the needs of the community over their own desires and only had enough children to replace themselves in the population. The community revolved around child-rearing, teaching children from infancy with a Montessori-like method that integrated learning and play so fully that the children had no need of the tedium of formal schooling and were hardly even aware that they were learning at all. The children's special talents were sought out and cultivated from birth, allowing each person to "specialize" in a particular discipline, from forestry and farming to teaching and mothering, and to hone their talents into valuable skills that contributed to the community. Though the three men had

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[1] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "To The Indifferent Women." *Poetry Foundation*, 2019.
[2] Kipling, Rudyard. "The White Man's Burden." *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Inclusive Edition, 1885-1918*, Page & Company, 1922, pp. 371–372.

intended to extol the virtues of American society and teach the inhabitants of this newfound country the principles of their democracy, they were soon shamed into silence—the inequality, waste, and poverty of America seemed ridiculous when compared with the standards of the halcyon society they had stumbled upon. Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of this jungle Arcadia was that there was not a man in sight. As the three explorers would later learn, there had been no men in the community for two thousand years, and the women of the society reproduced via parthenogenesis, having only female babies.

The discovery of this paradisiacal society does not grace the pages of our history books. Instead, this utopian female community, termed Herland, was described in a satirical science fiction story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and published serially in her magazine, *The Forerunner*, in 1915.[3] If such a perfect society had truly existed, scientists, political theorists, and sociologists would have flocked to it in the hopes of studying—and perhaps even attempting to adopt—its exceedingly effective social system. But Gilman's literary thought experiment was largely ignored until 1979, when it was rediscovered by Ann J. Lane, dubbed "A Lost Feminist Utopian Novel,"[4] and adopted into feminist literary studies on the coattails of the popularity of Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," which was republished in 1973. Though a society that hinges on such a high degree of altruism is infeasible, as are all utopias, much can

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[3] *Herland* was originally printed in a series of twelve installments in 1915 in *The Forerunner*, a monthly magazine that Gilman wrote original content for and edited. See Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "Herland." *The Forerunner*, 1915. Facsimiles of the original publication can be found in Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "Forerunner: Volume 6, 1915." *Radical Periodicals in the United State, 1890-1960*, Greenwood Reprint Corporation, 1968, pp. 12, 38, 65, 94, 133, 150, 181, 207, 237, 265, 287, 319. *Herland* is now criticized for its unethical undercurrents of racism and advocacy for eugenics. Though Gilman was certainly limited by the time in which she lived in some of her ideology, her consideration of gender roles is so progressive as to be worthy of study even in the twenty-first century. I focus on what I believe are some of Gilman's most innovative proposals in my introduction and in Chapter One.

[4] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland: A Lost Feminist Utopian Novel*. Edited by Ann J Lane, Pantheon Books, 1979.

still be learned from Gilman's model society and her tongue-in-cheek commentary on gender roles.

Though it may appear to be an essentialist declaration of female superiority, Gilman's *Herland* is ultimately a call for social amelioration via gender fluidity. While it may be easy for a feminist writer to fall into the women-are-better-than-men trap, Gilman adroitly avoids this snare. Instead of attempting to invert gender norms, she negates them—Herland is not a feminine society, but a genderless one. To the women of Herland, a woman is simply a person because they have no concept of masculine or feminine characteristics. As one of the male explorers comes to realize:

> When we say *men*, *man*, *manly*, *manhood*, and all the other masculine derivatives, we have in the background of our minds a huge vague crowded picture of the world and all its activities. To grow up and "be a man," to act "like a man"—the meaning and connotation is wide indeed… And when we say *Women*, we think *Female*—the sex. But to these women, in the unbroken sweep of this two-thousand-year-old feminine civilization, the word *woman* called up all that big background.[5]

Herland's women function at the interface of masculinity and femininity. Though biologically female, they wear short hair and plain but functional tunics, are athletic and intelligent, and are just as apt to be manual laborers as mothers. Instead of focusing on being either masculine or feminine, they have scrupulously adopted the characteristics that will best serve their community and perpetuate their society as a whole through a gospel of "reasonableness."[6] Gilman imagines a society of women not to argue that women are superior but to challenge the androcentric ideals

[5] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, "Forerunner: Volume 6, 1915," 321.
[6] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, "Forerunner: Volume 6, 1915," 183.

of the patriarchal world in which she lived by creating a parallel gynocentric society. The women of Herland are ardently interested in a bi-sexual society and insist that it must be preferable to their own, propelling Gilman's ultimate plea for a human race that operates not on hierarchies but on cooperation: "if a deprived or less than fully human race (or half the human race) can accomplish this much, a richly endowed, fully human race (or the entire race) ought to be able to accomplish much more."[7]

Though Gilman makes no mention of mental health treatment in *Herland* other than to note the women's remarkable "psychology," the gender fluidity she describes has since become a topic of interest in clinical psychology. Since the 1970s, two main terms have been used to describe people who do not fit neatly into polarized gender roles: androgynous and genderqueer. The first of these concepts, androgyny, is now defined as "the state or quality of being neither clearly male nor clearly female in appearance."[8] However, its clinical definition refers more to comportment than to physiology. It was originally defined as "the presence of both masculinity and femininity" and referred primarily to behavioral characteristics when it was used in clinical psychology in the 1970s.[9] Sandra L. Bem initiated this discussion by creating a psychological scale that went beyond measures of masculinity and femininity and considered a third category—androgyny—in 1974. She established the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), which considered masculinity and femininity as a two-dimensional continuum and classified a person as masculine, feminine, or androgynous—those who had a balance of masculine and feminine

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[7] Keyser, Elizabeth. "Looking Backward: From *Herland* to *Gulliver's Travels*." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1983, p. 37.

[8] "Androgyny, n." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

[9] Locksley, Anne, and Mary Ellen Colten. "Psychological Androgyny: A Case of Mistaken Identity?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 37, no. 6, 1979, p. 1018.

traits.[10] Prior to Bem's innovative scale, sex role orientation and mental health were measured according to the Congruence Model, which asserted that "masculinity and femininity are opposite poles of a single dimension. That is, that one must have either a masculine or feminine sex role orientation, because these orientations are mutually exclusive and incompatible."[11] Masculine males and feminine females were thought to have the highest levels of mental health.[12] Bem challenged this idea, however, using her new scale to assert that masculine males and feminine females were limited by the social expectations linked to their sex roles. Instead, she argued for a novel "Androgyny Hypothesis," published in 1975, which asserted that androgynous individuals, regardless of their biological sex, demonstrated the best overall mental health and were most able to adapt to a wide variety of situations.[13]

Bem's research sparked a salvo of criticism and an ongoing debate on the meaning of masculinity and femininity. Janet Spence, Robert Helmreich, and Joy Stapp found Bem's model too constraining and added a fourth category—undifferentiated—for people who were low in both masculinity and femininity.[14] Marylee Taylor and Judith Hall criticized Bem and Spence et al. for using two potentially conflicting definitions of androgyny to test the same hypothesis—Bem defined androgyny as having a balance between masculine and feminine traits, while

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[10] Bem, Sandra L. "The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1974, pp. 155–162.
[11] Whitley, Bernard E. "Sex Role Orientation and Self-Esteem: A Critical Meta-Analytic Review." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1983, p. 766.
[12] Lefkowitz, Emily S, and Peter B. Zeldow. "Masculinity and Femininity Predict Optimal Mental Health: A Belated Test of the Androgyny Hypothesis." *Journal of Personality Assessment*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2006, p. 95.
[13] Bem, Sandra L, and Steven A. Lewis. "Sex Role Adaptability: One Consequence of Psychological Androgyny." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 4, Apr. 1975, pp. 634–643.
[14] Spence, Janet T, et al. "Ratings of Self and Peers on Sex Role Attributes and Their Relation to Self-Esteem and Conceptions of Masculinity and Femininity." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 32, no. 1, Aug. 1975, pp. 29–39.

Spence et al. defined it as being high in both masculinity and femininity.[15] Later studies also conflicted with Bem's results, finding that masculine individuals, regardless of their gender, were more able to adapt to difficult situations[16] and had better mental health overall.[17] Research on the androgyny hypothesis declined starting in the mid-1980s until a 2006 study by Emily Lefkowitz and Peter Zeldow resurrected it, arguing that previous studies had relied solely on self-reports of mental health, which are notoriously biased. Instead, they considered the effects of sex role on mental health as assessed according to the individual, the health care provider, and social norms. They found that androgyny—defined as high levels of both masculinity and femininity—was associated with better mental health.[18] Ultimately, the research seems to have come full circle, currently supporting the idea that androgyny is correlated with better mental health.

The next important term for gender fluidity is genderqueer, which focuses more on how an individual identifies than on how they present to the world. Genderqueer is an umbrella term that "typically describes one of three gender identity categories: (1) an individual who feels their identity falls in between male and female, (2) an individual who may feel male or female at distinct times, or (3) an individual who rejects gender completely."[19] Riki Wilchins coined the term in 1995 as a way for those who did not conform to traditional gender roles to reclaim a term

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[15] Taylor, Marylee C, and Judith A. Hall. "Psychological Androgyny: Theories, Methods, and Conclusions." *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 92, no. 2, 1982, pp. 347–366.
[16] Jones, Warren H, et al. "The Enigma of Androgyny: Differential Implications for Males and Females?" *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, vol. 46, no. 2, 1978, p. 311.
[17] Taylor & Hall, "Psychological Androgyny," pp. 347-366 and Zeldow, Peter B. "Masculinity, Femininity, Type A Behavior, and Psychosocial Adjustment in Medical Students." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 48, no. 2, Feb. 1985, pp. 481–492.
[18] Lefkowitz & Zeldow, "Masculinity and Femininity Predict Optimal Mental Health: A Belated Test of the Androgyny Hypothesis," 99.
[19] Budge, Stephanie. "Genderqueer." *The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies*, SAGE, 2019.

for their self-expression with pride rather than derision.[20] According to Wilchins in a Transexual Menace newsletter:

> The fight against gender oppression has been joined for centuries, perhaps millennia. What's new today is that it's moving into the arena at [sic] open political activism.... It's about all of us who are genderqueer: diesel dykes and stone butches, leatherqueens and radical fairies, nelly fags, crossdressers, intersexed, transsexuals, transvestites, transgendered, transgressively gendered, and those of us whose gender expressions are so complex they haven't even been named yet.[21]

Genderqueer is now becoming obsolete within activist circles—James Penney argues that "queer discourse has run its course, its project made obsolete by the full elaboration of its own logic" and calls for reconsideration of "the relation between sexuality and politics."[22]

The term genderqueer has, however, been assimilated into psychology under the larger umbrella of the discipline's novel focus on supporting gender-nonconforming people. The American Psychological Association (APA) has taken measures to promote mental health in LGBTQ people, including forming a new division, the "Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity," which conducts research, publishes a journal, and creates educational materials to help psychologists better understand how to meet the specific needs of

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[20] Beemyn, Genny. "Genderqueer." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2019.
There is a temporal jump between Bem's use of "androgyny" in the 1970s and the emergence of "genderqueer" in the 1990s. I could find no additional terms that function as forerunners for the gender fluidity that my work focuses on. Charlie McNabb traces the history of the terminology that nonbinary people used to identify themselves and writes that "there were individuals who identified outside the binary but had no community terminology with which to label themselves" until genderqueer was coined in the 1990s in McNabb, Charlie. *Nonbinary Gender Identities: History, Culture, Resources*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, p. 9.
[21] Wilchins, Riki Anne. "A Note from Your Editrix." *In Your FACE: Political Activism Against Gender Oppression*, 1995. Quoted in McNabb, *Nonbinary Gender Identities*, 19.
[22] Penney, James. *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics*. Pluto Press, 2014, p. 1.

gender-nonconforming people.[23] The APA has also published guidelines "to assist psychologists in the provision of culturally competent, developmentally appropriate, and trans-affirmative psychological practice with TGNC people."[24] These guidelines list "genderqueer," which they define as "a term to describe a person whose gender identity does not align with a binary understanding of gender," under the larger category of "gender-nonconforming," which they define as "an adjective used as an umbrella term to describe people whose gender expression or gender identity differs from gender norms associated with their assigned birth sex."[25] I have focused specifically on the term "genderqueer" here rather than "gender-nonconforming" because "genderqueer" challenges gender binaries instead of assigned sex. The characters of the texts I examine never oppose the sex they were assigned at birth—female. Instead, their stories undermine the idea of gender as a polarizing binary and argue for gender fluidity.

Neither of the gender-fluid terms I have considered, androgyny and genderqueer, adequately describe enactments of gender in the works I analyze. Whereas androgyny was a diagnostic category that focused on how an individual's gender was perceived by the medical establishment, and genderqueer is a self-claimed identity that originated as a mode of social protest, I propose to use a new term, *strategic gender*, to highlight an active form of gender expression in which individuals might use aspects of both masculinity and femininity constructively.[26] Strategic gender is not an externally imposed label, as androgyny was, or a

[23] *Division 44: Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, American Psychological Association, 2019, www.apadivisions.org/division-44.
[24] Dickey, Lore M, and Anneliese A. Singh. "Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People." *American Psychologist*, vol. 70, no. 9, 2015, p. 832.
[25] Dickey and Singh, "Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People," 862.
[26] This term was coined by Richards, Eliza. Personal Interview. 19 Feb. 2019. She suggested it as a concise means of referring to the utility of gender I consider across my three chapters. I have been unable to find an equivalent term in my research, so I am grateful to her for permission to use her particularly apt term in my work.

personally claimed identity, as genderqueer is. Rather, it is a mode of action that allows people, regardless of their sexual orientation or biological sex, to adopt and discard characteristics traditionally associated with either femininity or masculinity when these traits are practical. Though the word "strategic" implies intention, this intent is on the part of the works themselves. The characters are often unconscious of their use of strategic gender: they are simply doing what seems reasonable to promote their own well-being and that of those around them in the social structure in which they live. The texts I consider effect strategic gender to push against the oppression of the conventional gender binary by arguing that gender can be both fluid and utilitarian.

In the following chapters, I implement a psychosocial framework to consider the idea of strategic gender as played out in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "Dr. Clair's Place," Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*, and Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*. These works vary in country of origin, genre, and century of publication: "The Yellow Wallpaper" is an American short story published in 1892, *The Babadook* is an Australian horror film that debuted in 2014, and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* is a Scottish novel published in 2017. This variety demonstrates that the dilemma they approach in different ways is universal. Each of these works portrays a female member of the traditional nuclear family—wife, mother, and daughter, respectively—who must devise a way to preserve her own mental health amid large-scale social conditions that deny her fulfillment, sanity, and perhaps even survival on the basis of her femininity. Each work also considers gender relations writ small by presenting destructive familial relationships rooted in gender. Through an analysis of the macro- and micro-level gender relationships portrayed in these works, I consider how these case studies complicate and combat women's subordinate place in both society and the family.

These stories all function as apologues, or "moral fable[s]"[27] in which "the statement to be made takes precedence over the action or verisimilitude of the characters or setting."[28] "The Yellow Wallpaper," which is a gothic tale, *The Babadook*, which is a horror film, and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, which uses elements of both fairy tales and trauma narratives, all use the affordances of their genres to distort reality and exaggerate facets of their plots to highlight social commentary on gender norms that are all too real. These dark genres transcend the boundaries of reality to create utopian thought experiments on the function of gender within society. Though they intentionally border on the fantastical, these texts are related in their serious common argument that their female protagonists must learn to use gender strategically, embracing their own femininity, but also manipulating socially forbidden aspects of masculinity, in order to create a sense of self-actualization.

In Chapter One, I propose a new reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." I argue that the female protagonist of the story comes to understand the immutability of her position within the patriarchal society of nineteenth-century New England and commits suicide, hanging herself in an enraged protest against her husband's pseudo-uxorious oppression and the social structure that denies her the productivity she so craves. Though the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" had no means to improve her deplorable situation and does not use strategic gender, I pair the story with another of Gilman's lesser-known later works, "Dr. Clair's Place," which suggests how strategic gender might be used to help a woman find the self-actualization the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" was denied.

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[27] "Apologue, n." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2019.
[28] Glenn, Ellen Walker. "The Androgynous Woman Character in the American Novel." PhD Dissertation, *University of Colorado at Boulder*, 1980, p. 22. Glenn also analyzed Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* as an apologue.

In Chapter Two, I trace the journey of recovery from mental illness in Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*. Through examining the socially sacred bond between mother and child, which is often more troubled in reality, I consider the taboo concept of maternal rage. I follow the protagonist as she experiences feminine depression and masculine aggression before eventually assuming characteristics of both genders. I assert that the protagonist ultimately learns to use aspects of both masculinity and femininity strategically to initiate the recovery of her mental health and love for her son. *The Babadook* calls for a reform of the mental health system, underscoring the necessity of a better way of recognizing the gendered dynamics of mental illness when developing modes of treatment and healing.

In Chapter Three, I claim that Gail Honeyman, in *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, creates a hybrid text that combines elements of trauma narrative and fairy tale in order to portray the genuine trauma of gender-based child abuse, but also to allow the protagonist an idealized recovery reminiscent of fairy tales. Within this framework, I demonstrate how the novel villainizes polarized gender roles by portraying them at their worst: feminine envy and toxic masculinity. I then argue that *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* imagines a revised social structure in which behaviors traditionally coded as masculine or feminine can be used as tools for people to fit in and help one another. The novel advocates a nongendered and social form of mental health treatment that is not institutionally bound. The protagonist achieves mental health through the aid of a host of people—both male and female—who teach her to use gender constructively rather than falling into its stereotypical traps.

These three popular works propose solutions for the dilemma of practicing mental health treatment in an intrinsically sexist society by calling on their readers to understand gender as strategic. Moving beyond the recently resurrected androgyny hypothesis, they assert that

strategically employing traits associated with both genders, depending on what circumstances require, is beneficial for the mental health of women as well as men. They also argue that mental health treatment should be social rather than overly-professionalized—none of the protagonists are able to cure themselves alone. The works expand mental health treatment into the community, asserting that a healthy society would mitigate the need for mental health professionals. Though these professionals often treat people according to their self-identified gender roles, thinking about gender in more strategic ways would recast feminine and masculine-identified behaviors as equally accessible tools for the common good of all citizens.

Chapter 1

"Angry Enough to Do Something Desperate": Social Protest and Self-Actualization in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "Dr. Clair's Place"

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.
– Sylvia Plath[29]

Though Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* provides a matriarchal utopia, her earlier short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," describes nothing short of a patriarchal dystopia. "The Yellow Wallpaper" invites the reader into the mind of its unnamed female narrator through a series of first-person journal entries. The entries provide an in-depth catalog of the narrator's thoughts as she languishes in an isolated summer home, undergoing a version of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's rest cure. Gilman's galvanizing story has inspired debates about its social message since its first publication in the *New England Journal* in 1892. In the years immediately following its publication, it was reviewed as a horror story and praised for its ability to petrify readers with the accuracy of its portrayal of insanity.[30] During its literary revival in the 1970s, it was read as a tale of feminist triumph in which the narrator gains "the limited freedom of madness," which "constitutes a kind of sanity in the face of the insanity of male dominance."[31] More recently, Jane Thrailkill departs from this line of interpretation by asserting that neither the narrator nor Gilman herself, who endured "a lifelong struggle with nervous illness," can be

[29] Plath, Sylvia. "Lady Lazarus." *The Collected Poems*, Harper & Row, 1981.
[30] Kennard, Jean E. "Convention Coverage or How to Read Your Own Life." *New Literary History*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1981, pp. 74-75.
[31] Lanser, Susan S. "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1989, p. 416.

construed as "getting better."[32] Rather, the story itself affected the real world by catalyzing a wave of feminist scholarship in the 1970s and 80s.[33]

I argue instead that the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" became aware of her hopeless situation in society, as many critics have noted, but that this understanding induced her to make the conscious choice to commit suicide as an alternative to an irremediable situation. This choice does not represent transcendence for the narrator, as the critics of the 1970s argue, or defeat, as Thrailkill suggests. Rather, it serves as a way for the narrator to highlight the egregious injustices to which nineteenth-century women were subjected, protest the suffocating patriarchy, and punish John, her most intimate oppressor, in a potent expression of taboo feminine rage. I provide close readings of the text and Gilman's personal writings in order to argue that "The Yellow Wallpaper" depicts neither escape nor capitulation. Instead, it is a violently affecting portrayal of one woman's revolt against the social system that constrains her. I analyze one of Gilman's later short stories, "Dr. Clair's Place," which provides the remedy for the restrictions demonstrated in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Through "Dr. Clair's Place," Gilman demonstrates how gender might be used strategically to support mental health and gain self-actualization.

Self-Study and Structural Misogyny

The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" does not indicate signs of mental illness at the outset of the story. From the opening entry of her journal, the narrator establishes herself as a woman of intelligence and logic who longs to use these virtues productively. She proves that she is well-read because her first impulse upon seeing the house in which she is to spend her summer

[32] Thrailkill, Jane F. "Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *ELH*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2002, p. 552
[33] Thrailkill, "Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" 553.

is to situate it within the gothic literary tradition. The narrator alludes to gothic horror tropes by characterizing the house as a potential "haunted house"[34] that is reminiscent of "English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people" ("YW," 25). She then quickly acknowledges that this is a fantastic view of the house, playfully dismissing these thoughts as "the height of romantic felicity" (23). The narrator also demonstrates skeptical rationality in her description of the house, determining that "there is something queer about it" because "why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?" (23). She is as logical in her description of her husband as in her description of the setting. She diagnoses John's aversion for anything beyond the rational, highlighting his severe mental restraints: "John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (23). Though emotions and imagination are anathema to John, the narrator disagrees. She argues that the self-expression and creativity inherent to her chosen occupation—writing—are necessary to support her mental health. In her own words, "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good" (25). Indeed, even the act of writing this initial journal entry evinces the narrator's longing for expressive productivity—she must write in secret because John forbids it. From her opening paragraphs, the narrator demonstrates her yearning to use her intelligence for a purpose.

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[34] Stetson, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wall-Paper." *The Yellow Wall-Paper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Dual-Text Critical Edition*, edited by Shawn St. Jean, Ohio University Press, 2006, p. 23. Hereafter abbreviated "YW" and cited parenthetically by page number. St. Jean's critical edition is unique in that it situates a transcription of the handwritten text from Gilman's fair-copy manuscript (ca. 1890-91) beside that of the first published version of Gilman's work in the *New England Magazine* in January 1892. All quotations cited in this chapter are from the *New England Magazine* text because it has received the most critical attention. This 1892 text included inconsistent hyphenation of the word "wallpaper," as noted in the title. I choose to follow critical convention in omitting the hyphen from the text's title when mentioning it in this chapter for consistency.

Trapped in a spartan room with little more than a bed and peeling wallpaper, the narrator lacks an external outlet for her keen thoughts, so she turns to introspection as her only source of creativity. She is denied human contact for long periods of time because John, her only companion significant enough to justify a dialogue, "is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious" (27). She is also "absolutely forbidden to 'work'" (23). As Judith Fetterley notes, the quotation marks around "work" demonstrate the narrator's partial acceptance of John's view that her exertions are unimportant.[35] However, in the act of writing the word she rebels against his opinion and her own misgivings by continuing her work regardless. In this repressive environment, the narrator is left with no other option for the cognitive exercise she craves than to study the only two things she has ready access to: herself and the wallpaper. Indeed, the narrator begins to embrace the self-study that she once sedulously denied herself. At the beginning of the story, the narrator quickly curtails the beginnings of introspection. She relates, "I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—," but then quickly cuts herself off, attempting to change her own thought process by writing "but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition" ("YW," 25). However, the narrator defies John's influence in a later journal entry with unrestrained candor, admitting, "I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to. I don't feel able. And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!" (35). The narrator pursues introspection as her only method of gaining a modicum of reprieve from the monotony of her surroundings.

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[35] Fetterley, Judith. "Reading about Reading: 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper'." *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, edited by Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, p. 162.

The narrator considers her relationship with John as a means of analyzing her relationship with masculine society writ large. Though she has not permitted herself to consider her own emotions until she is denied any other diversions, the narrator begins to scrutinize how John makes her feel. She attempts to view him as the stereotypical chivalrous male protector, writing, "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction," but even this forced compliment carries a sarcastic undercurrent of malice for his control over her because she seems to resent her inability to "stir" without him (25). She comes to realize that John's uxorious actions are woefully deceptive. He continually aggravates an illness that is obviously causing her to suffer, though this is of no consequence to him because "He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him" (29). He exerts total control over her by ensuring that not even her friends and family will take her seriously: "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?" (23). The narrator attempts to fulfill the role of a good, supportive wife, writing, "I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already" (29). When she is being honest with herself, though, she admits that she believes his "treatment" is exacerbating her condition (23) and that she is "angry" with John (25). I concur with Judith Fetterley's assertion: "the narrator senses the patriarchal point."[36] In other words, the narrator finally understands that John is not a helpmate but an oppressor. However, I diverge from Fetterley's focus on patriarchy at the individual level within the husband-wife dyad and argue that the narrator's analysis of her relationship with her husband is merely one facet of a larger discovery. The narrator's condemnation of John causes her to begin to consider female

[36] Fetterley, "Reading about Reading," 163.

oppression on a historical, structural scale, which she demonstrates through her scrutiny of the yellow wallpaper.[37]

As the narrator transitions her focus inward, she begins to consider a larger history and the meaning of her own femininity. Her analysis of the wallpaper, cataloged meticulously in the pages of her journal, serves as an examination of her place in society, allowing her to consider issues too harrowing and taboo to discuss overtly in her time period. In her initial description of the wallpaper, the narrator details it as "dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions" ("YW," 27). This description can also be applied to the history of women, which is "dull" because their actions were rarely catalogued in history books penned primarily by masculine hands, "irritating" for the injustice of expectations of submission and domestication, and filled with genealogical lines that are difficult to trace and terminate too soon because women typically took the names of their husbands. Through her analysis of the wallpaper, the narrator locates herself within a larger history of female subjugation. The narrator

[37] Gilman was known for her interest in the effects of social structure on women's lives. According to Gilman, "the social environment… is of enormous force as a modifier of human life" (Stetson, Charlotte Perkins. *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*. Small, Maynard & Company, 1898, p. 2). Therefore, the social structure of marriage affects the woman by forcing her to depend on the man for resources: "We are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation… The economic status of the human female is relative to the sex-relation" (Stetson, *Women and Economics,* 5). Gilman even goes so far as to suggest that the structure of marriage compels the housewife to trade "sex for food, an abhorrent arrangement that made all women's domestic work a form of prostitution" (Thrailkill, Jane F. "Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *ELH*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2002, p. 528). Gilman also viewed social movements as the potential solution for the plight of the housewife. She published a satirical poem, "The Socialist and the Suffragist," in which a socialist and a suffragist argue about whose role is most important before realizing that they share the same goal and must both actively work toward it: "The world awoke, and tartly spoke: / 'Your work is all the same: / Work together or work apart, / Work, each of you, with all your heart— / Just get into the game!'" (Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Socialist and The Suffragist." *"Yours for the Revolution": The Appeal to Reason, 1895-1922*, edited by John Graham, University of Nebraska Press, 1990, p. 85).

comprehends the violence women were often subjected to when she sees a place on the wallpaper "where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down" (31). This image evokes the hangings of the women throughout history who refused to conform to societal expectations. The narrator also learns the extent of this feminized history. She writes, "I really have discovered something at last… I have finally found out… I think there are a great many women behind" (45) as she realizes that her story is not only that of her oppression at the hands of John, but also that she has inherited a long legacy of repression.

As the narrator discovers the grim reality of her disadvantaged social position, she longs for a way to fight back against patriarchal oppression. She feels a sense of camaraderie with the subjugated women of the wallpaper, placing herself in the exact physical location of the former occupant of her room to note, "it is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach" (27). She aids the women in their attempt to destroy the wallpaper, which forms "bars" to confine them as a metaphor for the male-dominated history that has limited their opportunities (41). She writes of their attempted rebellion: "…really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper" (49). However, try as they might, the narrator and her compatriots can no more tear every scrap of yellowed paper from their prison walls than they can erase the history of structural misogyny it symbolizes. Instead, the wallpaper strengthens in spite of their efforts, infiltrating the rest of the house and even its purlieu with its malodorous presence (45) and staining the inhabitants' clothes its ghastly yellow (43). The narrator realizes the impossibility of escaping the wallpaper in a moment that parallels her understanding of the futility of her own social situation. She believes that all women are

eventually martyred in the cycle of female oppression: "But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads" (47). The narrator, who is isolated from the society she craves, forbidden the writing that gives her both pleasure and purpose, and barred from "stimulating people" and "advice and companionship about [her] work" (31), reaches a devastating enlightenment—she can neither escape the burdens of her own femininity in a masculine society nor claw her way from the walls of her nursery prison. She can now "see through" John (49) and the draconian rest cure that has denied her the outlet, collaboration, and vocation she desperately needs, so she seeks an alternative to the confines of both her wallpapered rooms and her prescribed domestic life.

Though most critics deride the narrator's introspection as her hamartia, ultimately leading to dejected madness, I view it positively as the catalyst of her increased understanding. Jane Thrailkill argues that "the narrator's intensely subjective self-absorption is not just morbid, but actively pathological" and indicts the narrator as the agent of her own madness, which she asserts is engendered by the narrator's choice to engage in self-reflection rather than take part in "productive work."[38] Beverly Hume concurs, even going so far as to argue that Gilman "implicates her narrator in a pathological and twisted domestic tale of self-sabotage and self-hatred."[39] I diverge from both Thrailkill and Hume's analysis by proposing that the narrator's introspection is enlightening. The narrator turns to self-study not due to abulia, as Thrailkill suggests, but in a desperate effort to find *anything* to study. The narrator is eventually driven mad, but this is due to the restrictive isolation in which she must live. Self-study does not contribute to this madness; rather, it is her last futile attempt at the creative productivity that

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[38] Thrailkill, "Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" 544.
[39] Hume, Beverly A. "Managing Madness in Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-Paper.'" *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2002, p. 3.

might save her from insanity. Indeed, John endeavors to prevent the narrator from thinking about herself as a means of controlling her.[40] Within this context, the narrator's continuation of her writing and self-study functions not as fragility, but as active rebellion. Introspection does come at a great cost to the narrator's well-being—as I will demonstrate in the next section, it culminates in her death—but the strengthened integrity and understanding it provides her is ultimately beneficial and well worth the price.

Social Dejection and Suicide

Although critics have traditionally interpreted "The Yellow Wallpaper" as ending with a graphic portrayal of the narrator going mad,[41] there is also evidence that the narrator commits suicide, and that the final scene of the story is told through the voice of a posthumous narrator.[42] The narrator *is* mad, at this point, but more importantly, I argue, she commits suicide as a form of social protest. In her last journal entry, the narrator demonstrates that one can be both utterly mad and immensely rational, following the precedent of Edgar Allan Poe's murderous

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[40] Fetterley, "Reading about Reading," 161.

[41] Hedges, Elaine R. "Afterword." *The Yellow Wallpaper*, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Feminist Press, 1973, pp. 37–63; Gilbert, Sandra M, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 1980; Kolodny, Annette. "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts." *New Literary History*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1980, pp. 451-467; Kennard, Jean E. "Convention Coverage or How to Read Your Own Life." *New Literary History*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1981, pp. 69-88; Treichler, Paula A. "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 3, no. 1/2, 1984, pp. 61-77; and Fetterley, "Reading about Reading," 147-164.

[42] Though posthumous narration grew in popularity as a narrative technology after Gilman's publication in works such as Emily Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz when I died" (which was written in 1862 but was not published until 1896), William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* the use of posthumous narration preceded Gilman and was used by authors with whom she would have likely been familiar. For a consideration of the posthumous voice as used by Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë, both of whom published long before Gilman, see chapters two and three of Raymond, Claire. *The Posthumous Voice in Women's Writing from Mary Shelley to Sylvia Plath*. Routledge, 2016. For an example of a short story told by a dead woman and a poem spoken by a dead man, see Prescott, Harriet Elizabeth. "The Amber Gods." *The Amber Gods and Other Stories*, Ticknor and Fields, 1863, pp. 3–66 and Poe, Edgar Allan. "For Annie." *Home Journal*, 28 Apr. 1849, p. 2. These works were suggested by Richards, Eliza. Personal Interview. 13 March 2019.

characters.[43] Much as Poe's madmen were able to plan grotesquely exacting murders while being fully aware of the consequences of such brutal crimes, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is capable of meticulous strategizing and considering the ramifications of her actions. The narrator is at her wit's end: due to the all-encompassing nature of patriarchal systems in the story, she cannot imagine a way to claim the externalized aggression associated with masculinity and fight back against John. Rather than acting out with masculine aggression and killing her captor, the narrator turns her rage inward, acting according to feminine norms and sacrificing herself in a last stand that gives her death meaning beyond the walls of her de facto prison. As I will demonstrate in a later section, she intends for her death to serve as a social protest in the face of patriarchy. The narrator voices a clear plan that evinces a bold decision: "I declared I would finish it to-day!" ("YW," 49). She also meticulously ensures that she is alone and unsurveilled, waiting until Jennie "is gone, and the servants are gone, and the things are gone, and there is nothing left but that great bedstead nailed down" (49). She ensures her privacy by locking herself in her room and throwing the key out the window so neither she nor anyone else can open the door (51). These actions reveal a pernicious rationality and demonstrate the careful planning and desire to be alone that often precede suicide. However, "The Yellow Wallpaper" contains a plot twist from Poe's tropes—the narrator will be her own murder victim.

In an instance of morbid foreshadowing, the narrator reveals her intent to hang herself, stating that she has "a rope up here that even Jennie did not find" (51). She is frustrated by her

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[43] Some examples of Poe's ironically rational madmen can be found in Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Tell-Tale Heart." *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales*, Signet Classics, 2006, pp. 172–177; Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Cask of Amontillado." *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales*, Signet Classics, 2006, pp. 152-158; and Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Black Cat." *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales*, Signet Classics, 2006, pp. 99-108.

lack of “anything to stand on” that would allow her an effective height from which to jump (51). Her writing becomes frantic and disjointed as she depicts herself gnawing at her bedframe and peeling at the wallpaper in a fit of rage because “this bed will not move” closer to something she could hang a rope from (51). The narrator apparently fails in her initial attempts to rig a noose because she considers an alternate form of suicide, thinking, “To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try” (51). She further attenuates her rash thought, reasoning, “Besides, I wouldn’t do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued” (51). At first glance, this statement seems as though it functions as a disavowal of suicide. However, the narrator immediately follows this rumination with “I don’t like to *look* out of the windows even” (51), revealing that she is not distancing herself from the idea of suicide, but rather from the abhorrent thought of her suicide occurring outside, in full public view. The narrator had previously enjoyed going outside to “walk a little in the garden or down that lovely lane [and] sit on the porch under the roses” (33). However, toward the end of the story, the narrator has realized the full extent of her social position and is no longer delusional enough to believe in freedom or the prospect of improvement outside. She makes no more mention of wanting to leave her room and even makes a conscious effort to remain within its walls by refusing Jennie’s supplications to leave (49). For the narrator, the “inside” of the house, in which she is restrained by John, and the “outside” of the larger world, in which she is limited by social mores relating to her gender, are equally constraining because neither will ever afford her the métier she craves. She decides against plunging from her upstairs bedroom window not because she rejects death but because she no longer equates the “outside” with liberation and does not want to do herself the final injustice of shifting her suicide from the private sphere of her bedchamber to the public sphere of

the front yard. Such a spontaneous death in the public gaze would do little more than confirm the diagnosis of hysteria that society has thrust upon her.

The narrator resumes her monologue after she has succeeded in her kamikaze quest to join the women of the wallpaper by hanging herself with the concealed rope. She reveals the moment after she plunges to her death by saying, “I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope” (51). Since the narrator was unable to move the bed, which was nailed to the floor, she may have affixed the rope to the “rings and things in the walls” instead (27). The narrator conceives of herself as one with the legions of dead women who inhabit the dismal history of the wallpaper, thinking, “I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?” (51). This musing also provides further support for the theory of suicide because the wallpaper, which the narrator now identifies with, is teeming with the hanged bodies of women who preceded the narrator in death. She attributes images of hanging to the wallpaper multiple times, describing it as having a “recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down” (31) and being composed of “strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths [that] just shriek with derision!” (51). The wallpaper represents a centuries-long lineage of oppressed women to which the narrator now realizes she is the most recent addition.

Although the narrator is now dead, she transcends reality by allowing herself the satisfaction of castigating John and providing a delphic posthumous explanation of her motives. She hears John outside her door almost immediately after she hangs herself and takes a perverse pleasure in his inability to enter. For once, she is keeping him out instead of him penning her in:

> Why there’s John at the door!
>
> It is no use, young man, you can’t open it!

How he does call and pound!

Now hes's crying for an axe (51, 53).

The narrator mocks John's powerlessness, portraying herself as saying, "John dear!... the key is down by the front steps" (53). This statement could be used as evidence that the narrator cannot truly be dead because she is speaking, but it is part of an imagined faux-conversation in which the narrator's side of the exchange occurs only in her head while John exclaims aloud. Throughout the supposed discussion, John never makes a direct reply to the narrator's comments, which indicates that he cannot hear her. There is no evidence that he follows the narrator's instructions and goes downstairs in search of the key, so he most likely follows his stated intentions and breaks down the door. Instead of responding to the narrator's pseudo-dialogue, John makes generic comments based on what he can see, such as "Open the door, my darling!" (53). When he breaks into the room and sees his wife's body swinging from a rope, he senselessly cries, "What is the matter?... For God's sake, what are you doing!" in a panic before sinking to the floor, succumbing to unconsciousness before he can run to his wife's body (53). The narrator transcends temporal reality by recounting her posthumous, one-sided "conversation" with John even though her deceased ears could no longer logically hear his exclamations just as she transcends physical reality by continuing to "write" the last entry in her journal even after her own hands have gone cold.[44] Indeed, the narrator's final act of

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[44] The narrator can no longer physically write her journal entries at this point in the narrative because she is dead. However, this logical fallacy does not discredit my interpretation of the end of "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a suicide. As Jenny Weatherford notes, "The story slips from one form into another—from journal to interior monologue, but without any intervening character or explanation to account for the shift… Interestingly, no one seems to experience the logical impossibility of the second half of the narrative as a fault" (Weatherford, Jenny. "Approaching the Ineffable: 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and Gilman's Problem with Language." *American Studies in Scandinavia*, vol. 31, 1999, p. 67.) That is to say, most interpretations of the ending, including that the narrator is mad, disregard the potential temporal limits of the story in favor of metaphorical analysis. The narrator could no more physically write

posthumous "journaling" directly contradicts John's scorn for the metaphysical. The narrator gives herself the last word of the story, yelling, "I've got out at last" at John's prostrate body as her ghostly form departs her corpse and begins to creep along the wall, a physical representation of the historic cycle of women succumbing to patriarchal oppression (53).

As the narrator is taunting John, she also portrays herself as saying that "the key is…under a plantain leaf" (53). This statement alludes to a passage from *Romeo and Juliet* and functions as an abstruse explanation of the narrator's situation and suicide motives. The word "key" has a double meaning; it is defined as both the metal implement that opens locks and the means for deciphering a code.[45] Using the latter definition, the narrator's association of the "key" with a plantain leaf insinuates that the plantain leaf should be considered to find the "answer"—an exposition of her rationale. The plantain leaf is widely regarded in folk medicine as a useful topical compound for wound care.[46] This use of the plantain leaf was mentioned in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

Benvolio: Tut, man one fire burns out another's burning,
One pain is lessen'd by another's anguish;
Turn giddy, and be holp by backward turning;
One desperate grief cures with another's languish:
Take thou some new infection to thy eye,
And the rank poison of the old will die.

Romeo: Your plaintain-leaf is excellent for that.

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in her journal while creeping around the room than she could write from the afterlife, so the story must end in an interior monologue regardless.

[45] "Key." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

[46] Skidmore-Roth, Linda. *Mosby's Handbook of Herbs & Natural Supplements*. 4th ed., Elsevier, 2009, p. 506.

Benvolio: For what, I pray thee?

Romeo: For your broken shin.

Benvolio: Why, Romeo, art thou mad?

Romeo: Not mad, but bound more than a mad-man is;
Shut up in prison, kept without my food,
Whipp'd and tormented and—God-den, good fellow.[47]

In Benvolio's opening statement, he is mocking Romeo's lovesickness for Rosaline by implying that the best way to recover from a lost love is to replace her with another pretty girl. Romeo replies that Benvolio's jesting suggestion is tantamount to using a plantain leaf, which was meant to treat superficial lacerations, to attempt to heal the grave malady of a broken heart.[48] Romeo is vexed with Benvolio and his entire community for refusing to take his ailment seriously. The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," who suffers greatly because she is not permitted the productivity she desires, is in a parallel situation because John frequently undermines her illness. John even goes so far as to belittle her affliction by addressing her as one might mollify a child, calling her a "blessed little goose" when she complains about her situation ("YW," 29). When Benvolio asks Romeo if he is insane because of his illogical reply, Romeo replies that he is "Not mad," but is "shut up in prison" and "tormented" in a scene that mirrors "The Yellow Wallpaper" narrator's confinement to her bedroom. Both the narrator and Romeo are exasperated with the extent to which their feelings are disregarded and are either physically (in the narrator's case) or metaphorically (in Romeo's case) restricted by this blatant heedlessness.

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[47] Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
[48] "Plantain." *Michigan Medicine*, University of Michigan, 2018.

Romeo's story, like the narrator's, ends in a suicide that is rooted in social factors. As the play progresses, Romeo, who erroneously believes that Juliet is dead, makes a deliberate choice to kill himself rather than live without his true love. Likewise, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" commits suicide rather than continue to live in a world that deprives her of her ambitions. Both Romeo and the narrator die deaths of hopelessness that could have been prevented by those around them. If the Montagues and the Capulets had resolved their trivial feud and permitted their children's love, which they were remarkably willing to do after the lovers' double suicide, Romeo and Juliet's lives could have been spared. Likewise, if the narrator's intellectual desires had been approved of by those around her, she would have survived and been able to contribute to society. The narrator's choice to tell John to look under a plantain leaf serves not as a physical direction but as a veiled summary of her entire situation and the justification behind her decision to hang herself. She directs this unheard explanation at John specifically to indict him as the most proximate cause of her irremediable situation.

My claim that "The Yellow Wallpaper" ends in suicide gains in feasibility within the larger context of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's other writings and personal life. Gilman wrote essays advocating for "Euthanasia for Incurables," such as an "old man suffering from cancer of the bowels and senile dementia," as a means of alleviating their suffering and saving their families from "useless effort."[49] She also advocated for suicide as "A Justifiable Exit" for those who were suffering and could no longer be of benefit to society,[50] refuting the idea that suicide is

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[49] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, 1860-1935. Papers, 1846-1961, Folder 226. Stories, miscellaneous. Articles on euthanasia, suicide, etc., http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/13731493 seq. 10

[50] It is important to note that Gilman viewed suicide as a solution for only the most extreme cases, in which the person can no longer be productive and is thus a social burden. Indeed, Gilman lamented the loss of people who took their lives due to poverty in an article in *The Impress*, a literary magazine that she edited from 1894-95. She condemned suicide due to poverty as "one of the most alarming features of our time," perhaps due to the loss of human capital, and wrote of it satirically as a public health crisis that might be ameliorated by "quarantine" or

a sin by writing, "Our feelings date far back, to darker crueler Gods of the remote past, who delighted in sacrifice and pain. We still harbor a dim feeling that in some way it is God's will to have us suffer, and that we must not seek to escape it. It is high time we had a better opinion of Him."[51] Gilman herself acted on this conviction by committing suicide rather than permitting her advanced breast cancer to kill her. In a signed note given to the press by her daughter for publication after her death, Gilman justified her decision by asserting, "When all usefulness is over, when one is assured of an unavoidable and imminent death, it is the simplest of human rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and horrible one… I have preferred chloroform to cancer."[52] Gilman's words and life choices indicate her opinion that suicide is a permissible choice when one has exhausted all other options and wants to end their own suffering.

This philosophy can be extended to "The Yellow Wallpaper," a story in which the narrator is undoubtedly suffering from her isolation and lack of vocation. According to the narrator, her mental pain is so great that no one else, including her husband/doctor, can conceive of it: "John does not know how much I really suffer" ("YW," 29). Through introspection, the narrator concludes that she is a woman attempting to operate within the confines of a patriarchal society that denies her productivity simply on the grounds of her gender. The narrator fits Gilman's definition of the "incurable" who deserves the option of "euthanasia," so according to Gilman's own logic, suicide is her most practical option. Had the narrator remained alive and

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"inoculation" in order to mock the ineffectiveness of contemporary attempts to alleviate poverty (Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, 1860-1935. Papers, 1846-1961, Volume 2o. The Impress, Vol. II, no. 1-20, October 6, 1894 - February 16, 1895., http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/15644732 seq. 145).

[51] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, 1860-1935. Papers, 1846-1961, Folder 226. Stories, miscellaneous. Articles on euthanasia, suicide, etc., http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/13731493 seq. 3

[52] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, 1860-1935. Papers, 1846-1961, Folder 284. Death, 1935, 1938., http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/13163459 seq. 1

somehow rebelled against John's constraints, she would have simply been one woman advocating for egalitarianism within a social structure that rejected it, so it is highly doubtful that she could have ever been productive by producing a noticeable change in society. It is almost certain, however, that she would have continued to suffer greatly for her efforts to circumvent social norms. Indeed, this image of one woman attempting to change a world that rarely heeded her applies to Gilman's real life—she spent much of her life writing and lecturing on gender equality, but she was not always taken seriously in her efforts. The first editor to whom she sent "The Yellow Wallpaper" declined it with a cursory note, stating, "I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself!"[53] Gilman may have allowed her character the alternative of suicide as a form of catharsis. Gilman continued her crusade for gender equality, but she could at least take comfort in the idea of a doppelganger that was no longer suffering from the emotional turmoil of this daily battle. Indeed, as I will explain in the next section, the consequences of the narrator's death extend off of the page and affect the real world, permitting the narrator the productivity in death that she longed for in life.

Self-Immolation and Revenge

Critics of "The Yellow Wallpaper" have traditionally conceived of the narrator as having only two choices for how to react to her forced rest cure: obedience or madness.[54] However, the

[53] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "On the Reception of 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" *The Yellow Wallpaper*, edited by Dale M. Bauer, Bedford Cultural Editions, 1998, p. 349.

[54] Paula Treichler writes that the narrator "escapes 'the sentence' imposed by patriarchy" through a madness that is both a triumph because she is defying John and a defeat because the patriarchy will eventually win, committing the narrator to harsher treatments (Treichler, "Escaping the Sentence," 67). Judith Fetterley characterizes "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a debate between two conceptions of reality—the narrator's and John's—which are represented by different stories that contribute to two competing texts. According to Fetterley, the narrator "can accept her husband's definition of reality, the prime component of which is the proposition that for her to write her own text is 'madness' and for her to read his text is 'sanity'… Or she can refuse to read his text, refuse to become a character in it, and insist on writing her own, behavior for which John will define and treat her as mad" (Fetterley, "Reading about Reading," 160). In other words, the narrator must either conform to John's expectations and submit herself to him or rebel against John, behavior that will cause him to label her as mad.

narrator, who describes herself as "angry" two times in her last journal entry alone ("YW," 51), has an overlooked third option that permits her to give her death meaning—social protest. The narrator, who begins the story as quite logical, is mad from the time she truly begins to believe that there are figures moving in the wallpaper. This moment is indicated by her own admission that "It [the wallpaper] dwells in my mind so!" (35). However, as I have acknowledged through a consideration of Poe's literary madmen, someone who is insane enough to distort the meanings of visual stimuli can still have the presence of mind to strategize and understand the consequences of their actions. In Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," for example, the narrator is driven mad by his fixation on an old man's blue "Evil Eye," which was most likely clouded because of cataracts rather than devilry.[55] Though Poe's narrator is obviously unhinged, he plans the old man's murder with care, patiently watching the old man sleep for a week before he finally acts and suffocates the man under his own mattress. Poe's narrator is also careful to avoid the ramifications of his crime. He hides the old man's body under his floor and replaces "the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even his—could have detected anything wrong."[56] Though the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is eventually apprehended, he demonstrates that madness and fastidious foresight are far from mutually exclusive. Likewise, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" was delusional enough to believe in hallucinations, but she retained the discernment necessary to plan her death and infuse it with a meaning that would reach beyond the walls of her confinement.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" depicts neither the narrator's "final triumph" as a means to "escape the sentence" as Paula Treichler suggests, nor submission to her patriarchal confines, but

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[55] Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart," 173.
[56] Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart," 175.

rather a third choice to end her own life in full view of the marital and medical establishments, as represented by John, as a means of protesting and bringing attention to the sheer inhumanity of gendered limitations.[57] Just before the narrator commits suicide, she locks herself in her bedroom, asserting that she does not "want to have anybody come in, till John comes" because, as she writes, "I want to astonish him" ("YW," 51). According to today's usage, the word "astonish" has a relatively innocuous connotation; it is synonymous with "surprise." However, the older denotation of "astonish" is much more violent, with definitions such as "to deprive of sensation, as by a blow; to stun, paralyze, deaden, stupefy" and "to shock one out of his self-possession, or confidence; to dismay, terrify."[58] According to this definition, the narrator chose suicide as a means of protest against John and the larger social structure he represents.[59] The most currently well-known instances of self-immolation,[60] or suicide as a form of protest, occurred after Gilman's death, during the Vietnam War, in a series of auto-cremations modeled after that of Buddhist monk Quang Duc, who set himself on fire in the center of a busy Saigon intersection as a form of resistance against Buddhist persecution by the Diem regime.[61] However, self-immolation is so common throughout history as to be almost archetypal—it can be traced back even to Roman mythology, in which Dido burned herself on a funeral pyre to

[57] Treichler, "Escaping the Sentence," 73.
[58] "Astonish, v." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2018.
[59] Due to his generic name, John is often characterized as an everyman, representative of the "social, domestic, intellectual [and] physical" dominance of men in the 19th century (Johnson, Greg. "Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 26, no. 4, 1989, p. 523.)
[60] Self-immolation is often associated with auto-cremation because this is the form most often represented in contemporary news and pop culture since the Vietnam War, but the definition of self-immolation is not restricted to death by fire. Its general definition is any means of self-inflicted death "on behalf of a collective cause" (Biggs, Michael. "Dying Without Killing: Self-Immolations, 1963-2002." *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, edited by Diego Gambetta, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 173).
[61] Verini, James. "A Terrible Act of Reason: When Did Self-Immolation Become the Paramount Form of Protest." *The New Yorker*, 16 May 2012.

escape an abhorrent remarriage.[62] As Michael Biggs writes, desperate individuals most frequently use self-immolation "as a means to advance their cause, it can be an appeal to others to change their behavior… [it] is a costly signal which conveys information: the depth of the individual's sense of injustice on behalf of the collective cause."[63] The narrator, who is forbidden any other means of productivity, executes her own demise with precision in order to transform it into a potent social protest.

The narrator chooses to end her life in a particularly gruesome manner in order to permanently traumatize John. As Timothy Dickinson notes, those who choose self-immolation carefully plan the extremely affecting nature of the image of their deaths. Most contemporary practitioners choose to douse themselves in fuel and set themselves on fire because:

> Fire is the most dreaded of all forms of death… the sight of someone setting themselves on fire is simultaneously an assertion of intolerability and, frankly, of moral superiority. You say 'I would never have the guts to do that. It's not that he's trying to tell me something, but that he's *commanding* me.' This isn't insanity. It's a terrible act of reason.[64]

Likewise, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" compels John to view her death, which is so hideously shocking as to "astonish" him fully out of consciousness, as a means of revenge against John for his unabating oppression. Many scholars have analyzed the role reversal in which John, who was formerly a caricature of masculine logic, is diminished to the analog of a

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[62] Verini, James. "A Terrible Act of Reason."
[63] Biggs, "Dying Without Killing," 196. See Biggs's chapter for an in-depth consideration of the motivations of those who commit self-immolation.
[64] Verini, "A Terrible Act of Reason."

hysterical fainting woman by the end of the short story.[65] However, interpreting the ending of "The Yellow Wallpaper" as social protest extends this theory of transient manipulation of John to give the narrator longer-lasting control over John's story. Traumatic events, such as witnessing "unnatural death," are now associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[66] People with PTSD often experience "recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive recollections of the event," "distressing dreams," and "flashbacks."[67] Although Gilman predated the official terminology of the disorder, she was no doubt aware of the debilitating effects of trauma. By compelling John to view her lifeless body, just weeks after he triumphantly said, "you really are better, dear… I feel really much easier about you" ("YW," 38), the narrator forever sears the scene of her death into John's mind, ensuring that her image will haunt him as he goes about his daily life and whenever he attempts to sleep. Though there is a gap between the narrator's desire for immoral revenge on the personal level and moral social reform on the structural level, John serves as a rebuke to the patriarchy writ small. Although she cannot change the entire social system that oppresses her and her fellow women, the narrator can target its most proximal representative, John, transforming him into an example of the harmful nature of the patriarchy, much as those who chose self-immolation during the Vietnam War sacrificed their own individual bodies to create an image of the large-scale suffering of others. The narrator's conscious choice to "astonish"—or, more accurately, traumatize—John demonstrates her intent

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[65] Judith Fetterley writes that the narrator "does, however briefly, force [John] to become a character in her text" by asserting herself at the end of the text and causing John to lose consciousness (Fetterley, "Reading about Reading," 160). Greg Johnson describes the scene as "Gilman's witty inversion of a conventional heroine's confrontation with Gothic terror" (Johnson, "Gilman's Gothic Allegory," 529). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also mock the moment as "John's unmasculine swoon of surprise" (Gilbert & Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 91).
[66] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed., American Psychiatric Association, 2013.
[67] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed.

to use her own demise to castigate her husband, gaining a form of revenge that extends beyond her own life to haunt the remainder of his.

The narrator's death also serves as a permanent social punishment for John. Although women of Gilman's time were often defined in relation to their husband's identity—they did, and still often do, take their husband's surname at marriage, subordinating their own identity to that of the husband—the narrator's death would create a role reversal, causing John to be socially defined in relation to her in his new role as a widower. Though John would almost certainly hide the true story of his wife's demise, it would be very difficult to conceal his wife's death from the general public, so the narrator would gain posthumous control over John's reputation by defining him as the physician who could not save his most important patient: his own wife. Through self-immolation, the narrator retaliates against John by degrading him physically, mentally, and socially, ultimately besmirching his master status as a competent physician.

This theme of the use of horror in an attempt to catalyze social change pervades not only the narrator's story, but also Gilman's own. Gilman creates horror by characterizing madness as a contagion that might escape the bounds of her work's pages in the convention of Edgar Allan Poe. Many critics have noted parallels between "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the work of Poe.[68] Gilman even admitted her desire to imitate Poe's horror in a letter to her friend, Martha Luther Lane, shortly after she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper":

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[68] Catherine J. Golden notes that one of the original readings of the story was "as a horror tale in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe" (Golden, Catherine J. "Speaking a Different Story: The Illustrated Text." *"The Yellow Wall-Paper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Dual-Text Critical Edition*, edited by Shawn St. Jean, Ohio University Press, 2006, p. 63). Beverly A. Hume compares Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" to Poe's "The Black Cat" (Hume, "Managing Madness in Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-Paper,'" 3). Annette Kolodny notes that Gilman's difficulty in publishing "The Yellow Wallpaper" was perplexing because readers should have already been primed for her work by Poe's: "her story located itself not as any deviation from a previous tradition of women's fiction but, instead, as a continuation of a genre popularized by Poe." However, Kolodny asserts that the reading strategies that Poe's work imparted to its readers did not fully apply to Gilman's story because Poe's work was "heavily male-gendered and highly idiosyncratic, having more to do with individual temperament than with social or cultural situations per se" (Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading," 455).

> When my awful story "The Yellow Wallpaper" comes out, you must try & read it. Walter says he has read it four times, and thinks it the most ghastly tale he ever read. Says it beats Poe and Doré! But that's only a husband's opinion.
>
> I read the thing to three women here however, and I never saw such squirms! Daylight too. It's a simple tale, but highly unpleasant.[69]

Gilman clearly delighted in her story's power to cause both emotional reactions and squirms of physical discomfort in its readers. Gilman emulated Edgar Allan Poe's use of mise en abymes in his work to accomplish this feat of horror by characterizing horror as infectious. For example, Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" contains two additional texts within the main text of the story. A poem, "The Haunted Palace," portrays a house, which has "Banners yellow, glorious, golden" that symbolize hair and "two luminous windows" that represent eyes to form a human head.[70] The mind symbolized by the house imagery goes insane, transforming from a sane home governed by "the monarch Thought's dominion" into a mad palace with "red-litten windows," or bloodshot eyes, and "Vast forms that move fantastically / To a discordant melody," or deranged thoughts ("FHU," 119). The house's descent into madness parallels that of the composer of the poem, Roderick Usher. Characters of the main text also read a story, "Mad Trist," in which the sounds of the hero, Sir Launcelot, fighting a dragon parallel the sounds of an unknown figure approaching in the main text so uncannily that the narrator is compelled to pause in shock and think, "there came… what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo… of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described" (125). The

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[69] Charlotte Perkins Stetson to Martha Luther Lane, July 27, 1890, Charlotte Perkins Gilman Letters, Rhode Island Historical Society, quoted in Golden, Catherine J, editor. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*. Routledge, 2004.

[70] Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Fall of the House of Usher." *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales*, Signet Classics, 2006, p. 118. Hereafter abbreviated as "FHU" and cited parenthetically by page number.

narrator and Roderick Usher eventually recognize that the sounds of the story coincided with the sounds of Roderick's twin sister, whom he buried alive, as she broke free of her burial vault and staggered toward them: "The breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield" from the story occurred simultaneously with "the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles with the coppered archway of the vault" (127). The central horror of Poe's work lies in a carnal fear—if inner texts can form such parallels with the events of the main story, then might the gruesome aspects of Poe's main story also be able to escape the bounds of their pages and affect the reader?

Charlotte Perkins Gilman inspires fear in "The Yellow Wallpaper" in a similar manner. By creating a multilayered mise en abyme in which a woman, Gilman herself, is writing about another woman, the narrator, who is also writing about the women she sees in the wallpaper, Gilman invokes the implicit question of whether the madness in her text might infiltrate one more level of this mise en abyme to reach those who read and write about Gilman and her work. Both Poe and Gilman base their horror on characterizing madness as a contagion that is potentially capable of escaping its pages and infecting the reader. Indeed, as Jane Thrailkill asserts, contemporary readers of "The Yellow Wallpaper" often reacted to the text "*Physiologically*," noting its strong visceral effects and propensity to cause readers to fear for their own sanity.[71] According to one contemporary reviewer, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is

> an eerie tale of insanity that is uncommonly effective. Most attempts to work up insanity as "material" are ineffective; but here the progress from nervous sensitiveness to illusion, and on to delusion, is put before the reader so insidiously that he feels something of that

[71] Thrailkill, "Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" 526.

> same chill alarm for his own mental soundness that accompanies actual contact with lunatics.[72]

Reviews such as this one evince Gilman's success at stunning her readers almost violently, engendering physical reactions to her ghastly text much as her predecessor, Edgar Allan Poe, achieved his previously nonpareil horror. This horror adds yet another layer to Gilman's elaborate mise en abyme: just as the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" hopes to violently "astonish" John, Gilman uses her story to shock her readers and attempt to catalyze social change.[73]

Mattering and Self-Actualization

Although the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" had no viable options for living a productive life in her contemporary social system, in a later short story, "Dr. Clair's Place," Gilman depicts a scenario in which gender might be used strategically for a woman to achieve a sense of fulfillment in a more egalitarian society. "Dr. Clair's Place," which was published in 1915, details the cure of a patient named Octavia Welch. Welch, who "had known no hope for many years" because she had "no money," "no friends," "no home," and "no work" and had not been able to successfully care for her children, was on her way to commit suicide when a former patient of Dr. Clair's intercepted her.[74] Welch voluntarily accompanies the former patient to the "psycho-sanatorium," a treatment center for the mentally ill that Dr. Clair, a female physician,

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[72] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, 1860-1935. Papers, 1846-1961, Folder 301. "The Yellow Wallpaper," 1899, 1916, 1923, n.d., http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/13163476 seq. 5 quoted in Thrailkill, "Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" 527.

[73] Gilman wrote that her goal in writing "The Yellow Wallpaper" was "to save people from being driven crazy" (Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper?" *The Yellow Wallpaper*, edited by Dale M. Bauer, Bedford Cultural Editions, 1998, pp. 349.) Given Gilman's focus on social movements in many of her lectures and writings, including *Women and Economics*, as previously noted, it stands to reason that Gilman would have viewed changes at the level of the individual reader that aggregate into social change as a potential remedy for the plight of the domestic housewife.

[74] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "Dr. Clair's Place." *The Yellow Wallpaper*, edited by Dale M. Bauer, Bedford Cultural Editions, 1998, p. 327. Hereafter abbreviated "DCP" and cited parenthetically by page number.

manages. At the psycho-sanatorium, Welch undergoes a more enjoyable version of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's rest cure that relies mainly on rest, good food, and massage. As Jane Thrailkill notes, Gilman did not fundamentally disagree with Dr. Mitchell's rest cure,[75] which attempted to renew "the vitality of feeble people by a combination of entire rest and of excessive feeding, made possible by passive exercise obtained through the steady use of massage and electricity."[76] Instead, Gilman used "Dr. Clair's Place" to modify Mitchell's theory and demonstrate what a rest cure should look like.

The concept of a female psychiatrist—much less one who owns her own practice—would have seemed quite radical in Gilman's time. The first American woman to receive a medical degree, Elizabeth Blackwell, graduated from Geneva Medical College in 1849. Blackwell was only admitted to medical school after the male student body unanimously voted to accept her because they thought the proposal was a joke.[77] The first woman to earn a PhD in psychology, Margaret Floy Washburn, graduated from Cornell in 1894, just over two decades before the publication of "Dr. Clair's Place."[78] The conferral of degrees was hardly tantamount to acceptance: Blackwell was often treated as a nurse and had difficulty attracting patients[79] and Washburn could not marry because she would have had to forfeit her professorship.[80] In contrast, Dr. Clair was widely respected by both male and female patients. She had the feminine boon of a loving family, but, as Gilman underscores, she also had an innovative professionalism:

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[75] Thrailkill, "Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" 544.
[76] Mitchell, S. Weir. "Fat and Blood: An Essay on the Treatment of Certain Forms of Neurasthenia and Hysteria." 6th ed., J. B. Lippincott Company, 1891, p. 9.
[77] Clark, Laura. "The First Woman in America to Receive an M.D. Was Admitted to Med School as a Joke." *Smithsonian*, 21 Jan. 2015.
[78] "Women, Gender, Feminism, and Psychology in the United States and Canada." *Psychology's Feminist Voices*, 2008.
[79] Michals, Debra. "Elizabeth Blackwell." *National Women's History Museum*, 2015.
[80] "Margaret Floy Washburn." *National Women's History Museum*, 2015.

"other women have husbands and children, also splendid—no one else had a psycho-sanatorium" ("DCP," 329). Dr. Clair fully embodies the traits of a physician, which were considered masculine characteristics in her time. She had the assertiveness necessary to enforce order among the residents of the psycho-sanatorium, the authority needed to manage her own business, and the professionalism required to provide medical treatment. Dr. Clair uses gendered behaviors strategically not only to prosper in her role as loving wife and mother, but also to flourish in the male-dominated professions of medicine, psychology, and business.

At Dr. Clair's psycho-sanatorium, patients were not forbidden from self-study and productivity as the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" was. Instead, they were taught how to study themselves productively to gain the sense of individual identity that women often lose to their position within their family.[81] I diverge from Thrailkill's assertion that Dr. Clair's ultimate remedy is to guide patients toward a vocation to save them from their "pathogenic 'self-study.'"[82] Rather, I view self-study not as the agent of madness, but as part of its cure. The first treatment that began to ameliorate Octavia's depression was a form of talk therapy rooted in introspection. Twice per day, Dr. Clair talked to her "not as a physician to a patient, but as an inquiring scientific searcher for valuable truths" ("DCP," 333). In other words, Dr. Clair made her feel like someone with something important to say, rather than simply the embodiment of a subordinate social role, as was the plight of the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Dr. Clair also "told [her] about other cases somewhat similar to [her] own, consulted [her] in a way, as to this or that bit of analysis she had made; and again and again and again as to certain points in

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[81] According to Betty Friedan, "The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question 'Who am I?' by saying 'Tom's wife… Mary's mother.'" Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, p. 126.
[82] Thrailkill, "Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" 544.

[her] own case" (333). Being "consulted" about her "own case" on equal terms with a medical professional transforms Octavia from a patient to an amateur doctor who works to cure herself with her own self-knowledge. Dr. Clair uses her talk sessions to let Octavia talk about herself and her feelings, to help her understand that she is not alone, and to teach her to use self-study not to wallow in her emotions, but to begin to feel better and truly know herself. Later in the story, Dr. Clair also encourages a more corporeal manifestation of self-study. The next step of Octavia's treatment is a study of her own reactions to various physical stimulants. As Dr. Clair tells Octavia:

> I want you to keep a record, if you will… here's a little chart by your bed. When you feel the worst be so good as to try either of these three things and note the result. The Music, as you have used it, noting the effect of the different airs. The Color—we have not introduced you to the color treatment yet… I would much like to have you make a study of these effects and note it for me. Then—don't laugh!— I want you to try taste, also. Have you ever noticed the close connection between a pleasant flavor and a state of mind? (333)

This physical self-study, in which Octavia considers the effects of external variables on her internal emotions, as well as the introspective talk therapy, form the beginnings of Octavia's cure.

Although it serves as the catalyst for Octavia's newfound salubrity, self-study is not the apogee of Dr. Clair's cure. Neither is a sense of vocation, as Thrailkill suggests.[83] Instead, introspection and productivity form two components of the true remedy of "Dr. Clair's Place"—mattering. Mattering is defined as "the feeling that others depend upon us, are interested in us,

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[83] Thrailkill, "Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" 544.

are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension."[84] Put simply, mattering is the feeling that one is an important part of a community and has the ability to help others. Octavia herself lauds "the People" as Dr. Clair's "Secret" ("DCP," 334). She cites interaction and intimate conversation with interesting people as the impetus of her transformation from a woman devoid of hope to a "well woman" who can ecstatically proclaim, "I am Happy!" (334). In Octavia's own words, "She had People there who were better than Music and Color and Fragrance and Sweetness, — People who lived up there with work and interests of their own… It was the People who did it. First she made my body as strong as might be, and rebuilt my worn-out nerves with sleep – sleep – sleep. Then I had the right Contact, Soul to Soul" (334). Octavia benefits from the social support of those around her, and she also thrills in improving the lives of others by sharing her own knowledge. She now teaches knitting for a living, a vocation that both has a tangible product and is intrinsically beneficial to others. Teaching also allows her to spend time connecting with others, providing the social network that is essential to mattering. Her story even becomes a quasi monomyth—she becomes an "Associate," or a graduate of Dr. Clair's who can now help others, much as a former patient helped her at the beginning of the story. Dr. Clair, who understands how to use masculine traits not only to improve her own social position but also to help others, teaches these skills to Octavia. As Thrailkill asserts, "The story ends with the convergence of cure and denouement, but in a form that would have been unimaginable to either Mitchell *or* Freud: in Gilman's tale, the patient joins the physician's staff. No longer a professional invalid, the former patient becomes a professional who *specializes* in invalids.[85] Through Dr. Clair's treatment, Octavia achieves a sense of mattering in which she is integrated

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[84] Rosenberg, Morris, and B. Claire McCullough. "Mattering: Inferred Significance and Mental Health among Adolescents." *Research in Community and Mental Health*, vol. 2, 1981, p. 165.
[85] Thrailkill, "Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" 544.

into a community she both needs and is needed by. Indeed, though Gilman predated the official sociological termination of the concept of mattering by almost a century, she was remarkably prescient. Contemporary research demonstrates that a sense of mattering is inversely correlated with depression, and this association is particularly strong in women.[86]

The longings of the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" extend far beyond a simple vocation. She wants to fulfill her "duty" to her family ("YW," 29), to receive "advice and companionship" (31), and to disseminate her "work" to the world (25). In short, the narrator needed a sense of mattering, but was instead driven to suicide by the sheer immutability of her suffocating social position. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the antithesis of "Dr. Clair's Place," in which Octavia achieves fulfillment and productivity by both contributing to and benefiting from a supportive social structure. Using Dr. Clair's success as a model, Octavia learns to prioritize her own identity and create a social network outside of the home in a manner that would have been viewed as distinctly masculine in Gilman's time. The meaning of Gilman's juxtaposition is clear—women were incapable of social contributions not because of an innate feminine disposition but because society barred them from it. In "Dr. Clair's Place," Gilman proposes an ideal society based on a meritocracy. A qualified woman is not only a man's equal in the workplace—she can outrank him. Indeed, Dr. Clair is her own husband's boss ("DCP," 329). In this utopia, members feel safe, loved, and valued, allowing them to reach "self-actualization," which is associated with unrivaled productivity.[87] Gilman's dichotomy asserts that supporting

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[86] Taylor, John, and R. Jay Turner. "A Longitudinal Study of the Role and Significance of Mattering to Others for Depressive Symptoms." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, vol. 42, no. 3, Sept. 2001, p. 323.

[87] Though Maslow published after Gilman's death, the end of "Dr. Clair's Place" mirrors the self-actualization at the apex of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Similar to Maslow's pyramid, Gilman's "Dr. Clair's Place" demonstrates that one must have their "physiological," "safety," "love," and "esteem" needs met before one can realize "self-actualization," which Maslow defines simply as the healthy happiness associated with an individual

women and allowing them the contribution they crave would create a productive society in which all citizens work together toward a common goal, instead of a society in which half of the labor force is repressed by the insecurities and fallacies of the opposing half.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" has traditionally been conceived of as a tale of a madwoman that functions on a simple binary: the narrator's madness is either a triumphant transcendence or a dejected submission. I contribute a third interpretation, in which the narrator's understanding of her position within a patriarchal social structure leads her to commit suicide as a disavowal of social injustice, as an enraged protest, and as a rebuke to her husband. A later story, "Dr. Clair's Place," provides the remedy for the narrator's plight—an alternate social structure in which women may use aspects of masculinity to achieve the sense of mattering they had been denied. "Dr. Clair's Place" demonstrates how gender might be used strategically and transformed into a tool instead of a constraint. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's stories precede the work treated in my other two case studies by a full century. Concepts of gender fluidity in mental health were not adopted by the social sciences until the 1970s, when androgyny was first used as a diagnostic term. Gilman could not pursue the question of what affordances aspects of masculinity might provide her female characters as fully as the works I consider in the following chapters because she was at the forefront of the movement to view gender fluidity positively. However, Gilman does serve as an important harbinger, paving the way for my more contemporary case studies, which consider strategic gender with more complexity.

"doing what he is fitted for." See Maslow's essay, now a part of the psychological canon, for more information: Maslow, A. H. "A Theory of Human Motivation." *Psychological Review*, no. 50, 1943, pp. 370–396.

Chapter 2

Madness and Motherhood: Gendered Mental Illness and Rage in *The Babadook*

Anger as soon as fed – is dead –
'Tis Starving makes it fat –
– Emily Dickinson[88]

While "The Yellow Wallpaper" incorporates elements of the gothic into its call for social change, director Jennifer Kent's 2014 Australian film, *The Babadook*, fully engages psychological horror to challenge the gender binary. *The Babadook* portrays the day-to-day life and complex dyadic relationship of Amelia Vanek, played by Essie Davis, and her son Samuel, played by Noah Wiseman. Amelia's husband died in a car crash as he was driving her to the hospital to have Samuel, and although Samuel is now six years old, Amelia is still reeling from her loss, suffering from depression so severe that it hinders her relationship with Samuel. The tedium of Amelia's life as a single mother, from having to constantly surveil her tantrum-prone son to the monotony of working as a nurse in the dementia ward of her local nursing home, leave the viewer with a strong sense of dejection, but it is not until Samuel finds a new children's book, *Mister Babadook*, waiting on his bookshelf that the true horror of the film begins. Opening the book unleashes its namesake, a taloned monster clad in a black cloak and top hat, upon Amelia and Samuel, who are subsequently plagued by traumatizing events, such as glass shards in their food, strange phone calls, cockroaches in the walls, and eventually by the Babadook himself. However, as Aoife Dempsey notes, "the real monster in the film is not Kent's antipodean bogeyman, the Babadook."[89] Instead, it is the repressed grief and blame that

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[88] Dickinson, Emily. "Mine Enemy Is Growing Old." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, edited by R. W. Franklin, Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 572.
[89] Dempsey, Aoife M. "The Babadook." *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, vol. 14, 2015, p. 130.

the apparition embodies. The Babadook serves as a tangible representation of Amelia's latent anger over the loss of her husband. Both Amelia and Samuel's eventual refusal to conform to their respective gender roles over the course of the film serves as an argument for strategic gender in mental health, which would allow patients to process their mental health issues unfettered by social norms.

The Babadook is typically understood as a film about grief and the difficulties of the maternal role. Noting that Amelia must face her own inner turmoil in order to work toward being a good mother, Rikke Schubart argues that Samuel uses "wild, deep, and dark" play to teach his mother how to confront the Babadook and her own depression in order to rewrite her maternal role and narrative.[90] Aviva Briefel claims that the film uses the typical maternal action of reassurance not to alleviate fear, but to intensify it in order to utilize horror movie tropes as a lens through which to consider the maternal role.[91] Paula Quigley also focuses on the complexities of maternity, characterizing the story as a commentary on, and eventual denial of, the traditional horror movie conventions of "Good Mother" and "Bad Mother."[92] Although much attention has been paid to the film's critique of the traditional maternal role, far less scrutiny has been afforded to the film's consideration of mental illness. The film's genre—horror—allows it to depart from reality, considering exaggeratedly taboo emotions and gender issues not to condone the violent actions the film portrays but to call for action on the part of mental health institutions. I propose to analyze sociologically the mental disorders portrayed in *The Babadook* in order to elucidate the roles that gendered ideas of mental health play in

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[90] Schubart, Rikke. *Mastering Fear: Women, Emotions, and Contemporary Horror*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, p. 197, 200.
[91] Briefel, Aviva. "Parenting through Horror: Reassurance in Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*." *Camera Obscura*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2017, p. 3.
[92] Quigley, Paula. "When Good Mothers Go Bad: Genre and Gender in *The Babadook*." *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, vol. 15, 2016, p. 60.

Amelia's attempts to process her own grief and mental illness. Through close readings of the film's key scenes, I will demonstrate Amelia's polarized shift from feminine depression to masculine aggression and her eventual embodiment of characteristics of both genders. *The Babadook* portrays these gender tropes and then ultimately subverts them in order to advocate for a strategic gender approach to mental health in which people may express qualities linked to both genders in order to heal. I will support this assertion through a consideration of horror movie tropes, the particular atrocity of maternal rage, and an analysis of criticism relating to how horror functions.

Sociology of Gendered Mental Health

Sociological research has evinced that women and men experience and express mental health issues in fundamentally different ways. According to Sarah Rosenfield and Dawne Mouzon, "neither gender experiences worse mental health overall, but men and women experience substantially different types of problems."[93] Women tend to experience more internalizing disorders, such as depression and anxiety, and they tend to suffer from more self-blame, self-reproach, and feelings of being unable to improve their own condition.[94] Men, on the other hand, experience a greater prevalence of externalizing disorders that negatively affect those around them, such as antisocial personality disorders and substance abuse, along with aggressivity and difficulty forming close relationships with others.[95] The higher prevalence of depression experienced by women is typically attributed to their social position: unequal social demands and disadvantages can lead them to have higher levels of distress.[96] This distress is

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[93] Rosenfield, Sarah, and Dawne Mouzon. "Gender and Mental Health." *Handbook of the Sociology of Mental Health*, edited by Carol S Aneshensel et al., 2nd ed., Springer, 2013, p. 277.
[94] Rosenfield & Mouzon, "Gender and Mental Health," 277.
[95] Rosenfield & Mouzon, "Gender and Mental Health," 277.
[96] Ross, Catherine E. *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2017, pp. 96-97.

evident in the conventions of daily life, when women and men are expected to live up to divergent roles. Women are subjected to "emphasized femininity," associated with "traits of submissiveness, nurturance, and emotional sensitivity as ideals," while men are expected to subscribe to "hegemonic masculinity," which is associated with "assertiveness, competitiveness, and independence, traits needed for success in the labor market."[97] Women and men experience mental illness differently because they are held to radically different standards and provided with disparate opportunities.

Some of the main differences between women and men that are often correlated with divergence in mental health are the rates and ranks at which they may enter the workforce. Women tend to have jobs with less pay, autonomy, and opportunity for advancement, all of which exacerbate distress: "Women… have more jobs that are part-time, with lower security and wages. They are more concentrated in lower levels of management, with less direct decision-making power than men."[98] Women also experience more distress due to role conflict, since they are often responsible for both succeeding at work and taking care of their children. This causes women the stress of perpetually attempting to fulfill roles with conflicting demands.[99] Arlie Hochschild provides a term for the household and childcare duties a woman must complete upon returning home from her actual job—the "second shift."[100] Hochschild notes that her book on the disparities between male and female labor was inspired by her own experiences as a young professor who brought her baby to nest in a box during her office hours, analyzed the way in which students and colleagues reacted to him, and questioned why her male peers never seemed

[97] Rosenfield & Mouzon, "Gender and Mental Health," 279-280.
[98] Rosenfield & Mouzon, "Gender and Mental Health," 279.
[99] Ross, *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*, 102.
[100] Hochschild, Arlie. *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. Penguin Books, 2012.

compelled to blur the lines between home and work as she was.[101] Though much of Hochschild's original research, published in 1989, is outdated, her concepts are, unfortunately, still applicable. In 2009, working mothers with preschool children spent 5-7 more hours per week on domestic duties, including childcare, than working fathers. This time difference would accumulate to an additional two weeks of twenty-four-hour days per year of work.[102] The higher prevalence of depression in women is catalyzed by their roles within society, which often rob them of autonomy and leisure time in which to de-stress and make them feel compelled to choose between career advancement and caring for their children.

Feminine Depression and Role Conflict

Though *The Babadook* is rife with detailed scenes of maternal stress, many of which I will analyze below, Amelia is plagued by something more serious than the typical stress of motherhood and the grief that follows the loss of a spouse. Amelia has a legitimate mental health disorder—major depressive disorder—as demonstrated by her actions throughout the first half of the movie. The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-5*) provides a list of nine symptoms and states that at least five of these must be present to justify a diagnosis of major depressive disorder.[103] Of these, Amelia demonstrates depressed mood, loss of interest and pleasure in activities, insomnia, fatigue, and excessive feelings of guilt, thus qualifying her for the diagnosis. The *DSM-5* notes that "responses to a significant loss," such as "bereavement," may be difficult to distinguish from major depressive

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[101] Hochschild, *The Second Shift*, xi-xviii.
[102] Milkie, Melissa A., et al. "Taking on the Second Shift: Time Allocations and Time Pressures of U.S. Parents with Preschoolers." *Social Forces*, vol. 88, no. 2, 2009, pp. 487–517 cited in the updated afterword of the 2012 edition of Hochschild's *The Second Shift*.
[103] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed., American Psychiatric Association, 2013. I reference the online publication of the DSM-5, made available by Psychiatry Online in the DSM Library database, which lacks pagination, so I do not provide page numbers in these citations.

disorder, but it provides mechanisms to distinguish between normal grief and mental illness.[104] Major depressive disorder differs from grief in its manifestation as a "persistently depressed mood and the inability to anticipate happiness," unrelenting even after long periods of time, and feelings of "worthlessness and self-loathing."[105] Amelia demonstrates these characteristics: her melancholy has persisted unyieldingly for the nearly seven years since her husband's death, she is unable to find joy in any of life's little pleasures, even recoiling from her son's well-meaning hugs, and she continues to blame herself for her husband's death. Although the grief and the stress of motherhood play major roles in Amelia's life, they, along with the stressors of her job and role as a single parent, have compounded into a diagnosable mental health disorder.

The compounding social factors and role conflicts that have been linked with increased rates of depression in women are prominent in Amelia's life from the opening scene of *The Babadook*. As a single mother, she is solely responsible for Samuel and receives no reprieves from his constant mischief and outbursts. Viewers are introduced to Samuel as his piercing voice cries, "Mom! Mom! I had the dream again," and he wakes Amelia in the middle of the night from a nightmare of her own so that she can attend to his fears and check his room for monsters. Before Amelia awakes the next morning, Samuel, who has a penchant for building weapons, sneaks down to the basement to MacGyver old belts, nails, and wood into makeshift catapults with the goal of defending himself and his mother from an imagined monster. As Amelia stumbles down the stairs after a sleepless night, she is greeted by the culmination of Samuel's matutinal recreation—he yells, "Watch this! When the monster comes, I'm gonna do this," as he fires a ball through the living room window. Aviva Briefel draws attention to the

[104] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed.
[105] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed.

film's intense focus on the strain and weariness that parenthood causes Amelia, noting that its "unusually close attention to mundane acts" provides "an excruciatingly intimate view of Amelia's frustration and fatigue with her daily tasks" as the film catalogs the wearisome cycles of Samuel interrupting her fitful sleep, his near-constant need for her reassuring presence, and his incessant creation of homemade weapons that Amelia must confiscate to protect Samuel from himself.[106] Samuel's character is that of the stereotypical difficult male child—characterized by tantrums, destructive violence, and a proclivity for dangerous behaviors—taken to the extreme. Although Amelia attempts to be affectionate toward Samuel, these scenes and a plethora of other scenes throughout the movie, from Samuel shrieking at the top of his lungs to pushing his cousin from a tree house and breaking her nose, reveal the nearly constant stress that caring for Samuel brings to her life.

Amelia's part-time job as a nurse at a senior center is the epitome of the traditional female career, which is grievously lacking in autonomy, more likely to be lower-level, and can be deleterious to one's mental health.[107] Hers is the antithesis of a job that is positively correlated with better mental health, reduced anxiety, and higher self-esteem, which involves "complex tasks related to data, people, and things, work that is not routine, and work that is not closely supervised."[108] Amelia works a job that is visibly degrading—she wears a starched light pink collared dress complete with a tiny clock pinned at her breast while a male coworker who seems to be of otherwise equal status lounges around in loose gray scrubs. Much of Amelia's work is also revealed to be futile. In one scene, she calls out bingo numbers for a room of

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[106] Briefel, "Parenting through Horror: Reassurance in Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*," 4-5.
[107] Rosenfield & Mouzon, "Gender and Mental Health," 279.
[108] Lennon, Mary Clare, and Laura Limonic. "Work and Unemployment as Stressors." *A Handbook for the Study of Mental Health: Social Contexts, Theories, and Systems*, edited by Teresa L Scheid and Tony N Brown, 2nd ed., Cambridge, 2010, p. 216.

elderly patients. Amelia has already drawn nearly all of the balls from the cage, so it is clear that there is a high probability that someone should have already won and that the residents of the nursing home are incapable of comprehending the game. Amelia, who calls the numbers with a pasted-on smile, even goes so far as to acknowledge facetiously the absurdity of the game, saying, "Good, Elaine! Another few days and someone could call out Bingo!" when a resident indicates that she has a correct number but forgets to mark her card. The camera immediately pans to a shot of her supervisor watching from the side and frowning as soon as Amelia jokingly calls out the number "five billion." This reveals how highly supervised Amelia's job is, which is a hallmark of careers correlated with poor mental health. Amelia's most miniscule attempts at decision-making are foiled. When she pre-makes a resident's tea with milk in it, as the resident normally prefers, the resident stoically replies, "I don't want milk," and Amelia must remake the cup. These scenes, in which Amelia is demeaned and must perform absurd tasks, demonstrate the stress that her mundane, controlled work environment places on her already tenuous mental health.

The Babadook also provides an almost textbook example of the stressful role conflict experienced by working mothers. Role conflict, which is defined as "the tension caused by competing demands between two or more roles pertaining to different statuses," can occur when a woman is torn between the duties of her place of employment and of caring for her children.[109] In the film, Amelia is assisting a resident of the nursing home to walk down the hall when her supervisor petulantly interrupts to say, "Amelia, your son's school is on the phone." Amelia must leave her job in the middle of her shift to drive to Samuel's school and face a somber, black

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[109] Conley, Dalton. *You May Ask Yourself: An Introduction to Thinking Like a Sociologist*. 3rd ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2013, p. 113.

clad teacher and principal as they show her the homemade crossbow that Samuel snuck into school that morning. They inform her that her son's behavior is so deviant that they must employ a monitor for him in order to protect the other children from his destructive tendencies. Throughout the film, Amelia is often late to work or forced to call in sick as she attempts to fulfill her maternal duties. As Baxter and Alexander note, single mothers do not have a spouse to share in household duties, so they are more likely to experience strain between work and family than women with partners.[110] Having no partner to help alleviate some of her burden creates even more stress for Amelia, and this conflict between Amelia's two main roles as nurse and mother constantly pulls her in two different directions, causing distress and increasing her risk for depression.

The gendered social stressors that Amelia must cope with, from her role as a single mother to her low-wage part-time job, coupled with the sudden trauma of her husband's death, result in a mental illness that is gendered as well. She works a conventional female job rife with tedium and sorely lacking in autonomy, she is the sole provider of care for a child with marked behavioral problems, and she is affected by the compounding of these two stressful roles as they conflict with one another and vie for her limited time. She embodies the ideals of emphasized femininity, wearing a fake smile and spreading pseudo-cheer as she navigates a life that revolves around the self-sacrificial, feminine act of nurturing. When she is in her home, she is caring for Samuel, and when she is at work, she is assisting patients, so she rarely gets any free time to care for herself and process her grief and anger over the death of her husband. These stressors contribute to the pain she feels from the loss of her husband and manifest themselves in a notably

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[110] Baxter, Jennifer, and Michael Alexander. "Australian Journal of Social Issues." *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2008, p. 197.

feminine manner as depression, as opposed to more masculine alternatives such as aggression or substance abuse. By the midpoint of the film, Amelia has been characterized as the ne plus ultra of traditional female mental illness. However, Amelia soon begins to undergo a transformation in which her former feminine deference shifts to shockingly acerbic masculine rage.

Masculine Rage and Violent Motherhood

One night, as Amelia is attempting to soothe Samuel to sleep, she permits him to pick any book he would like from his bookshelf for them to read together as a bedtime story. Samuel chooses an unfamiliar book with a dark red cover entitled *Mister Babadook*. The first few pages are relatively innocent, with a whimsical rhyme and cadence that make Samuel giggle: "If you're a really clever one / And you know what it is to see / Then you can make friends with a special one, / A friend of you and me."[111] As they read on, Amelia senses the sinister nature of the book and attempts to get Samuel to choose a different one, but he persists in his desire to read *Mister Babadook*. The tone of the book becomes increasingly minatory with a promise that the Babadook will escape the story world and enter Samuel and Amelia's lives. As Samuel begins to shake and whimper, Amelia reads, "I'll soon take off my funny disguise / (Take heed of what you've read…) / And once you see what's underneath… / YOU'RE GOING TO WISH YOU WERE DEAD."[112] As the movie progresses, Amelia and Samuel are plagued by events that initially seem like eerie coincidences, such as strange phone calls and odd noises. When Amelia tears the book up and throws it out with the garbage in an attempt to prevent it from afflicting them any further, it shows up on her doorstep bright and early the next morning with meticulously-placed tape binding each shredded page precisely together. Amelia is thoroughly

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[111] Kent, Jennifer, director. *The Babadook*. Entertainment One, 2014.
[112] Kent, *The Babadook*.

unnerved and leafs through the remainder of the book, which adumbrates a violent possession. *Mister Babadook* vows, “I’ll wager with you, I’ll make you a bet. / The more you deny, the stronger I get. / You start to change when I get in / The Babadook growing right under your skin.” The book portrays the Babadook looming over Amelia’s bed saying, “Let me in!” followed by a pop-up paper Amelia framed by the black silhouette of the Babadook as she strangles her dog and Samuel before finally slitting her own throat with a knife.[113] Though Amelia burns the book, calls her sister, and goes to the police station, she receives no help from the outside world. The next night, the viewer must watch as Amelia cowers underneath her sheets while the Babadook approaches, crouches above her bed on a light fixture, and dives down her throat with a shriek.

Though the scene in which the Babadook’s pitch black form flies into the mouth of a wide-eyed, trembling Amelia is often analyzed as a straightforward, cliché horror movie possession, subtle clues from the film allow the reader to piece together another interpretation.[114] At a birthday party for her sister’s daughter, Amelia succumbs to the other mothers’ prying and admits that she was once a writer who “did some kids’ stuff.” After the *Mister Babadook* book makes its unwelcome return on her doorstep, Amelia’s hands are shown stained black—the same color as the book’s hand-painted ink—as she frantically calls her sister. These details suggest that instead of being the victim of the Babadook, Amelia was its creator.[115] Amelia’s role as the author of the book from which the Babadook is unleashed evinces that she has become tired of a

[113] Kent, *The Babadook*.
[114] See Kidd, Briony. “Umbilical Fears: Jennifer Kent's The Babadook.” Metro Magazine, 2014, pp. 6-12 and Buerger, Shelley. “The Beak That Grips: Maternal Indifference, Ambivalence, and the Abject in *The Babadook*.” *Studies in Australian Cinema*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2017, pp. 33–44 for a consideration of Amelia as a victim of possession.
[115] See Quigley, Paula. “When Good Mothers Go Bad: Genre and Gender in The Babadook.” Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies, vol. 15, 2016, pp. 57–75 for a consideration of Amelia writing the book herself as a safe form of self-expression.

feminine mental illness that is often correlated with self-blame and that has plagued her for nearly seven years without abating.[116] By designing the book about a clearly male creature (the book's title is *Mister Babadook*), Amelia exhibits a seemingly unconscious desire to actively confront her own inner demons in a more masculine way because continuing to act as the feminine caretaker will never permit her the time or the energy to take care of herself and come to terms with her grief at the loss of her husband. The Babadook is not an external menace arbitrarily sent to haunt Amelia and Samuel. Rather, the creature is a spectral representation of Amelia's raw grief and anger at her son for his inadvertent role in his father's death. This melancholy haunts her relentlessly, just as the black-taloned form of the Babadook does. The beginning of the book (before it shifts to anapests and devolves into murderous threats) is written in primarily iambic meter, which mimics the sound of the human heart, so the book is quite literally an outward manifestation of her inner, latent emotions. She created the book in an attempt to come to terms with her melancholy, but is so overwhelmed by the act of acknowledging her sadness that she succumbs to her grief, eventually becoming so mad with despair that she nearly murders her own son. Amelia *is* temporarily possessed, but not by the conventional B-movie demon. Instead, she is possessed by the sadness and resultant mental health disorder that she has no language or strategies to adequately cope with.

Although Amelia is timorous and deferential throughout the first half of the film, her conversion to an exaggerated gothic depiction of masculine aggressivity may be indicative of a form of conscious protest. Alfred Adler was an Austrian psychologist who wrote of an "almost universal dissatisfaction with the feminine role" on the part of women because they were viewed

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[116] Rosenfield & Mouzon, "Gender and Mental Health," 277.

as inferior and allowed only trivial tasks, as in Amelia's mundane job.[117] Adler outlines a means of "rejecting the woman's role" through a concept that he terms "masculine protest."[118] According to Adler, a woman who realizes that she cannot accomplish her life goals while labeled as an inferior woman will begin to adopt masculine characteristics, acting as a tomboy, shunning housework, and pursuing endeavors that are typically construed as manly, such as sports.[119] Adler writes that humans must emulate either the "ideal woman" or the "ideal man," so women who realize the shortcomings of the female role will begin to act masculine instead. As Adler asserts, "The whole history of civilization… shows us that the pressure exerted upon women, and the restriction to which they must submit even today, cannot be borne by any human being; they always give rise to revolt."[120] Upon realizing the futility of her feminine role, Amelia, too, embraces violently masculine actions as a means of protesting her social position and attempting to forge a new place for herself in society.

From the moment of her symbolic "possession" by the Babadook, Amelia is governed by the bereavement and mental illness that it represents. She shifts from displaying symptoms of a mental health disorder that is typically feminine—depression—to meeting the qualifications for a typically masculine mental health disorder—antisocial personality disorder. Antisocial personality disorder, which is far more common in males than females,[121] is characterized in the *DSM-5* as a disregard for the rights of others as exhibited by a failure to obey the law, deceitfulness and lying, impulsivity, irritability and aggressiveness, disregard for the safety of

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[117] Adler, Alfred. *Understanding Human Nature*. Translated by Colin Brett, 3rd ed., Oneworld, 1998, pp. 114, 112.
[118] Alder, Understanding Human Nature, 114.
[119] Alder, Understanding Human Nature, 115.
[120] Alder, Understanding Human Nature, 115.
[121] Rosenfield & Mouzon, "Gender and Mental Health," 277.

oneself or others, irresponsibility, and a lack of remorse.[122] In the second half of the movie, Amelia's grief tears her from the fetters of social mores, allowing her to ignore the misogynistic norms to which she once conformed. She begins to adopt more masculine behaviors, such as speaking in a deep voice that is not her own and relying on physical force to achieve her means; indeed, she displays nearly all of the indications of antisocial personality disorder. As Briony Kidd notes, *The Babadook* is comparable to Kubrick's *The Shining*, but with an interesting gendered complication—"the character of Amelia seems to embody both the feminine and the masculine—the nurturing protectiveness of Wendy (Shelley Duvall) [the mother] *and* the unleashed aggression of Jack [the father]."[123] *The Babadook* does not simply polarize the two genders as *The Shining* does; rather, it eventually merges them. A close reading of some of the film's key scenes will prove Amelia's transformation from presenting the feminine mental illness I have demonstrated to a masculine mental illness before eventually culminating in a well-balanced androgyny.

Upon waking on the morning after her possession, Amelia, whose workplace demeanor was formerly one of submission and timidity, argues vehemently with her supervisor as she attempts deceptively to call in sick. She bitterly declares, "All right, give all my shifts away. That's just what I need." Her supervisor, whose side of the conversation cannot be heard, apparently threatens her job because Amelia shouts, "You do that!" before forcefully slamming the phone down and crawling back into bed. Amelia shifts from a frazzled mom who spends much of her time in the first part of the film attempting to hurry Samuel so she can get to work on time or groveling through the phone with white lies to call in sick when Samuel absolutely

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[122] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed.

[123] Kidd, Briony. "Umbilical Fears: Jennifer Kent's The Babadook." Metro Magazine, 2014, p. 11

prevents her from working, to a remorseless truant who yells at and lies to her boss with marked insolence simply because she does not want to go to work at her appointed time. This deceitfulness, disregard for others, belligerence, and irresponsibility is characteristic of antisocial personality disorder and represents a pronounced transformation in Amelia's behavior.

In the beginning of the film, Amelia's life is characterized by the constant conflict between her roles as both a mother and an employee. After her transformation, however, she rejects both of these roles and commits completely to putting herself first, even at the expense of those who are dependent upon her. Amelia, who has not slept well in weeks due to her own nightmares and Samuel constantly awakening her in the middle of the night, is exhausted and wants nothing more than to sleep. In the past, Amelia would have disregarded her own fear and fatigue and gotten up to soothe Samuel back to sleep when he came to her bed. On the morning after her metamorphosis, however, when Samuel approaches and asks for something to eat because his stomach is upset, Amelia sighs and ignores his pleas. When Samuel persists in his whining, Amelia denies him for the first time and responds in the cadence of the Babadook's voice, saying, "Why do you have to keep talk-talk-talking? Don't you ever stop?" as she glares at the camera in the foreground with her back to Samuel. Samuel apologizes meekly, but Amelia, who is fully awake now, sits up in bed, snarls at Samuel, and yells, "If you're that hungry, why don't you go and eat shit?" Amelia, who used to embody the role of caretaker both at home and at work, now blatantly spurns this role. She demonstrates an atypical disregard for the health of her now-traumatized son and ends the role conflict that has plagued her by brazenly refusing to act as either a nurse or a mother and rejecting even the simplest and most necessary acts of caretaking, such as providing food for her son. Though this moment is problematic for its

flagrant portrayal of child abuse, it is a turning point for Amelia because it is one of the first times that she gives in to her own desires instead of suppressing them.

As the film progresses, Amelia commits copious horrific acts, from brandishing a knife at Samuel and cutting the house's phone lines to ripping a bloody tooth from her own mouth and snapping the family dog's neck. These acts, which at first glance seem purely atrocious, are intriguing because they serve as some of Amelia's first attempts to heal through working out her rage at her husband's death and her blame of her son in the exaggeratedly brutal modes that horror films allow. Perhaps one of the most frightening scenes of the film occurs when Amelia catches sight of a hiding Samuel and chases him up the stairs with super-human speed. Samuel darts into Amelia's bedroom and locks the door, allowing the film to cut between his terrified face and shots of Amelia on the other side of the door as she first attempts to deceive Samuel, telling him in a sickly sweet voice that the dog is hurt and they must take it to the vet, and then threatens him in an unnaturally deep voice, yelling, "Let me in, you little shit!" as Samuel jumps and shrinks from the door. Amelia eventually loses her temper completely and savagely bangs on the door before roaring, hanging from the doorframe, and swinging her legs to bash the door in with a primitive howl. Amelia's acts of perfidy and aggression are characteristic of masculine mental disorders, most notably antisocial personality disorder.[124] She finds Samuel crouching in a corner, and they face each other and shriek before Samuel wets himself in terror. Amelia glares at Samuel from under raised eyebrows in an expression reminiscent of a Kubrick stare[125]

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[124] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed.

[125] Film director Stanley Kubrick was known for a specific shot in which an actor tilts their head down and looks up to glare at the camera. The Kubrick stare often preceded heinous acts that were prompted by the character's insanity. Some notable examples of the Kubrick stare are executed by Jack Torrance before he attempts to murder his family with an ax in *The Shining*, Alexander DeLarge before he goes on a spree of "ultra-violence" or beating, raping, and eventually murdering people in the presumed safety of their homes in *A Clockwork Orange*, and Private Leonard "Gomer Pyle" Lawrence before he shoots his drill sergeant and then himself in *Full Metal Jacket*.

and berates him, towering over him in a threatening low angle shot as she snarls, "You little pig! Six years old and you're still wetting yourself." She then finally admits to both Samuel and herself that she resents Samuel for her husband's death, sneering, "You don't know how many times I wished it was you, not him, that died… Sometimes, I just want to smash your head against a brick wall until your fucking brains pop out!" This admission, in which Amelia acknowledges her abhorrence for Samuel in an uncharacteristic stream of vitriol, is horrendously abusive. However, while this moment seems entirely deleterious, it also serves as a catalyst for healing for Amelia. She aggressively blames Samuel in a manner characteristic of masculine mental illness instead of continuing to blame herself for her despair and maternal deficiencies as one might with feminine mental illness. Though it is a traumatizing disclosure, this hyperbolic sadism is one of the affordances of horror films. The genre permits the exploration of taboo topics through exaggerated modes as a form of potent social commentary. The events of the film are also reminiscent of psychotherapeutic talk therapy—Amelia must process what she is feeling to begin to come to terms with it. Though it is a brutal confession, this act and the masculine rage it embodies allow Amelia to admit her innermost desires and begin to work through them.

Amelia's stated desire to kill her own son marks her not only as an abusive mother, but also as actively filicidal, which is perhaps the most taboo desire that a maternal figure, typically revered for protecting and nurturing children, can give voice to. Indeed, there is something particularly disturbing about a mother who would kill her own children. Even now, nearly four hundred years after its origination, we read Lady Macbeth's vow to "Have plucked [her] nipple from [her baby's] boneless gums / And dashed the brains out" (1.7.65-66) and her cries of "unsex me… And take my milk for gall" (1.5.48,55) with a strange mix of repulsion and awe because we are nearly incapable of comprehending this level of social transgression and

seemingly unnatural behavior and are thus deeply repelled by it.[126] A mother's love for her child is so valuable to human fitness and evolution that it activates reward systems in the brain, releasing oxytocin and vasopressin to promote bonding, so the lack of this instinct is almost inhuman.[127] The horror of maternal indifference, and even rage and filicide, is terrifying to us because the concept of a mother's love is so intrinsic to our biological nature that we cannot conceive of its absence. Amelia's story, however, forces readers to admit that real human emotions are never as straightforward as evolutionary theory, and loving one's own child can be an extremely difficult endeavor.

As Shelley Buerger notes, Amelia and Samuel invert the typical mother-child relationship described in Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, in which "the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it."[128] It is Amelia who longs to break free of Samuel's incessant neediness, as indicated by small but telling moments, such as a scene in which they are sharing a bed, but Amelia sighs, moves a sleeping Samuel's foot from its resting place on her hip, and rolls out of his reach to the opposite side of the bed.[129] Kristeva furthers this argument in a later talk in which she claims that a mother gains a healthy love for her child only through the child's separation from her: "The first stage of inwardly turned passion is followed by the mother's passion for a new subject, her child, provided that he stops being her double and that she detaches herself from him so that he gains autonomy. This motion of *expulsion*, of *detachment* is essential."[130] Kristeva writes that this detachment is necessary for the mother to be

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[126] Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Barbara A Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library.
[127] Bartels, Andreas, and Semir Zeki. "NeuroImage." *NeuroImage*, vol. 21, no. 3, Mar. 2004, p. 1155.
[128] Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 11.
[129] Buerger, "The Beak That Grips," 37.
[130] Kristeva, Julia. "Motherhood Today." Colloque Gypsy V. 21 Oct. 2005, Paris.

capable of forming normal relationships with others.[131] If the separation is not completed correctly, as with Amelia and Samuel, whose relationship is complicated by the trauma associated with Samuel's birth and his constant clinginess, the mother may fail to achieve "maternal passion." This "Bad Mother," or one who either refuses to nurture her children or obsessively controls them, is a horror film trope precisely because we are terrified of something that we view as being completely unnatural.[132] Maternal love is a necessary component of our survival as a species, so it is so engrained in our psyche that we have no way of processing its absence: "This 'void of indifference' inspires a dread that is analogous to the instinctive retreating from death because it embodies the same threat to the assimilation of meaning through language and ritual. Meaning as understood through the idea of mother love as a constant is replaced with uncertainty and nothingness."[133] In other words, much of the horror of *The Babadook* stems from the human inability to process an innate abhorrence for the film's portrayal of a mother who does not nurture her child.

Rebirth, Protection, and Egalitarianism

Though Amelia had to engage in masculine protest to begin to process her grief, it is ultimately her femininity that saves both her and Samuel. Samuel, whose initial, biological birth occurred in a moment of death and terror that has since caused Amelia to blame him for his father's death, must be reborn in love before Amelia can truly act as a caring mother for him. Samuel eventually manages to escape from his mother's attacks using throwdown fireworks and his homemade weapons, which are no longer the superfluous toys they once seemed to be, and runs down to the basement. The basement is revealed to be Samuel's stronghold—as Amelia

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[131] Kristeva, "Motherhood Today."
[132] Buerger, "The Beak That Grips," 39.
[133] Quigley, "When Good Mothers Go Bad," 39.

chases him, he pulls a readied trip wire, causing Amelia to stumble down the stairs and smash her head on the doorway before he hits her in the back of the knees and she falls to the floor, losing consciousness. When Amelia awakes, screaming animalistically, she finds herself lying flat on her back and bound to the floor by a web of tiny ropes in an image reminiscent of Gulliver at the hands of the Lilliputians. Samuel, who is wise beyond his years and understands his mother's plight, kneels at her side, saying, "I know you don't love me. The Babadook won't let you. But I love you, Mom. And I always will." Amelia's wretched face softens at his sweet words, but she then continues to wail. This scene, in which Amelia is lying on her back in her nightgown, crying, screaming, bloody, and writhing in pain, is reminiscent of a childbirth scene. Amelia manages to free one hand and grab Samuel, attempting to choke the life from him, but he once again reacts in love, reaching out to stroke her face instead of defending himself from her murderous rage. Amelia casts Samuel, who has now been reborn in this moment of his selfless love, away from her body, marking a new separation, and crawls to her hands and knees to vomit up blood, which symbolizes her ejection of the Babadook as she reclaims her own son. It is notable as well that Samuel, the male figure of the story, must embody submission and affection, both of which are anti-masculine characteristics, in order to save himself and allow his mother to heal. Amelia collapses, and a wide shot reveals that the lower front of her nightgown is soaked with blood, providing further evidence for the metaphorical rebirth. Samuel, whose traumatic birth initiated Amelia's descent into grief and mental illness, has finally been allowed a proper birth, this time focused on the love of a child instead of a husband's death.

Amelia, who finally begins to embrace her maternal role through the distinctly female act of Samuel's rebirth, must now actively prove her love for her son. As they walk upstairs, Samuel is seized by the Babadook and dragged away, screaming. He is thrown against the wall

by an invisible force before Amelia, now fiercely protective, manages to grab him and grasp his body to hers. Amelia faces off against the Babadook, an encounter that is made all the more painful when it initially takes the form of her dead husband, and finally confronts it to defend Samuel. Amelia, now straight-backed and defiant, stares into the darkness where the growling Babadook lurks and yells, "You are nothing!" As the Babadook begins to approach her, Amelia yells, "This is my house! You're trespassing in my house! If you touch my son again, I'll fucking kill you!" She clutches Samuel to her breast and roars at the Babadook, which finally collapses in a heap at her feet. Amelia, who now speaks in her own voice, is no longer working through the opposing roles of oppressed female or enraged male. Instead, her rage is her own, and she is now able to use this bottled up anger productively to truly love and protect Samuel, confronting her own grief and actively deciding that it will no longer be allowed to harm her or her son.

Though Amelia is finally able to deal with her mental illness face-to-face, *The Babadook* is true to life and acknowledges that mental health disorders rarely simply disappear. Indeed, approximately 1 in 5 people who experience a major depressive disorder, such as Amelia's, develop chronic depression, the average length of which is approximately twenty years.[134] In the final scene, the film shifts from the monochromatic gray color scheme that dulled the house when depression dominated Amelia's life and is shot outside, amid the vibrant greens and pinks of nature. Amelia, who has been out gardening and collecting worms with Samuel, returns to the house, where it is revealed that the Babadook still lives in the basement. Now, however, the Babadook is no longer fearsome—Amelia is able to control the Babadook, which cowers out of

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[134] Holzel, Lars, et al. "Risk Factors for Chronic Depression--A Systematic Review." *Journal of Affective Disorders*, vol. 129, no. 1-3, Mar. 2011, p. 1.

sight. Amelia feeds it the worms in a gesture that allows her to reclaim the formerly submissive act of caretaking. Paula Quigley writes of this scene as Amelia claiming a "quasi-maternal role towards the Babadook itself," but she does not consider the power dynamic that this assumed role implies.[135] Amelia, who was once over-shadowed by the demands to nurture both her son and her patients, now utilizes caretaking, in the form of feeding the Babadook, as a means of power. The Babadook, like her depression, will not leave her, but she now has control over it, demonstrated by her ability to lock it in the basement and its reliance on her for food. This is symbolic of Amelia's newfound ability to manage her depression, which is evinced when she walks back upstairs and goes out into the sunlight to have a proper birthday party for Samuel before the film ends with a shot of mother and son gazing lovingly at each other and truly hugging for the first time.

The Babadook defies ideas of gender hierarchies, compelling Amelia to act out both the conventions of masculine rage and feminine nurturing because both acts are necessary for her to begin to heal. Instead, it advocates for constructive egalitarianism, in which people are not restricted to polarized gender categories and may embody both masculine and feminine characteristics. Samuel must be both aggressive and nurturing and Amelia must be both enraged and maternal to survive. *The Babadook* has been critically recognized for its refusal to conform to traditional genres and character tropes.[136] Samuel begins the film as the conventional "possessed child" but ends the movie as a "wise innocent," while Amelia blurs the lines between the typical "mother-as-victim, mother-as-monster, and… mother-as-saviour."[137] By superseding

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[135] Quigley, "When Good Mothers Go Bad," 75.
[136] Balanzategui, Jessica. "The Babadook and the Haunted Space Between High and Low Genres in the Australian Horror Tradition." *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2017, pp. 18–32.
[137] Quigley, "When Good Mothers Go Bad," 68.

both polarized genders and horror movie conventions, *The Babadook*, which considers Amelia's tenuous mental health throughout the film, argues that mental health cannot operate on a binary. Amelia was not able to begin to heal until she broke through social boundaries and experienced mental illness in both traditionally feminine *and* masculine manners. Indeed, recent sociological research confirms the "androgyny hypothesis," which negates outdated ideas that masculine males and feminine females exhibit optimal mental health and instead states that high levels of both masculinity and femininity in both genders are correlated with better mental health.[138] The film portrays a sort of talk therapy, in which Amelia must realize and admit her innermost feelings in order to begin to heal and to save herself and her son. *The Babadook* functions as an allegory for mental illness, portraying murderous and abusive extremes not to condone these activities but to use a fantastical narrative to raise underlying issues of gender norms and mental health. By both highlighting and subverting the false dichotomy formed by traditional gendered conceptions of mental heath, *The Babadook* questions the typical treatment of mental illnesses, in which diagnoses and research are often based largely on gender,[139] and instead argues that patients must be helped to utilize whatever coping strategies are needed to work through their mental illnesses. Though my first two chapters have focused primarily on relationships within the household, Chapter 3 broadens the arena where women draw on gendered behaviors

[138] Lefkowitz, Emily S, and Peter B Zeldow. "Masculinity and Femininity Predict Optimal Mental Health: A Belated Test of the Androgyny Hypothesis." *Journal of Personality Assessment*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2006, pp. 95–101.
[139] Race, gender, and class are the social characteristics that the majority of sociological research considers. These three categories are so influential that they are often referred to as "The Holy Trinity of Stratification." The American Sociological Association also created a distinct section entitled "Race, Gender, and Class" specifically for this research. This demonstrates that much of the research done on mental health prioritizes gender. Women are also more likely to be diagnosed with depression than men, even if they have similar symptoms or scores on standardized tests, which reveals that physician bias influences mental health diagnoses ("Gender and Women's Mental Health." *Mental Health*, World Health Organization, 2018.)

strategically; it moves beyond the domestic realm in order to consider how gender might be used to improve the mental health of a young woman in the wider social sphere.

Chapter 3

"Successful Camouflage as a Human Woman": Utilitarian Gender Fluidity and Social Trauma Recovery in *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*

This is like a life. This is lifelike.
I climb inside a mistake
and remake myself in the shape
of a better mistake—
a nice pair of glasses
without any lenses,
shoes that don't quite fit,
a chest that always hurts.
There is a checklist of things
you need to do to be a person.
– Joshua Jennifer Espinosa[140]

While *The Babadook* focuses on a mother's depression surrounding the loss of her husband and the difficulty of achieving positive intimacy with her son, Gail Honeyman's 2017 novel, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, tells the story of the atrocious abuse of a young girl by her mother, and the ways the daughter overcomes her trauma as an adult. The book doles out disturbing facts about the eponym and main character of the book, Eleanor, in tantalizingly slow fashion as the story progresses. In the opening chapters, Eleanor bluntly describes her current life, but gives almost no details about her backstory. According to Eleanor, she works a mind-numbing office job that she received because her future employer felt sorry for her when she "turned up for the interview with a black eye, a couple of missing teeth and a broken arm" after her supposed boyfriend raped and beat her.[141] She is often called "mental" in mock *sotto voce* by her callous coworkers (EO, 9), and she spends her weekends completely alone, eating pizza and

[140] Espinosa, Joshua Jennifer. "It Is Important To Be Something." *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, 2015.
[141] Honeyman, Gail. *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine*. Penguin Books, 2017, p. 3. Hereafter abbreviated "EO" and cited parenthetically by page number.

drinking her way through two large bottles of vodka so she is "neither drunk nor sober" while she waits for Monday morning (5). The reader receives no clues for the etiology of such a wretched lifestyle until Eleanor reveals that she has a disfiguring scar running down the entire right side of her face and speaks of her mother, whom she refers to with the ironic hypocoristic "Mummy." Mummy is a sadistic termagant who uses their scheduled weekly phone conversations as opportunities to berate Eleanor for fabricated failures and assure her that she is unworthy of others' affection. Eleanor's sadness reaches a crescendo when she attempts to commit suicide by drinking herself to death upon coming face to face with her despairing loneliness. Luckily, she survives this moment of desperation and decides to go to therapy, where she divulges the final secrets of the book: she had a younger sister, Marianne, with whom she had a close relationship, but Mummy locked them in the house and attempted to burn them alive when Eleanor was ten years old. Marianne and Mummy perished in the fire—the Mummy who holds regular conversations in the book is a figment of Eleanor's imagination—and Eleanor was badly burned when she ran back into the house to try to save her sister. The book's opening is essentially a catalog of misfortunes, chronicling the abuses Eleanor suffered as a child and how those traumatic experiences have molded her into a social pariah who is incapable of forming relationships or finding meaning in life.

How can a book rooted in such extreme psychological, emotional, and physical pain garner reviews lauding it as "satisfyingly quirky,"[142] "laugh-out-loud funny,"[143] and "endearing… part comic novel, part emotional thriller, and part love story"?[144] How can a story of such

[142] Maslin, Janet. "Books to Breeze Through This Summer." *The New York Times*, 25 May 2017.
[143] Ashby, Martha. "Why You Need to Read 'Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine' Right Now!" *Harper Collins Publishers Australia*, Harper Collins, 6 Apr. 2018.
[144] "Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine." *Kirkus Review*, Kirkus, 23 Jan. 2017.

unspeakable trauma spend seven weeks on the Amazon best seller list,[145] become a Reese Witherspoon Book Club pick,[146] and win a film contract with MGM?[147] The short answer is that *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* is not simply a trauma narrative, nor is it meant to be. Though the book portrays someone healing from a traumatic history, its focus is not on realism but on didacticism. The book defies genre, innovatively operating at the interface between trauma narratives and fairy tales. A reader must willingly suspend critical disbelief in order to enjoy the story and learn the moral it teaches, much like a fairy tale, but the reader also must enter the psyche of a trauma survivor who is trying to recover from severe abuse. The book intricately weaves together both genres, drawing on elements from each but conforming to neither. The novel focuses on Eleanor's horrific backstory and its effects on her adult life in the manner of a trauma narrative, but it also resolves this trauma quickly and completely to underscore its moral much as a fairy tale might. I argue that the novel uses trauma as the platform from which to consider the anguish associated with negative gender-based familial relationships and to call for a social system rooted not in a gender binary but in kindness. The novel demonstrates how strategic gender can be used to help one fit in and form relationships, rather than generating the alienation and envy sometimes spawned by traditional gender norms. The novel argues for mental health treatment as social rather than medical by rooting Eleanor's recovery firmly within the altruistic goodwill of those around her.

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[145] "Amazon Charts." *Amazon*, 21 Oct. 2018.
[146] "Reese's Book Club Picks." *Hello Sunshine*, June 2017.
[147] McNary, Dave. "Film News Roundup: Reese Witherspoon to Team With MGM on 'Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine'." *Variety*, 19 Dec. 2018.

Trauma Narrative/Fairy Tale Interface

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine contains many elements of psychological and trauma theory. Eleanor's mother alternated between dubious acts of saccharine affection and outright neglectful abuse, which left Eleanor with an anxious attachment style that is correlated with difficulty establishing relationships as an adult.[148] Eleanor's apathetic existence at the beginning of the novel also mimics many aspects of Bessel van der Kolk's freeze theory, in which trauma survivors dissociate in order to deal with their suffering to such an extent that their brain scans show nearly ubiquitous decreases in activity and "they obviously cannot think, feel deeply, remember, or make sense out of what is going on."[149] A person in the freeze state "will be apathetic and indifferent to others. They lack the motivation to push themselves to success, and they engage in ritualistic activities that 'keep them frozen.'"[150] This describes almost perfectly Eleanor's lack of effort to form human relationships or obtain a job promotion and her daily habit of reading the paper and doing two crosswords during her lunch hour to avoid conversation with her coworkers. Eleanor's therapist also practices elements of family systems therapy, such as empty-chair dialogue, in which the patient talks to an empty chair as though a family member were sitting in it.[151] None of these theories, however, are ever fully developed—Eleanor learns to form secure attachments almost immediately once she starts interacting with others, she "thaws" her emotions on cue, and family systems therapy is only given a glancing

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[148] McCarthy, Gerard, and Alan Taylor. "Avoidant/Ambivalent Attachment Style as a Mediator between Abusive Childhood Experiences and Adult Relationship Difficulties." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1999, p. 472.
[149] Van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books, 2015, pp. 71-72.
[150] Hall, Sue Parker. *Anger, Rage and Relationship: An Empathetic Approach to Anger Management*. Routledge, 2009, p. 51.
[151] Paivio, Sandra C, and Leslie S Greenberg. "Resolving 'Unfinished Business': Efficacy of Experimental Therapy Using Empty-Chair Dialogue." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, vol. 63, no. 3, 1995, p. 419.

nod. The book engages a hodge-podge of trauma theories superficially and unconvincingly, so the book cannot function solely as a trauma narrative.

The novel must also be read as a partial fairy tale, a genre that glosses over real trauma—Snow White's stepmother attempted to have her executed,[152] Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother was eaten by a wolf,[153] and Hansel and Gretel were imprisoned for weeks and threatened with cannibalism[154]—to expedite its happy ending and convey a moral. Just as fairy tales allude to horrific abuse but neglect the impacts it would realistically have on its victims in favor of them living "happily ever after," the novel accelerates Eleanor's recovery from genuine trauma to an absurd degree only possible in fiction. The most confusing aspect of attempting to view Honeyman's novel solely through the lens of trauma is stated point-blank in the title—*Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*. The entire book takes place within the span of about six months (it begins in "the middle of summer" (EO, 100) and ends with the planning of an office Christmas party). After her suicide attempt, Eleanor takes less than "two months" off from work and attends weekly therapy sessions during this time (308). Within this astonishingly short time frame, Eleanor is, indeed, able to fully recover from her lifetime of traumatic experiences and become "completely fine." Her transformation is catalyzed by an unlikely friendship with a new coworker, Raymond, budding relationships with her office mates, and a physical makeover. She metamorphoses from someone who has not had a visitor to her apartment "this calendar year" and views calling in her annual meter reading as a viable source of human interaction (46) to a woman with supportive coworkers, a network of friends, and a potential romantic relationship.

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[152] Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. *Little Snow-White*. University of Pittsburgh, 15 Nov. 2005.
[153] Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. "Little Red-Cap (Little Red Riding Hood)." *The Essential Grimm's Fairy Tales*, edited by Lori Campbell, Quayside, 2016, pp. 101–107.
[154] Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. "Hansel and Grethel." *The Essential Grimm's Fairy Tales*, edited by Lori Campbell, Quayside, 2016, pp. 37–48.

She also gives up binge drinking, a habit that realistically takes years to break, immediately and experiences only a few desultory cravings instead of harrowing withdrawal. In true fairy tale form, in just a handful of therapy sessions and with some social support, Eleanor works through an entire childhood of abuse and neglectful foster care; she also comes to terms with her suppressed memories of her dead sister and casts away Mummy's voice, both of which have haunted her for twenty years.

Unfortunately, this miraculously rapid complete recovery simply does not happen for survivors of such extreme trauma. Just accurately diagnosing a patient who experienced severe child abuse, which is the first of three stages of recovery, can take therapists an average of six years.[155] True stories of trauma recovery are told in spans of years and even decades, rather than weeks or months.[156] As Judith Herman notes, there is no magic resolution to trauma, and even those victims who are able to return to some semblance of a normal life do so with setbacks and a worldview that is permanently altered:

> Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete. The impact of a traumatic event continues to reverberate throughout the survivor's lifecycle. Issues that were sufficiently resolved at one stage of recovery may be reawakened as the survivor reaches new milestones in her development… The survivor who has accomplished her recovery faces life with few illusions but often with gratitude. Her view of life may be tragic, but for that very reason she has learned to cherish laughter.[157]

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[155] Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. BasicBooks, 1992, p. 157.
[156] See Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* and Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* for patient stories with accurate depictions and timelines of trauma recovery.
[157] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 211-213.

Completely recovering from extreme, long-term trauma in a matter of months, as Eleanor does in the novel, is, quite frankly, the stuff of fantasies. This major discrepancy excludes *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* from aligning entirely with a realistic trauma narrative and defines it as a partial fairy tale.

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine stubbornly evades categorization into a specific genre. Its publisher, Penguin, advertises it as a romance, but, as I will address in a later section, it contains almost no elements of heterosexual attraction.[158] Instead, it is a story of genuine trauma made to align with the structure of fairy tales. The novel rewrites some elements to modernize the genre but maintains the same ultimate goals as traditional fairy tales. Vladimir Propp, a Soviet structuralist, asserts that "All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure" and enumerates a thirty-one step sequence of functions that occur in a predictable order.[159] Though Propp admits there is some deviation from his morphological formula, I find it too constraining to be universal and concur with Jack Zipes's critique of Propp's sole focus on Russian tales.[160] Max Lüthi broadens the scope of Propp's theory by claiming that Propp's formula distills to "a lack (or a villainy which causes a lack) and its liquidation,"[161] though by this definition nearly any popular story could be construed as a fairy tale. Zipes provides a plot structure that, in true fairy tale fashion, is neither too broad nor too narrow, "but just right."[162] According to Zipes, a fairy tale is predicated on a "signifying encounter" in which "the protagonist will meet either enemies or friends." There may be multiple characters who "test the

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[158] "Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine." *Specialty Retail*, Penguin Random House, 2018.
[159] Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. 2nd ed., University of Texas Press, 1968, pp. 23. For a concise examination of Propp's functions grouped into six main categories—Preparation, Complication, Donation, Struggle, Return, and Recognition—see Murphy, Terence Patrick. *The Fairytale and Plot Structure*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, pp. 36-37.
[160] Zipes, Jack. *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*. Routledge, 2006, p. 49.
[161] Lüthi, Max. *The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man*. Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 54.
[162] Steel, Flora Annie. "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." *American Literature*.

protagonist to see whether he is worthy of their help." The protagonist will acquire "gifts" from these helpers, which "bring about a miraculous or marvelous change or transformation." The protagonist will be tested, and with the aid of the new gifts, will prevail. However, they will suffer a setback and need "a miracle or marvelous intervention… to reverse the wheel of fortune." The protagonist will finally be successful and acquire boons—"money," "survival," "wisdom," or "marriage"—as a result of their ultimate transformation.[163] Zipes's definition follows the general trajectory of Propp's original analysis of fairy tale morphology without being so exhaustive as to be formulaic.

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine follows Zipes's basic plot structure for a fairy tale, though the novel is longer and more detailed than traditional fairy tales. These original tales had to be concise enough to be told in one sitting, memorized, and passed on to future generations because they were an oral tradition long before they became a literary genre.[164] Our society, in which large chunks of data can be disseminated at the press of a button, and a bestselling novel can become a part of the national consciousness within months, no longer imposes these limitations on modern fairy tales. The beginning of the story demonstrates the traditional initial "lack" of fairy tales—Eleanor lacks human contact to such an extent that she sometimes speaks aloud to her beloved potted plant, Polly (EO, 50). As per Zipes's fairy tale structure, the "signifying encounter" of Eleanor's story occurs when she and Raymond, whom she had just met, must band together to help an elderly man, Sammy, when they find him lying unconscious on the sidewalk. Raymond persuades Eleanor to visit Sammy in the hospital, and Sammy clasps her hand in gratitude for saving his life. "The feeling of [her] hands in his, cozy and safe, and

[163] Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 49-50.
[164] Murphy, Terence Patrick. *The Fairytale and Plot Structure*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, p. 38.

the look of kindness and warmth in his eyes" enthralls Eleanor, just as touching a magic object is the catalyst of the action of many fairy tales, and she spends the remainder of the novel pursuing human interaction (82). Initially, her pursuit is misdirected—she is motivated by a juvenile crush on an aloof rock star who functions solely as a MacGuffin—but her futile quest to become so attractive he will be forced to notice her brings her to several "helpers" in the form of women in the beauty industry. She passes their "tests," or is amicable enough that they want to aid her, thus demonstrating a rudimentary interest in social interaction, so they "gift" her with various forms of beauty, from makeovers to haircuts. These interactions transform Eleanor, who goes from social rejection to integration almost overnight. However, as Zipes augurs, Eleanor suffers a major setback—she goes to the rock star's concert, assuming he will see her and profess his love for her, but is utterly disenchanted when she realizes she is just a face in the crowd. This forces her to confront her paralyzing loneliness for the first time; she reaches her nadir and attempts suicide. Luckily, her "marvelous intervention" comes in the form of Raymond, who nurses her back to health and convinces her to get professional help. In the end, her relationships with Raymond and Sammy and the gifts of beauty and confidence from the "helpers" allow her to transform herself and acquire what she desires most—friendship—just as Zipes's model ends happily, with a "marvelous 'transformation.'"[165]

Bruno Bettelheim goes beyond structure to consider the social goals of fairy tales. He characterizes fairy tales as stories that simultaneously address the trauma that most people will eventually experience and give children the hope that good will prevail in the end: "a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence—but… if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters

[165] Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 50.

all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious."[166] Fairy tales often forsake complexity—their dilemmas are straightforward, their characters are flat, and they are based on simple dichotomies—because their ultimate goal is to convey morals and information about the human condition to a child who is still learning how to function in the world.[167] They end happily not to subvert realism but to highlight the relationships that truly make life meaningful. According to Bettelheim, "'And they lived happily ever after'—does not for a moment fool the child that eternal life is possible. But it does indicate that which alone can take the sting out of the narrow limits of our time on this earth: forming a truly satisfying bond to another."[168]

As I have indicated, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* is a hybrid story that contains components of both fairy tales and trauma narratives. Eleanor's story is unreserved in its portrayal of the dark fears of a trauma narrative—abuse, loneliness, and feeling unloved—but this portrayal is often achieved through the stock characters of fairy tales. Mummy, for example, is a one-dimensional narcissist with no redeeming qualities. This fairy tale simplicity, however, is not a failure in the story's attempt to portray trauma. Gail Honeyman states that her goal in writing the novel was to convey the importance of kindness: "There are no dramatic acts of valour, nobody sweeps in and saves her. Little gestures enable her to save herself. We can all fight against loneliness by engaging in random acts of kindness."[169] Read in this light, a completely accurate portrayal of trauma recovery is unnecessary. Instead, the story portrays trauma recovery within a fairy tale motif to teach people—typically children, but in this case, adults—how to interact with one another in order to work toward the hoped-for happy ending, a

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[166] Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Vintage Books, 1977, p. 8.
[167] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 8.
[168] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 10.
[169] Woods, Judith. "Gail Honeyman: 'I Hope Eleanor Oliphant Has Helped to Fuel the Debate on Loneliness.'" *The Telegraph*, 15 May 2018.

social cure for trauma. Though adults are often skeptical of fairy tales, their beauty and value lie in their ability to depart from reality for a few magical moments to "help children as well as adults to understand universal human problems better."[170] The story portrays Eleanor's initial state as a frozen survivor of trauma realistically, but then allows her a fairy tale-like accelerated recovery to highlight the value of the kindness of the strangers she encounters. The story blends aspects of trauma narratives and fairy tales both to demonstrate the real life horrors of trauma and teach a fairy tale lesson—It reminds us to treat those we meet with compassion because their façade of being "completely fine" might be masking a lifetime of hardship.

Murderous Maternal Envy

Fairy tales are known for central gender conflicts between evil (step)mothers and their innocent daughters, and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* follows this tradition with a renewed vigor. Eleanor's relationship with her narcissistic mother is one of the most dynamic and well-written components of the book. Mummy's poorly camouflaged envy for her daughter drives the plot of the novel forward with a compellingly paradoxical mix of horror and humor. This issue of a mother who abuses her children out of envy catalyzes the action of many fairy tales: "Snow White's (step)mother tries to kill her; Cinderella's stepmother forces her to be a servant; Hansel and Gretel's (step)mother convinces their father to abandon them in the forest."[171] Indeed, fairy tales function as some of the first and only mediums to acknowledge that mothers might be capable of harming their own children. Until 1962, when Henry C. Kempe published "The Battered-Child Syndrome," child abuse went virtually undiagnosed—and thus

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[170] Mieder, Wolfgang, editor. *Disenchantments: An Anthology of Modern Fairy Tale Poetry*. University Press of New England, 1985.
[171] Schanoes, Veronica L. *Fairy Tales, Myth, and Psychoanalytic Theory*. Routledge, 2014.

unprevented[172]—because physicians had "great difficulty both in believing that parents could have attacked their children and in undertaking the essential questioning of parents on this subject."[173] Estela Welldon genders this idea, arguing that child abuse went unnoticed because physicians could not believe that *mothers* would harm their children.[174] Fairy tales, which have been passed down via word of mouth for centuries, were able to confront the problem of child abuse, especially in the particularly fraught mother-daughter relationship, long before society as a whole or even the medical profession could conceive of it.

As Sibylle Birkhäuser-Oeri notes, maternal envy "comes not from love but from power-seeking, a need to dominate others."[175] Eleanor's mother manifests this need for domination over her daughter's life in her effort to ensure that Eleanor will perpetually be limited by her inability to view herself as lovable. In an act of psychological abuse, Mummy cruelly made sure Eleanor understood that she was not wanted from a very early age—If one's own mother cannot love them, who can? Mummy rarely spoke of Eleanor's father, referring to him only as "the gametes donor" when she did (EO, 27). After doing some research, Eleanor, who was less than ten years old at the time, assumed that perhaps her mother was referring to artificial insemination. However, even at such a young age, Eleanor "understood that assisted conception was the antithesis of careless, spontaneous or unplanned parenthood, that it was the most deliberate of decisions, undertaken only by women who were serious and dedicated in their quest to be mothers," and she could not conceive of her mother as that type of woman (27). Eleanor's suspicions were confirmed when she asked her mother about her father directly. Her mother told

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[172] Levanthal, John M, and Richard D Krugman. "'The Battered-Child Syndrome' 50 Years Later: Much Accomplished, Much Left to Do." *JAMA*, vol. 308, no. 1, 4 July 2012, p. 35.
[173] Kempe, C. Henry et al. "The Battered-Child Syndrome." *JAMA*, vol. 181, no. 1, 7 July 1962, p. 19.
[174] Welldon, Estela V. *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood*. Rouledge, 1988, p. 10.
[175] Birkhäuser-Oeri. *The Mother: Archetypal Image in Fairy Tales*, 34.

her it was a "compulsory donation," or rape, and that she hoped Eleanor's father, who "smelled like high game and liquefied Roquefort," was "languishing in the outer ring of the seventh circle of hell" (28). The veracity of the alleged rape is dubious because Mummy often fabricates absurd lies to hurt her children—When asked how old she was when she gave birth to Eleanor, she responded, "I was thirteen…no, wait… I was forty-nine. Whatever. Why do you care?" (253). She also had a second child after Eleanor was born, Marianne, whose origin is never explained in the book. Regardless of the details of Eleanor's conception, Eleanor's mother made no pretense of ever wanting children and made certain that Eleanor was well aware of this fact.

Eleanor's mother most likely resented her children because she felt their needs prevented her from the glamorous lifestyle she harbored delusions of attaining. Mummy was far more occupied with the idea of a life of grandeur than with the day-to-day rigors of child rearing. She operated in extremes, feeding her children elaborate feasts or nothing at all. According to Eleanor, "One week we'd be dipping quail eggs in celery salt and shucking oysters, the next we'd be starving. I mean, you know, literally, deprived of food and water" (274). Eleanor's mother was so averse to the fare of the hoi polloi that Eleanor had never seen ketchup before she dined at a friend's house (59). Eleanor's mother also longed to forsake her children for a life of exotic travel. She often told them fantastic stories of adventures that a young woman of little means such as herself could never really have embarked upon. According to Eleanor, "Mummy has lived in Mumbai, Tashkent, São Paulo and Taipei. She's trekked in the Sarawak jungle and climbed Mount Toubkal. She's had an audience with the Dalai Lama in Kathmandu and taken afternoon tea with the maharaja in Jaipur. And that's just for starters" (253). When Eleanor confronts Mummy about trying to burn her children alive, Mummy speaks of her heinous crime as though she was simply removing a few pesky barriers from her own path to happiness. She

even goes so far as to flippantly refer to her own children as "inconveniences": "Look, what I did, darling—anyone would have done the same thing in my situation. It's like I told you: if something needs to change, change it! Of course, there will be inconveniences along the way… you simply have to deal with them, and not worry too much about the consequences" (316). It is also notable that Mummy's chosen method of filicide involves burning the house, a symbol of the domesticity she feels is holding her back from an illusory life of luxury. Eleanor's mother's behavior was rooted in her egotistical refusal to consider the needs of anyone other than herself, including those of her own young daughters.

Mummy's antipathy for her daughters is rooted in envy of their youthful beauty. Eleanor's mother was characterized as a femme fatale. Newspaper articles accentuate the juxtaposition between her beautiful appearance and her horrific acts in oxymoronic titles such as "the pretty face of evil" (EO, 48) and the "'Pretty but deadly' kiddie killer" (320). From Eleanor's conception, Mummy viewed Eleanor as a threat to her own physical beauty and was proud of her body for bearing the trauma of childbirth without losing her feminine figure: "I was twenty… From an evolutionary point of view, that's actually the peak time for a woman to give birth, you know. Everything just springs back into place. Why, even now, I still have the pert, firm breasts of an early-career supermodel" (254). Mothers who are threatened by their daughters' beauty highlighting their own imminent aging may push their daughters away and refuse to teach them femininity.[176] Eleanor's mother cemented her own status as the alpha female and denied Eleanor's femininity by ensuring that Eleanor could not view herself as beautiful. In Eleanor's own words, "Mummy has always told me that I am ugly, freakish, *vile*. She's done so from my earliest years, even before I acquired my scars" (26-27). Mummy also

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[176] Welldon, *Mother, Madonna, Whore*, 46, 68.

insulted Eleanor each time she attempted a feminine act, such as dressing up or dancing: "What did you wear? I bet you looked ridiculous… Dancing's for the beautiful people, Eleanor. The thought of you, lumbering about like a walrus…" (180). Eleanor's mother casts biological femininity as a weakness, undermining Eleanor's legitimate emotions by blaming them on her menstrual cycle, saying, "Oh dear. Someone's in a strop. What is it—time of the month? *Hormones*, darling? (315). Mummy even goes so far as to claim control of Eleanor's sexuality, reminding Eleanor that all of her erotic organs came from her mother: "You grew inside me, your *teeth* and your *tongue* and your *cervix* are all made from my cells, my genes" (32). Eleanor's mother's narcissistic sadism forced Eleanor to grow up completely deprived of femininity. At the age of thirty, Eleanor is essentially asexual—she does not understand gender customs, such as allowing a man to buy her a drink (63); the closest perception she has of sexual attraction is a teenage crush on a jejune musician; and she has no idea how to dress or comport herself according to the norms for an adult woman.

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine combines the psychology of trauma theories with the maternal envy characteristic of some fairy tales to reveal some of the psychological underpinnings of the mother-daughter relationship. Fairy tales have undergone a form of evolution throughout the centuries as only those that truly spoke to the human condition were favored and survived to be honed through the generations to represent our deepest problems and desires, so it stands to reason that these simple tales should reveal the complexities of human minds and relationships.[177] Feminist psychoanalyst and sociologist Nancy Chodorow argues that mothers treat daughters differently than sons because they can remember being daughters themselves: "The different length and quality of the preoedipal period in boys and girls are

[177] Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 3.

rooted in women's mothering, specifically in the fact that a mother is of the same gender as her daughter and of a different gender from her son… Being a grown woman and mother also means having been the daughter of a mother, which affects the nature of her motherliness and quality of her mothering."[178] Psychologists note that mothers tend to devote more resources to daughters because of shared experience bias.[179] Neuroscientists have even demonstrated that the strong relationship between mothers and daughters extends into their brain structures—mothers and daughters have more similar corticolimbic circuitry (the part of the brain responsible for emotional regulation) than any other parent-offspring dyad.[180]

The closeness of the mother-daughter relationship is especially critical because parents are the first gender models to which a child is exposed.[181] Parents treat their male and female children differently from birth, dressing them in blues and pinks and giving them gender-appropriate toys to guide them toward socially acceptable expressions of gender.[182] More specifically, mothers must teach daughters the acts of care-taking that will prepare them to one day be mothers themselves.[183] They also indoctrinate daughters into feminine beauty standards, teaching them about body image[184] and serving as role models for beauty practices, such as wearing makeup.[185] If the mother does not properly fulfill her duties to her daughter, the

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[178] Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. University of California Press, 1978, p. 98.
[179] Nikiforidis, Lambrianos et al. "Do Mothers Spend More on Daughters While Fathers Spend More on Sons?" *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2018, pp. 149–156.
[180] Yamagata, Bun et al. "Female-Specific Intergenerational Transmission Patterns of the Human Corticolimbic Circuitry." *Journal of Neuroscience*, vol. 36, no. 4, 27 Jan. 2016, pp. 1254–1260.
[181] Witt, Susan D. "Parental Influence on Children's Socialization to Gender Roles." *Adolescence*, vol. 32, no. 126, 1997, p. 254.
[182] Thorne, Barrie. *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*. Rutgers University Press, 1993.
[183] Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 113.
[184] Clarke, Laura Hurd, and Meridith Griffin. "Becoming and Being Gendered Through the Body: Old Women, Their Mothers and Body Image." *Ageing & Society*, vol. 27, 2007, p. 702.
[185] Gentina, Elodie, et al. "The Practice of Using Makeup: A Consumption Ritual of Adolescent Girls." *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, vol. 11, 2012, p. 121.

daughter may have low self-esteem[186] or experience difficulty competently fitting into society.[187] If this flawed relationship is taken to the extreme, as with the outright child abuse Eleanor experienced because her own mother envied her youth and beauty, the daughter may be robbed of any viable means to learn femininity and fit into a society that is constantly divided by gender.

After an extensive search of psychological literature, I was unable to find even one book-length study on the impact of maternal envy on the mental state of the daughter. I turned to feminist psychoanalytic theory in the hopes of learning more about what seems likely to be an important issue, but few critics consider the envy a mother feels for her daughter, even in a discipline predicated on women's rights. The few who do write about maternal envy approach the issue solely from the mother's perspective, normally giving it only a passing glance submerged within a larger tome: these works undermine their own claims to feminist enlightenment by overlooking the immense damage such behavior can have on the developing daughter. Feminist Nancy Friday, for example, pities the mother who is intimidated by her own daughter:

> Alas, the entire literature and folklore of the oedipal conflict is written entirely from the child's point of view. Nobody tells the mother what she should feel. Nobody gives her sanction for what she *is* feeling. All she knows is she is supposed to have only nice, storybook, motherly emotions. There is no place here for jealousy of a young girl, resentment at finding your place as the only woman who matters undercut, anger that the

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[186] Smith, Jane Ellen et al. "Mother-Daughter Relationship Quality and Body Image in Preadolescent Girls." *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, vol. 25, no. 9, Sept. 2016, pp. 2683–2694.
[187] West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 1987, p. 126.

> person who always obeyed you, and whom you love, now demands to do things her way, and makes you feel old.[188]

Psychologist Phyllis Chesler also sides with the mother who envies her daughter because she feels social pressures that underlie the mother's jealousy. According to Chesler, "the overemphasis on female appearance, the early age at which female children are eroticized, the aging male's preference for ever-younger women, and the consequent female terror of aging, together lead to a non-stop, all-female competition for the 'fairest of them all' prize."[189] The issue of maternal envy is neglected in academia—Even these renowned feminist critics use the problem as a excuse for one more passing blow at the patriarchy, defending only the mother and completely neglecting the damage that such behavior, which is at least partially the adult mother's choice, can inflict upon the mentality of her innocent daughter.

It is up to fairy tales, then, to highlight the traumatic impact of the "envy and pride" that grow "ever greater, like a weed" in the mother's heart upon the life of her daughter.[190] In Snow White, for example, "the stepmother has a character entirely the opposite of our heroine. It is as though the appearance in the psyche of something as bright as Snow White has produced its opposite too, absolute wickedness, so that now the struggle between good and evil begins."[191] This dichotomy polarizes us against the stepmother, and we feel compassion for Snow White as she cowers in the wilderness without aid or food. Taking up the torch of traditional fairy tales, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* demonstrates how Mummy's envy of her daughters transformed her into a murderess and has lasting impacts on Eleanor's life even twenty years

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[188] Friday, Nancy. *My Mother / My Self*. Delacorte Press, 1977, p. 138.
[189] Chesler, Phyllis. *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001, p. 172.
[190] Grimm, *Little Snow-White*.
[191] Birkhäuser-Oeri, Sibylle. *The Mother: Archetypal Image in Fairy Tales*. Inner City Books, 1988, p. 34.

after Mummy's death, thus functioning as a call to action against maternal envy, a mental health issue that has been too long overlooked.

Communal Maternity

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine combines traditional fairy tales and trauma narratives by focusing on maternal envy. It diverges from fairy tale convention, however, ultimately rewriting the fairy tale's traditional ending—its "happily ever after" is precipitated not by the protagonist's dependent marriage to a handsome prince but from her autonomous ability to work toward her own happy ending with ample social support from a legion of maternal figures of both genders. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar use the story of Snow White to demonstrate how maternal envy plays out in traditional fairy tales in their landmark text, *Madwoman in the Attic*. They assert that the true focal point of the story is the fraught mother-daughter dyad:

> "Little Snow White," which Walt Disney entitled "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves," should really be called Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother, for the central action of the tale—indeed, its only real action—arises from the relationship between these two women: the one fair, young, pale, and the other just as fair, but older, fiercer; the one a daughter, the other a mother; the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other both artful and active; the one a sort of angel, the other an undeniable witch."[192]

This sentence could just as well have been written about Eleanor and her mother. Just as Snow White's stepmother was envious of the pure beauty of an innocent child who "was as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony wood," Eleanor's mother was threatened by the

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[192] Gilbert, Sandra M, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 2nd ed., Yale University Press, 1979, p. 36.

budding femininity of her two young daughters.[193] In Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of the fairy tale, "Women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass [which they equate with the censorious voice of the patriarchy] sets them against each other."[194] They, like other feminist critics, rightfully villainize the patriarchy but fail to see the more proximal evil of the harm an envious maternal figure can wreak upon her daughter. In the evil stepmother's quest to become "fairest of all,"[195] she weaponizes femininity against her daughter, disguising herself as different maternal figures and attempting to kill Snow White with "the female arts of cosmetology and cookery."[196] She endeavors to commit filicide via a corset laced tight enough to suffocate, a poisoned comb, and a poisoned apple, the symbol of the first woman's sin in the Garden of Eden.[197] *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* parallels the fairy tale until this point, highlighting the tension between a narcissistic mother who envies her daughters due to patriarchal beauty standards, but it diverges in its interpretation of the implements of beauty—corsets, combs, and comestibles from the nineteenth century transform to nail polish, black skinny jeans, and layered bobs in the twenty-first century. Female strangers approach Eleanor with items of beauty as well, but they operate not in malice, as Snow White's assailants did, but in kindness.

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine contains many vignettes of the beauty industry. Though Eleanor maintains a delightful nescience for the conventions of the au courant—she responds to a makeover with "I look like a small Madagascan primate… It's charming!" (EO, 122)—the women she meets at nail salons, womenswear counters, and hair boutiques respond to

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[193] Grimm. *Little Snow-White*.
[194] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 38.
[195] Grimm, *Little Snow-White*.
[196] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 40.
[197] Grimm, *Little Snow-White*.

her queries with universal goodwill. A sales clerk at a department store picks out an entire outfit for Eleanor, even walking with her to another department to help her replace her démodé black Velcro shoes with stylish ankle boots to "really finish off the outfit" (120). A makeup consultant tells her that her face is already "lovely" and teaches her how to use concealer to make her scar "barely noticeable" (121-122). A hairdresser who befriends Eleanor even offers to cut her hair at "mates' rates" (139) and transforms her into a "much younger woman, a confident woman with glossy hair that brushed her shoulders and a fringe that swept across her face and sat just over her scarred cheek," prompting Eleanor to exclaim, "You've made me shiny, Laura… Thank you for making me shiny" (150). This, too, is partially the stuff of fairy tales—concealer can no more erase a raised third-degree burn scar than a pair of hair cutting scissors can instill confidence. Indeed, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* functions as a sort of Cinderella story in which the maltreated daughter gains the life she desires through the aid of cosmetics and clothing. The main discrepancies are the number of fairy godmothers, the intentional lack of a prince, and the daughter's ultimate desires. The maternal love conveyed in the women's small gestures, however, is real. They impart the knowledge that Mummy denied Eleanor, teaching her how to fit in.

The emphasis of the novel is not on beauty, as it is in traditional fairy tales, but on acceptance. Eleanor does not seek to be beautiful—her use of the word "shiny" to describe her transformed reflection in the mirror evinces that she hardly even comprehends the word in relation to herself. She even admits to feeling "sorry for beautiful people" because beauty is so external and transient (25). Indeed, the permanent scar on her face cedes some form of posthumous victory to Mummy—Eleanor's deformity would perpetually exclude her from being "the fairest of them all" according to myopic beauty standards. This, however, is not her goal.

Instead, Eleanor, who once had nothing to consult but garish magazines to "tell [her] which clothes and shoes to wear, how to have [her] hair styled in order to fit in… the right kind of makeup to buy and how to apply it," finally learns the art of "everywoman acceptability" from an army of caring women (26).

The feminine beauty ideal is portrayed in a plethora of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales, most notably, "Cinderella," "Snow White," and "Sleeping Beauty."[198] Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz, who coded *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* and statistically analyzed the tales' usage of feminine beauty, noticed a pattern emerging: "Many tales connote goodness with industriousness, and both with beauty, and characters are 'rewarded' for their hard work… In this way, beauty becomes associated not only with goodness but also with whiteness and economic privilege."[199] While many feminist critics excoriate the feminine beauty ideal as an oppressive tool of the patriarchy, lamenting the extra time and stress it demands of women, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* notes its utility.[200] Though Eleanor receives a physical makeover and learns to adhere to conventional beauty standards, she remains purposefully detached from them, choosing to masquerade in feminine regalia rather than be consumed by it:

> I'd made my legs black, and my hair blond. I'd lengthened and darkened my eyelashes, dusted a flush of pink onto my cheeks and painted my lips a shade of dark red which was rarely found in nature. I should, by rights, look less like a human woman than I'd ever done, and yet it seemed that this was the most acceptable, the most appropriate

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[198] Baker-Sperry, Lori, and Liz Grauerholz. "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales." *Gender & Society*, vol. 15, no. 5, Oct. 2003, p. 711.
[199] Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales," 719.
[200] For in depth considerations of the oppressive power of the feminine beauty ideal, see Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. Harper Perennial, 2002. and Bartky, Sandra Lee. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. Routledge, 1990.

> appearance that I'd ever made before the world. It was puzzling. I supposed I could have gone further—made my skin glow with tanning agent, scented myself with a spray made from chemicals manufactured in a laboratory, distilled from plants and animal parts. I did not want to do that (EO, 191-192).

Indeed, Eleanor views gender as a sort of costume that she may don and doff at will, and she is not brainwashed into the never-ending pursuit of an unattainable beauty ideal. She refuses to compromise her health by exposing her body to synthetic chemicals, and she uses the same accessories—a "shopper" and "jerkin"—in the last line of the novel that she references in its introduction, proving that she has not truly changed (325). Instead, Eleanor learns to view beauty—and, by extension, gender—as a tool; not as the tool of subjugation wielded by the patriarchy but as a tool to fit in and initiate the relationships she craves. Though she is relatively indifferent to gender norms and never fully identifies with them, she discovers that "successful camouflage as a human woman" can gain her social acceptance (26). The coworkers who once shunned her are friendly, even congregating around her desk to chat, as soon as she changes her appearance. In her own words, "People seem to like me better with makeup on, for some reason" (174). The kind actions of the legion of maternal figures who train Eleanor in the feminine arts ultimately bestow confidence and teach her to put effort into how she presents herself to others so she can gain what she truly desires—relationships.

Maternal Men

This novel propinquity is futile unless Eleanor, whose single true relationship terminated with her sister's death when she was ten years old, can learn to reciprocate amity and maintain her newfound relationships. Children who were abused often experience difficulty interpreting

and responding appropriately to others' emotions.[201] They also demonstrate deficits in theory of mind,[202] which is defined as "the ability of an individual to make inferences about what others may be thinking or feeling and to predict what they may do in a given situation based on those inferences."[203] These difficulties in understanding others are rooted in their bewildering relationship with their abusive parent. For example, a child who is abused at home may wrongfully attribute hostility to trustworthy people because assuming the worst of people is a protective mechanism.[204] Children of abuse are also likely to have an insecure attachment style,[205] so these children have a reduced ability to interpret the intentions of others because they "get little or no information about the goals, ideas, and beliefs of their attachment figures or receive extremely inconsistent, often changing, or bizarre and frightening information,"[206] leaving them with an impaired theory of mind.[207]

Emotion interpretation and advanced theory of mind are imperative in social situations because they allow us to intuit what others are feeling and respond accordingly, abilities that Eleanor decidedly lacks at the beginning of the novel as a result of the lasting impact of her mother's caustic abuse. In one of the novel's opening scenes, for example, she ironically thinks a doctor's "social skills were woefully inadequate, especially for a people-facing job like his"

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[201] Howes, Carollee, and Robert Eldredge. "Responses of Abused, Neglected, and Non-Maltreated Children to the Behaviors of Their Peers." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 2-3, Sept. 1986, pp. 261–270.
[202] Pears, Katherine C, and Philip A Fisher. "Emotion Understanding and Theory of Mind Among Maltreated Children in Foster Care: Evidence of Deficits." *Development and Psychopathology*, vol. 17, 2005, pp. 47–65.
[203] Schlinger, Henry D. "Theory of Mind: An Overview and Behavioral Perspective." *The Psychological Record*, vol. 29, 2009, p. 435.
[204] Dodge, Kenneth E, et al. "Social Information-Processing Patterns Partially Mediate the Effect of Early Physical Abuse on Later Conduct Problems." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, vol. 104, no. 4, 1995, p. 641.
[205] Carlson, Vicki, et al. "Disorganized/Disoriented Attachment Relationships in Maltreated Infants." *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1989, pp. 525–531.
[206] Pears and Fisher, "Emotion Understanding and Theory of Mind Among Maltreated Children in Foster Care," 49.
[207] Fonagy, Peter, et al. "The Relationship Between Belief-Desire Reasoning and a Projective Measure of Attachment Security (SAT)." *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, vol. 15, no. 9981, Mar. 1997, pp. 51–61.

and laments his "terrible bedside manner" (EO, 7). She misreads the situation, however, because it does not dawn on her that his perceived rudeness is entrenched in his idea that she is using him for painkillers and is possibly insane—her visit to his office is occasioned by fabricated back pain that she attributes to the weight of her breasts, which she measured on "kitchen scales" for corroborative evidence (7). Much of the humor of the book is based on her consistent misunderstanding of how people act and what they say. For example, when she attempts to buy a computer at a department store and the worker asks, "What will you be using it for?" she replies with "that's absolutely none of your business," because she assumes he is asking about her potentially taboo search plans—she intends to use it to stalk the rock star—instead of the desired functions of the device (19). At the beginning of her story, Eleanor clearly has no concept of how to communicate with others, so she cannot sustain a sincere friendship.

Psychological theories indicate that children are predominately socialized by their mothers.[208] *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* revamps these theories and undermines traditional gender stereotypes of maternity as a feminine concept by providing Eleanor with the most unlikely of mothers—Raymond, a single, childless, relatively unkempt man, functions as the primary maternal figure of the story, both caring for Eleanor and teaching her how to care for others through his actions. Eleanor's biological mother maintained power over her children by denying them social ties, isolating them, and insulting their every attempt at fitting in, so it is up to Raymond to teach Eleanor the social skills that Mummy cruelly denied her. Raymond exhibits congeniality from his first meeting with Eleanor, in which she calls him to remove a virus from her computer because he is the new office IT guy. He chats with her, asking more

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[208] Maccoby, Eleanor E. "The Role of Parents in the Socialization of Children: An Historical Overview." *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 6, 1992, pp. 1006–1017.

about her and her job than the rest of her coworkers have attempted in her entire nine years at the office. Though Eleanor is not particularly responsive to his benevolence, Raymond persists in his attempt to get to know her. His focus on making an intimate connection within the conversation rather than on his superior status as the possessor of technological knowledge that Eleanor lacks is associated with feminine communication patterns.[209] After he and Eleanor are drawn together through the mutual act of saving Sammy, he reaches out to her, inviting her to his mother's house, a pub, and weekly lunches at his favorite café with amicable reciprocity. Raymond pays attention to Eleanor and teaches her the pleasure both of being noticed and of noticing small ways to help others. When washing dishes together at his mother's house, Raymond wordlessly "nudged [Eleanor] away from the sink and thrust a tea towel" into her hands to dry them instead because he was mindful of the raw eczema patches on her hands (EO, 93). He also teaches her rules for social courtesies more commonly associated with women, such as visiting a sick friend in the hospital, showing up to parties fashionably late, and checking in with people via emails and texts. Raymond serves as an example for Eleanor of how to be a friend and interact with others, teaching her with tender affection much as a mother might socialize a small child.

Eleanor learns to care for people and interpret their feelings through observing Raymond's good-natured communication with others, much as infants with secure attachment initiate their own forays into theory of mind by imitating their parents.[210] For example, when a

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[209] For a compelling analysis of the difference in communication styles between males and females, see Tannen, Deborah. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. Harper, 2007, especially her distinction between masculine communication as focusing on independence and feminine communication as focusing on intimacy (pgs. 26-31).

[210] Meltzoff, Andrew N. "Social Cognition and the Origins of Imitation, Empathy, and Theory of Mind." *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Childhood Cognitive Development*, edited by Usha Goswami, 2nd ed., Blackwell Publishing, 2010, p. 62.

waiter at the restaurant she frequents with Raymond confides that his girlfriend is dying of cancer, leaving him to raise their baby daughter alone, Eleanor responds to his suffering with uncharacteristic sensitivity because she has learned empathy from Raymond. She is able to overcome her fear of touching others and use touch positively to comfort the waiter because she has seen Raymond touch Sammy's shoulder and hold his hand while he was sick in a maternal gesture of reassurance. Eleanor describes her attempt to console the waiter:

> I braced myself, then put my hand on his arm. I was going to say something, but then I couldn't think what was the right thing to say, so I just kept silent, and I looked at him, hoping he'd intuit what I meant—that I was desperately sorry, that I admired him for caring so much about Hazel and Lois and looking after them, that I understood, perhaps more than most, about loss, about how difficult things must be, and would continue to be (185).

Children require touch and affection to grow and develop properly and to gain a positive understanding of their relationship to others.[211] Likewise, Raymond's motherly caregiving and gentle touch teaches Eleanor theory of mind, allowing her to imagine how others might feel and respond to these feelings for the first time, some of the basic skills for caring for others by anticipating their needs.

We cannot appropriately care for others without first caring for ourselves, so Raymond also teaches Eleanor practices of self-care, just as a mother might teach a child to begin to understand and meet its own needs. It is Raymond who worries about Eleanor's unexpected absence from work, retrieves her address from employee files, and goes to Eleanor's home,

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[211] Field, Tiffany. "Touch for Socioemotional and Physical Well-Being: A Review." *Developmental Review*, vol. 30, 2010, pp. 367–383.

where he finds her bruised and crumpled on the floor, in the midst of a suicidal binge. He gently carries her to the sofa, much as a mother might put a child to bed, brings her soup in a mug because he knows she is too weak to use a spoon, and cleans up the house while she sleeps. When she awakes, the nightmarish scene of her breakdown has vanished. The "pain killers," "bread knife," and "drain cleaner" (218) she had meticulously lined up on the kitchen table have disappeared almost as if by magic, and she finds that "the kitchen floor gleamed…There was a pile of folded laundry on one of the chairs. The table was bare save for a vase, the only one [she] owned, filled with yellow tulips" (231). Raymond had saved her the agony of having to clean up these horrors herself and even exhibited a feminine attention to detail by replacing them with yellow tulips, which represent "cheerful thoughts and sunshine," in an expression of well wishes.[212] He wordlessly wiped up her vomit, washed her clothes, and wrapped her in blankets, just as a mother might nurse a baby with an upset stomach. When she showers, composes herself, and decides to call Raymond, he asks how she is. She responds with "Fine, thanks" because she has learned this is "the correct answer" (232). He replies with, "For fuck's sake, Eleanor. Fine" and comes back to check on her, teaching her that she does not always have to be "fine" with true friends. Raymond helps Eleanor through her lowest point and the climax of the book by functioning as the mother she never had. He takes care of her tenderly, much as a mother might care for a sick child, and he persuades her to go to therapy. He teaches Eleanor that others "understand what it feels like to be unhappy" and can help her if she will talk to them (234). Raymond shows her that it is permissible to not always be "fine"—to recognize her own needs, both physical and emotional, prioritize them, and take care of herself.

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[212] "History and Meaning of Tulips." *Florapedia*, ProFlowers, 19 June 2014.

Raymond's actions also help Eleanor come to terms with her own past, providing her with a form of catharsis. Not long after Eleanor takes a leave of absence from work and begins regular therapy sessions, Raymond surprises Eleanor by presenting her with a plump black cat with "thick fur [that was] covered in bald patches" (270). As Eleanor fawns over the cat, Raymond tells its backstory, which is uncannily similar to Eleanor's own. One of his roommates had heard screaming and found the cat, injured, but alive, in a metal trashcan that someone had set on fire. Eleanor is hesitant at first when Raymond asks her to take it in because the idea of caring for a "vulnerable creature" reminds her of trying and failing to care for Marianne, whose death she still believes is partially her own fault (271). She ultimately decides to be brave, reminding herself that "This is not the same as before, not even close to it. She's a cat, and you're a grown woman. You're more than capable of doing this" before assuring Raymond with great solemnity that she "will assume the mantle of care" (271). Eleanor's eventual bond with the cat, which she names Glen, provides her with a sense of restitution, allowing her to nurse a burn victim back to health years after her sister died in a house fire and she nearly perished herself. Much as children of abuse benefit from animal-assisted therapy because the animal provides a consistently affectionate relationship, Eleanor learns to love herself through her newfound love for Glen.[213] The cat, with its similar traumatic past, functions as a mirror to allow her to better understand herself: "The thing about Glen is that, despite her offhand manner, she loves me. I know she's only a cat. But it's still love; animals, people. It's unconditional, and it's both the easiest and hardest thing in the world" (286). Indeed, Eleanor's decision to finally say "Good-bye" (316) to her mother and become her own person, no longer plagued by

[213] Signal, Tania, et al. "Going to the Dogs: A Quasi-Experimental Assessment of Animal-Assisted Therapy for Children Who Have Experienced Abuse." *Applied Developmental Science*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2017, pp. 81–93.

phantasmal conversations with Mummy, seems to stem as much from her realization that she is capable of what Mummy was not—truly loving herself and someone else—as from her interactions with mental health establishments. This life-changing transformation of Eleanor's self concept was catalyzed by Raymond's remarkably prescient hunch that Eleanor might be in need of a furry companion.

Raymond bends gender roles, functioning as the mother Eleanor was denied by effectively maturing her—socializing her, teaching her to understand others, and helping her to love herself. Though the Library of Congress catalogs *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* under the genres "psychological fiction" and "love stories," Eleanor's relationship with Raymond is therapeutic rather than romantic.[214] Indeed, Gail Honeyman herself describes the novel as "an exploration of platonic friendship" because "there are a lot of Raymonds in the world: he's the sort of ordinary, kind, decent man who doesn't often get featured in fiction."[215] There are no instances of physical attraction between Eleanor and Raymond. Instead, Eleanor's first impression of Raymond portrays him as decidedly unattractive:

> He was barely taller than me, and was wearing green training shoes, ill-fitting denim trousers and a T-shirt showing a cartoon dog lying on top of its kennel. It was stretched taut against a burgeoning belly. He had pale, sandy hair, cut short in an attempt to hide the fact that it was thinning and receding, and patchy blond stubble. All of his visible skin, both face and body, was very pink. A word sprang to mind: porcine (EO, 17).

Raymond, who spends much of the book nurturing others, mothering Eleanor, and lovingly taking care of his own mother and her home, has far more feminine qualities than masculine

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[214] "Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine." *Library Catalog*, Library of Congress, 2017.
[215] Armitstead, Claire. "Gail Honeyman: 'I Didn't Want Eleanor Oliphant to Be Portrayed as a Victim.'" *The Guardian*, 12 Jan. 2018.

characteristics. They hug, and Eleanor kisses his cheek at the end of the novel, their only interaction that could be interpreted as romantic. However, even this exchange is far from sensual. The embrace has a platonic quality, with Raymond tucking a loose strand of hair behind Eleanor's ear like a parent might tidy up a child. Eleanor describes Raymond as "soft but strong" and emasculates him by describing the bristles of his beard as "soft and ticklish" instead of prickly as a man's beard is usually described (325). Though the book's ending allows the potential for Raymond and Eleanor to eventually initiate a romantic relationship, their interactions throughout the novel are strictly platonic.

In stark contrast to Raymond, all of the men in the novel who identify as males are presented as villains who harbor traits of toxic masculinity and attempt to use sexuality as a form of domination. Eleanor's only "boyfriend," for example, was a freeloader who lived with her before the beginning of the novel because he "couldn't find a job that suited him" (142). He asserted his dominance over her by beating her, raping her, and bragging about all of the other women he slept with. As Eleanor later tells Raymond, "He used to punch me in the kidneys, slap me—he fractured twelve bones, all in all. He stayed out some nights and then came home and told me about the women he'd been with" (142). Eleanor's reference to a man who was clearly nothing more than a self-serving sadist as her "boyfriend" demonstrates that she had no concept of what a true relationship should look like.

Only Raymond, the person who finally teaches Eleanor what normal friendship is like, breaks the trend of toxic masculinity by being decidedly un-masculine. The other men Eleanor encounters are predatory. When Eleanor attempts to dance at a party, innocently doing the YMCA with a group of women, a man corners her on the dance floor with a "leer" and refuses to take her hints of disinterest. He asks her if she is a "nurse" in a chauvinistic attempt to make

conversation, and she is forced to walk off of the dance floor and go to the ladies' room to avoid being followed (169). Later, when Eleanor slips into a hotel bar because she needs a reprieve from the sadness of a funeral, the bartender takes advantage of her melancholy. He continually refills her glass of vodka and coke, gradually slipping in far more vodka than coke. Once she is obviously inebriated, he tries to coerce her, leaning uncomfortably close and suggesting that she "might need a little lie-down" while smiling "wolfishly" (201). Luckily, Raymond finds her and interrupts, saving her from her own naiveté. Every stereotypically masculine man Eleanor meets is overtly salacious, resorting to aggression in an abhorrent attempt to seduce her and radiating traits of toxic masculinity.

Though the surface-level plot of *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* reads like a tawdry teenage drama—the awkward girl meets a sweet guy and all of her problems are solved—the book is unexpectedly iconoclastic. Rather than falling into the trap of a puerile romance and reaffirming traditional gender norms, the novel subverts them. The novel operates at the interface of trauma narratives and fairy tales, borrowing elements from each but conforming entirely to neither, as a call to action for a revised social structure. *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* decries traditional gender roles, arguing that they often bring out the worst in people, by villainizing all of the characters who completely conform to gender—Mummy craves the unattainable feminine beauty ideal to such an extent that she envies and eventually attempts to murder her own daughters, and every male who displays heterosexual desires is excessively prurient to the point of aggression and violence. Instead, the book argues for an avant-garde gender fluidity in which all people may adopt various gender roles to advance the overall good of society and support the mental health of its members. Eleanor is imprisoned in a frozen state of arrested development at the beginning of the novel, so she initially requires the aid of the legion

of beauticians to transform her exterior into that of a female, giving her the social acceptability necessary to begin to integrate into society. This transformation does not function as support for the feminine beauty ideal; it is simply a means for Eleanor to use gender strategically as a tool to fit in. Though Raymond is biologically male, Eleanor, who is a survivor of sexual assault, needs him to be feminine so she can begin to trust him. In the novel's world of strategic gender, Raymond is able to function as a mother, caring for Eleanor, socializing her, and teaching her healthy ways to love herself and others. Though it is easy to be captivated by the novel's surface-level wit and charm, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* functions as an innovative call for mental health care reform. Though Eleanor attends a few relatively cliché therapy sessions, her recovery is ultimately catalyzed by the kindness of the people she comes into contact with, which argues for therapy as a social rather than an institutional venture. The people who support Eleanor use gender in unconventional ways—the women of the book teach her to view it as a tool rather than a standard and Raymond subverts it altogether by functioning as the mother she so desperately needs—in order to assert a new idea of gender as strategic. The novel ultimately de-genders and socializes mental health, arguing that gender should not function as a restrictive category, but rather should be used as a tool to support the mental health of all members of a group because it equates mental health with communal health.

Coda

Gothic Horror as Social Commentary

> *This type of fear-literature must not be confounded with a type externally similar but psychologically widely different; the literature of mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome*. – H. P. Lovecraft[216]

The works I have considered all function as apologues, using elements of the gothic to permit avant-garde social commentary that would be unacceptable if presented more directly. Works of gothic fiction are characterized as using "ghastly settings, Byronic characters, atmosphere and mood… to create [an] emotional response."[217] Andrew Smith provides further characteristics of the genre: "forms of monstrosity, …images of insanity, transgression, the supernatural, and excess."[218] "The Yellow Wallpaper," *The Babadook*, and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* all incorporate some of these elements to go beyond realism in order to call for a heightened social morality. Ironically, the works portray harrowingly immoral events, from traumatizing husbands and children to outright filicide, as a way of underscoring a moral message. The works require a willing suspension of disbelief to see beyond their horrific superficial layers to their true function as didactic allegories. They do not advocate for the abuse and violence they portray. Rather, they use violence to shock the reader and transmit controversial, progressive messages in fantastically-inflected, highly accessible popular genres. These works use gothic elements to probe at questions of humanity too dark to be considered through another lens. How is a woman supposed to react when an entire social structure is against her? What happens when a mother hates her children? Though these questions are

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[216] Lovecraft, Howard Phillips. *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. Dover, 1973.
[217] Spector, Robert D. "The Gothic." *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*, edited by Martin Coyle et al., Routledge, 1990.
[218] Smith, Andrew. *Gothic Literature*. 2nd ed., Edinburgh University Press, 2013, p. 4.

shocking and disturbing, they engage real human dilemmas with real-life impacts. Gothic horror confronts these unspeakable dilemmas unflinchingly and provides a means of addressing problems too distressing to approach overtly.

Using the exaggeratedly macabre features of gothic horror to permit social commentary is arguably an inherent element of the genre. Perhaps the most widely known contemporary example is Jordan Peele's 2017 horror film *Get Out*. The premise of the film is darkly fantastical: A white girl dates black men and brings them home to meet her family. The family steals the black men's bodies, sends their souls to an underworld called "the sunken place," and auctions them off to elderly white people. The soul of the highest bidder will be implanted in the black man's body, permitting the buyer to leave their own debilitated body and gain vitality and immortality.[219] Peele's film has garnered immense acclaim for its iconoclastic challenge to veiled racism in the twenty-first century. As Lanre Bakare notes, "the number of things Peele manages to reference is stunning: the taboo of mixed relationships, eugenics, the slave trade, black men dying first in horror films, suburban racism, police brutality."[220] Perhaps Peele's most stunning accomplishment is his attack on "liberal racism": the villains of the movie are "middle-class white liberals."[221] *Get Out* has received a plethora of awards, including an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay and nominations for the Golden Globes and BAFTA Awards.[222] The popularity of a film that attacks base ideas still unconsciously harbored by much of its audience demonstrates that elements of the gothic allow poignant social critique that would be anathema if expressed directly.

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[219] Peele, Jordan, director. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures, 2017.
[220] Bakare, Lanre. "Get Out: The Film That Dares to Reveal the Horror of Liberal Racism in America." *The Guardian*, 28 Feb. 2017.
[221] Bakare, "Get Out."
[222] "Get Out: Awards." *IMDb*, 2019.

Though Peele's film is certainly revolutionary, gothic fiction has been used to subtly attack social mores since its inception. The first gothic text, English author Horace Walpole's 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, used ridiculously large objects—most notably, a black-plumed helmet so large it crushed a child—as an attack on consumerism. According to Cynthia Wall, the oversized objects were meant "as a metaphorically realistic measure of the presence of things in eighteenth-century culture."[223] The first American gothic fiction, Charles Brockden Brown's 1798 novel *Wieland*, is often analyzed as a critique of the religious fanaticism of eighteenth-century New England because the novel's protagonist kills his family in obedience to a divine voice.[224] These works, combined with the contemporary example of *Get Out*, demonstrate that gothic stories are a product of the time and culture in which they originate: they use their exaggerated affordances to comment on pertinent social issues.

The works that I analyze follow in the footsteps of *The Castle of Otranto* and *Wieland* by using the hyperbolic darkness of the gothic to confront the problems of the times in which they were composed. "Dr. Clair's Place," *The Babadook*, and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* all portray women who confront oppression underpinned by polarized gender roles by learning to use modes of behavior typically associated with both masculinity and femininity, depending on what is most useful under the circumstances. Though "The Yellow Wallpaper" was written in a time period in which women were more overtly restricted, *The Babadook* and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, both of which are contemporary works, raise similar questions of gender-related social oppression. The parallel themes of works that were written over a century apart

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[223] Wall, Cynthia Sundberg. *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century*. University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 118.
[224] Christophersen, Bill. *The Apparition in the Glass: Charles Brockden Brown's American Gothic*. University of Georgia Press, 1993.

raises the question of how much has truly changed since Charlotte Perkins Gilman's time. Though the idea of strategic gender as presented in the later works is progressive—and perhaps even transformative—the fact that all of these works must bury their calls to action under the guise of a gothic apologue adds another level to their social commentary. When will our own society be ready to hear these arguments overtly and take responsibility for its biased understanding of gender roles, particularly those associated with women?

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