

A NOVEL LOOK AT THE FEMALE GOTHIC

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Abstract

The Female Gothic, as coined by Ellen Moer in her celebrated novel *Literary Women*, presents women's domestic roles through the supernatural to express the horrors of their docility. Narratives pertaining to this literary canon are frequently considered reflective of a woman's journey toward liberation. By analyzing current film and television narratives alongside a classic short story, this paper reveals a neglected aspect of the Female Gothic mode. The conversation centered on the characteristics of the Female Gothic, while fitting in its observations, disregards the medium that realizes such familiar themes as female entrapment and a suppressive male antagonist. Through fastidious analyses of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," along with Netflix's miniseries *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020) and Universal Picture's *The Invisible Man* (2020), this essay demonstrates how the act of looking effectuates women's doubts over domestic confinements.

Keywords: Female Gothic, act of looking

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Marriage, motherhood, and mansions all share something in common; whether figuratively or physically, they entrap women in the sphere of domestic life. Accordingly, it is no wonder they comprise critical parts of the Female Gothic, a literary mode originally coined by Ellen Moers. In Moer's 1976 novel *Literary Women*, she defines Female Gothic elements, specifically how they manifest internal fears about domiciliary life. Ellen Ledoux expounds Moer's definition in her research as a portrayal of "how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women novelists employ certain coded expressions to describe anxieties over domestic entrapment and female sexuality" (2017, p. 1). In essence, the Female Gothic is a form of gothic orchestrated by women to reveal their often untapped desires to be free of societal pressures and limitations.

Like other literature genres, the Female Gothic has distinguishable requisites, such as a troubled heroine, an oppressive male antagonist, a mysterious mansion, and, according to author Greg Johnson (1989), "familiar Gothic themes of confinement and rebellion, forbidden desire, and 'irrational' fear," (p. 3). These characteristics are evocative of several narratives from authors like Jane Austen, Emily Brönte, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," she incorporates all the essential components of Female Gothic. Indeed, Gilman's unfortunate narrator resides in a "colonial mansion, a hereditary estate," where her oppressive husband treats her postpartum depression, or what he firmly believes to be "a slight hysterical tendency" (2008, p. 3). Gilman's story certainly encapsulates such themes as imprisonment, resistance, refused desire, and, more indispensably, irrational fear. Gilman's narrator elicits her untenable panic through her perception that someone (and at times, some thing) is watching her. This fear translates seamlessly to the character of Dani Clayton (Victoria Pedretti) in the Netflix series *The Haunting of Bly Manor* and Cecilia Kass' (Elisabeth Moss) experience in the 2020 film adaptation of *The Invisible Man*. The show, in conformity with the Female Gothic, embraces aspects of the "The Yellow Wallpaper," such as "'imprisonment' in an old mansion, claustrophobia and a propensity for violence" (Băniceru, 2018, p. 10). Dani's claustrophobia is allusive to Gilman's narrator's fierce disdain for the room her husband kept her in. Cecilia's account can likewise be compared to and analyzed with features of the Female Gothic. Similar to Gilman's narrator, Cecilia is apprehensive of her husband due to his abusive tendencies; her story reflects the Female Gothic by portraying an oppressive marriage and a longing to rid herself from it.

Each story presents the womens' inner fears, notably relating to the domestic realm, as supernatural figures that place them under observance. Whether a wallpaper, a recurring vision, or a husband with invisibility, the looking presence of each entity symbolizes domestic confinement. More emblematically, the stories incorporate protagonists with seemingly fallacious anxieties over

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the surveillance imposed on them. This suspicion, for all characters, is a direct result of their adverse relationships with different forms of female entrapment. Arguably, the feeling of being watched lends itself as another staple of Female Gothic, as it undeniably realizes women's intrinsic yearnings to dismantle domesticated structures. Tied to the more popular elements like a suppressive male antagonist and self-discovery, the act of looking is the medium through which supernatural beings reflect women's realistic anxieties.

In the "The Yellow Wallpaper," three distinct entities watch the narrator, embodying her misgivings about marriage's traditional gender roles, domestic expectations, and the limitations that the former two place on women. The narrator's husband, John, John's sister Jennie, and the wallpaper, respectively, represent these fears. Gilman's personification of these horrors allow domestic conventions to veritably observe the narrator, in turn catalyzing her psychosis. Each entity symbolizes its particular piece of the domesticized whole in order to draw connections between the act of watching and the Female Gothic mode.

John's character exemplifies the aspects of matrimony that force an inferior status on women. He deprives the narrator of her bodily-autonomy, self-authority, and infantilizes her—all in the name of marriage. The image of marriage Gilman presents is one of highly (and dangerously) gendered positions, including an "all-controlling husband" (Băniceru, 2018, p. 10). For example, the narrator repetitively questions her authority in matters of personal health, rationalizing "What is one to do" (Gilman, 2008, p. 5)? It is additionally implied and explicitly mentioned that John aims to restrict the narrator's actions and thoughts. For instance, the entire narrative is structured through the narrator's secret diary entries as she hides her thoughts from John. Her husband also verbally attempts to control her judgement: "There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?" (Gilman, 2008, p. 25). Being the narrator's physician and her husband are interchangeable to John, practically synonyms, because they both permit him ascendancy. Lastly, John infantilizes her throughout the narrative to establish the division of power in their marriage. By calling her "little girl" and "little goose," he verbally deprives the narrator of equal status (Gilman, 2008, p. 23, p. 11).

Consequently, the narrator's fear of being seen by John is an analogy for her apprehensions concerning the traditional dynamics of marriage, in which men are irrevocably granted more power. The Female Gothic "centers its lens on a young woman's rite of passage into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially in joint institutions of marriage and motherhood" (Davison, 2004, p. 48). Consider Carol Margaret Davison's

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(2004) claim in her critical essay "Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'":

Her husband's failure to respond to her needs and take her seriously, thus denying her experience legitimacy, results in a concerted *repression of her natural and authorial instincts* [emphasis added] and a severe distrust that blossoms into a *paranoid conviction* [emphasis added] that she is the victim of a well orchestrated conspiracy involving her husband and his sister... (p. 60)

Davison acknowledges that John's authoritarian tendencies, inarguably a result of his title as a husband, perpetrate the narrator's irrational fear. She also appropriately interprets the suppressive male antagonist and irrational fear as indicators of a larger mode—the Female Gothic. What she and other scholars have failed to identify, however, is *how* the narrator's fear of being watched connects to other Female Gothic notions like female entrapment. John's looking is the omitted variable in the equation. Indeed, it is his scrutinizing presence that actualizes the narrator's inner fears of marriage and therefore promotes the Female Gothic.

Davison does not specify the nature of the conspiracy and instead ignores the basis of the narrator's "paranoid conviction" (2004, p. 60). However, it is evident that the narrator's distrust of and conspiracy against John are rooted in her wariness of his constant supervision. Gilman showcases a narrator who's hyper-conscious of her husband's seeing presence: "There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word" (2008, p. 9). Veritably, the narrative structure is influenced by the narrator's concern over John's watching. After admitting that she is "getting a little afraid of John," the entry continues: "I have watched John when he did not know I was looking, and come into the room suddenly on the most innocent excuses, and I've caught him several times LOOKING AT THE PAPER!" (Gilman, 2008, p. 28). The narrator's capitalization underscores the significance of this act; she is afraid of him as a result of his looking. Moreover, the paper is widely interpreted to be a personification of herself, so John's observance of the paper is an additional layer of his looking at her.

Looking as a means of revealing women's inner fears is not restricted to John and his representation of marriage roles; Jennie's looking likewise exposes the narrator's anxiety over domestic expectations. Jennie embodies the "enthusiastic housekeeper" perfectly fulfilled with household chores and domestic conventions (Gilman, 2008, p. 15). Jennie's degree of domesticity is undoubtedly established by the narrator: "Of course I didn't do a thing. Jennie sees to everything now" (Gilman, 2008, p. 16). The narrator gladly relinquishes her household duties

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because she resents the traditional model of womanhood. For that reason, the narrator's suspicion over Jennie's looking is more adequately described as a fear of "the pillars of domesticity" (Băniceru, 2018, p. 10). The narrator is as acutely aware of Jennie's seeing presence as she is of John's. She repeats, "There comes John's sister... I must not let her find me writing" (Gilman, 2008, p. 15). By concealing her true inclination, free self-expression, from Jennie, she is hiding from the overwhelming and demanding expectations of womanhood. As the narrator initiates her psychosis, she admits that "Jennie has an inexplicable *look* [emphasis added]" (Gilman, 2008, p. 27). Once again, looking is portrayed as an act that is fear-inducing and supernatural, accentuating it as an element of the Female Gothic.

If John and Jennie's looking represent marriage and domesticity, sequentially, then the wallpaper's "unblinking eyes" symbolize the barriers these impose on women. Explicitly described as "bars," the outside patterns entrap a woman that is "trying to climb through" (Gilman, 2008, p. 32). The narrator displaces her fears onto the wallpaper, in turn resonating with this woman. For example, the fact that the woman "creep[s] about behind the pattern" is a projection of the narrator's adverse attitude toward domesticity and her inferiority as a wife (Gilman, 2008, p. 22). The crawling is thus a palpable reference to John's infantilization of her and the creeping woman's entrapment by the outside pattern reflects the narrator's anxieties over the constraints of marriage and domestic chores. The wallpaper, then, is a symbolically-charged, imagined observer that the narrator constructs in her psychosis.

Gilman's vehicle of choice, the wallpaper's looking, achieves the supernatural to express the central elements of the Female Gothic. The wallpaper, according to the narrator, has "two bulbous eyes [that] stare at you upside down...the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other" (Gilman, 2008, p. 13). Immediately devising a looking presence in the object representing her internal struggles, the narrator introduces the wallpaper with eyes. Certainly, the fact that the eyes are upside down reflects the narrator's own deterioration—a reminder that her own life is in disarray. In the same manner that her concerns about matrimony and docility seem to watch over her, female entrapment lurks in the wallpaper as an entity capable of "expression" (Gilman, 2008, p. 14). The act of looking becomes a pinnacle of Gilman's Female Gothic mode, allowing her narrator's fears to watch her.

The ending of "The Yellow Wallpaper" subverts the narrator's forebodings by denying them a looking presence: Jennie, the human portrait of domesticity, is forbidden from entering the room; John, a symbol for the inherent patriarchy in marriage, faints before the narrator repeatedly walks over him in a physical act

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of new-found dominance. The narrator tears down the wallpaper as she escapes the "social, domestic, and psychological confinements of a nineteenth-century woman writer" (Johnson, 1989, p. 3). With nothing and no one left to observe her, the narrator "got out at last" (Gilman, 2008, p. 41).

The act of looking, as established in "The Yellow Wallpaper," continues in modern media. In *The Haunting Of Bly Manor* and *The Invisible Man*, there is perceptible usage of looking to evoke terror in the female protagonists. Dani Clayton and Cecilia Kass dread their ex-lovers' seeing presence, which restrain their autonomy and agency for unique reasons.

The miniseries *Bly Manor* underscores a woman's plight over her sexuality, which, as maintained by Moers, is a salient point of the Female Gothic. A significant portion of Dani's irrational fear stems directly from her perception that Eddie, her deceased fiancé, is watching her. Dani bears immense guilt over his death, blaming herself and, more profoundly, her queerness. During their break up, she admits her sexuality in subtle language: "I just thought I was being selfish, that I could just stick it out and eventually I would feel how I was supposed to" (Flanagan, 2020). Eddie reacts fervently, stepping out of the car onto the last moments of his life. As his glasses illuminate with the headlights of an oncoming truck, Eddie's life ends suddenly. Dani screams as she watches her fiancé die.

Dani's trauma becomes supernatural as Eddie returns to her life in the form of a hallucination whose gaze pierces through looking-objects like mirrors and glass windows. The vision of Eddie that Dani conjurs is complete with bright shining glasses, undoubtedly signaling that she feels watched by him. Eddie follows Dani wherever she goes—depicted by her meticulous covering and avoidance of mirrors or reflective surfaces. Terrified to look into mirrors, Dani avoids the reality of her past. On the surface, it's Eddie; and in a deeper sense, it is her lack of self-identity and resentment toward heteronormative marriage roles. Dani's psychotic hallucinations—reminiscent of Gilman's narrator—are precipitated by the burden she carries over not submitting to an idealized marriage. Eddie is the only character to appear in mirrors because he serves an exclusive purpose in the narrative: His role as Dani's intrusive vision reflects the "conflicts within [herself]... regarding her own sexuality and identity" (Davison, 1989, p. 53). The mirrors and his glasses therefore become symbolic objects that register the act of looking as a medium of invoking fear, substantiating it as part of the Female Gothic.

Of the reoccurring moments in which Eddie watches Dani, there is one that proficiently epitomizes his looking as an element of the Female Gothic. Dani and her love interest, Jamie (Amelia Eve), are sharing a passionate kiss when Eddie

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and his gleaming glasses appear behind Jamie. This scene leaves no doubt that Eddie's character is a materialized version of Dani's ambivalence toward her sexuality and her failure to fit into a typical marriage framework. She frightfully notices Eddie observing her as she advances toward self-discovery, suggesting that her anxieties are looking back at her. Therefore, Eddie's *looking* acts as the intermediary between Dani and her internalized angst. Without his penetrating gaze, the theme so familiar to the Female Gothic would not evince itself.

In another instance of contemporary media engaging with the Female Gothic, the 2020 film *The Invisible Man* conspicuously employs the act of looking to reveal Cecilia's dismay over her oppressive husband Adrian (Oliver Jackson-Cohen). Cecilia's story begins with an escape from Adrian's modernized mansion. She flees because, as the audience quickly discerns, Adrian is aggressive and controlling. As she silently maneuvers throughout the house, she passes a screen displaying several angles of security footage, immediately stressing the seeing presence her husband has on her. Cecilia disables the cameras before she flees, signaling a need to be surveillance-free before she can proceed to act out of her own free will. She also pauses in front of what initially appears to be nothing but is truly Adrian's invisibility suit. Her hesitant glancing reflects and foreshadows the looking trope; she unknowingly observes the symbolic-object that Adrian will later utilize to haunt her. Later, while in hiding at her friend's house, Cecilia learns of Adrian's alleged suicide. Yet, Cecilia's intuition is too strong; she is sure that Adrian is still somehow watching her (Whannell, 2020).

As if perfectly cut from the Female Gothic whole, *The Invisible Man* incorporates various forms of domestic grievances and a supernatural entity to embody them. Not only is Cecilia attempting to evade an oppressive marriage, but Adrian also threatens to continue ravaging her life unless she submits to motherhood. Cecilia detests Adrian because of his overpowering position in their relationship and his threat to force maternity on her. Accordingly, his aggressive watching—even prior to the invisibility—alludes to the established trope of women's fears physically looking back at them.

Like Gilman's narrator, Dani and Cecilia ultimately break loose from the forces threatening to suppress them in physical acts of dominance. John's fainting enables the narrator to tear down the paper, a symbol of female entrapment, without being watched by him. Dani's act of rebellion has analogous intentions—she throws Eddie's glasses in a fire to psychologically cut ties with his looking and appreciate her authentic identity. Lastly, Cecilia wears the invisibility suit to stage Adrian's murder as a suicide. After she kills him, she stands out of view of his cameras while looking down at him. Her intentional avoidance of the camera insinuates that she is simultaneously free of his watching and of

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the threats that his surveillance superimposed on her. All three women fulfill their needs—those of liberty, independence, and self-acceptance—after their overlapping fears no longer observe them.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, and *The Invisible Man*, the female protagonists suffer from untenable panic provoked by the manifestation of their fears. While such terror is familiar to the Female Gothic, the medium by which it is incited has been *overlooked*. Literary critics acknowledge that the female characters in the Female Gothic mode are apprehensive of domestic confinements, but they neglect the *manner* in which those anxieties are realized, namely the looking presence of symbolically-charged entities. John, Jennie, and the wallpaper represent several domestic impediments that, through watching Gilman's narrator, induce the mental-spiral leading to her defeat of female passivity. Eddie's luminous eyes follow Dani across the world, constantly reminding her of the internalized guilt and shame she holds regarding her sexuality and identity. Through a physical gesture against Eddie's gaze, Dani divorces the heteronormative structure of marriage that once prevented her from living candidly. Adrian maliciously places Cecilia under his surveillance throughout the entirety of their relationship, designing an environment where she would always be the oppressed, subservient wife. He further attempts to manipulate Cecilia into birthing his child by promising to end his torturous watching. Adrian's looking, therefore, becomes a symbol for the domestic ideologies of marriage and motherhood. When Cecilia stands atop his dying body, out of view from Adrian's infamous cameras, she severs his grip over her body and mind. The three narratives, then, promote the act of looking as a trademark element of the Female Gothic, one that unmasks female protagonists' domestic forebodings.

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