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The True Cost of Womanhood:

A study of women's mental health in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's
"The Yellow Wallpaper" and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

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Abstract

This essay examines the depiction of women's mental health and the effects which societal ideals have on it in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. These two literary works openly criticise the societal standards of femininity in the 19th and 20th centuries. The analysis discusses how forceful implementation of these ideals upon women can have great effects on their mental health. With support from the historical background and both authors' own experience with mental illness, this essay argues that impossible norms and constant male subordination of women can become too much for a woman to carry and can lead to actual insanity.

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Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) are two literary texts that were published 70 years apart, but have obvious similarities, which are impossible to disregard, in describing the contemporary ideals concerning femininity. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is set in the 19th century and revolves around a couple who move into a new house for their summer vacation. The woman, who is also the narrator of the story, is suffering from nervous depression. Her husband John, who is also her doctor, prohibits any activities, especially working and writing, as a part of her treatment. This treatment was called 'rest cure' and focused on keeping the patient, in most cases a woman, completely isolated from social and physical activities so as to not over-stimulate her. This treatment existed in real life and it was used by many doctors in the 19th century. Rest cure was first introduced publicly by S. Weir Mitchell in 1873. His initial patients were mostly women who were exhausted from work. However, he eventually started implementing this cure for women with mental health problems who "had tired out the doctor, and exhausted drug-shops and spas and travel, and outlived a nurse or two" (Poirier 17). In the unnamed narrator's case, the lack of stimulation and constant subordination by her husband pushes her deeper into her fantasy world where she projects her inner turmoil onto a peculiar yellow wallpaper in one of the rooms. As time passes, the narrator starts seeing various patterns and movements in the yellow wallpaper. Slowly but surely she falls into complete madness as she tries to rip the wallpaper apart through biting and tearing it, in hopes of rescuing the woman whom she imagines is stuck behind the paper.

The Bell Jar is a coming-of-age story of a young woman, Esther, who struggles at being true to herself and fulfilling her dreams of a career as a poet, while at the same time being expected to conform to the conventional patterns of how women during the 1950s America should be and act. The most prominent matters Esther struggles with are on the one hand those revolving around female virginity, and on the other hand the idea that a woman cannot have a career and be a mother/wife at the same time. Her mother and her love interest Buddy both expect her to stay pure until marriage and eventually choose the life of a happy housewife over that of a successful poet. Esther, on the other hand, views the loss of her virginity as a crucial step into adulthood and struggles with the idea of conforming to a mould others have created for her. Her struggles with womanhood and the sense of alienation from the world nearly cost her life as she tries to commit

suicide several times before being admitted to a mental clinic, where she eventually believes to have regained a sense of sanity and can go back to school and her “normal” life. At the end of the novel, Esther admits that although she is better, she can still feel the bell jar of her insanity hovering over her head, ready to engulf her at any moment.

Both texts show a woman’s declining mental health due to the shackles put upon her by her social environment. The unnamed female narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Esther, who is also the narrator of *The Bell Jar*, both struggle to conform to the norms that their societies have created for them, while simultaneously trying to find their own voice. The outcome of this struggle becomes life threatening. The focus of this paper is on how society blames women who cannot live up to the prevalent standards of femininity. To what extent are women who cannot or do not want to identify with these ideals regarded as insane? To what extent do the two texts that I am comparing depict women’s mental health problems as a natural reaction on impossible standards?

In support of my analysis, I will provide a short historical overview of mental illness from the Middle Ages until today, with focus on the 19th and the 20th centuries, and the differences in views of men and women. With this, I intend to show that women who do not live up to societal standards are seen as unstable and dangerous to others and themselves. The pressure from these norms can become too heavy for a person to carry, eventually leading to actual insanity, as depicted in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Bell Jar*.

Background

A brief history of mental illness

From the Middle Ages up until the 18th century, mental illness was seen as a result of bodily disorder, as it was believed that the body's functions were reliant on four humours that constantly needed to be regulated through a "healthy lifestyle". These humours were blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. They were associated with the fundamental elements: air, water, earth and fire. An imbalance in the humours was seen as the main cause for mental and physical health conditions (Trener and Horden 66). Many medieval physicians believed that mental illness was psychosomatic – a two-way exchange between body and soul. This belief had its roots in the Stoic philosophy, which argued that the soul could express its "intentions through the physicality of the body" (Ibid 63-64). Religion was an important part of Medieval society and greatly affected different areas of it, including medicine, which led to a "close interplay of the religious and the medical" (75). Hence, certain Medieval physicians would often argue that mental illness was of demonic origin. For instance, signs of insanity and demonic possession were very similar as both could be denoted from violent behaviour, odd facial expressions and hand gestures, and loud shouting (Ibid 68).

In the wake of the "Scientific Revolution" and the secularization of the 18th century, the general view of mental illness changed drastically and began taking the shape which they have today. Religious reforms in the Western world led to rejection of certain medieval treatments of mental illness, such as exorcism (Mellyn 85). It was believed that mental disorders were mediated by the brain and could be caused by the external factors. With time, physicians started differentiating mental illness into different categories. For instance, insanity was seen as a form of neurosis – a disorder directly connected to the nervous system. These new discoveries paved the way for neurology and a more in-depth understanding of psychological conflicts, which were seen as the cause to neuroses and psychoses (Berríos and Marková 123-125).

The 18th century was also a turning point in the comprehension of mental health, when the token gender for insanity switched from male to female and took a more sexual significance. Although

men and women experienced the same symptoms of mental disorder, their maladies were differentiated by physicians. There was a regular malady that was associated with the economic and intellectual pressures of a civilised man, and a female malady that was associated with sexuality and the essential nature of a woman. It was believed that women were more prone to mental disorders, especially those concerning insanity, than men and would “experience it in specifically feminine ways” (Showalter 7-8). However, together with the new discoveries that were made in the 19th and 20th centuries, more people argued that external factors were the main cause of mental illness in women, rather than their reproductive organs (55). With this, many believed that the reason why women were more often proclaimed as insane than men depended on their confining social presence. Richard Napier, a 17th century physician, noted that among his patients, women from any social class suffered more from depression, expressed more anxiety, and complained more of stress and unhappiness in their marriages than male patients. While feminists saw that as a result of the mistreatment of women on a societal level (Ibid 3), physicians did not seem to share the same view and instead chose to focus on and blame the different “biological crisis of the female life-cycle”, such as puberty, childbirth, and menopause (Ibid 55).

Gilman’s and Plath’s mental health struggles

“The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Bell Jar* are regarded as semi-autobiographical depictions of the authors’ own experiences. Gilman’s short story was first seen as a horror tale inspired by the famous gothic author Edgar Allan Poe. However, in her autobiography *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935) she explained how this story was in fact based on her real life experience with postpartum depression and S. Weir Mitchell’s rest cure, saying “I had been as far as one could go and get back” (121). This is the same physician and the same rest cure that are mentioned in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. For her first visit to Mitchell, Gilman prepared a detailed case history of her illness, but Mitchell was not impressed by this and seemed to have regarded Gilman’s meticulousness as a sign of arrogance. In his book *Doctor and Patient* (1888), he explained that he wanted obedience from his patients and that the “wisest [woman asked] the fewest questions” (48). Gilman was prescribed a completely domestic life with minimal social interaction and with the sole focus on her child and on rest. Mitchell even forbade her from writing or working for the rest of her life (Gilman 96).

Gilman followed her doctor's prescription for several months, but this only led to more suffering. Her health deteriorated as she was not allowed to work or interact with other people, and she spent many hours crying in her room. However, one day she experienced a "moment of clear vision" (Treichler 68) when she realised that Mitchell's rest cure and the traditional domestic life he had prescribed her were actually some of the main causes of her depression. This prompted Gilman to end her marriage and move to a different state with her child. She decided to write "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a response to Mitchell to show him and others the dangers of patriarchal society for women (Gilman 121). As with the previous time periods, 19th-century medical attitudes towards women were highly affected by social, religious and scientific beliefs. Even S. Weir Mitchell, who was seen as more open-minded than the common man, believed that woman's life centred around her womb, and that a woman's greatest achievement in life was to be a mother (Poirier 19). Colleen Moore describes how 19th-century society was determined to maintain the traditional pattern of American family life by encouraging women to focus on motherhood and the domestic lifestyle, and leave the public sphere to men. This meant that men were the only ones earning money in the family, while women had to entirely depend on them (13). Due to this, when Gilman's short story was first published, she received many negative and life-threatening letters from male physicians in the US who were displeased with how Gilman portrayed women's mental health. They believed her work should be either censored or completely prohibited (Dock, Allen, Palais and Tracy 61). It is believed that the reason why "The Yellow Wallpaper" did not become popular during its time is because it "struck too deeply and effectively at traditional ways of seeing the world and woman's place in it" (ibid 60). The publication of this short story also inspired other patients who were prescribed Mitchell's rest cure to come forward and share their experiences. Their stories were very similar to those of Gilman and also argued that this treatment should be prohibited (Poirier 23).

Sylvia Plath describes *The Bell Jar* as an "autobiographical apprenticeship", which she had to write to free herself from her past demons (Perloff 507). Some critics, such as Lynda K. Bundtzen, believe that the novel should not be read as an autobiography, but rather as an "allegory about femininity" (253). However, many passages in Plath's journals and her life experiences tell a different story, which makes it possible to claim that Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, can be seen as a fictional depiction of Plath herself. Likewise, several other main characters in *The Bell Jar* are believed to be based on actual people in Sylvia Plath's life. Plath's

own mother was the inspiration for Mrs. Greenwood, Esther's mother. When the book was written, she actively tried to suppress its publication as she did not approve of how Plath depicted her (Perloff 512). Buddy Willard was inspired by Plath's college boyfriend, Dick Norton, who was also a pre-med student at Yale. Their relationship was very similar to that of Esther and Buddy's. Sylvia Plath was expected to settle down with her boyfriend and get married instead of pursuing her career (Hammer 66). Like Esther, Plath struggled to conform to the double-edged standards society imposed, and just as in the novel, this struggle became life threatening. While Esther survives the multiple suicide attempts, Sylvia Plath ended her own life approximately one month after *The Bell Jar* was published (Baldwin 22).

In an interview Plath described her own struggles with depression, which might have been one of the main reasons for her first suicide attempt followed by some time spent in a mental hospital (Wagner-Martin 33). Afterwards she focused on trying to create a second self, which she wrote about extensively in her journals. This new Plath would be more glamorous and radiant externally. However, constant adaptation to this second self stopped her from realising and fulfilling the true version of herself, which might have been the cause for her final and successful suicide attempt (Hammer 67).

Analysis

In the following section I will analyse and compare “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Bell Jar*. The analysis will be divided into three subsections: societal norms of femininity; the man as the rational voice; and entrapment. These subsections illustrate three common themes that can be found in both stories and that closely deal with the topic of women’s mental health.

Societal norms of femininity

The societal norms of femininity were very similar in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The main focus was on raising girls to be ideal wives and mothers for their future husbands and families. The phrase “True Womanhood” (Moore 9) was coined by Barbara Welter in 1960s to illustrate a specific value system during the 19th century and to capture four principal virtues a “true woman” should, it was believed, possess. These were purity, submissiveness, faith, and domesticity. This ideal of a true woman was presented as a general fact, and anything that could be threatening to it, such as education, was looked down upon and seen as unnecessary (ibid). A woman was allowed to get an education and to work. However, it was not seen as appropriate for her to pursue a career. Her education should only focus on making her a better housewife, rather than a politician, a lawyer, or in general a competitor in the public sphere. Highly educated women were seen as a threat to the established American family structure and life, as their primary responsibility was to maintain the home (10). Therefore, when a woman had a mental breakdown, such as those depicted in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Bell Jar*, many believed this was due to her attempt to defy her “nature” by competing with a man instead of serving him, or looking for additions to her maternal functions (Showalter 123). Doctors, such as S. Weir Mitchell, believed that the only way a woman could get better was with very limited “brain work” as it could otherwise intervene with her “womanly duties” (Martin 737). The protagonist of Gilman’s short story is therefore assigned a rest cure by John, her husband-doctor, that highly limits her daily mental and physical stimulation. However, the unnamed narrator herself believes “that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do [her] good” (“Wallpaper” 10). This “fancy” of hers is received with hostility, which forces the narrator to keep a secret diary, or “dead paper” (2-3) as she calls it, as an outlet for her thoughts and feelings. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who had the rest cure prescribed for her, believed that this type of treatment, which forced a traditional, domestic life upon her, was in fact one of the

main reasons for her worsening health. The only way she got better was through quitting S. Weir Mitchell's treatment and instead focusing on what was stimulating for her, mentally and physically.

The idea of "True Womanhood" slowly died out by the beginning of the 20th century. However, together with the new wave of Freudianism in the 1940s, the image of women and gender differences from the previous decade were reinforced (Friedan 95). Sigmund Freud believed that women were biologically inferior to men. He saw them as "childish, helpless, with no possibility of happiness unless [they are] adjusted to being man's passive object" (ibid 110). This image of women that Freud and his supporters had stemmed from Freud's concept of "penis envy". During one of his lectures on "The Psychology of Women", Freud suggests that penis envy occurs when a girl notices her lack of penis in comparison to her male counterpart. This makes her feel at a disadvantage, and leaves deep-rooted effects on her development and character formation. It becomes a turning point in a woman's life, where she essentially regards herself and other women around her as less than men. Penis envy, according to Freud, creates severe insecurities, neurosis (i.e. depression, anxiety, obsessive disorder), and a wish to become more like a man. In Freud's opinion, a woman's biggest desire is to have a penis, which is something she can fulfil by giving birth to a boy "who brings the longed-for penis with him" (ibid 107-108). The mother can then "transfer to her son all the ambition she has had to suppress in herself" and hope to get some sort of satisfaction from her son to "silence" her masculinity complex (ibid 107-108). Mass media popularised Freud's ideas together with the 19th-century view of femininity, promoting an image of a devoted suburban housewife who was "beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home" (ibid 13). However, many women who tried to conform to these societal norms that were seen as perfectly fitting for them, felt unhappy and depressed. Betty Friedan calls this "the feminine mystique" – a phrase embodying the general assumption that women are fulfilled by just being housewives and mothers, when in reality the way they feel and the image they are trying to conform to are inconsistent with each other (ibid 7). This feeling of unhappiness was not widely discussed. Therefore, most women thought that other women around them were happy and fulfilled with their lives and housewife duties. It was assumed that if a woman felt bad, there was something wrong with her personally, or they were told that, in fact, nothing was wrong with them (ibid 15).

It is clear that Esther, in *The Bell Jar*, is deeply affected by the societal norms of the 20th century, and is a victim of the feminine mystique. While she constantly expresses disdain for existing societal norms and imagines herself pursuing a career as a poet, Esther likes to toy with the idea of how her life could turn out if she chose one or the other path. She uses a fig tree as an analogy to illustrate her conflicting emotions and thoughts:

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor...

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest (*BJ* 73)

The expectations of women during the 1950s were very conflicting. A woman should be educated, but at the same time her main focus needs be on finding a husband and being a good wife/mother. As one college student, who Friedan interviewed, said: "You're a social outcast at home if you don't [go to college] /.../ [however] everybody wants to graduate with a diamond ring on her finger. That's the important thing" (145). If a woman decided to pursue her career, she was seen as "neurotic and unfeminine" because a truly feminine woman did not want a higher education (ibid 11-12). Due to this, many women felt conflicted in regards to their identity and future, just like Esther in the quote above. She wants to be a famous poet, but at the same time, the society in which she lives expects her to conform to its norms and to follow a suburban housewife's lifestyle instead. To have a successful career and to be a mother at the same time were seen as complete opposites that could not be combined. Hence Esther feels that by choosing one she has to give up on the other. This creates an inner turmoil that leaves her lost, eventually leading to suicidal thoughts. People closest to her try to lead her down the marital path, while at the same time she feels that she has more to offer to the world than just being a mother and a wife. Records show that many women experienced this identity crisis in the 1950s, but doctors believed that this was due to them defying their biology (ibid 73). The only way for them not to suffer was through education in the form of courses in marriage for college girls, prenatal maternity groups, parent education, or any other

similar subject that oriented them in their role as women (116). This type of “education” was highly urged by women’s magazines and media, and became available not just in colleges, but also in high schools, which encouraged more young American girls to get married early on in their lives (ibid 12).

It is important to note that women themselves were partly responsible for the preservation of these norms. Although there were scholars and feminists who spoke out against the subordination of women during the 19th and 20th centuries, the general public followed the existing societal standards. In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Gilman briefly introduces a second female character, Jennie. She is John’s sister and works as a housekeeper of the couple’s summer mansion. Jennie’s presence becomes a constant reminder for the unnamed narrator of how an ideal housewife and mother should act. This makes the narrator feel guilty as she herself is unable to take care of her child or her home, but it also makes her hide from Jennie, as she feels that Jennie possesses the same beliefs as John and will tell him if she sees the narrator writing in her diary. Although, Jennie does not do anything explicitly or deliberately to make the narrator feel guilty, her decision to support her brother’s treatment of his wife by helping to monitor and to keep her away from the outside world, and constantly informing on her to John, indirectly upholds the patriarchal norms. This, then, makes women like the unnamed narrator, who do not want to conform to the conventional societal standards, seem like social outcasts, while it makes the rest of the women seem to be supporting their own subordination.

In *The Bell Jar*, Mrs. Greenwood, Esther’s mom, and Mrs. Willard, Buddy’s mom, are two main female characters who both directly and indirectly remind Esther where the woman’s place is. Mrs. Greenwood constantly urges her daughter to learn to shorthand just like her, which essentially is transcribing thrilling letters for others, mainly young men. Mrs. Willard teaches her son and Esther that “what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from” (*BJ* 67). These two women also promote the idea of chastity for women and how men would not respect them if they were not pure. Esther finds their views troubling as she does not want to serve men and transcribe their thrilling letters; she does not want to be pure for a man who does not do the same for her; and she does not want to be a place for an arrow to shoot off from - instead she wants to “shoot off in all directions [herself], like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of

July rocket” (*BJ* 79). These examples show the general view most women had during those two periods, and that girls did not have many female role models in their lives who promoted the idea of women not being subordinate to men but rather in control of their own lives. However, the lack of feminist role models is understandable considering how heavily influenced the 19th and 20th centuries were by male opinions on how women should and should not be, and the isolation to which women were subjected if they did not conform to the prevalent societal norms. In such an environment, it is easier to follow the already set rules than to question them, as it is essentially the same thing as questioning and poking holes in your own life experience.

The man as the rational voice

John in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Buddy in *The Bell Jar* are the two most important male characters in the texts. Besides being the unnamed narrator’s husband, John is also her physician, the one who diagnoses her and prescribes her the rest cure. Buddy is Esther’s long-lasting boyfriend, whom she eventually loses interest in after finding out that he has had sexual interactions with another girl, while Esther is expected to keep herself pure for him until they get married. However, both Esther’s and Buddy’s mothers consistently pressure Esther into settling down and marrying Buddy, as he is portrayed as the ideal 1950s American male. He is athletic, religious, and studies at Yale to become a doctor. He has great family values and is prepared to take care of Esther if they eventually get married. Both of these men hold an important position in the protagonist’s life, while at the same time they are the ones upholding and imposing patriarchal standards upon them.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, men were perceived as the rational gender, and their voice mattered more than women’s in various areas, such as medicine. Paula A. Treichler points out how it was expected of everyone to obey male logic and judgement in the realm of medical science, and how this male privilege lets John, for example, control the female narrator’s view and understanding of the world (65-66). In the first few pages of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the reader is introduced to John’s high sense of rationality: “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” (“Wallpaper” 9). Following this description, the narrator carefully voices her concerns to her diary about the legitimacy of John’s diagnosis of her

and his proposed cure. However, she tries to disregard her own feelings because he is “a physician of high standing”, and her brother, who is also a physician, has the same view as John (10). Pragmatic doctors such as John, the narrator’s brother, and the frightening Weir Mitchell, to whom John threatens to send the narrator if she does not get better, see the female imagination as a direct cause of mental illness. Conrad Shumaker argues that men like John are afraid of their wives’ imagination and artistic side, as these two things can undermine their materialistic reality (“Too Terribly Good” 592). Therefore, John relies on solely physical means, such as extensive rest and force feeding, to cure his wife, which in Shumaker’s opinion only “[destroys] her in the process” (Ibid). Through this, John silences the narrator’s imaginative side, which could, in a way, also be seen as her rational side as it is the only part of her that is telling her to question her husband’s way of treating her. In so doing, John gains control over the narrator and ensures himself of the legitimacy of his materialistic way of seeing the world. This power dynamic between the narrator and her husband can be seen as an illustration of a bigger societal hierarchy between the two genders, as all the male characters in “The Yellow Wallpaper” share the same view as John.

As mentioned earlier, “The Yellow Wallpaper” can be seen as Gilman’s critique of the male dominated medical science and its undermining of women. To underline her point, the author specifically uses S. Weir Mitchell’s real name as he was her original physician who prescribed to her his infamous rest cure. This rest cure is essentially the same as that which John prescribes to his wife. Both John’s and Mitchell’s rest cures prohibit the patient from work and any social interaction with the outside world. The patient is advised to spend her days in bed sleeping and being fed. Mitchell himself had expressed that psychological manipulation is a crucial part of this treatment by saying how important “the moral methods of obtaining confidence and insuring a childlike acquiescence in every needed measure” are (Martin 737). Therefore, the patient is usually treated as a child and forced to be dependent on either her doctor, who is usually a man, or her husband/brother/father. This can be seen depicted in Gilman’s short story on several occasions. Whenever the unnamed narrator voices any worries she feels in regards to her treatment or the uncanny wallpaper, John is quick to undermine her by referring to her concerns as “excited fancies” that her “imaginative power and habit of story-making” put into her head (“Wallpaper” 15). He often follows up with endearing words and actions to finish up the conversation, such as calling his wife “my blessed little goose” (Ibid), or telling her that if she was in any danger he would take

her away from the mansion, but as her doctor he can see that she is getting better, whether she can see it or not, and that he knows what is best for her (Ibid 23). Initially, this behaviour angers and frustrates the narrator as she feels like she cannot discuss her case with John, but at the same time, she regards this as his way of showing love. Because of this she develops a false image of herself, which reinforces John's diagnosis and views. This false self of the narrator tries to speak in a more rational manner and not cry whenever she is with her husband, which fools him into thinking that she is getting better, when in reality, she is being pushed deeper into insanity.

As I have already argued, it was assumed in the 19th century that a woman will obediently listen and follow the all-knowing male. Moving the focus to *The Bell Jar*, a novel written in the 20th century, it becomes apparent that not a lot had changed. Esther has big dreams of becoming a poet, which her boyfriend Buddy is aware of. However, in a casual conversation, Buddy says "in a sinister, knowing way that after [Esther has] children [she will] feel differently [and will] not want to write poems anymore" (*The Bell Jar* 81). Friedan discusses how during the 1950s in the US, it was thought that giving birth was the most miraculous thing a woman could do. Therefore, if a woman was against the idea of giving birth something must be wrong with her mentally for not appreciating such a blessing (14). This view of basing women's identity solely on the act of childbirth does not impress Esther, as she thinks that "maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed /.../ as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (*BJ* 81). It could be argued that men promote what *they* think is beneficial. Taking something that is such a big part of a woman's nature and forming her whole identity around this sole aspect makes childbirth a means of oppression instead of a way of nurturing a woman's potential as a human being. Also, this point of view indicates that a woman's identity ends at childbirth, which essentially limits a woman's worth to "a vehicle of procreation" (Ghandeharion, Bozorgian and Sabbagh 65).

A noticeable similarity between John and Buddy is their chosen career. John is already a doctor and Buddy is studying to be one. Interestingly, in the two texts these doctors are portrayed as the pillars of patriarchal society, who use their position to implement the prevailing standards on the unnamed narrator and Esther. As mentioned before, men were perceived as the rational voice, while women were there to serve them (Friedan 95). In "The Yellow Wallpaper" this is visible through

the parent-child-like relationship between John and his wife, where he tries to completely isolate her from the outside world and make her dependent on him. Buddy in *The Bell Jar* expresses his superiority through cynical actions. He spends a summer sleeping around with a waitress while dating Esther, but still expects her to be completely pure for him. He sees her poetry as dust, and expects her to eventually give up on her dreams, to settle down and be a wife and a mother. It can be argued that Gilman and Plath use John and Buddy to epitomise the social values of their times. They are two successful men working in a field where someone less educated than them could not question their authority or opinion (Poirier 16). The less educated, in this case, were women, because education for them was seen as unnecessary if it did not improve their quality of motherhood or wifeness (19). Therefore, the important areas of society were mostly filled with rational, all-knowing men, such as John and Buddy, who presented solutions to problems that suited them and their needs best. It becomes clear from the above mentioned examples from “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Bell Jar* that John’s and Buddy’s treatment of the protagonists were not based on love but control, typical of the relationship between men and women in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Entrapment

“The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Bell Jar* are not just titles of a short story and a novel, but they are also references to two reoccurring symbols of entrapment in their respective stories. Charlotte Perkins Gilman introduces the yellow wallpaper early on by describing it as repellent and revolting. This wallpaper is located in the nursery where John and his wife sleep. From the beginning, the unnamed narrator feels disturbed and appalled by the wallpaper and its uncanny pattern, but her husband refuses to do anything about it, as he does not want to give in to her “fancies”. Due to the rest cure, John’s wife is forced to spend most of her time in the nursery without anything to do but stare at the wallpaper. Slowly but surely, it comes to life in the eyes of the unnamed narrator, and she starts to see a female figure creeping behind and out of the wallpaper. It all culminates with John’s wife ripping the yellow wallpaper apart, crawling around the room herself and saying “I’ve got out at last in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (“Wallpaper” 36). With this ending, it becomes clear that the unnamed narrator at some point throughout the story starts to identify herself with the female figure stuck behind the wallpaper. Paula A. Treichler discusses how the wallpaper can be seen as a representation of the

narrator's own mind and the societal structure that makes women dependant on men, while the female figure behind the wallpaper can be seen not only as representative of the narrator herself, but of the female gender in general (64). The unnamed narrator becomes delusional and goes mad due to John stripping her of her rights and not letting her exercise her own free will. This power dynamic can also be applied on a bigger scale. As mentioned earlier, 19th-century society was highly patriarchal, where men's opinions were more validated than women's. Due to this, the majority of women were not allowed to make any important societal or personal decisions, as it all depended on men. Just like the unnamed narrator, women were entrapped in a reality that thrived on their subordination, which led to countless cases of women being treated the way the protagonists were treated in these literary works.

Paula A. Treichler proceeds to discuss how the discourse surrounding the unnamed narrator's medical diagnosis can be described as "a prime example of an authorised linguistic process whose representational claims are strongly supported by social, cultural, and economic practices" (68). Instead of only focusing on the yellow wallpaper as a symbol of entrapment, Treichler points out how the diagnosis of John's wife, and everything that it incorporates, can be seen as a "death sentence", especially if it comes from a man (70). The discourse used in regards to the unnamed narrator by her husband is highly phallogocentric, and portrays and makes the unnamed narrator feel like a "dysfunctional child", who is limited, confined, and regarded as "the other" in relation to John (ibid 74). As mentioned above, S. Weir Mitchell, the founder of the rest cure, believed that psychological manipulation was needed for the treatment to succeed. In his records, women who he believed were "cured" appeared to be submissive, hopeless, and defeated (Poirier 23), which is exactly how the unnamed narrator appears to be due to John's treatment of her. While the rest cure in itself is harmful, the language and the way John uses it has also a big effect on his wife's mental state and interpretation of her surroundings. He makes her feel trapped in their home, both physically by not letting her out, and verbally by making her believe she is a danger to herself and others. By connecting this discourse with the yellow wallpaper and the uncanny illusions the unnamed narrator experiences while looking at it, it can be said that the wallpaper represents "the death sentence imposed by the patriarchy" on the narrator and the other women (Treichler 73).

In Sylvia Plath's novel, she uses a bell jar as an analogy for Esther's feelings of entrapment. These feelings partly stem from the hypocritical societal norms, and partly from her own mental health problems. Throughout the book, Esther experiences an identity crisis, as she struggles to fit the mould that society has created for women. At the beginning of the book, Esther comes across as a girl with a perfect life. However, the more familiar readers get with Esther's thoughts and feelings, the clearer her internal struggles to fit in with the rest become. The environment she lives in does not leave a lot of room for her to flourish as an individual, which instead makes her obsessed with her inadequacies as she believes that she is not good enough for the ideal future that society promotes (Ghandeharion, Bozorgian and Sabbagh 64). Esther feels as if she is stuck under a bell jar, where she is slowly being suffocated by all the limitations imposed on women and the double standards between the genders. For the most part of the story, Esther plays the role of an object as she becomes a product of other's and society's expectations (Wagner-Martin 48). These societal pressures affect her mental health as well, and put a different type of bell jar around her. She starts losing control of her life, and she feels that she cannot connect with the outside world anymore. After spending months at a mental institution, and regaining some control over her body through purchasing birth control, Esther feels how the bell jar is lifted. However, the outside world is not ready to let her forget about her struggles. Esther feels some sort of disappointment from her mother for being a mentally ill daughter, while Buddy cynically wonders who would marry her now that she has been in a mental hospital. Their reactions mirror those of the general public. A person in Esther's position is seen as damaged and unlovable in society's eyes as they do not live up to the impossible standards. Esther herself is worried that the bell jar can descend upon her at any time. This only shows how big the gap is between reality and the perfect fantasy world that society has created, and how impossible it is for a person to achieve and fulfil the vain and empty expectations without losing a part of themselves.

Conclusion

This essay has investigated in what way society blames women who cannot live up to the prevalent standards of femininity and regards them as insane in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. This literary analysis supports the initial claim that women who do not conform to or live up to these impossible ideals are seen as unstable and danger to themselves and others. The pressure put upon women can become too heavy, which can

eventually lead to actual insanity, as depicted in the two works. Although these stories were written during different centuries, women's social situation was very similar. Motherhood and wifehood were seen as the main goals in woman's life. Education was only necessary if it improved the woman's ability to take care of her home and her family. A woman who instead wanted to pursue her career was seen as unfeminine and neurotic. The unnamed narrator in Gilman's short story, and Esther in Plath's novel struggle to conform to this idea of femininity. Their families, friends, and general population push them towards the traditional suburban housewife lifestyle, but internally both women feel that it is not the right path for them. John, the unnamed narrator's husband and doctor, tries to keep her away from the outside world as not to over stimulate her, while in reality, she feels that work and social interactions will help her. Esther does not want to be a mother and a regular housewife. Instead she wants to be a successful poet, but her family and her boyfriend do not approve of that and push her towards the traditional path for women. Without receiving any support from their surroundings, the protagonists go mad in their respective stories. However, society's response to that is to blame them for not following the rules and for being disobedient to their biological calling. In conclusion, women who do not fit the mould of an ideal female are treated as inadequate, and personally blamed for being different. Women during the 19th and 20th centuries with similar experiences to those of the protagonists were treated as social outcasts and had no place in their respective societies.

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