

# The physical and metaphorical significance of claustrophobic spaces in Kincaid's 'Girl' and Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'.

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October 12, 2020



Jamaica Kincaid's '*Girl*' and Charlotte Gilman's '*The Yellow Wallpaper*' are two stories centered around the experiences of women in society. Through the use of space, they exemplify ways in which society confines women, albeit from different points of view.

Kincaid's '*Girl*' made its first debut in the New Yorker in 1978. Unlike the typical format of stories, this story takes the form of a single ongoing sentence where the narrator advises a younger girl. The narrator, who comes off as a mother or someone in a position of moral authority over the younger girl, gives a set of rules, while the narratee is barely given an opportunity to express herself.

This story buttresses the highly performative aspect of gender and the 'making of woman'; it is apparent that there is a power dynamic where the addressed is at a disadvantage and thereby confined to the limits of

societal expectations, similar to how claustrophobic spaces give little room for movement. In the narrator's rules, we see the traditional expectations of women in patriarchal societies such as 'this how to sew on a button', 'this is how you set a table for dinner', 'this is how you sweep a whole house' and so forth. Throughout the story, the narrator gives advice that will groom the young woman into the normative ideal woman. These instructions are in line with the social norms of gender where women are expected to cook, clean, take care of the home and be docile. *Women are taught in such societies that subservience to men is important and their self-expression should be carefully centred around men's egos.* This can be seen in this story when the narrator emphasizes how the young girl should behave in the presence of men.

*In the typical binary postcolonial society where men are considered dominant, women inevitably become acquiescent* as a direct result of having less social capital. In other words, women are not only regulated in their homes but also on a large scale societally. Such rules and expectations restrict self-expression by requiring women to act in a certain way - no room for personal aspirations or desires outside of tradition. The narratee's life is being defined with little room for rebellion. The daughter's first rebuttal '*but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*' is ignored to signify that society will not reward compliance as that is what is expected of a woman. The fear of not being the ideal woman is used to keep the narratee in check. As can be seen with the last line, the narrator responds to her question 'but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?' by saying '*you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?*'.

Society is the metaphorical claustrophobic space in this story; *women are kept in a box and are expected to stay there by stifling any form of individuality.* It is clear that the narrator identifies the potential for frustration from all the restrictions and gives rules that indicate a 'transgressive potential of performance' (Janes "Kincaid"). For instance, the narrator mentions "this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all". In the same way tight spaces give little room for manipulation, this transgressive loophole shows the narrator is aware and understands that gender performance is restrictive. Thus, there is an attempt to incorporate advice that allows for some authenticity. As a reader, one is put in the position of the narratee by being on the receiving end of the advice. With every phrase, the reader feels more locked in and desires begin to feel out of grasp. The momentum and exactitude of the instructions coupled with the judgemental statement at the end, causes one to feel overwhelmed for the symbolic lack of breathing space. This story can be seen as a societal analogy of a tight, crowded and windowless room.

On the contrary, Charlotte Gilman's story involves a concrete physical space. The Yellow Wallpaper was first published in 1892 and was initially interpreted as a horror story. In 1973, 5 years before Kincaid's Girl was published, readers began to approach this story from a feminist perspective as this was a period when feminist ideals began to surface as a movement. Similar to how the references to weather, landscape, agronomy and cooking provide a sense of rootedness in *Girl*, The Yellow Wallpaper makes use of descriptors to establish the location of this story. It takes place in a lonely 'colonial mansion' that is 'quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village'. This lets us know the building is secluded from the busyness of the town, even though she can see people from her window. In the same vein as Kincaid's girl, there is a power dynamic present between the narrator and her husband who is representative of society.

The narrator in this story is seemingly suffering from post-partum depression and her husband, who is a physician, rents an untenanted building for three months to aid her recovery. He chooses the nursery as her room and as aptly described by Lorelee MacPike, "the fact that the narrator's prison-room is a nursery indicates her status in society. The woman is legally a child; socially, economically, and philosophically she must be led by an adult — her husband; and therefore the nursery is an appropriate place to house her" (Janes "Gilman"). The pattern of infantilization is also apparent in her husband's choice of language. He refers to her as 'little girl'. Typically, children are not always able to make informed decisions and require constant guidance. By infantilizing his wife, the husband suggests she is incapable of making independent choices and he is in the best position to judge what is in her best interest. When the narrator comments

about her appetite to correct the physician's notion that it is improving, he dismissively replies 'bless her little heart'. This is the same way the young girl's statement about not singing benna in Sunday school is dismissed in Kincaid. Both the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the young girl are confined by people with higher societal authority who believe they have the best judgement. Not only is the narrator physically restricted to her physical setting, she is also mentally and expressively restricted by her husband's stubbornness and gaslighting.

There are various facets as to how the setting is a claustrophobic space. In describing the nursery she rests in, she mentions the furniture is 'inharmonious', the floor is 'scratched', the wallpaper is 'torn off in spots' and the sides of the bed posts had been 'gnawed at'. The interior design of living spaces often have the ability to affect one's state of mind. The way one would feel discouraged coming home to a messy room after a long day of work, discordant furniture also has the effect of causing one to feel overwhelmed and caged in. This in turn affects mood, behaviour and can cause irritability. This is highlighted when the narrator describes the wallpaper pattern as 'infuriating' and 'torturing'. Her suggestion to move to one of the more visually pleasing rooms downstairs is turned down by her husband. He also monitors her activity within the nursery. When she gets up at night to take a closer look at the wallpaper, he tells her not go 'walking about like that' because she'll get cold. He speaks to her as though she is not a grown woman capable of basic safety. Even within the enclosed physical space, her movement and will are restricted. In contrast with Kincaid's girl, transgressive action is not encouraged here but the narrator does so regardless — she lies constantly about her thoughts and emotions to her husband to retain some form of authenticity. Although she is confined to such a displeasing space, she would rather it be her than her newborn. This consideration shows she recognizes the impact of such an environment on one's expression and movement and would not want her child to experience it. Relief from living in a confined space does not stop when one steps out either, because they know they will have to return. This is why when she walks into other parts of the house and when she goes riding, she believes the smell of the wallpaper follows her around.

A major part of this story that is significant to the topic of claustrophobic spaces is the yellow wallpaper in the room. At the start of the story, she vividly describes her disdain for the pattern and mentions it commits 'every artistic sin'. She goes further to label the color 'repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow'. Eventually, she begins to see what she believes is a woman stuck behind the incongruous pattern of the wallpaper. The narrator states this woman is subdued during the day, which metaphorically suggests how women are expected to be complacent as they go about their daily lives. She states that she sees her during the day on the roads beneath the trees and walking down the lane. I believe this refers to regular women going about their business, but she sees them as submissive women 'creeping' around, being careful to remain within societal standards. The only safe haven for eccentricities are in the dark, i.e. the only safe time to pause performative expectations is when no one is watching. It is not until she discovers this entrapped woman that she feels she has something to look forward to. This also shows a potential side effect of claustrophobic spaces. When one is repressed for too long, it can take a mental toll. In this case, the narrator begins to hallucinate.

While her narration stops being reliable, the woman stuck in the wallpaper remains relevant as it mirrors her own situation — being stuck in the nursery and confined by poorly informed judgements. She convinces herself that the woman in the wallpaper desires to be freed from its confines and makes it her mission to do so on the last day of their stay. Upon seeing the torn wallpaper, Jennie, her husband's sister, laughs and says she wouldn't mind ripping it herself. In a prior scene, she also catches Jennie staring at the wallpaper intently. The two brief moments of solidarity between both women suggests a joint understanding — and empathy on the part of Jennie. It comes off as Jennie subtly acknowledging the enforced domestic state they are both in, but being powerless to do anything. Tight spaces tend to feel like the walls are closing in and the narrator's frustration peaks when she finally tears apart the wallpaper. Ironically, at the end of the story, she locks herself in but states she 'got out at last'. This goes to prove her transgressive act of rebellion was the escape she needed.

To conclude, both stories contextualize claustrophobic spaces by presenting as the similar realities of women

across societies — suppressed, domesticated and often infantilized. Acts of self expression are often rebuked and seen as rebellious. There is little to no room for individuality, just like tight spaces have little room for movement. The same way it gets harder to breathe in tight spaces is the same way women get overwhelmed with the unending societal expectations and judgment.

#### Works Cited

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