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Safe as a Subtle Adaptation of "The Yellow Wallpaper"

"I guess this one I had was…had Yellow Wallpaper," mumbles Carol, the protagonist of *Safe i*n response to a probing reflection question. It is in this moment that individuals familiar with the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman begin to make sense of the story that the director, Todd Haynes is attempting to tell in his film, *Safe*. The remark is no coincidence as the female narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," supposedly suffers from temporary nervous depression that causes her to become hysterical. Because of her alleged hysteria, the narrator begins to see a woman entrapped in the yellow wallpaper who creeps around on all fours. As the story progresses, it is gradually revealed that her husband, John, engages in misogynistic behavior that represses and imprisons her. When Gilman's story ends, the narrator strips away all the yellow wallpaper and "frees" the creeping woman which she declares as synonymous with herself. Much like Gilman's narrator, Haynes' main character Carol develops an uncurable illness that seems to decrease in symptoms once she is separated from her husband and old environment. Subsequently, Todd Haynes draws from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's use of physical environments and illnesses in "The Yellow Wallpaper" to construct a symbolic narrative centered around female repression.

Throughout his various interviews, Todd Haynes never outright mentions reading or drawing inspiration from Gilman's, "The Yellow Wallpaper." Nonetheless, Haynes is adamant about constructing a narrative whose themes of illness and Carol's interactions with her physical

environment intertwine with the repression of the female identity. In an interview conducted by the film society, Film at Lincoln Center, Todd Haynes reflects on his inspirations for *Safe*, stating what he wished to explore, "…the synonymous relationship between immunity and identity and unconsciousness and how all those things start to be stripped down...How all those things kind of work when you're not paying attention to them and once attention is paid to immunity, identity, once the unconsciousness is lifted all those things start to fumble" (8:25–9:09). Essentially, Haynes is interested in deconstructing the relationship between illness and identity. He uses Carol's fatal illness as an obstacle that forces her toward a certain degree of existentialism. This existentialism then prompts her to question other aspects of her life such as her role, status, and identity. Once these aspects become paid attention to the comfort, she once found within the status quo is undone. The cultural status quo does not provide the stable "immunity" Carol seeks, as metaphorically reflected by her debilitating illness. Similarly, the text Advances in Psychiatric Treatment features an article published in 1913 titled "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper," wherein Charlotte Perkins Gilman reflects:

> For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia–and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country…he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to 'live as domestic a life as far as possible,' to 'have but two hours' intellectual life a day," and 'never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again' as long as I lived (Gilman 265).

Strangely, Gilman's experiences with illness and relationship with a well-known professional physician parallel much of what Carol encounters in *Safe*. Carol's upper-class status affords her

quality doctors, yet none of them find what causes her sickness and conclude that nothing appears wrong with her. Unsurprisingly, the narrator in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," shares Carol's class status yet also faces similar treatment from well-established physicians. The differences between Haynes' and Gilman's work seem to surface in the tones of their interviews. While Charlotte Perkins Gilman bluntly announces her work as a vocal warning against patriarchal society. Alternatively, Haynes wants his audience to pick up on his criticism of female repression through subtle narrative choices that prompt careful audience reflection. It is reasonable to conclude that "The Yellow Wallpaper," is a quiet presence in *Safe*, as both artists utilize illness and physical environments as tools of deconstruction.

Within Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," illness and madness become a way for the narrator to realize the oppressive patriarchal structures that confine her. In the first few pages of the story, the narrator expresses her frustration and mixed feelings about her husband John's dismissal of her illness, "You see he does not believe I am sick! 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," also stating that mention of her condition angers her husband (648). The narrator's illness brings out her husband's misogynistic tendencies. It also reveals the lack of autonomy and self-expression the narrator possesses in her living space. An important aspect to note is John's occupation as a physician that he uses to appeal to his own authority to wave away the narrator's concerns. Similar paternalistic acts occur in the film, *Safe*, where none of the male characters treat Carol's illness with any seriousness. Instead, illness suffered by both female characters is seen as a form of mad hysteria that triggers the male characters to restrict self-expression. On that point, Julie Grossman's essay, "The Quiet Presence of 'The Yellow

Wallpaper' in Todd Hayne's Film [*Safe*]" she explains how Gilman uses illness to prompt her character's mental journey, "…readers understand the high cost of her mental freedom– she escapes from an oppressively gendered ideology as a sick woman into a state of madness, as Gilman represents her metaphorical escape from the constraints of her life" (Grossman 113). Therefore, the narrator's nervous disorder allows her to perceive the ways patriarchal society unjustly stigmatizes her. Though, because of her illness and mistreatment she descends further toward her madness which further prevents her from being taken with any seriousness. Intriguingly, Todd Haynes states his desire to use illness as a tool for Carol's conscious realization, as it resembles the arc of self-discovery Gilman's narrator undergoes.

In the film *Safe*, Carol's illness is a representation of a cultural "disease" that patriarchal systems and figures inflict on her psyche. Yet, like Gilman's protagonist, illness pushes Carol to liberate her identity at the cost of her own comfort. Like the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Carol's coughing fits get stimulated by patriarchal aggregators that brush off her condition as a mere "illness" with no cure for the sake of preserving the status quo. For one, the well-off doctor Carol claims Carol is "perfectly healthy" and notes an improvement in her condition before handing her disgruntled husband a card to a psychiatrist instead (*Safe* 33:44-12). While not stated outright, the adequate organization and professionalism of the office suggest that the doctor is one of high quality afforded by Carol's rich husband, Greg. When he is handed the card, Greg appears dumbfounded and stares at the doctor in disbelief that Carol's illness may possess mental origins. While it is not overt, Greg's body language indicates a passive dismissal of his potential contributions to Carol's condition. Such behavior also echoes how Gilman's physician dismisses her melancholia as a form of female hysteria. Just as John in, "The Yellow Wallpaper" brushes the unnamed narrator off by appealing to his authority as a male physician, Greg directs Carol to

merely follow along. He never asks for Carol's input. Again, unlike Gilman's own experience and that of her narrator, the misogyny in the scene is expressed through body language over dialogue. In his essay, "How Clean Was My Valley: Todd Haynes's *Safe*," Roy Grundmann specifically elaborates on the patriarchal biases present between the characters in the scene, "Again, she is sent to the doctor who, in a classically paternalistic gesture, hands her husband, not Carol, the address of a psychiatrist. Both visits at the doctor are triggered by Carol's failure to be 'loyal' to her husband and by her 'inadequate' response to male sexuality and affection" (Grundmann 23). As Grundmann also notes, the exchange between Greg and the doctor demonstrates the lack of personal agency Carol possesses. While the doctor explores the possibility of a mental disorder caused by Carol's environment rather than an illness, the psychiatrist she visits fails to connect with her. For instance, when Carol visits the specific psychiatrist recommended by her doctor, he is met with Carol's blank stare when he says, "We really need to be hearing from you. What's going on in you?" (39:00-10). The camera's position creates a spatial distance between Carol and the psychiatrist which conjures up a feeling of detachment between the two. On a similar note, the psychiatrist being male worsens Carol's ability to connect or relate with him. What she chooses to say may undergo scrutiny from another male figure. Whereas in Gilman's work, the narrator only feels secure expressing her thoughts in journalistic notations to avoid unwanted criticism or claims from her husband that expressionism worsens her "ill" hysterics. In her essay, "The Quiet Presence of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' in Todd Hayne's Film [*Safe*]", Julie Grossman further defines Gilman and Haynes' metaphorical use of illnesses with similar terms, "It is impossible for the medical or self-help groups represented in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and [*Safe*] to cure either the narrator or Carol because their illnesses are cultural diseases understand as symptoms of a sick society's reliance

on enlightenment discourse designed to maintain the cultural status quo" (Grossman 113). While Carol's symptoms seem to decrease when segregated from her old life, the open ending wherein Carol stares blankly indicates that the illness will forever remain with her so long as the self-help group retains the status quo. Like John in, "The Yellow Wallpaper," the self-help group Carol finds herself in dissuades her from thinking about her condition too much. Alternatively, while Charlotte Perkins Gilman's unnamed narrator fully embraces her identity as a free "creeping" woman, her nervous disorder remains uncured and positions her as "crazy." Like Gilman's protagonist, Carol's illness is a metaphor for liberating their repressed identities through an illness at cost of becoming "mad" or exploited.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses physical environments like the yellow wallpaper and the vibrant exterior world to represent the narrator's struggles against systematic patriarchal entrapment. One of the repeating symbols made throughout Gilman's story is the image of a "creeping" woman whom the narrator continuously describes, "It is the same woman, I know, for she's always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight. I see her in that long-shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape ' arbors, creeping all around the garden" (634). Earlier in the story, the narrator associates the garden as a source of personal comfort due to its beauty. Yet, John discourages her from leaving the confines of her room under the notion that it will worsen the narrator's nervous disorder. Insofar, the creeping woman is representative of the narrator's underlying identity that wishes to knock against the established patriarchal culture. The luscious garden is a liberating physical environment for the narrator, while the room with the sickly yellow wallpaper is representative of her confinement. Simply, the interior world is a source of discomfort as it represents the patriarchal structures that oppress the narrator and worsen her disorder. The exterior world

represents freedom, but the interior world restrains the narrator to the point where the narrator can only "creep," among it at night. Furthermore, whether it is a figment of the character's supposed disorder, the narrator begins to claim that the wallpaper in her room shifts and changes due to a woman trapped behind it, "The front pattern does move– and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!...And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern– it strangles so" (634). As touched upon earlier, the narrator's debilitating condition ironically allows her to defile and systematically break down the conventional status quo. The narrator's illness forces her to mentally project on her physical environment to deconstruct gendered ideology. Specifically, the woman behind the wallpaper is a mirror reflection of the narrator's insubordination under patriarchal ideologues. As one will see later, the physical environments Carol navigates through also prompt her to reflect on her gendered status and identity. By the story's end, the narrator physically rips apart the yellow wallpaper in her room to free the creeping woman whom she reveals as synonymous with herself, exclaiming, "'I've got out at last,' said I, 'in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back'" (656). While not stated directly, the "Jane" the narrator mentions is implied as her true name. If it is, the wreck of the wallpaper symbolizes the narrator's freedom from her self-repression. For Charlotte Perkins Gilman, physical environments in "The Yellow Wallpaper," represent the narrator's struggles against the status quo and prompt her journey to liberation.

In the film form, Todd Haynes reappropriates Gilman's use of physical environments to symbolize female entrapment on a visual level. He uses a sickly color palette of dim whites and old-fashioned flowery patterns within Carol's house. Then a plethora of washed-out sterile colors within the doctors' offices and the self-help isolation cabin featured in the last shot of the film.

The environment that comforts Carol lies in the exterior world segregated from society, which is represented with bright, deep, and vivid colors. One of the first notably uncomfortable interior shots takes place in Carol's bedroom after an uncomfortable conversation about her sickness that provokes Greg to exclaim, “I don’t want to hear about it” (30:04—47). The room is dimly lit with washed-out colors that provoke a feeling of dreariness. Subsequently, the camera is pulled back to a wide shot where both characters face away from one another. The shot type visually enhances the metaphorical distance between the characters. It is not a direct parallel to Gilman’s work as other aspects littered throughout the film, but the use of mise-en-scene to make interior spaces uncomfortable is reminiscent of, “The Yellow Wallpaper. What is similar is Greg’s outright refusal to acknowledge Carol’s concerns about her condition, like John's. After the intense exchange, Carol wakes up in the middle of the night and chooses to wander outside through her gardens until the police ask if she is okay (35:21–36:04). Just as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story, the gardens represent an exterior refuge that Carol “creeps” around at nighttime. It is the first place Carol turns to for a safe space after being told off by her husband. While the nighttime makes for a dreary scene, the colors of the flowers and greenery that decorate the garden contrast with the washed-out colors of her bedroom. Also, like Gilman’s work, Carol’s liberating space is temporary, as the police who symbolize the confines of society interrupt her contemplative wandering. In the journal article, “Melodrama, Sickness, and Paranoia: Todd Haynes and The Woman’s Film,” Belau and Cameron note a similar phenomenon with Carol’s relationship to physical environments, “The environment is attacking Carol from the most intimate to the most public spaces she inhabits. Detached from the ontological and sexual assumptions of the traditional medical-discourse genre, Carol has no safe spaces in which to perform an identity” (Belau & Cameron). The closest Carol gets to possessing a liberating space

to perform her gender identity is the self-help group segregated away from her rich suburban home. To return to the film's last shot, like Gilman's narrator, Carol performs a self-projection on her interior environment when she wanders over to a mirror in her sterile quarantine home and mumbles, "I love you. I really love you. I love you (1:55:04—44). Unlike Gilman's narrator, Carol never fully self-actualizes her liberation nor outright defies systematic conventions. Rather, Carol loses her grasp on reality and her musings in the mirror appear as frail attempts at self-love. Thus, while Carol's journey in *Safe* differentiates, Todd Haynes's use of physical environments to examine female repression resembles what is seen in, "The Yellow Wallpaper."

All in all, Todd Haynes uses narrative aspects centered around illness and physical environments in, "The Yellow Wallpaper" to examine societal suppression of female identity in, *Safe*. While Todd Haynes never cites utilizing, "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a source of inspiration in his interviews, his motivations and narrative resembles what Charlotte Perkins Gilman chooses to examine in her own short story. Both Haynes' *Safe*, and Gilman's, "The Yellow Wallpaper" use illness to lead their respective characters on an arc where they attempt to escape their confinements and self-liberate. The physical environments employed in both works allow the characters to systematically deconstruct and ruminate on their patriarchal oppression. Although, in the film *Safe*, Todd Haynes visually expands on Gilman's use of exterior and interior spaces through mise-en-scene. Hence, while Haynes never confirms the use of, "The Yellow Wallpaper" in *Safe*, there is enough evidence and parallels between the two stories to suggest otherwise.

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