

The yellow wallpaper through the perspective of vladimir propp critical thinking ...

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



Esteemed literary critic Vladimir Propp, in his essay "Fairy Tale Transformations," breaks down the essence of the fairy tale into a series of elements and functions, all linked inexorably to religious practices found in past traditions. According to Propp, fairy tales are an amalgam of the functions and roles of religion and culture in various societies; the tropes of fairy tales are reflections of these customs. These functions all exist in some form or another in the vast majority of fairy tales, allowing Propp to organize and codify the structures and natures of fairy tales. "We observe that the actors in the fairy tale perform essentially the same actions as the tale progresses, no matter how different from one another in shape, size, sex, and occupation, in nomenclature and other static attributes" (Propp 785). While Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is far from a fairy tale, it has a relatively fairy tale-like structure, and applying Propp's principles to the short story can reveal a uniquely structured tale that is akin to many of these fairy tales.

Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* follows the story of an unnamed narrator, a married woman who, it is presumed, recently had a child and is experiencing a sort of postpartum psychosis. Her husband, John, a doctor, prescribes her a rest cure at a quiet summer mansion, where she is effectively sequestered in a room, causing her to grow more and more slowly insane. As she starts to experience more and more fantastical sights, and her grip on reality starts to fade away, the plot and characters of "The Yellow Wallpaper" structurally resemble a fairy tale - at least in the manner in which Vladimir Propp establishes these tropes.

Propp is innately concerned with two different perspectives on fairy tales -

naturalist and folklorist. In essence, he notes that many elements of nature can also be found in folklore, and vice versa; there is a distinct resemblance of nature to folklore, and this enables the fairy tale to be examined through both of these perspectives. In one perspective, folkloristic texts are organized in the linear elements that comprise the story, and in the other the patterns are found underneath the text itself, often out of order and instead rearranged to fit certain schemes:

" Both fields allow two possible points of view: either the internal similarity of two externally dissimilar phenomena does not derive from a common genetic root - the theory of spontaneous generation - or else this morphological similarity does indeed result from a known genetic tie - the theory of differentiation owing to subsequent metamorphoses or transformations of varying cause and occurrence" (Propp 785).

Propp tends to follow the latter; fairy tales, according to him, possess certain narrative elements that cannot be reduced any further than they already have - these are found in " The Yellow Wallpaper."

Propp has broken down fairy tales into a series of functions and narrative elements, all of which stem from an initial situation and allow the story to fall into the normal path of a fairy tale. " Fairy tales exhibit thirty-one functions, not all of which may be found in anyone fairy tale; however, the absence of certain functions does not interfere with the order of appearance of the others" (Propp 786). In essence, these functions are often found in fairy tale, but they are not all contained in every one. Propp also notes that, " in contrast to other types of tales (the anecdote, the novella, the fable, and so on), the fairy tale shows a comparatively sparse sprinkling of elements from

real life"; this further indicates Propp's philosophy of fairy tales being rooted in narrative structure and religious imagery (Propp 789).

The central facet of a fairy tale is the dispatch or departure on a quest; this is where the primary characters (the hero or heroes) have to embark on a journey or accomplish a task. While this dispatch is always a constant in fairy tales, "The dispatching and departing actors, the motivations behind the dispatch, and so forth, are variables" (Propp 786). In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the dispatch is of the narrator to the room in the summer mansion, and the journey itself is the rest cure - the narrator's own attempts to understand and escape her situation are this story's example of the fairy tale's hero's journey.

In order to understand "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a Propp-structured fairy tale, its plot must be examined using Propp's primary functions. First, there is the absentation, where the hero must leave his or her place of security or home to embark on the journey - this can be interpreted to be the narrator and John's escape to the country home for the summer, leaving the security of home for these unfamiliar climes. "It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer" (Gilman 508). Next is the interdiction, where the hero is warned against taking action; here, John gives the warning, as he rebukes his wife's pleas to not undergo the rest cure - "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" (Gilman 508).

John, the husband, is both the interdictor (the friend warning against bad things) and the villain (the person who arrives through the violation of the

interdiction); the narrator's insanity could also be said to be the villain, as the arrival of the narrator to the house may also constitute a violation of the interdiction. The madness of the narrator performs reconnaissance to seek information on how to defeat her and make her insane; this madness chooses to do this through slowly driving the narrator insane through hallucination. Trickery follows, in which the narrator's madness shows the narrator women in the wallpaper, as well as increasingly decrepit conditions within the room, to drive her mad: " On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind" (Gilman 514). Complicity occurs in the narrator's own willingness to believe the hallucinations. The madness performs villainy on the narrator, providing new torments and horrors; John also performs villainy due to his imprisonment of the narrator against her total will and consent.

The narrator is made known of John's villainy by recognizing just how inconsiderate he is of her, and begins her counter-action by falling further and further into madness. She departs from sanity, and begins identifying more and more with the woman she sees in the wallpaper (acting as the 'donor' figure). The wallpaper itself acts as a talisman, or helpful device or tool the hero can use to further their journey: " Talismans play a significant role in the fairy tale. They are often the only means by which [the protagonist] can attain his goal" (Propp 796). Though it is not actively helpful in helping her physical escape, her obsession with it occupies her attention during her incarceration in the room, and it becomes her sole companion (including the woman she imagines crawling around within the wallpaper). She obsesses over it to an incredible level: " On a pattern like this, by

daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind" (Gilman 514). In this way, she uses the wallpaper in a unique way to free herself the only way she can - by mentally escaping her rest cure.

Eventually, the narrator falls further and further into madness, until she actually causes John to faint and escapes at the end of the story: " 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!" (Gilman 519). Despite the structural nature of the fairy tale as part of the hero's journey, the narrator's escape is purely metaphorical, and it is presented as a negative thing; the narrator has completely lost her mind, remaining in the room whilst thinking she has escaped. At the same time, she feels fulfilled despite her apparent insanity: " Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was" (Gilman 515).

Gilman's narrator's unique troubles, particularly what John inflicts her with (the rest cure), can be categorized under Propp's notion of 'basic harm.' What actually constitutes the real basic harm of " The Yellow Wallpaper" is vague - it could be John's rest cure, to be certain, but it could also be the latent postpartum depression that the narrator already had from the birth of their child. As that is what causes John to implement the rest cure, it stands to reason that it is what is being acted upon. Propp notes that the form of this basic harm can be transformed based on a number of cultural factors; instead of being captured by a dragon, for instance, the narrator of Gilman's story is instead trapped by her own growing psychosis.

In order to fit "The Yellow Wallpaper," like other fairy tales, into the traditional notions of fairy tales and their customs as derived from religion and other sources, Propp posits that various transformations of numerous types can and will occur. In essence, ancient religious practices are the chief source of fairy tales, with these tales either taking basic or derived forms. Propp believes that the former is much more pure than its derived counterpart, and one can examine these fairy tales through these transformations to determine if a form is derived or basic. According to Propp, the fantastic is older than the logical, and the heroic is older than the comedic and so on.

One of these transformations is reduction: "Reduction points to the lack of agreement between the fairy tale and the whole tenor of the life surrounding it; reduction points to the low degree of relevance of the fairy tale to a given environment, to a given epoch, or to the reciter of the fairy tale" (Propp 791). In essence, the original element is shortened dramatically to form the new fairy tale. In the case of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the fairy tale is significantly reduced; as it is a fairy tale distinctly unrelated to its environment, there is very little that is fantastic about the story outside of what lies within the narrator's imagination. This occurs to the point where the hero's journey is effectively stripped of most, if not all, other characters besides the protagonist (narrator) and antagonist (John), and the narrator herself is confined for the majority of the story, having little agency and identifying with the woman in the wallpaper: "At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be"

(Gilman 514).

The opposite of reduction is expansion, in which " the basic form is extended and broadened by the addition of extra detail" (Propp 791). Due to the rather simplistic and stripped-bare nature of the story, " The Yellow Wallpaper" benefits from hardly any expansion; if anything, the hero's role is expanded to include several supporting characters, if one includes them as part of her fevered and psychotic imagination (e. g. the women in the wallpaper as donor or helper figures): " she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern--it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads" (Gilman 517).

If anything, " The Yellow Wallpaper" is most decidedly a case of contamination in fairy tales, as Propp notes. " In general, the fairy tale is in a state of decline today, and contamination is relatively frequent The expression thus lost its sense but was not deprived of a certain characteristic vividness" (Propp 791). Removing the fairy tale from its religious origins, the horrors and wonders of the world of Gilman's story lie in the psychological and medical - the narrator and John both deal with incompatible notions of medicine and psychological help. The biggest obstacle that the narrator must overcome is her husband's overreliance on 19th century medicine, with the rest cure being a decidedly unique cultural phenomenon of that time. By making it no longer a fight against the supernatural, but instead within the narrator's mind, Gilman contaminates the story's fairy tale inspirations and takes them further away from the spiritual. The story is a tale of women's intuition over modern patriarchy masked as science; there is no trace of belief or lack of belief of God in the story.

Apart from contamination, inversion is the biggest change this fairy tale makes to others: in this transformation, "Often the basic form is reversed" (Propp 791). In "The Yellow Wallpaper" the protagonist is a woman, with her loyal husband actually being the villain of the piece. By making this gender swap so important to the story (by making the conflict directly related to women's agency and the relationships between husbands and wives), this inversion directly serves the story's themes of feminism and discrimination - a most effective tactical move on the part of the author.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" goes through many acts of intensification and attenuation, especially with regards to its characters and actions. While many fairy tales have the hero go on a quest, the narrator here is exiled to the room in this summer home for the duration of the rest cure, thus subverting the dispatch: "Dispatch is one of the constant elements of the fairy tale; this element occurs in such a variety of forms that all degrees of dispatch intensity are demonstrable" (Propp 791). Furthermore, the dispatch is not initiated by the wife; she is instead subjected to it by her husband against her will, thus subverting even further the concept of the hero's journey. The narrator does not attempt to accomplish a goal; she merely wishes to survive the rest cure.

Many of the substitutions of fairy tale elements in "The Yellow Wallpaper" are both internally and externally motivated, though they are mostly external due to the changes in ethnography (ancient Greece/Europe/Russia for 19th century America) and culture. "The majority of such substitutions may be explained very easily, but there are substitutions which require a special ethnographic exegesis. Elements from life are always immediately

obvious, and, more often than not, scholars center their attention upon them" (Propp 792). Confessional and superstition-based substitutions also occur: " Current religion is also capable of suppressing old forms, replacing them with new ones" (Propp 792). In the case of " The Yellow Wallpaper," replacing old religion with both the eccentricities of schizophrenia and the hubristic complexities of modern science constitutes such a substitution; Propp would note a total absence of true religion in the work. Instead, he would see the negative effects of modern science on a fragile mind, exacerbated by the oppressive environment in which the woman has been placed.

In conclusion, " The Yellow Wallpaper" is a very reduced, significantly altered form of the kinds of fairy tales Vladimir Propp examined with regards to structure. There is very little expansion, and many of the functions of the fairy tale and the hero's journey mentioned by Propp are inverted or eliminated altogether (lack of a physical journey, a concrete villain, supporting characters like the donor and helper). Comparing this story with other fairy tales, the narrator is a Rapunzel in a castle who cannot get herself down, living in isolation to the point where she begins to imagine friends of her own. Eventually, she can no longer escape, though she has deluded herself into thinking she already has. Propp's functions and list of transformations, when applied to " The Yellow Wallpaper," show a dramatically twisted fairy tale with a decidedly dark ending - the hero's win is hollow at best, and they do not get to return home with the spoils of victory.

Works Cited

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