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



Ashley King Professor Maloney Philosophy 2450 April 29, 2013 Hysteria In the film Gaslight we witness a young Paula unknowingly being driven to the point of insanity by her new husband Gregory. Gregory was using Paula to find her aunt's missing jewels through a long drawn plan of moving into the home in which he had previously killed the aunt. Gregory had no interest in Paula, but was only using her to get close to the things he loved so much, the jewels. " In Gaslight we are given the perfect contradiction of the education and creation sought in remarriage comedy: in this melodrama the woman is meant to be decreed, tortured out of a mind altogether" (Cavell, 49). Gregory uses every means possible to convince his wife she is going crazy. We watch a progression of oppression and isolation happen between a man and a woman that is devastating to both Paula and the viewer. " In the claim of reason I call something like this ' having a voice in your own history,' and compare the ways in which one may be so denied (deny oneself) in philosophy and politics. This denial of speech is not the loss of speech, a form of aphasia, but a loss of reason, of mind, as such-say of the capacity to count, to make a difference. " Paula transforms from a character with a beautiful voice to a woman with no voice, or perhaps no meaning at all, when she becomes silenced by her husband's manipulations. The movie begins with Paula, a beautiful and talented young singer, being told by men that she must essentially forget what she is to become. We hear it first when she is leaving her aunts home and again we hear it from her voice teacher. The teacher states that " she is not invested in her singing and she might just want to give up singing if she is in love. " At this point we see both her voice and sense of freedom are taken away from her. " So not only individual

men are destroying her mind, but the world of men, in its contradictions with itself, is destroying for her the idea and possibility of reality as such" (Cavell, 50). This behavior continues through out the development of the film by her husband. Paula has now abandoned her voice and is being oppressed by Gregory. According to MacKinnon " The major obstacle to the liberation of women-the central problem we confront and the fundamental reality that we still need to change-is what women need liberation from: male dominance" (MacKinnon, 504). Gregory gradually convinces Paula she is losing her mind, going hysterical & that she needs to be isolated from all outsiders. Gregory is clearly dominating Paula. He is playing tricks on her so she believes she is becoming forgetful and doing things without remembering. He hides her watch, a brooch and moves furniture to distort her reality. The lights in the house and the noises she hears in the attic are part of his plan to create a false sense of horror and confusion to Paula as well. By looking into the title and comparing it to the domination that is happening in this film we see the title Gaslight is an obvious reference to the light used within the house. The same lights that lower and rise when the husband is using them to sneak around in the attic at night. " Following the cue of the light, of the rising and falling of the light as a cause of madness, and considering that this rising and falling is the light by which we see the figures on the screen, we have to ask whether there is something in the light of film that is inherently (not, of course, inveterately) maddening" (Cavell, 68). Gregory has planted the idea in Paula's head that perhaps there is a ghost in the attic, or perhaps she is hearing things. She second-guesses herself and all of the logical conclusions as to what could really be happening in the attic until the detective makes

her believe herself. This is where the symbolic light in Paula's head flips back on and she realizes that she has been fooled the duration of her marriage. She eventually discovers the menacing tricks he has been playing on her with the help of the detective. According to Cavell " The process of controlled amnesia is one that is to render the woman of Gaslight stupid, say self-stupefying: she does not know what the fairly obvious sounds of tramping are on the floor above and she does not know why, hence soon not even whether, the gas lamp is obviously lowering in her room—self —stupefying, but in such a way that what she imagines cannot be dismissed, either by her or by us, as ordinary stupidity, any more than Descartes's suggestion that he might only be dreaming that he is sitting before his fire can be dismissed by him or (if we follow him) by us as ordinary stupidity" (Cavell, 51). Aphasia refers to the Greek word meaning speechlessness. It is described as a disturbance of the comprehension and formulation of language caused by dysfunction in specific brain regions. This movie depicts men plaguing the ailment of aphasia onto woman, upon Paula specifically. The detective is introduced to us in the film as being a heroine. He is the savior of Paula's voice. " Bringing her back from strangulation, reintroducing her to language (demonstrating that her words are not shameful, but ordinary and perfectly credible, that the act of speech is hers to define), returns her to her voice—becoming, one could say, her voice teacher" (Cavell, 58). He gains her trust by producing the match to her beloved dead aunt's glove. He also ends Paula's self-stupefaction by questioning her on the changing lights. He implies that she knows why the lights fluctuate and presses the fact that she is in denial rather than losing her mind. The interaction between the

detective and Paula in the house shows her enlightenment to the truth through the conversation between herself and the detective. “ Every night when my husband goes out...’ she stops, startled by hearing her own words. The man continues for her, carrying on her words: ‘ The light goes down. Then what?’ And she is able to go on: ‘ I hear things... I watch... Then the light goes up.’ A hesitation again, and again the man continues; ‘ and he comes back” (Cavell, 58). According to Cavell “ A dog would have no trouble making this connection. Only a human being could be prohibited from making it, from subjecting herself to her own thoughts” (Cavell, 58). This is Cavell’s exact point in saying to have a voice in your own history. Paula had been not only robbed of a voice but she was denying herself her voice as well. The film ends in a glorious portrayal of Paula’s self-discovery. She is no longer victim, caged by her husband’s lies, and uses her rediscovered voice against her husband. “ Are you suggesting that this is a knife? I don’t see any knife. You must have dreamed you put it there... Are you mad, my husband? Or is it I who am mad? Yes. I am mad.. If I were not mad I could have helped you... But because I am mad I hate you, and because I am mad I have betrayed you. ” Marilyn Frye describes perfectly what the emotions are that disguise oppression so well. She describes them as a birdcage and without looking at the cage as a whole you may get lost in the transitions of each individual wire. “ The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one’s life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being

caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby-trapped" (Frye, 3). Cavell and Frye both convince us that oppression can be avoided and changed through voice. Her husband Gregory had systematically oppressed Paula, but she regained her voice and freed herself from the cage he had confined her to.