



ANTAGONISTIC KINDNESS IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"

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ABSTRACT

This article depicts John's attitude in treating his wife's nervous depression in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." The treatment is supposed to help the wife get better. However, she ends up with a severe mental breakdown. The researchers argue that John's attitude towards his sickly wife is called antagonistic kindness. This study employed the qualitative descriptive method through the perspective of feminist literary criticism. Since the narrator is the wife, the data were taken from the wife's accounts of John's acts and speeches towards her during the special treatment in the rented mansion. The wife's thoughts on John also serve as essential data to show how manipulative and dictating John is. The research indicates that John's attitude embodies antagonistic kindness manifested in two major cruel-kindness actions or decisions, including psychological manipulation and dictation towards his wife. John exhibits psychological manipulation through his insistence that all the treatment is for the wife's sake, yet, such a thing is to make the wife feel guilty for being a burden. Moreover, John's dictation is seen by having his wife's daily activities scheduled, preventing her from doing anything out of his control. John also never listens to what his wife wants or feels, thus worsening the wife's psychological condition. The researchers further argue that John exhibits the so-called antagonistic kindness to maintain his reputation as a physician of high standing and keep dominating his wife as his property. The findings thus might help the readers be aware of any forms of kindness that antagonize and manipulate them psychologically.

Keywords: *antagonistic kindness; dictation; domination; manipulation; nervous depression*

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menggambarkan sikap John dalam mengobati depresi saraf istrinya dalam "The Yellow Wallpaper" karya Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Perawatan itu seharusnya membantu si istri menjadi lebih baik. Namun, dia berakhir dengan gangguan mental yang lebih parah. Para penulis berpendapat bahwa sikap John terhadap istrinya yang sakit-sakitan inilah yang disebut kebaikan antagonis. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif melalui perspektif kritik sastra feminis. Karena narator adalah istri, data diambil dari penjelasan si istri tentang tindakan dan ucapan John terhadapnya selama perlakuan khusus di vila sewaan. Pikiran istri tentang John juga menjadi data penting untuk menunjukkan perilaku John yang manipulatif dan mendikte. Penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sikap John mewujudkan kebaikan antagonis yang diwujudkan dalam dua tindakan atau keputusan kebaikan yang kejam, termasuk manipulasi psikologis dan dikte terhadap istrinya. John menunjukkan manipulasi psikologis dengan terus mengatakan bahwa semua perawatan adalah demi si istri, namun, hal seperti itu sebenarnya untuk membuat si istri merasa bersalah karena telah menjadi beban. Selain itu, Perilaku mendikte John terlihat dari caranya yang mengendalikan jadwal kegiatan sehari-hari istrinya, mencegahnya melakukan sesuatu di luar kendalinya. John juga tidak pernah mendengarkan apa yang diinginkan atau dirasakan istrinya, sehingga memperburuk kondisi psikologis si istri. Para penulis lebih lanjut berpendapat bahwa John menunjukkan apa yang disebut kebaikan antagonis untuk mempertahankan reputasinya sebagai dokter terkemuka dan terus mendominasi istrinya sebagai miliknya. Dengan demikian, temuan ini dapat membantu pembaca menyadari segala bentuk kebaikan yang memusuhi dan memanipulasi mereka secara psikologis.



Kata kunci: *kebaikan antagonis; dikte; dominasi; manipulasi; depresi saraf*

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INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" was first published in 1892 by the New England Magazine. Wilson (1997) elaborates that Gilman wrote the story in the same year and sent it to The Atlantic just to have the editor reject it. In 1920, the story was anthologized in William Dean Howells' *The Great Modern Stories* and started to get "much serious attention." Elaine R. Hedges wrote the short story's "first lengthy analysis" after republishing it in 1973. Since then, Wilson adds, the story gathered "widespread critical attention," especially from both psychological and feminist perspectives. Wilson further recounts that the story was commented to be the epitome of psychological realism and Gothic fiction. Barnett et al. (2008) remark that the story was first read as a ghost story before being seen as a feminist one in recent years.

It has been more than a century since the story's first publication, yet, many researchers still have it for their studies. For example, within the last decade, the story's narrator remains the most popular subject of analysis. The focus covers a wide number of different topics, some of them are the narrator's mental health (Bowden, 2018; Kantharia, 2020; Poitras, 2020; Saha, 2019; Truncyte, 2020), patriarchal oppression (Mínguez, 2014; Raouf, 2014; Schultz, 2020), and gender roles, equality, and empowerment (Alajlan & Aljohani, 2019; Ghandeharion & Mazari, 2016; Khellaoui & Mazri, 2019).

Bowden (2018) relates Gilman's personal experience in post-partum depression to the narrator's psychological problem, stating that the short story "illuminate[d] the problems within a patriarchal medical system" and "served as a rebuttal to the popularized idea that women and their nervous systems were weaker than their male counterparts, and therefore more susceptible to failure and illness." This statement affirms that when the short story was written, women's medical condition was never considered serious since they were biologically weak.

Saha (2019) agrees with Bowden by arguing that the narrator's and Gilman's mental breakdown was more caused by "a severe cultural and patriarchal oppression" than post-partum depression. The rest cure prescribed as the treatment worsened their condition since the doctor was only concerned with the "rich diet and minimal exertion," assuming that the patients would get physically and mentally better by gaining "weight and red blood cells." Quoting Gilman's "Human Work" (1904), Saha presents the author's argument that having "both work and marriage" might be a better treatment for the hysteria since being involved in a steady socio-economic work may hinder women from a breakdown and being "trapped in a space that forced them to remain without access to the public space and enjoy its privileges."

The studies, as mentioned earlier, regrettably fall short of focusing on the main male figure in the story, John, the narrator's husband. Raouf (2014) focuses his analysis on the patriarchal control of the narrator's body and mind, resulting in separation, discipline, surveillance, and language as the methods. Meanwhile, Mínguez (2014) argues that the narrator's mental breakdown resulting from domestic confinement was one way to degrade

women through literature. Furthermore, Schultz (2020) shows that women can gain control from patriarchal oppression. Those previous studies share the focus on patriarchal oppression but did not highlight the husband as the active agent.

This study aims to fill the gap that the previously mentioned discussions lacked to address, focusing on the main male character in the story. During the rest cure that John prescribes to his wife, he exhibits his kind intention through his actions and speeches for his wife's recovery. However, John's attitude only brings more harm than cure. The researchers, thus, specifically term John's kind yet cruel attitude as antagonistic kindness. The term comes because John's act and speech towards his wife end up antagonizing instead of comforting her.

LITERATURE REVIEW

John's antagonistic kindness is a form of emotional manipulation. It is an act that he conducts to maintain his domination over his wife. Thus, the literature review is elaborated under the feminist literary criticism focusing on male domination.

a. Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism, says Dobie, 2012 (p. 112), reads a literary text to find how the "male/female power structure ... makes women the other (the inferior)." Guo (2019) goes along with this and argues that two out of some key points in discussing a literary work from a feminist perspective are "the patriarchy" and "the other." These two terms refer to the power relation where the former is the subject of domination, and the latter is the object.

Patriarchy favors males as the source of power and puts the female silenced and marginalized Guerin et al. (2005), subordinated and inferior (Saputri & Neisya, 2021). It is the male's privilege to define "what it means to be female" (Beauvoir, 1953); either they become "the angel in the house" or "the madwoman in the attic" (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000). To be deemed the angel, a woman is supposed to attend to her husband's every need. Thus, her contentment lies in her service to her husband and children, making her feel guilty, "selfish, and neurotic" for wanting something outside her domestic role (Friedan, 2001). John's attitude toward his wife mainly centered on this assumption. Thus, when he finds that his wife failed to conform to the image, he manipulates her emotionally to put her back in her assigned role.

b. Emotional Manipulation

Grieve (2011) defines emotional manipulation as "the tendency to influence others' emotions to obtain the desired outcome strategically." It is said to be the "dark side" of emotional intelligence (Austin et al., 2007), in which males are more likely to engage (Bacon & Regan, 2016; Grieve et al., 2019; Hyde & Grieve, 2018). Emotional manipulation is significantly predicted by the masculine gender role (Grieve et al., 2019) and elevated by "a relentless drive to achieve goals" (Hyde et al., 2020).

Emotional manipulation is "a form of violence," said Kecsoová (2019). It belongs to domestic abuse, which inflicts the victim through language. Thus, its invisible yet damaging effect might be more significant than physical injuries. Further, Kecsoová (2019) explains that emotional manipulation serves the perpetrator as "a vehicle of power." It enables whoever uses it to influence reality. The victim might perceive the manipulator's constructed reality as the truth.

(Hyde & Grieve, 2018) mention that people are willing to engage in emotional manipulation by conducting malicious or disingenuous acts. Malicious manipulation aims to

make the victims feel guilty. Meanwhile, the disingenuous one is to reassure them to go along with what the manipulator says (Hyde et al., 2020).

This subdiscussion serves as the theoretical basis for analyzing John's speech, attitude, and behavior that exhibit his antagonistic kindness. Through his sweet words, John manipulates his wife's emotions and behavior so that she behaves the way he tells her. Unfortunately, the manipulation affects her mentally, and she falls deeper into insanity instead of getting better.

RESEARCH METHOD

The researchers employed a descriptive qualitative method in conducting this study. The data were taken from the story's narrative, especially any accounts of John's acts and speeches perceived from his wife's point of view. As the story's narrator, the wife's thoughts on John became part of the data collected to depict John's cruel kindness. To exemplify John's antagonistic kindness toward his wife, the analysis paid close attention to John's attitude during his wife's treatment, resulting in her worsening mentally. The attitude includes John's nice acts and sweet speeches that, unfortunately, leave her no room to do anything she likes or say anything she wants. The analysis was conducted under the framework of feminist literary criticism, focusing on emotional manipulation as the device of male domination.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

John is the main male character in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." He was "a physician of high standing" and "practical in the extreme." As a practical person, John did not believe in anything that could not "be felt and seen and put down in figure." In other words, John only believed in the physical phenomena he could experience through his senses. Thus, John did not believe his wife had a mental health condition since she did not show any physical symptoms. He was utterly confident in saying that his wife only experienced "temporary nervous depression," which was nothing to worry about (Gilman, 2008, p. 391). Bowden (2018) explains that what John's wife experiences today is called post-partum depression, which was never considered an illness in Gilman's time.

Due to his wife's "slight hysterical tendency," John prescribed his wife a rest cure and took her to spend the summer in a "colonial mansion" that stood "well back from the road, quite three miles from the village" (Gilman, 2008, p. 392). The prescription meant the wife should rest from everything, including any "congenial" work. This treatment mirrors how a specialist cared for a female patient who suffered from a nervous breakdown in the early twentieth century. Saha (2019) quotes Gilman's autobiography that narrates how Gilman was asked to "live a domestic life as far as possible" and "never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again" as the treatment for her "severe and continuous nervous breakdown."

However, the said cure did not lead John's wife to the expected recovery but to her mentally deteriorating. The researchers argue that the wife's worsened mental condition was due to John's failure to listen to her wants and needs despite his kind attitude towards her, thus, his antagonistic kindness. The following discussion lists two major actions that John exhibits as the manifestation of antagonistic kindness: John's manipulation and dictation.

a. John's Manipulation

When John brought his wife into the rented mansion to spend the summer and to have the "perfect rest, and all the air [she] could get," he told her that it was "solely on [her] account" (Gilman, 2008, p. 392). The wife should have felt content that her husband took her to rest and spend the summer in a rented "colonial" mansion. She might be able to enjoy the holiday and do anything she likes. However, the wife should deal with John's opposition from the

beginning. Most importantly, John did not believe that his wife was sick when she knew what she had was more than "a temporary nervous depression." The wife should have said something about her sickness, but she could do nothing since her husband is a physician and "of a high standing," which could "assure friends and relatives" to believe him instead of her (p. 391). John knew that his social position and profession enabled him to make people go along his way. In this case, to make them support his decision regarding his wife's treatment. The researchers then argue that John's deceitful act, the disingenuous emotional manipulation, as Hyde & Grieve (2018) term it, is the "heavy opposition" the wife met that exhausted her "a good deal" (p.392).

John often said something nice to his wife that one might think he truly cared about her. However, his true intention might be far from what he said since, at the same time, he said something that implies the opposite. For example, John told his wife she was "his darling and his comfort and all he had." The expression might sound sincere since the wife also wrote that John loved her "very dearly." However, he said his wife should take care of herself "for his sake" (Gilman, 2008, p. 396). The phrase "for his sake" might lead to a question of why it had to be for him. Then the phrase "all he had" might help answer the question. John told his wife that she was all he had was to evoke her guilt. John wanted his wife to feel that her sickness was an inconvenience for him. Thus, of such a feeling, she had no other option but to follow his instruction to relieve him of the burden.

What John said to his wife contradicts each other and implies that all he does for his wife is actually for his benefit and never for hers. On another occasion, when his wife thought that she might only get "better in the body" and not in her mind, John begged his wife to stop thinking such "a false and foolish fancy." He asked her for his sake, their child's, and her own (Gilman, 2008, p. 397). The last statement indicates that John put himself before anybody, even his family. His wife becomes the last person for John to consider, even though previously he told her that all the effort to make her better was only for her.

In their study on emotional manipulation, Hyde & Grieve (2018) mention that one of the traits of malicious emotional manipulation is to use one's emotional skill to make others feel uneasy, even guilty. What John said to his wife might embody the said malicious act. He plays with his wife's emotions and conscience through all those sayings. John wants her to follow through with the rest treatment he planned by making her feel guilty. He wants his wife to think that her sickness is not worth all the inconveniences of moving to a rural place and spending money on the vacation house. Indeed, John's wife does feel like a burden for making him rent a mansion for three months just to cure her not-so-serious case (Gilman, 2008, p. 393).

Furthermore, Kecsov (2019) acknowledges that the emotional manipulator wields their rhetorical power to influence reality, precisely the victim's reality. John, indeed, exemplifies such an ability. He used his social standing to forcefully assure her that he knew better and was always right. Thus, it left the wife no room to argue regarding her case. All she could do was submissively take whatever reality John constructed for her. Kecsov (2019) adds that emotional manipulation relies on the victim's perception. The wife's repeated narrations of "what is one to do?" (Gilman, 2008, pp. 391–392) imply that she could only live in John's constructed reality, resulting in her believing that her "case [was] not serious!" (p.393). However, the exclamation mark at the end of the expression may lead to a suspicion that it was not what she wanted to say. If she could, she would have told him that her illness was serious and that she needed different treatment from what she had. However, she could only watch John "away all day, and even some nights when his cases [were] serious" (p.393).

b. John's Dictation

John's antagonistic kindness manifests not only in manipulating his wife's feelings but also in dictating her life. John demanded his wife to be as he wanted her. He never let her stray from the path he had set for her. The wife just needed to do what he asked her.

During the wife's rest cure, John's dictating act started to reveal when he did not believe his wife was mentally troubled. He even convinced "friends and relatives" that what his wife had was "nothing the matter" (Gilman, 2008, p. 391). John did the convincing to make his wife feel obliged to do anything he prescribed since he had friends and relatives supporting him. Thus, the wife could only do what John said, taking "phosphates or phosphites ... and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise" (p.392).

John always made sure that his wife's conduct went as he wanted. He "hardly lets [her] stir without special direction" (Gilman, 2008, p. 392). To the wife's narration, John did such an act because he was "very careful and loving." However, the researchers found that the wife's statement was weak and unconvincing. It is contradictory to say that someone is loving and thus becomes dictating. One might argue that John was worried about his wife's condition; therefore, he needed to be careful and not let her behave without telling her what to do and what not. However, the researchers also argue that John's dictating behavior stems from his sense of domination and superiority. He sees his wife as his subordinate, not his equal. Thus, he has the right to dictate and dominate her. John's attitude mirrors how Nirwinastu (2021) depicts how men behave in a patriarchal household. They are the heads of the family and see their wives as inferior, "weak and dependent creatures."

Furthermore, the wife said that John loved her despite his dictating act might be since she could not say anything but such a saying. She was aware that her case could not be cured just by the rest treatment forbade her from having "congenial work, excitement and change" (Gilman, 2008, p. 392). However, she could do nothing about that because she never had a say in her condition, nor did someone listen to her. Her husband and her brother, both physicians and of high standing, kept saying that she would be better by physical exercise and prescribed medicines. The wife was conditioned to keep silent about whatever John decided for her. She was never "given any space to talk or to answer to men" (Nirwinastu, 2021).

John's dictating act intensified because his wife had "a schedule prescription for each hour in the day" (Gilman, 2008, p. 392). At a glance, this act seems to prove his concern for his wife's sickness. However, all those hourly prescriptions were of no help, nor were the "cod liver oil and lots of tonics" (p.396) since it is not a physical illness that his wife suffered. Instead, she was having "nervous troubles" that were "dreadfully depressing" (p.393). Thus, what she needed was a psychiatrist.

When the scheduled prescription could only exhaust the wife more, John's dictation became a threat. He told her that he would "send [her] to Weir Mitchell" if she did not get better (Gilman, 2008, p. 395). In the story, Weir Mitchell is someone "like John and [her] brother," thus, a physician, although he was said to be "more so." Saha (2019) details that S. Weir Mitchell was the specialist who treated Gilman's neurasthenia, whose "method of rest cure worsened her case of hysteria." Gilman argued that Mitchell's method was less effective because he was only "invested in the details of a patient's physical symptoms" (quoted in Saha, 2019).

Nevertheless, the threat seemed to work for the wife since she finally had a better appetite and gained "flesh and color" (Gilman, 2008, p. 397). Nevertheless, the wife felt that she was

just physically better. When she wanted to tell him what she felt, John silenced her with his "stern, reproachful look that [she] could not say another word." He asked his wife to trust him when he told her so since John was a doctor and knew she was getting better. John always put his wife under his control, implying that he was always subordinate to him and causing her helplessness (Juhana et al., 2021) for not having a choice but to listen to him.

John failed to acknowledge his wife's mental illness until it was too late. His pride as a physician forbade him to admit that her case was serious and that the rest cure he prescribed failed her. He was too satisfied thinking that "there [was] no reason" for his wife "to suffer" by his method (Gilman, 2008, p. 393). Thus, when John found his wife creeping around the room, he fainted, realizing very late that his method was useless in treating his wife.

CONCLUSION

Discussing the main male character in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" leads the researchers to conclude that the wife's worsened condition was due to John's manipulative and dictating acts. The wife suffered from nervous depression, but how John managed the treatment led her deeper into insanity instead of getting better. Through his sweet talks and nice acts, John manipulates his wife to feel guilty and burdened to make her go with what he wants her to be. Any future research on the short story may emphasize why John's treatment of his wife was a big failure. Also, the extent to John's constructed reality affects his wife on the truth.

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