

## Eyes that Bind: Sartre’s ‘Look’ and Merleau-Ponty’s Perception in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s phenomenological story *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a gripping tale of a woman having her mental health treated via rest cure. Phenomenology seeks to understand reality by deriving significance from a foundation of direct, subjective, human experience. Such is the case for philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, both of whom investigate reality as it is constructed by the perception of their own consciousnesses and by that of the Other, or other people’s consciousnesses. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes an objectifying “look” that the Other enacts on an individual, passing judgment and defining that individual as an object in the world. This “look” is evident in Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* when characters look at each other in an objectifying manner. Yet Gilman moves beyond this objectification through the incorporation of other senses. In a similar move, Merleau-Ponty searches in *Sense and Non-Sense* for a style of perception that emphasizes all senses rather than strongly highlighting sight, allowing the Other to grasp an individual’s unique way of being. Exploring Sartre’s objectifying “look” through *The Yellow Wallpaper* reveals insights into the application of Sartre’s theories on sight and the limitations of such

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theories, while Gilman's shift to a more holistic approach to perception mirrors Merleau-Ponty's ideas on sensation and reveals a subjectifying mode of perception.

### Objectification and "The Look"

In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre's chapter dedicated to understanding the relationship between the Self and the Other in terms of sight is titled "The Look." The chapter begins with Sartre looking out his window at the people around him—a woman coming his way, a man passing by his street, a beggar calling—and decidedly claims that "all are for me *objects*" (252). Sartre expounds on this idea, realizing that the relation between the Other and his own perception of the Other is fundamental to a certain way of being-for-others (253). This means that there is a certain way one exists in the world which is revealed only by perceiving the Other and recognizing that the Other is an other consciousness. This leads Sartre to wonder about the significance of apprehending a man he sees in the park as simultaneously human and object, asking, "What do I mean when I assert that this object is a man?" (254).

Sartre differentiates between the object-man and objects such as the park benches and the lawn. Sartre places the Other as a privileged object, an object that creates its own spatial relationship with the benches and the lawn, a configuration separate from one's own, a spatiality which flees from oneself rather than being oriented to oneself (254). Sartre sees the Other as this special type of object that positions the world in such a way that one cannot put oneself at the center of it, alienating one's reality from that of the Other (255). Sartre describes this Other-as-object as a sinkhole for reality, writing, "The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting" (255). Under Sartre's analysis, being the looker who sees the Other is destabilizing. The Other is both an object in the world and a distinct consciousness, whose presence creates a unique spatial relationship of reality that is, for Sartre, inaccessible to one's own perception.

Having fleshed out his ideas about what it means to be looking upon the Other as simultaneously object and consciousness, Sartre moves to explore what it means to be the one looked at within this framework. The crowning example Sartre uses to develop what it means to be seen is the hypothetical situation of an individual peering through a keyhole on a door, crouched alone in the hallway outside the room (259). Importantly, just before beginning this example, Sartre found that to apprehend a look

upon oneself is to be vulnerable, to immediately know that “I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I cannot in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense—in short, that I am seen” (259). Sartre uses this realization to frame his case of the keyhole peeper to discover what it means for an individual to be *seen*.

Having established the setting of his thought experiment, Sartre places an individual alone in a currently empty hallway, looking into a room through a keyhole to catch a potential love affair. The fact of this individual being alone is important because it leaves the individual with no need to qualify their actions. Instead, the individual exists purely in the act of looking, with no transcending view outside of their own sight with which to confer any judgment of character on the situation. The individual’s situation is as such: because there is a spectacle to be seen behind the door, the individual is jealous, and because they are jealous there is a spectacle to be seen (259). This circular condition reflects to the individual the facts of their existence: their body and its jealousy. The individual is not currently reflecting on their action of looking through the keyhole, as they are instead fully engrossed in the act and are existing purely objectively.

A sudden and dramatic shift occurs in this individual’s mode of being when they hear footsteps in the hall. They know that “someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure” (260). Upon recognizing that they have been seen, the individual becomes reflective of their situation and being, which modifies the structure of their self. First, the individual now sees themselves as they are in “pure reference to the Other” (260). As Sartre had previously explained, to see an Other is to see a type of object. Here that paradigm shifts, and it is the individual being seen by the Other that is seen as a type of object. The individual feels this objectivity, being “ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object” (261). The individual is forced to be in the midst of the world by the Other’s look, which fixes them squarely on the level of object.

Beyond these initial realizations, Sartre determines that the individual peering through the keyhole had their freedom instantly limited by the new presence of the Other. In addition to their objectifying look, the Other possesses their own freedom which limits the possibilities the individual has. For the individual caught at the keyhole, “the Other’s freedom is revealed to me across the uneasy indetermination of the being which I am for him” (262). It is because of the Other’s capacity for freedom that their look arrests the individual. As Sartre writes, “We are dealing with my being as it is written in and by the Other’s freedom” (262). The Other’s

consciousness is free to pass a judgment of character on the individual, a defining label with which to make the individual more object than subject.

The ultimate consequence of Sartre's established "look" is this way in which it defines one's existence. From the perspective of the individual caught looking through the keyhole, Sartre explains, "In fear or in anxious or prudent anticipation, I perceive that these possibilities which I am and which are the condition of my transcendence are given also to another, given as about to be transcended in turn by his own possibilities. The Other as a look is only that—my transcendence transcended" (263). The same transcendent quality of freedom and possibility that characterizes the individual's existence also typifies the Other's existence. However, the individual's existence is also that of a real object in the world for the Other. Thus, Sartre's structure of the look objectifies the self because the freedom possessed by the Other's existence transcends one's own possibilities, leaving the Other to see one's limitations and objective facticity.

### "The Look" and Beyond in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

This Sartrean framework of an objectifying look can be understood through the lens of how Charlotte Perkins Gilman's characters see each other in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Gilman's story tells of a woman studying a grotesque yellow wallpaper while undergoing a rest cure for an alleged hysterical tendency in a rented summer estate. From the beginning of the story, Gilman establishes an unequal dynamic between the narrator and her husband, John. The narrator relates that John is a practical physician, scoffing at the thought of anything that cannot be felt, seen, or put down in numbers (Gilman *Yellow* 1). The narrator laments that John does not believe she is sick, and understands that "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?" (1). Already, Gilman establishes John's character as a Sartrean Other who takes the narrator's existence as given. John fails to realize the transcendent subjectivity possessed by the narrator and instead transcends her consciousness by settling a gaze upon her which freezes her into a slightly hysterical type of woman-object that needs to be left alone to be fixed.

The narrator is objectified by John's look as well as by the opinion of her brother, who is also a physician, and agrees that the house rest will cure her (1). While the physicians' perspectives physically arrest the narrator at home, her mind remains free as she secretly writes about her experiences under this treatment plan. At this summer estate, John has

placed the narrator and himself in an upstairs room that has functioned in the past as a nursery, a playroom, and a child's gymnasium. The windows to the room are barred; the stairs are gated; the wallpaper is old, torn, and peeling; and the bed is bolted to the ground (2-3). With little to do outside of this room, the narrator becomes intensely fascinated with its flamboyant wallpaper, finding it to be the worst paper she has ever seen (3).

All the while, as the narrator studies the wallpaper, the tension in her relationship with John persists. The narrator continually refers to how difficult it is living with these nervous troubles, illustrating how John's view of her becomes her own in the same way that Sartre explained the one looking through the keyhole seeing oneself through the objectifying look of the Other (3-7). John does not seriously listen to his wife. When she tries talking to him about re-papering the room to get rid of the horrid old yellow wallpaper, he tells her, "You know the place is doing you good" and says that he does not want to renovate the house for their short, three-month summer stay (4). Again, John falters in this and nearly every conversation with the narrator, never seeing her for anything other than what he already thinks of her. To John, she is simply an object which he has judged as broken and must be fixed. The narrator is not allowed to have any input into her situation, so her freedom escapes her as John posits her to be a given object.

While John fills the role of a Sartrean Other for the narrator, taking away her freedom and condemning her to objectivity in house rest, the narrator finds a different Other in the yellow wallpaper as she studies it and finds it looking back at her, smelling, and marking her clothing. The narrator is agitated by the wallpaper pattern, finding it repulsive, yet intriguing. As she studies the confusing pattern, the narrator finds "a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down" (5). This dark imagery casts a horrific shadow over the whole wallpaper, with the terrifying allusion to broken necks and bulbous eyes suggesting a dangerous effect. The narrator sees more eyes all over the paper, "up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere" (5). Seeing a multitude of creepy eyes, the wallpaper appears to exist as a sort of object that can look back at the narrator, as if it were a mirror reflecting the eyes of men like her husband and brother who unblinkingly define her as hysterical.

As the narrator spends more time studying the wallpaper, she finds a sub-pattern of a different shade that she can only see in certain lighting (5-6). As she examines it, the narrator discovers "a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (6). Seeing this new background pattern sparks the narrator to a greater determination to follow and understand the

wallpaper's design, despite the exhaustion that comes with her studies. This work pays off and the narrator shockingly realizes: "Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day. It is always the same shape, only very numerous. And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" (8).

The existence of a woman in the sub-pattern of the wallpaper clearly illustrates Sartre's understanding of the self and Other relationship through sight. Just as Sartre began his analysis by looking at objects in the world like a park bench and lawn before moving on to examining the Other as an object, the narrator began with studying a hideous and confusing object and now moves on to exploring an Other. The woman inside the wallpaper is an Other, and she is undoubtedly an object. They exist as the sub-pattern of the wallpaper, meaning that while they may be free to creep about behind the fore-pattern, their freedom escapes them by the fact that they blend into the objective fabric of the wallpaper's design.

The narrator focuses on a central wallpaper woman as she begins to see this woman more fully. At night, the narrator sees the front pattern shift to become bars and the woman behind them becomes plain to see (10). Growing sure that the dim sub-pattern is indeed a woman, the narrator notices that "by daylight she [the wallpaper woman] is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still" (10). During the daytime, when there is increased light in the room, the wallpaper woman fades back into objectivity amongst the rest of the pattern. It is only in darker areas, such as under moonlight or candlelight, where the portrait of the whole pattern is dimmer, that the woman can stand out among the pattern's objects as something unique.

The paper, while being the object of the narrator's gaze, exudes its own influence as if the woman behind it were a transcendent self and not an objective pattern. The narrator once catches Jennie, one of the housekeepers, looking at the paper with her hand on it (10). Jennie reacts with shame at having been seen, similar to how Sartre's looker responded to being caught at the keyhole. In her angry response to the narrator catching her, Jennie remarks that "the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches on all my clothes and John's, and she wished we would be more careful!" (10). Later still, the narrator is disturbed by her detection of an awful, yellow odor that the paper produces (11). The wallpaper is not merely a passive object, but rather its qualities invite interaction between its pattern, the narrator, and the woman inside it with more than just the sense of sight.

In accepting this invitation, the narrator moves beyond the alienating Sartrean look which posits the self and the Other as conflicting, transcendent consciousnesses. In "The Look," Sartre concluded without

providing a clear explanation for seeing Others or for being seen by Others in a constructive and subjectifying manner. This leaves Sartre's understanding of the relationship between the self and Other with an unbridgeable gap wherein seeing or being seen is synonymous with objectifying or being objectified. This constant objectification and lack of connection is isolating. The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, on the other hand, does not stop at seeing the wallpaper woman as a given object of the world in the way that John sees the narrator as a given object. The narrator sees, smells, and is touched by the paper and its pattern. When she sees that the wallpaper woman shakes the fore-pattern and that some of the women in the wallpaper try to climb through but are strangled by the pattern to become the broken necks and bulbous eyes, the narrator determines that the wallpaper woman is positively a real consciousness that she must aid in reaching freedom beyond the constraint of the paper (12).

Determined to help the wallpaper woman break free, the narrator decides to begin ripping the wallpaper from the walls. However, with the end of her and John's three-month stay rapidly approaching, the narrator worries that she might run out of time to tear the paper down. So, on the night before their last day, the narrator is glad that John is sleeping somewhere in town and that she was able to convince Jennie to leave her alone for a better night's rest (13). The narrator waits, and "as soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper" (13). Through tearing down the paper alongside the wallpaper woman, the narrator thoroughly rejects the objectified existence of the paper and its woman. She instead seeks to achieve freedom for herself by taking charge of her existence and for the wallpaper woman by allowing her to be perceived without the objective pattern that had enmeshed and hidden her identity.

The story concludes with a seeming shift into the perspective of the wallpaper woman when the narrator sees many creeping women and offers the line, "I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?" (14). This new narrator supposes she will have to return to behind the pattern when night comes, though she much prefers being out and able to creep around as she pleases (14). The final line of dialogue in the story comes from this wallpaper woman-turned-narrator, who says to John, "I've got out at last, in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (15). Gilman leaves readers with many questions as her story comes to a swift conclusion after this sudden and jarring perspective switch. Regardless, by having the wallpaper woman break free from the pattern—the object through which others could see

her—Gilman’s story offers the possibility of defining oneself even in the face of Sartre’s objectifying look.

### Lived Experience, Sensation, and Perception

In an article entitled “Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*,” published in 1913, Gilman speaks of her own experience of having been treated for melancholic breakdowns through a rest cure. Gilman was pushed “near the borderline of utter mental ruin” by this treatment and yearned to do work again. She viewed work as the joyful growth and service of every human being and felt that by returning to work she might recover some sense of power over her life, or her freedom might return. It is from her writing, then, that Gilman explains how her lived experience influenced *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Gilman “Why”). Similarly to Gilman and Sartre’s phenomenological works, Merleau-Ponty explores perception based on people’s authentic lived experiences.

Merleau-Ponty’s book *Sense and Non-Sense* explores perception through multiple senses, moving beyond Sartre’s emphasis on sight in “The Look.” In a chapter titled “The Film and the New Psychology,” Merleau-Ponty briefly expresses an interest in the study of wallpaper patterns that mirrors Gilman’s work. Echoing the plot of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Merleau-Ponty writes, “A sick person contemplating the wallpaper in his room will suddenly see it transformed if the pattern and figure become the ground while what is usually seen as ground becomes the figure” (48). Although Merleau-Ponty uses a masculine pronoun in describing this example, it nonetheless connects clearly to *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which the narrator sees the background pattern become the main figure of interest upon discovering the wallpaper woman, while the actual pattern is seen as the background which frames the wallpaper woman. This shared use of wallpaper and shifting foreground and background patterns as a focus of study connects Gilman and Merleau-Ponty’s work. It also suggests the utility of wallpaper patterns as a concrete illustration of phenomenological theories on perception.

In the lines following this wallpaper example, Merleau-Ponty wonders how vastly different the world would appear if one could see the intervals between things as the object or main figure while seeing the things themselves as the background on which that figure appears (48–49). In essence, Merleau-Ponty asks how one might perceive the world, its objects and people if one could unmesh the background things from the foreground things like the narrator in Gilman’s story. For example, instead of seeing a street lined with trees that appear as trees because they contrast



the empty space in between them, one could view the space between the trees as the meaningful figure and the trees as the backdrop on which that meaning rests (48-49). For Sartre, to look at a thing was to see it as an object in the world that blended in with other similar objects of the world. The world was Sartre's to make sense of, that is until the Other appeared with their own consciousness and suddenly made sense of the individual who became entangled in that very same web of objects in the world.

Merleau-Ponty reveals a relationship between the foreground and background that exists with its own meaning regardless of how it is judged by a particular perceiver. Merleau-Ponty points to the example of a musical melody, writing, "The melody is not a sum of notes, since each note only counts by virtue of the function it serves in the whole, which is why the melody does not perceptibly change when transposed, that is, when all its notes are changed while their interrelationships and the structure of the whole remain the same" (49). A melody exists as something that is beyond each of the individual notes of which it is composed. As Merleau-Ponty explains, a melody could be transposed up or down, having every one of its notes replaced, yet it can remain the same melody on account of the relationship between those notes persisting. While perceiving an Other in a Sartrean way, one might only look at the individual parts that make up the Other as an object amongst other objects. Using Merleau-Ponty's perception, one becomes able to look at the Other as some structure that transcends the limits of its individual parts, thereby returning to the individual their unique freedom.

Merleau-Ponty then speaks of a blind man who might equate the color red, which he cannot see, with a different sensation such as the blare of a trumpet which he is capable of hearing (49). Merleau-Ponty explains that such a phenomenon is typical, that people often describe colors as hot, cold, hard, sharp, soft, or mellow. He quotes the painter Cézanne, saying that "one could see the velvetiness, the hardness, the softness, and even the odor of objects" (49-50). This leads Merleau-Ponty to the realization that "my perception is therefore not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being; I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once" (50). Under this framework, one could imagine Merleau-Ponty as the Other who catches Sartre's individual at the keyhole. But rather than leveling a judgment on the individual, placing them as an object in the same vein as the hallway objects like the door, a rug, or the keyhole, Merleau-Ponty as Other can grasp the individual as a thing with a unique structure of being, a unique existence that is not a mere object in the pattern of the world.

Merleau-Ponty's work and Gilman's story provide similar frameworks of perception that allow one to move past the freezing moment of Sartre's keyhole example in "The Look." Sartre established a type of look that is a real phenomenon. When caught in the action of something embarrassing, one feels ashamed as one recognizes oneself through the eyes of the Other and watches one's freedom be torn away by the Other's freedom to lay judgment on one's existence. *The Yellow Wallpaper* displays this type of look when the narrator's husband, John, sees his wife as only a given object in the world whom he judges to possess a nervous tendency rather than her own freedom. Similarly, the narrator first sees the woman in the wallpaper as an object, trapped in the sub-pattern by the grotesque and dangerous bars of the fore-pattern. The narrator is not content with such a view of the wallpaper woman; instead, she moves beyond Sartre's "look" by apprehending the structure of the wallpaper through all her senses. She and the wallpaper woman physically tear down the paper, rejecting the notion that they are trapped by enmeshment with the objects surrounding them. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty developed a style of perception that holistically seeks to understand things as their own unique structures, encompassing all sensations and producing an existence greater than the sum of its individual parts. Thus, through an existential reading of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, one is afforded insights into the application of Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's philosophical theories on sight, sensation, and perception.

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