The Alienated Perspective In The Yellow Wallpaper By Charlotte Perkins Gilman And Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas By Hunter S. Thompson

It has been argued that, in literature, the alienated perspective is more illuminating than the conventional one.

In light of this view, compare and contrast the presentation of main characters marginalised by society in The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas by Hunter S. Thompson.

Protagonists alienated by society are nothing new. As far back as Greek tragedy, and the plays of Ancient Rome, the narrative device of a main character separate from the main body of their civilisation is a common one. It had certainly not died down by the late second millennium. In both The Yellow Wallpaper (1892) and Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (1971), the perspective is one of an outcast, with both Charlotte Perkins Gilman's' unnamed narrator and Hunter S. Thompson's alter ego Raoul Duke isolated by the mainstream by the very perspective that makes them valuable. Such characters and their viewpoints serve in much the same way as the old trickster gods in mythology did: they shine a light on society and culture, questioning narratives held to be true by the majority and setting out contrary notions. They point out gaps in the stories people tell themselves, so that they may change and evolve. They are alienated, that is to say, they are apart from and do not hold to the ideals, methods and notions of the society around them. This makes their views even more valuable than a more traditional viewpoint, because from the outside, they can see the contradictions others cannot. The female narrator of The Yellow Wallpaper is undergoing treatment for depressive periods that her family, friends and the medical community do not fully understand, and so is best placed to show how the 'cures' of contemporary psychology are harming her and those like her. Raoul Duke, and his friend Dr Gonzo, are drug enthusiasts in 1970's America, and are equally best placed to show how the values of their society are ultimately hypocritical, and how the 1960's counterculture both were part of failed so horribly. Critics have looked to compare the two presentations of marginalised characters, explore their alienation from the contemporary norm, and demonstrate why their unique perspectives are so illuminating.

Neither story has an antagonist as such, but in practice, the main characters of both are most commonly opposed by authority in various forms, especially authority trying to unsuccessfully solve their problems. For Gilman's narrator, the authority is her husband John, who keeps her locked in her bedroom. When talking about her misgivings, the narrator writes "If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is nothing really the matter… what is one to do?". It is revealing that by giving both a separate section of the interrogative, being a 'physician of high standing' and 'one's own husband' are indicated to be of equal importance. To a modern reader, the first does make some sense. John is a medical professional and even if he is prescribing the wrong treatment, he is doing exactly what the contemporary wisdom of his profession dictates, and with the best possible intentions. The second, however, is more alien to a modern reader. Because he is her husband, and because of the patriarchal nature of society, he has more power over her than anyone else. He is the one

who suggests the rest cure, and he is the one who makes her friends and relatives believe “that there is nothing really the matter”, and thus deprives her of their support. As well as this, it is interesting to note the language he uses towards her, an example being: “Bless her little heart”. The use of demeaning and diminutive language here shows John’s patriarchal and arrogant attitude. By referring to her as “little” and using a third person pronoun to refer to her when she is in the room, he effectively strips the narrator of her agency. She is an adult woman, but she is referred to like a child who has to be helped, whether she likes it or not. Similarly, Raoul Duke, due to his heavy involvement in drug culture, is opposed by an authority that wants to ‘cure him’. Throughout the novel. he and Dr Gonzo are in constant fear of narcotics agents, and actively try to avoid what they term as “outback Nazi law enforcement” who intend to “run them down like dogs”. The increased length of the novel over a short story helps to emphasise this, creating a slow-burning, tense chase to stay ahead, rather than the faster, compacted pace of a short story. They are acutely aware of how their marginalisation, and their attitude, makes them targets for the police of Nevada. But, when the two finally come face to face with authority at the District Attorney’s Conference, the supposed drug experts know nothing about Duke’s world. The line “At her age, if she did smoke grass, she’d have one hell of a trip!” in response to a question about whether anthropologist Margaret Mead smoked cannabis, is telling. Even teenagers know that cannabis is not a hallucinogen. By not even knowing this elementary drug lore, the police are shown to have a hollow authority, based on their own misinformed preconceptions. This can be compared to John, who while supposedly an expert physician, cannot help his wife due to his own lack of knowledge. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in both cases, the protagonists know what the experts do not, but given their outcast status, would not have their knowledge or point of view acknowledged.

A key difference between Gilman’s narrator and Raoul Duke is the attitudes they hold towards their marginalisation. Duke begins his novel as paranoid, twitchy and convinced that he is in the right. Again, the line “outback Nazi law enforcement” is open to critical interpretation. By explicitly comparing Nevada’s authorities to one of the most brutal regimes in history, Thompson instantly creates a clear moral dichotomy in the reader’s mind. The police are in the wrong, so therefore, Duke must be in the right. At the same time, the image that immediately follows “And they’ll run us down like dogs” shows Duke’s fear of the authorities that he has been marginalised from. He knows that to be an outcast, and outside of what society deems normal, is to invite condemnation and violence. It is, however, the first theme that runs through more of the text than the second, with Duke’s partner in crime Dr Gonzo saying in the novel’s first flashback about a rental man, another symbol of marginalising authority, “Reds wouldn’t help a pig like that”. Reds, referring to secobarbital, were a tablet-based hallucinogen. Gonzo portrays them, and their effects, as overtly positive and implies that taking them would rid the man of whatever causes him to be against the protagonists. In other words, drugs might marginalise people, but it is better to be marginalised than to be part of the authority. This is in clear opposition to the views of Gilman’s narrator. The line “Personally, I disagree with their ideas”, is not a great statement of resistance, but a polite disagreement. It is interesting to note that she sets the line apart from any of the paragraphs to give it emphasis, expressing her disagreement the only way that she feels able to. She cannot bring herself to disobey her husband and his expertise, even though she disagrees with him. She is reluctant to challenge authority, and because she still wishes to conform to society's expectations of womanhood, she suffers. Later in the short story, after she begins to lose her sanity, her attitude changes. 'I've got out at last... And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!' The woman the narrator sees in the wallpaper during her madness is constantly described as being trapped within the floral patterns. By pulling off the paper and declaring herself to be free, she identifies

with the woman, and sees herself as just as trapped as she appeared to be. Tearing the wallpaper off is only a symbolic act, but still important as a metaphor for her rejecting both her treatment, and her marginalisation. Gilman seems to have been enamoured of such symbolic acts of liberation. Just over a decade later, Ellen, the heroine of Old Water, saves herself from drowning with her unwanted lover. Because she is more physically fit, and more independently minded than him, she is able to swim up to the surface, and more symbolically, rise up from both death and the relationship. Both of Gilman's protagonists, crucially, liberate themselves from the men in their lives themselves, and do not wait for others to do it for them. This links well to Gilman's views on women, which were progressive for the time, and held that the domestic environment oppressed women through the patriarchal values and ideals promoted in society.

One of the most important similarities between the two protagonists is that both come to great revelations, and indeed the aesops of their stories, not through the moral maturation of other main characters, but through insanity. The narrator of The Yellow Wallpaper, at the very end of the novel and utterly bereft of sanity, finally realises that she cannot continue to be trapped. Her newfound desire is best shown in the lines: "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" Note the rhetorical question, which leaves the reason John faints open not to debate, but to symbolism. On the surface, it is because his wife's mind is all but gone. Gilman presents the interpretation that it is because the narrator has dared to free herself. The word choice here supports this, with the use of "fainted" and "creep" indicative of a change in power dynamic. Fainted especially has old connotations of femininity, and thus traditional weakness: in 19th Century literature, men were laid senseless, women fainted. Lastly, the fact that she has to creep over him "every time" is interesting, and appears to be the last part of the narrator's revelation. Women must free themselves from the strictures of male society at any cost, and every time they do so, it must be over men, not with them. While insanity fuels Duke's conclusions, he draws a different aesop from his experiences. Originally, he goes to Las Vegas in a quest to discover the "main nerve" of the American Dream, but soon gets lost in a narcotic haze. He never loses sight of his original goal though, and toward the end of the novel, gets directions to a bar a man considers the American Dream. In his description, Duke finds "a huge slab of concrete in a vacant lot… burned down three years ago". The symbolism is unsubtle, depicting America's guiding ideal as a derelict shell. However, there is deeper meaning within.

EJ Colville, writing for Iowa State University, posits that "the year it burned down, 1968, signaled a time of ideological death for Thompson, and none of the cheap illusions of success or progress Las Vegas offered could fill that gap. The entire presence of Las Vegas... seemed to signal the death knell for the idealists of Thompson's era." For Thompson, and Duke, the Dream was dead, and its last vestiges had disappeared with the end of Sixties counterculture. The trip to Nevada was ultimately futile. Duke's search, like everyone else's, was always doomed to failure. While I agree with Colville's interpretation, there are counterarguments. One would be that finding the "huge slab of concrete" was not futile at all. Duke describes Vegas as the "main nerve", somewhere close to the source of the Dream. If we take the burned husk as the American Dream, then he was right. He found it, and by finding it dead, is able to move on from both its unattainable ideals and his own lost countercultural ideologies. Las Vegas could not fill the gap, but it leaves Duke able to look for something else that can.

Lastly, both protagonists suffer from a loss of self, and identity, due to the pressures of mainstream society. Gilman's narrator begins to lose herself around the middle of her story, as

her husband's treatments take their toll. This is best shown in the line: 'I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!' We can see here that the narrator is prioritising her duties as a wife over her own needs, and seems to be prepared to sacrifice her own mental health to cater to her husband. Nineteenth Century society demands that as a woman and a wife, she must care for and support her husband above all else, and that nothing else can be considered as important. Society's expectations put more strain on her, and lead her further down the path of mental illness. This is also clearly seen in the narrator's narrative voice, and in the syntax and language she uses. Throughout the story, it is consistently polite and refined, without contractions or slang. That she keeps the same language patterns through the narrative, even as her mental state deteriorates, is one way that Gilman shows the extent of society's control over the actions of women. Likewise, Raoul Duke suffers from a similar loss of identity. His quote, 'We are all wired into a Survival Trip now' shows this well. He explicitly states that the only way to survive the society of the 1970's is to be on drugs: the edge must be taken off reality if it is to be coped with. Capitalising 'Survival Trip' emphasises its importance in Duke's mind, and shows that his loss of identity from drug abuse is preferable to dealing with society sober. In a wider sense, one of the main themes of the novel is the loss of identity felt by Duke's entire generation. "Consciousness Expansion' went out with LBJ... and it is worth noting, historically, that downers came in with Nixon'. By framing it in drug terms, Duke illustrates how his generation has lost their way. The hope and liberation offered by hallucinogens and 'uppers' has been replaced with a desire to blot out the horror of the world with 'downers' like cocaine and heroin. This is a contrast with The Yellow Wallpaper, where rather than it be social change that is affecting the protagonist, it is the underlying lack of change that devalues their identity.

In conclusion, I believe that the alienated perspective is indeed more valuable than the conventional one, in both stories. The Yellow Wallpaper’s narrator’s perspective on the rest cure and her position in society is valuable because she is the one being treated and being kept under the thumb of men. Raoul Duke’s perspective is valuable because he is a drug user, and he knows their effects, much more so than the conventional authority figures that claim to understand his marginalised group. As outcasts, both can look from the outside in on their respective societies, and comment on the contradictions and injustices that others cannot see. These unique perspectives are so illuminating because they cast their light from a different angle from conventional accounts, and let us as readers see aspects that those who are in the centre of things could never report on. Whether it be on Silas Weir Mitchell’s rest cures and traditional patriarchy in the 1890’s, or on the American Dream and US counterculture in the 1970’s, the viewpoints of those who are outcast by the mainstream of society are more illuminating than the viewpoints of those who have cast them out.