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Emotionally Unavailable by Design: An Analysis of Narrator Reliability in *Nevada* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*

What readers consider a "reliable" narrator often reveals more about their assumptions than about the narrator's truthfulness. Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* prompt readers to critically examine their internalized biases regarding narrative reliability. Each text achieves this through distinct approaches to narrative structure, perspective, and the portrayal of emotional vulnerability. *Nevada* employs third-person indirect discourse to follow Maria on a road trip, while *The Yellow Wallpaper* unfolds through the first-person epistolary format of an unnamed narrator. Despite the immersive intimacy of the first-person voice, Gilman's narrator remains unnamed. By contrast, Maria is named early, with her gender and social context made clear. Yet the narrative structure flattens her personhood through emotional detachment and stereotyping. The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* appears more emotionally accessible and credible to readers, despite lacking the most basic marker of personhood—a name. Meanwhile, Maria is difficult to empathize with, due to the narrative distance mirroring her dissociation. This disparity raises important questions about whose pain is believed, and which ways of expressing that pain are accepted as valid or deserving of empathy in literature.

In the opening passage of *Nevada*, the Narrator describes what appears to be a violent moment in first-person: "She's choking me. She's really in there, fingers on cartilage, mashing

my trachea and I can't breathe, Maria thinks" (Binnie 1). The scene then is revealed to be a sex scene, creating a disorienting blend with intimacy and what seems like a moment of crisis. The Narrator goes on to state that Maria truly cannot breathe, but she also cannot bring herself to care. Third-person narration often conveys objective reliability, but feminine protagonists are rarely afforded this unconditionally. *Nevada* exposes the assumption that for women, narrative reliability depends on emotional vulnerability. Maria is portrayed as emotionally detached, a result of her experiences as a transgender woman shaped by class, gender dysphoria, and interpersonal issues. This detachment complicates how her personhood is represented. Maria is difficult to empathize with because her emotional experience is filtered. The narrative structure renders Maria unknowable and distant— not because she is dishonest, but because she is reduced to a caricature of herself. The narrative detachment mirrors how transgender individuals are often reduced to projections rather than recognized as fully knowable people.

Binnie challenges readers to critically analyze Maria's struggles rather than immediately empathize, subverting common expectations of transgender literature by emphasizing intellectual engagement over emotional resonance. For example, the narrator remarks, "Trans women in real life are different from trans women on television […] you take away the mystification, misconceptions and mystery, they're at least as boring as everybody else. Oh neurosis! Oh trauma! Oh, look at me, my past messed me up and I'm still working through it!" (Binnie 4). Through this ironic tone, the Narrator resists conforming to stereotypical portrayals of transgender women and denies readers an easy, sentimental narrative. Rather than allowing Maria to be reduced to a familiar trope, Binnie compels the reader to assess her experiences intellectually.

This narrative strategy aligns with C. Wright Mills' concept of the sociological imagination, where he states, "neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (Mills 3). The sociological imagination asserts that individual experiences are inextricable from larger social contexts. This is illustrated when the Narrator states: "I don't care, whatever, I'm trans. I have been trans since I was little. There is this dumb thing where trans women feel like we all have to prove that we're totally trans […] Maria didn't though. She felt weird when she was little, but she assumed everybody else did too" (Binnie 41- 42). While the Narrator presents a somewhat conventional narrative of early gender dysphoria awareness, Maria does not fit this mold. Binnie deliberately contrasts the Narrator's voice with Maria's more ambiguous relationship to gender identity, refusing to simplify her character to fit dominant narratives of transgender authenticity.

Binnie reframes Maria's pain as a product of systemic forces rather than isolated trauma. This challenges traditional narrative strategies that rely on emotional identification as the primary mode of reader connection. Instead, Maria's emotional detachment, seen in the way she intellectualizes her pain, reflects a deeper coping mechanism: her inability to fully connect with her emotions because the oppressive systems around her demand that she remain detached to survive.

In *Nevada*, Maria rarely presents her pain in a raw or unfiltered form; instead, her experiences are refracted through a lens of analysis. For example, the Narrator describes Maria's romantic history alongside her gender exploration: "[Maria] was dating somebody when she came out as trans. They broke up and then she was dating somebody else, and then they'd been broken up for a week when she started hanging out with Steph. She's never been a single woman, she's only been a woman in the context of relationships. Those relationships have been

acting as cushions, as safety nets, enabling her not to have to figure out who she is, what she needs from her life" (Binnie 57). Rather than offering a glimpse into Maria's emotional state or the internal reasoning behind her decisions, the narrative provides an analytical assessment of her behaviour, creating a sense of detachment.

The emotional distance embedded in the narration reflects the reality of navigating a world that demands emotional labour from transgender individuals while simultaneously denying them full personhood. Binnie resists sentimentalization through her narrative structure and reflects the realistic emotional withdrawal that societal pressures force as a form of self-preservation.

In contrast, *The Yellow Wallpaper* immerses readers in the inner world of a woman whose seemingly unreliable tone conveys a deeper truth about the abuse she endures. The Narrator begins her diary with a distant tone similar to *Nevada*, "It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer" (Gilman 3). She and John appear as mere ordinary people, but this is a red herring as the Narrator later devolves into a fragmented version of herself due to isolation, culminating in her hallucination of a woman trapped behind the wallpaper. Unlike Maria, who intellectualizes her alienation, Gilman's narrator embodies it. The first-person, epistolary format allows readers to witness her spiraling thoughts in real time, making her emotional vulnerability more palpable.

Gilman's narrator personifies the wallpaper as she writes, "There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down… I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy store" (Gilman 6-7). The Narrator hallucinates that the wallpaper is personified, but roots the claim in a sense of realism. She tells the reader

about her experience as a child getting hallucinations as well, noting that these experiences have been long-standing. Despite the Narrator's unreliable perceptions of the wallpaper, her truthfulness about her past allows readers to trust her experience even when her perceptions shift.

Through the epistolary format, we see her fragile mental state from the inside out, not as an outside observer, but as a participant in her confusion and pain. By offering direct, unfiltered access to her inner world, the narrative challenges traditional notions of a "reliable" narrator and compels readers to confront how narrative form can distort the concept of truth. Despite lacking a name, her pain becomes vividly human. Readers don't analyze Gilman's narrator; they believe her.

Even the way each character relates to others within their narrative reflects their emotional positioning. Maria is constantly misread, misunderstood, and interpreted through others' perceptions—particularly Steph, her partner, who fakes infidelity out of frustration. Steph tells her: "We didn't even kiss, but I was talking about you, and how hard it is to get through to you, close to you, to figure out where your feelings are, but the only way I know how to do it any more is to wait for you to write about it on your stupid blog" (Binnie 70). Steph's complaint mirrors the reader's own struggle—Maria is unreachable, her pain visible only in performance, not in shared vulnerability. The same emotional wall that protects Maria from the world also separates her from the reader. This is especially significant when considering the demands placed on transgender people to make their suffering legible and palatable to cisgender audiences. Maria refuses to do that, which is a radical narrative choice, but one that risks alienating readers conditioned to expect emotional openness.

However, Gilman's narrator tries to gain empathy from those around her. She is desperate for recognition from her husband John, who dismisses her fears as hysteria: "John does

not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him" (Gilman 5). She internalizes his dismissal—"I meant to be such a help to John... and here I am a comparative burden already!"—and folds it into her own sense of failure (Gilman 5). Her writing captures the insidious logic of gaslighting: the more she doubts herself, the more she is believed by the reader. Ironically, it is her gentleness and vulnerability that construct her as reliable.

Gilman's first-person confessional voice invites readers to align with the narrator's internal world, even when it becomes unstable. Binnie's third-person indirect discourse invites readers to observe Maria, not necessarily to feel with her. Maria is emotionally complex, but her depth is difficult to access because the narrative keeps us at arm's length. This formal difference has real consequences for how readers interpret each character's reliability. Gilman's narrator may be "unreliable" in the sense that she hallucinates and descends into madness, but her voice is sincere and emotive. Maria is "reliable" in that her insights are sharp, her commentary accurate—but she withholds emotional availability, making her hard to connect with.

Even at their moments of rupture, the two protagonists express themselves differently. In the climax of The Yellow Wallpaper, the narrator declares: "'I've got out at last,' said I, 'in spite of you and Jane'" (Gilman 19). Her exclamation punctuates the narrative with a definitive moment of self-expression, even as she slips into madness. Maria, on the other hand, expresses a more muted form of liberation by having a cliff-hanger ending. Both protagonists find their form of escape, one through madness and the other through detachment, but both in the end are shaped by their narrative choices.

Often marginalized people are expected to lay out their pain in a way that feels palatable for others, something easily consumed for emotional effect. It turns suffering into a spectacle, something the audience can process and sympathize with quickly. Maria's unreliability is not a

flaw; it is a boundary. She does not want to be read intimately, and the narrative structure respects that. But readers, conditioned to empathize through closeness, might misread her opacity as dishonesty. The lack of sentimental cues makes it difficult to feel with her, even if readers understand her.

The contrast here is stark. Maria is named, categorized, and surrounded by broad references to her identity. Yet her voice is mediated, processed through the framework of the third-person narrator. Gilman's narrator is anonymous, stripped of contextual grounding, and yet her suffering makes her real. The Narrator is most believed when she is most broken, and this pattern of valuing vulnerability only when it aligns with familiar scripts of feminine suffering is still prevalent in how readers consume narratives of trauma today. It suggests that certain voices only become credible once stripped of agency and reframed as cautionary tales. This is often how trauma is consumed in mainstream narratives, only when it fits a recognizable, broken-down version of suffering that others can relate to or feel pity for. This inversion challenges conventional assumptions about reliability and empathy.

This raises a troubling implication: must victims be broken, passive, or tragically poetic to be believed? Must the narrator's collapse be the price she pays for credibility? And why does Maria's refusal to collapse—her insistence on analytic distance, her anger, her detachment—render her unreliable? These questions sit at the heart of how readers perceive reliability. Gilman's narrator gains sympathy because she is emotionally vulnerable, but Maria is seen as more suspect and difficult. Both protagonists are punished for their gender. Yet only one of them is afforded the reader's sympathy.

Both *Nevada* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* resist easy interpretations of narrative reliability. They ask readers to confront not only what they believe, but why they believe it. Is reliability a

matter of factual accuracy or emotional legibility? Must narrators suffer visibly to be trusted? And whose stories are readers more likely to empathize with—those that are emotionally accessible or those that demand labor to understand? Gilman's narrator is granted sympathy because her voice is intimate and broken, while Maria remains alienated because she refuses to make her pain consumable.

Narrative reliability is not just a technical feature—it is an ethical lens that shapes who readers believe and the kinds of emotional expression they are conditioned to trust. Gilman's narrator embodies her suffering in ways that readers recognize and reward. Maria analyzes hers in ways that readers are less equipped to interpret empathetically. Both approaches are valid and honest, but only one fits the traditional mold of what it means to be a "reliable" narrator. And that mold—what it excludes, what it demands—reveals more about readers than about the narrators themselves.

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