

A Comparative Study of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “To Room Nineteen”

IREM SEKLEM

North American Studies
Philipps-Marburg University
Germany

Abstract:

“The Yellow Wallpaper” and “To Room Nineteen” have been compared in terms of their critical approach to women’s madness. How madness is considered a female sickness has been my central focus. The way how male dominated society perceive the sickness and its relation to women has also been crucial throughout the analysis. The heroines in both short stories have been shown as those subjected to insidious oppression by their husbands and the patriarchal society. It has been demonstrated that they come to be regarded as outcasts because of questioning their society and its norms. Madness or/and suicide become an alternative to them in the end.

Key words: Madness, Female sickness, Patriarchal society, Outcasts, Alternative

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“Contemporary feminist philosophers, literary critics, and social theorists have been the first to call attention to the existence of a fundamental alliance between “woman” and “man” and madness. They have shown how women within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and the mind... While the name of the symbolic female disorder may change from one historical period to the next, the gender asymmetry of the representational tradition remains constant. Thus madness, even when experienced by men, is metaphorically and

symbolically represented as feminine: a female malady
(Showalter 3)

I. Introduction

In this paper I will compare "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "To Room Nineteen" in terms of their focus on women's madness. I will first deal with the relation between women and madness and try to show that those who are exposed to oppression in the family and in the society. I will assert that some women who reject the conventional women roles, and question the patriarchal rules come to believe that there is something wrong with themselves because of the teachings of the male-dominated society. Afterwards, I will demonstrate the process in which they start to perceive that what they believe contradicts the values of their society and their time. Lastly, I will focus on madness or/and suicide as a better alternative than such a life offered to them.

In the "Yellow Wallpaper" I will show the way of treatment administered on Jane, the heroine, and how this treatment itself is already a sickness. I will portray her as the sick person confined to the room at the top of the house without outside world, exciting activities, intellectual ambiance, and solely with her imagination. I will depict her physician-husband's behaviors towards her with a critical approach. Eventually, I will try to reveal the more she peels off the yellow wallpaper the more she identifies herself with the woman in the wallpaper. I will, also, indicate how she tries to communicate with her husband and how her husband silences her with his medical (physician) and gender (man) superiorities. Finally, I will claim she goes mad because of her society's medical and patriarchal practices and this is the only way for her to be listened and reject patriarchal version of treatment. In "To Room Nineteen" I will show how an intelligent woman, Susan makes an intelligent marriage and comes to have a perfect family with four children and a huge house. I will try to depict

the steps to Susan's withdrawal from her life: her confining herself to her bedroom, then to "Mother's Room" at the top of the house, to the garden, Mrs. Townsend's Hotel, to Wales, to Fred's Hotel, and to her death in the room 19 in that hotel. I will claim, intelligence is a metaphor, in this short story, for male-dominated society who puts the rules while the emotion is for the female world. I will assert that she is muted throughout her life, and she cannot share her real emotions with her husband simply because they might sound irrational, and since she cannot understand and cannot accept this world she first goes mad and later commits suicide.

These two short stories are chosen since I believe they ideally provide a representative outlook on women's madness and those who are responsible for this.

II. Woman and Madness

"Piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" were the keywords of the cult of the true womanhood in the nineteenth century (Quawas 2006, 35). Women were supposed to enjoy domestic spheres and create in their home a heavenly atmosphere for their husbands and children. Welter argues that when you put those four qualities together they "spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife- woman" (qtd. in Quawas 2006, 35). Only those who follow these attributes were believed to attain real happiness and contentment. Quawas indicates that the cult of true womanhood was a combination of four ideas: "a sharp dichotomy between the home and the economic world outside that paralleled a sharp contrast between female and male nature; the designation of the home as the female's only proper sphere; the moral superiority of women; and the idealization of her function as a mother and wife" (2006, 36).

Despite the prevalence and the trend of the cult of true womanhood and family life, a considerable amount of women, in the second half of the nineteenth century, rose up against the

female derogating and restricting effects of domestic life which were highly appreciated by the patriarchal society. Two clashing ideologies of the period were: "True Womanhood" and "Women's Rights" (Quawas 2006, 36). Adherents of Women's Rights believed that neurosis was an outcome of women's rage that had been long-suppressed and compulsory passivity and idleness. Quawas states that "women's mental diseases, hysterias, anxieties, and perpetual invalidism were psychological enactments of the insubstantial and insignificant roles they were allowed to play in a male-dominated Victorian society, a world that literally rendered them invalid" (2006, 41). They were considered "to be intellectually inferior, passive, and domestically inclined by nature" and supposed to "live their lives according to such traits." Therefore, "if they showed discontentment in the role allotted to them, their behavior might be categorized as 'hysteria'" (Quawas 2006, 45).

R. D. Laing offers important new ways of understanding the link between women and madness. As such, he interpreted schizophrenia of women as a result of their oppression and repression they are exposed in the family. He further says "madness itself became intelligible as a strategy form of communication in response to the contradictory messages and demands about femininity women faced in patriarchal society" (Showalter 1985, 222). As Laing asserts, "it is a kind of temporary answer to social and political oppression. It is but a stage in the evolution or spiritual quest of a conscious, truly sane person" (Quawas 2006, 47).

III. An Analysis of "The Yellow Wallpaper"

The heroine of "The Yellow Wallpaper" initiates the story with the description of a deserted country estate in which she and her husband will stay throughout the summer: "A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house..." (Gilman 1995, 3). She goes on by introducing her husband,

John: "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?" (Gilman 1995, 3). It is thereupon understood that she is "sick" (Gilman 1995, 3). The reason of their presence in the abandoned summer house is to seek cure for the heroine's sickness. Her husband and brother, who is also a well-known physician, agree that her case is merely a "temporary nervous depression" (Gilman 1995, 3). The narrator makes it clear from the beginning that she keeps a diary- "dead paper" (Gilman 1995, 3) and she articulates what she thinks about her own problem:

So, I take phosphates or phosphites- whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to 'work' until I am well again. Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do? (Gilman 1995, 3)

As she confides to her journal, she "has her own plan for recovery including visits with friends and, most important, a return to her writing" (Treichler qtd. in Ford 1985, 311). She declares that life outside home, which implies responsibilities more than being a wife and mother, might help her. However, her doctor-husband disputes these activities and sticks to the idea of isolation and avoidance of exhausting the mind by thinking. He, instead, believes that sleeping and passivity are the real solutions to her problem. In accordance with John's medical method, she is consigned to the room at the top of the house in which she is supposed to stay. The treatment that John favors and applies is called "rest cure" (Showalter 1985, 142). Not much exists in the room apart from a bed. The narrator states that it seems "the room was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium" (Gilman 1995, 5). What strikes and disturbs her most is the yellow wallpaper:

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in the following,

pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide- plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions. The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smoldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others. No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long. (Gilman 1995, 5)

She is immensely tormented by the wallpaper- at the head of her bed- and begs her husband for moving to another room or changing the paper. However, he objects to this request suggesting that she should not give in to her "fancies" and further claiming that "after the wallpaper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on" (Gilman 1995, 6). Therefore, the wallpaper is to remain and she is left alone with that depressing wallpaper.

The more she is confined to the room, subjected to inactivity, and to lack of intellectual life the more she cries for nothing she feels oppressed and obsessed with the yellow wallpaper. She cannot create an intimacy with the wallpaper easily. Initially, she resists it yet the wallpaper gradually prevails over her. The pattern that she recognizes first is "a broken neck and two bulbous eyes" (Gilman 1995, 7) then "a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (Gilman 1995, 8). Meanwhile, John is frequently away on business trips leaving his wife to the nursing of his sister. She is not allowed to continue keeping her journal. Therefore, she hides it when her husband or his sister appears: "Here comes John, and I must put this away,- he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman 1995, 5). As the days go by, the pattern she sees takes different shape and she, now, sees a woman imprisoned behind the bars:

There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. 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. I don't like it a bit. I wonder- I begin to think- I wish John would take me away from here! (Gilman 1995, 11)

Her final attempt, too, to convince her husband about changing the room fails. He says: "I cannot leave the town just now. Of course if you were in any danger, I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you" (Gilman 1995, 11). He further adds: "There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy" (Gilman 1995, 12). Throughout the story the way John treats and talks to his wife -his "blessed little goose"(Gilman 1995, 6)- indicates how he perceives her as childlike, helpless and even inferior to some extent even though he is "very careful and loving" (Gilman 1995, 4). This situation can be noted as aggravating factor on her despair.

As Quawas points out, "he denies her an autonomous existence as he tries to reshape her accordance with all that being a wife/ patient entails, including being submissive, childlike, and subservient" (2006, 43). He treats her as a poor child who has no idea what is good for her. "By keeping her unemployed and secluded, her husband ensures his wife's reliance on him. She must remain the child he treats her as" (Quawas 2006, 44). From now on she cannot share her feelings and state of mind with John since he blames her for letting her imagination behave uncontrollably, and he commands her to use her "will and good sense to check the tendency" (Gilman 1995, 7). Upon recognition of the woman figure of the yellow wallpaper, she establishes a new relationship between herself and the wallpaper. Her behaviors start visibly to change.

Isolation and passivity make her feel more alienated from her husband, her sister-in-law, and her child. She becomes more concerned with the wallpaper day by day:

Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was. John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wall-paper. I turned it off with a laugh I had no intention of telling him it was because of the wall-paper-he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away. I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. There is a week more and I think that will be enough. (Gilman 1995, 14)

What she perceives from the pattern is a "woman to be rescued from inside a wall" (Farquharson 2009, 5). More significantly, her growing concern with the paper makes her assume a responsibility to save the woman within the wallpaper. She wants to help that woman. Therefore, she does not tell others what she sees and knows. While she is very preoccupied with the wallpaper and the woman in it she comes to believe her husband pretends "to be very loving and kind." She asserts that she can "see through him" (Gilman 1995, 16). Likewise, she has lost her trust to Jennie- "the sly thing" (Gilman 1995, 17). However, she does not feel lonely, and she tells that "the room has come to be damaged at the hands of women" including herself (Treichler 1984, 67): "I wasn't alone a bit! 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" (Gilman 1995, 7). She is determined to take the woman outside the paper to set free her before they leave that house. Therefore, in the last day of their stay in that summer house she locks herself in her room since she does not "want to go out" and she does not "want to have anybody come in, till John comes" (Gilman 1995, 17). She tells

the reader "I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope-you don't get me out in the road there" (Gilman 1995, 18).

While she is inside trying to tear all the paper away John tries to unlock the door. Her language visibly becomes bolder and confident: "I want to astonish him", "Why there's John at the door! It is no use, young man, you can't open it" (Gilman 18). When John manages to open the door what he sees shocks him: "What is the matter? he cried. For God's sake, what are you doing! I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder" (Gilman 1995, 19).

At this point, it is easy to observe that the narrator's "new impertinent self" emerges (Treichler 1984, 73). She refuses "victimization" (Quawas 2006, 49) and develops bravery in the face of her husband. Her physician-husband now has to stop and pay attention to what she says: "I've got out at last," she says "in spite of you and Jane? And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back." (Gilman 1995, 19). It, now, becomes clear that she has been identifying with the woman whom she dedicates herself to save. More significantly, she parts herself from what her husband and sister-in-law know her as, Jane, "to resurrect that part of herself which she has killed, and to unite the two halves of herself" (Quawas 2006, 49).

Her name is revealed to reader only at the end of the story. It might be interpreted in such a way as Quawas indicates, "she has lost her self among the socially prescribed false selves which she has assumed, consciously or unconsciously. She is, of course, torn between male society's prescriptions for female behavior, her own tendency toward the internalization of these roles, and a nostalgia for some lost, authentic self" (2006, 48). Her new self is demonstrated through her creeping on her fainted husband as she circles the room "on all fours like the child John has accused her of being" (Ford 1985, 310). She devises a new language and she rejects "the patriarchal diagnosis of women's condition" (Treichler 1984, 68)

and "male judgment (diagnosis)" (Treichler 1984, 74) with this language, and she is no longer a passive or manipulated woman under the pretext of treatment. As it is underlined in the story, madness might offer a shelter for the self of a woman rather than causing its loss.

IV. An Analysis of "To Room Nineteen"

"Yet this is the reflection of a madwoman. How very strange!" (Lessing 1978, 433) says Susan Rawlings, the heroine, after many years of her marriage which has "grounded in intelligence" (Lessing 1978, 413), when she looks at herself in the mirror. The story makes it clear that the marriage of Susan and Matthew is based on "intelligence" (Lessing 1978, 413) and mutual respect. They belong to upper-middle-class with a big-gardened house and four children. She seems to "have chosen her roles willingly, and to have fulfilled them competently, even creatively" (Halisky 1990, 47). "For the sake of the children" (Lessing 415) Susan quits her job, becomes a full-time mother, and dedicates herself to her children, her husband and keeping their big house. She becomes a perfect mother and wife yet she has not been "alone "for a moment" (Lessing 1978, 420-21). She spends her days waiting for her children come from school, thinking about dinner and counseling to the maid. However, soon after they move to the big house, Lessing clearly remarks that there is something amiss in these two perfect couple's marriage: "And so they lived with their four children in their gardened house in Richmond and were happy. They had everything they had wanted and had planned for. And yet...Well, even this was expected, that there must be certain flatness..." (Lessing 1978, 414). Susan and Matthew talk about how a unique couple they are, how much they have "infallible sense for right" (Lessing 1978, 414). It should be their love for each other that keeps them all together: "Their love for each other? Well, that was nearest it. If this wasn't the centre, what

was?" (Lessing 1978, 415). They dismiss all intense emotions from their marriage but embraced "the dry, controlled wistfulness which is the distinguishing mark of the intelligent marriage" (Lessing 1978, 416) instead. To control almost every emotional side of their marital life and "to assimilate even the potentially explosive emotions of infidelity by understanding and thereby containing them" has been an important task for both of them (Halisky 1990, 48). Upon Matthew's coming home late one night and confessing Susan that he has had an affair, Susan forgives him "of course": "Except that forgiveness is hardly the word. Understanding, yes. But if you understand something, you don't forgive it, you are the thing itself: forgiveness is for what you don't understand" (Lessing 1978, 417).

Susan constantly tries to "rationalize" (Bell 1992, 181), and restrain her dissatisfaction with her rational life: "There was only one thing to do, and of course these sensible people did it; they put the thing behind them, and consciously, knowing what they were doing, moved forward into a different phase of their marriage, giving thanks for past good fortune as they did so" (Lessing 1978, 417). However, on reaching her forties rationalizing does no more help Susan. She comes to feel free only when she is alone- when the children are at school and her husband is away on business: "She was already planning for the hours of freedom when all the children would be off her hands" (Lessing 1978, 419). When she locks herself to her room to be alone and have tranquility, she is always interrupted by Mrs. Parkes, the daily woman (Lessing 1978, 420), with some questions about household responsibilities. Later on, she looks for calmness in their big garden yet she cannot like being in there at all, "because of the closeness there of the enemy- irritation, restlessness, emptiness, whatever it was- which keeping her hands occupied made less dangerous" (Lessing 1978, 421). Talking about this issue with her husband cannot be in question: "What should she say to her dear friend and

husband, Matthew? When I go into the garden, that is, if the children are not there, I feel as if there is an enemy there waiting to invade me. What an enemy, Susan darling? Well I don't know, really... Perhaps you should see a doctor?" (Lessing 1978, 421).

Not being able to be alone and free comes to be such a serious problem to Susan that everybody around her seems to be an obstacle to her freedom: "as if the pressure of these people- four lively children and her husband- were a painful pressure on the surface of her skin, a hand pressing on her brain" (Lessing 1978, 424). She mentions Matthew always with positive attributes: "a husband, so good and kind and insightful" (Lessing 1978, 425). He seems to strive for understanding her and he does not mind hiring au pair and a woman to take care of the household. She cannot find any reason for feeling so depressed. Therefore, she seeks the origin of her despair in herself: "She said to Matthew in their bedroom: I think there must be something wrong with me. And he said: Surely not, Susan? You look marvelous- you're as lovely as ever" (Lessing 1978, 425). No matter how much she emphasized that Matthew is "insightful" she cannot confide her inner troubles to him. She "chooses retreat rather than confrontation" (Halisky 1990, 47): "She said to herself: I've got to force myself to say: Yes, but do you realize that I never feel free? There's never a moment I can say to myself: There is nothing I have to remind myself about, nothing I have to do in half an hour, or an hour, or two hours..." (Lessing 1978, 425). This is what she feels inside. She only can say out loud: "I don't feel well" (Lessing 1978, 425).

In the course of her attempts to affirm that she has chosen the right life and everything concerning her private and family life is just perfect she becomes more and more depressed. She decides to use the room, "Mother's Room" (Lessing 1978, 427), at the top of the house to be on her own. However, she is frequently interrupted by trivial chores: "But now there was a

room, and she could go there when she liked, she used it seldom; she felt even more caged there than in her bedroom" (Lessing 1978, 427). As the story unfolds, the reader feels the sense of the heroine's "being trapped, or hunted, by the affections" of her family (Halisky 1990, 47). When the children of Susan cuddle her they make her feel "human cage of loving limbs" (Lessing 1978, 427), which demonstrates that even her role as a mother restricts her. Meanwhile, the devil she believes she sees does not free her. She is extremely afraid of him: "Dear God, keep him away from me. She meant the devil, for she now thought of it, not carrying if she was irrational, as some sort of demon" (Lessing 1978, 427). I believe the devil represents her emotional part she has to repress and also unconventional roles for women that she has been trying to escape from the beginning of her marriage. He invites Susan to break off wifehood and her motherhood so that she can be fully free. She is well aware of her societal roles and responsibilities. Therefore she is scared and wants to run away from the devil. So "she dreamed of having a room or a place, anywhere, where she could go and sit, by herself, no one knowing where she was" (Lessing 1978, 428). She rents a room near Victoria. "The room was ordinary and anonymous, and was just what Susan needed" (Lessing 1978, 429). Her first moments of solitude are such a great happiness to her: "She was alone. She was alone. She was alone. She could feel pressures lifting off her" (Lessing 1978, 429). However, she is bothered by Miss Townsend, so that she has to find another solution.

She tells her husband that she really needs holiday. Upon his agreeing on that, she chooses "the remotest place" she knows of (Lessing 1978, 432) and takes a vacation in Wales. However, this attempt results worse than the previous ones since what she experiences in Wales is nothing more than "her devil" (Lessing 1978, 432). For this reason she comes back to "her home and family, with the Welsh emptiness at the back of her mind like a promise of freedom" (Lessing 1978, 432).

Her last resort becomes "Fred's Hotel" (Lessing 1978, 435). As long as Susan pays, the owner agrees on everything. She is given the room nineteen. Moreover, she has to fake her name and introduces herself as Mrs. Jones. She finds the room psychologically comforting and peaceful. She does not do anything in the room: "From the chair, when it had rested her, she went to the window, stretching her arms, smiling, treasuring her anonymity, to look out. She was no longer Susan Rawlings, mother of four, wife of Matthew, employer of Mrs. Parkes and of Sophie Traub, with these and those relations with friends, school-teachers, tradesmen" (Lessing 1978, 437). However, Susan newly-found peace is interrupted by Matthew since he thinks Susan has a lover. Therefore, instead of telling the truth, Susan prefers to invent a lover and this situation becomes the last straw which drives her crazy. The place she chooses to commit suicide is the room nineteen since "the demons were not here. They had gone for ever, because she was buying her freedom from them" (Lessing 1978, 446).

Susan, "quietly, tenderly ushers herself across the borders of that aloneness into death" (Halisky 1990, 48): She puts herself on the bed, "found a blanket folded in the bottom of the chest of drawers, and carefully covered her legs with it. She was quite content lying there, listening to the faint soft hiss of the gas that poured into the room, into her lungs, into her brain, as she drifted off into the dark river" (Lessing 1978, 447). All her endeavors to find freedom result in failure. Ultimately, she reaches that freedom she dreams of through suicide. It is the only way to escape from all responsibilities and constraints. It is striking to observe how she welcomes her death. As Halisky points out, "her final emotion as she drifts off into 'the dark river' is contentment." She is "entering a realm she need not ultimately fear" (1990, 54).

Lessing, in this short story, crystallizes the invisible restraints imposed on women and pathetic results of them. When Susan who is regarded as intelligent woman is deprived

of money and intellectual improvement for the sake of proper wifehood and motherhood- which are societal assertiveness- she loses her real self, and the chance of attaining that self offers madness or/and suicide in such a society. "I'm simply not myself" says Susan (Lessing 1978, 425). Such an utterance already amounts to a great pain, but Susan, in the face of her society who is ready to rob her integrity, attains her 'self' and freedom though it costs her sanity and life. Madness or suicide thus becomes more than an escape, but rather a search for identity and individuality.

V. Conclusion

In this paper I have compared "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "To Room Nineteen" in terms of their focus on women's madness. I have asserted that both Susan and Jane are exposed to lack of their own money, intellectual atmospheres, and social life, which makes them muted in the face of the constrictions. This muteness pushes these heroines to find the lost voice of their own. The first step for both becomes to resign from all domestic responsibilities such as looking after the children, cleaning-up, and cooking. Later on, they start to question about rational/irrational and sanity/insanity. They seek another alternative since what they believe does not agree with what patriarchal society asks for. This alternative is, surely, nothing but madness or/and suicide.

As Laingian theory asserts "madness becomes not only a form of rebellion but an intelligible and potentially healing response to conflicting social demands" (Quawas 2006, 47). Gilman uses madness to represent "female consciousness" and portrays "her schizophrenic narrator questing for some form of truth" (Quawas 2006, 47-48). As for what these women want is best articulated by Halisky: "They want no longer to be usurped and explained by the powers of rationality, of pattern, that have limited their being. They want the freedom, the oneness, of a

return to themselves." Moreover, what is also significant is that "each woman is programmed by the reason her culture has taught her to consider definitive, to label the expression of that self 'madness' (1990, 49). In "The Yellow Wallpaper" I have shown the treatment administered on Jane, the heroine, and how this treatment itself is already a sickness. In the end, I have claimed she goes mad because of her society's patriarchal and also medical practices and this is the only way for her to be listened and reject patriarchal version of treatment. In "To Room Nineteen" I have showed how an intelligent woman, Susan, makes an intelligent marriage. I have purported that intelligence represents men while the emotion represents women. Whether the ends of these stories can be fully resolved or not, madness has been a significant chapter of women's history. Most importantly, social and political systems, patriarchal norms, and society supporting them are to blame for women's insanity. I would like to claim madness demonstrates a rejection and protest against women-restricting rules and rule-makers. As Laing states "if the world is in truth inhospitable, unhomelike, then perhaps withdrawal from that world is a sane and reasonable method of self-preservation" (49).

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