Introduction

"For Mrs. Oke, who seemed the most self-absorbed of creatures in all other matters, and utterly incapable of understanding or sympathizing with the feelings of other persons, entered completely and passionately into the feelings of this woman, this Alice, who, at some moments, seemed to be not another woman, but herself."

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Portrait

Portrait of Vernon Lee by John Singer Sargent, 1881.
Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Biography
Vernon Lee was born Violet Paget on October 14, 1856 in Château Saint-Léonard, France. Her educators were her mother, half-brother, and governesses, as well as extensive travels she did throughout Europe with her family. Later on, she wrote about the psychological effects that places have on individuals. She started to write early on in her life, eventually writing in four different languages: German, Italian, English, and French. At 14, she published Biographie d'une monnaie. Violet Paget adopted her pseudonym Vernon Lee by taking the surname of her half-sister Eugene Lee-Hamilton. The first time she used her pseudonym was when she published works on art and aesthetics in 1878 and 1879 in Frazer’s Magazine. Lee wrote forty-five major works during her lifetime, in many areas including: short stories, biographies, dramas, essays. She even created her own genre, called “genius loci” or “spirit of places”, and wrote seven works between 1897 and 1925 that fall under this genre.

When Lee wrote her book on music in 1880 called Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy, her reputation in London spiked. She followed this with Belcaro, a collection of essays about art that published one year after her rise to fame. She was classified in the same group as Walter Pater and John Addington as people who had influence on the Italian Renaissance, evident in Euphorion (1884) and Renaissance Fancies and Studies (1895). She met Pater in 1881 in England, just after she made the acquaintance of his distinguished supporter Oscar Wilde. The thing that set her apart from Pater is that she called for social action in the Aesthetic movement while he did not. Lee was also friends with other people involved in the movement, such as: John Singer Sargent, Robert Browning, William Morri, Dante Gabriel Rosetti, and Edward Burne-Jones.

Lee also wrote dramas, such as Ariadne in Mantua (1903) and short stories, some of which are collected in Hauntings (1890), which contains “Oke of Okehurst” and “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,” which is a short story that originally appeared in the famous The Yellow Book. Her preoccupation with psychology was seen in her blatant criticism of World War I in Satan the Waster (1920).
Lee never openly discussed homosexuality in her work, yet there are many cases where it can be evident that an underlying tone is being hinted at. She herself was a lesbian and had three women that she was connected with during her lifetime. Her first romantic relationship was with a woman named Annie Meyers that she met in 1870’s and ended in 1881, when she met Mary Robinson. The two women met at a drawing-room party and were inseparable until 1887, when the breakup of Mary’s marriage to James Darmsteter ended her even her friendship with Vernon Lee. It was in 1887 that Lee began a new friendship with Clementina (Kit) Anstruther-Thomson. Lee and Kit were very close companions, and the two women traveled and wrote together until 1897. During their relationship, Lee began her extensive work on aesthetics, something Kit was able to help with. The two women came up with a new idea of psychological aesthetics: “The spectators ‘emphatise’ with works of art when they call up memories and association and cause often unconscious bodily changes in posture and breathing.” This was the introduction of the German concept of Einfühlung, or empathy, into the concept of aesthetics England. Vernon Lee died in 1935 in Italy.

Although not much of her work can be seen in modern adaptations, it certainly affected literature of the 19th and 20th century, including the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” that Charlotte Perkins Gilman published in 1892. Lee’s work was profound, both in her time and now. She was a part of movements of her time, contributing heavily in terms of criticism and innovation, while also paving the way for new theories and interpretations.
Criticism: Then & Now

The response to Vernon Lee's work in the late 19th, early 20th century was very mixed. Her travel novels met with much acclaim and praise, but her forays into short stories and different forms of criticism seemed to receive equal measures of love and hate. As noted by Gettmann in "Vernon Lee: Exponent of Aestheticism"[1], Henry James was one of those who, while initially having supported Lee, and reviewed *Hauntings* as "bold, aggressive, speculative fancy" (Leighton[2]), had later considered her as "markedly saucy"[3]. He had even written a letter to his brother describing her as "as dangerous and uncanny as she is intelligent"[4]. On the other end of the spectrum, G.B. Shaw, in response to Lee's story "Satan the Waster", proclaimed that "...the sooner we put Vernon Lee into the position occupied three hundred years ago by Queen Elizabeth the better."[5]. Along with this glowing remark, according to Gettmann, "...Vernon Lee was the only disciple that Walter Pater ever acknowledged". Clearly, Lee's critics expressed very different views. Lee herself wanted to be a critic, and sought to receive the same respect and standing as her male counter-parts. Gender-roles as they were at the time, however, meant that despite working under a pseudonym, Lee's work would always be judged through a patriarchal society's lens.

Today, Lee's work is beginning to receive more attention. Lee is credited as being a major founder in the aesthetic movement, as well as being one of the first people to popularize the term "empathy". This, with new interest in lesbian studies and early women writers, has boosted Lee's image and brought more attention and focus to her works.

Resources and Links

Entry on Vernon Lee from GLBTO.com
Review of Oke of Okehurst by Jim Rockhill from The Weird Review
Html version of Oke of Okehurst/A Phantom Lover from Project Gutenberg
Multiple formats of Oke of Okehurst/A Phantom Lover for download from Many Books
Kindle edition e-book of Hauntings from Amazon.com
A Biography and other books about Vernon Lee via Google Books
Oke of Okehurst shares many similarities with, and may have influenced, Daphne du Maurier’s 1938 novel *Rebecca*. Below is the trailer for Hitchcock’s adaptation of that novel in 1940.

What the Characters Might Have Looked Like

While these pictures aren’t actually depictions of the characters, they can be used to help visualize them.

Alice, young or old, with the white dress.

William, a fit man, with his furrowed forehead.
Lovelock, who had "...auburn curls and a peaked auburn beard...".

The artist narrator.

Portraits by various artists: Rhoda Astley (nee Delaval) by Arthur Pond, ~1750; Lars Gabriel Branting, artist unknown, 1882; Jacob Kornerup by I. Busch, 1853; Portrait of a Young Russian Man in Fur Trimmed Dressing Gown by unknown author, uploaded October 2010. Images Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Summary

Part I

“She seemed sent me from heaven or the other place.”
The narrator was in his studio with a guest rearranging pictures and paintings and showing them this pictures of Mrs. Alice Oke. The narrator, an artist, began the telling of the story of Oke of Okehurst to a guest in his studio.

Part II

The story began with Mr. William Oke coming into the narrator’s studio with a friend and requesting a sitting for him and his wife. The narrator accepts and travels to Okehurst. He is welcomed by William when he arrives, who apologizes for his wife bout of sickness that had rendered her absent. The narrator is given a tour of the house and, counter to his expectations, it is beautiful. William comments that the house is too large for them because they have to children. Alice cannot have children. William lies and says that he does not like children. The narrator, in his room, was called for dinner by Mr. Oke.

Part III

The narrator described Alice. He cannot help but think how different, and special she is. He became enthralled with Alice, her personality, her appearance, the thing that lured him in. Then he went on to describe William who he says is good and wholesome, but being married to Alice seemed to have changed him. He noted that William had a “manic-frown,” “that deep gash between his eyebrows.” Alice often would look into the distance, with no prompting, and at nothing in particular. The narrator described their relationship as William feebly trying to gain appreciation and acknowledgement from Alice, who paid him no mind and, repulsed, actively tried to irritate and shock him.

"...yet it seemed to me, sometimes, that this monotonous life of solitude, by the side of a woman who took no more heed of him than of a table or chair, was producing a vague depression and irritation in this young man, so evidently cut out for a cheerful, commonplace life."

The narrator discovered the pictures of the couple's predecessors: Nicholas and Alice Oke. Alice looked just like the deceased Alice Oke and not just because she dressed "up to look like her ancestress... sometimes absolutely copied from this portrait." Nicholas was embarrassed of his ancestors and what they did. He tells the narrator the story then about his ancestry. After the Scotch wars, Nicholas became the last Oke, until he married Alice Pompret. William described the Pomprets as "restless, self-seeking," and didn't feel as if he descended from that side of the family. Nicholas Oke rebuilt Okehurst and Christopher Lovelock came to live nearby. He became friendly with everyone, including Alice Oke. One night riding home, Lovelock was attacked and killed by two highway men, who were assumed to be Nicholas and Alice. This story was told to William and Alice as children, and William hoped that tradition would die and that it was false.

Part IV

"...this bizarre creature of enigmatic, far-fetched exquisiteness--that she should have no interest in the present, but only an eccentric passion in the past."

The narrator was "required to put her into play," and told Alice that William told him the story of Alice Oke, then Alice told him her version. Alice thought the dead Alice "may have felt that she had a right to rid herself of him, and to call upon her husband to help her to do so." She said that Lovelock has been seen in the house and that the yellow drawing-room is haunted with his ghost. She said that although nothing happened in the room that something will happen in the room.

Part V

"The panes of the mullioned window were open, and yet the air seemed heavy, with an indescribable heady perfume, not that of any growing flower, but like that of old stuff that should have lain from years among spices."

Alice showed the narrator the yellow room and read to him the poems of Christopher Lovelock. The narrator wanted to paint her just like that, they way she seemed most natural and herself.

"She drew the curtain and displayed a large-sized miniature, representing a young man, with auburn curls and a peaked auburn beard, dressed in black, but with lace about his neck, and large pear-shaped pearls in his ears: a wistful melancholy face. Mrs. Oke took the miniature religiously off its stand, and showed me, written in faded characters upon the back, the name "Christopher Lovelock," and the date 1626."

After Alice showed him the miniature of Lovelock, he thought she was dangerous and took some time away from her. But not for too long, for he couldn't help but want to watch her as she talked about Lovelock and Alice and draw her in the yellow room.
William was going through a chest of clothes from past generations and the narrator asked about the dress Alice wore in the picture, and William said it wasn't there at that Alice had it. At another sitting, Alice said that the deceased Alice had to kill Lovelock because she "loved him more than the whole word!" and seemed to be sobbing. She ended the sitting, claiming to be ill.

**Part VI**

The narrator noted Alice's unusual cheerfulness. William was happy that Alice was so well and wished that she were like that more often, but the narrator thought that her cheerfulness was not normal, considering what happened yesterday. Some relatives were expected and Alice was running around giving orders.

"There was something in her unusual activity and still more unusual cheerfulness that was merely nervous and feverish; and I had, the whole day the impression of dealing with a woman who was ill and who would very speedily collapse."

The narrator was walking around the property and came upon Alice at the stables; she was dressed like a man in riding clothes. She took him riding in a horse-drawn cart down the road and stopped at Cotes Common, where Christopher Lovelock died, and told the narrator the story.

Lovelock was riding home when he saw a cart approach with two men, one obviously Nicholas Oke. Nicholas said he had some news for him, brought his horse close to him, and fired a pistol. Lovelock dodged and his horse took the bullet. He drew his sword and Nicholas drew his. Nicholas was disarmed on his back when Lovelock said he would spare him if her asked for forgiveness. The second man rode up and shot Lovelock in the back. Lovelock fell and light shined on the man, and he cried out that it was Alice who killed him, then died. Nicholas threw Lovelock's purse into the pond, then the couple rode off, Alice lived long after but her husband did not. He became mentally ill before his death and threatened to kill Alice. In a fit, he told the story of the killing and made a prophecy that the next time the master of Okehurst marries another Alice, that will be the end of the Okes of Okehurst.

Alice said that they have no children and she doesn't want any. When they returned, William was waiting outside and helped his wife out of the cart. She withdrew pleasantly and said that they were at Cotes Common. William was not happy.

**Part VII**

The relatives had arrived and three days into their visit they played dress up in the old clothes. William briefly opposed but gave in to their insisting. William was excited by seeing everyone dress that he put on his uniform that he wore before he got married. Someone noticed that Alice was missing. At that moment a stranger entered the room.

"...a boy, slight and tall, in a brown riding-coat, leathern belt, and big buff boots, a little grey cloak over one shoulder, a large grey hat slouched over the eyes, a dagger and a pistol at the waist. It was Mrs. Oke, her eyes preternaturally bright, and her whole face lit up with a bold perverse smile."

Alice said it was the outfit Alice wore when she went riding with her husband. A cousin toasted to the health of Alice: dead and alive. Alice toasted to the health of Lovelock's ghost.

**Part VIII**

After that party, the narrator noticed that change in William that had probably been happening all along. Alice suggested that they all act out the murder, but she really had no intention of following it through. At dinner, William saw a man on the other side of the window making signs at Alice, cried out, and jumped out the window in pursuit. Alice smiled. William returned saying that he made a mistake, but Alice said that is was Lovelock he say.

The narrator noticed that William was irritable, paranoid, and easily frightened, and called him ill. William often start at the sight of a figure in the distance, that often turned out to be a neighbor. The narrator tried to ask Alice not to tease William about Lovelock, and told her he was ill, but she was indifferent and said he should see a doctor in town.

William told the narrator about their childhood. Alice was brought over for Christmas when they were little, then they were married, and finally his suffering through the disappointment of their baby, where Alice almost died of illness.

"I would give anything my life any day if only she would look for two minutes as if she liked me a little as if she didn't utterly despise me," and the poor fellow burst into a hysterical laugh, which was almost a sob."

**Part IX**
The narrator noted that William was jealous of Alice, but didn't know why or of what, and thought that William probably didn't realize this himself. He felt that Alice emotionally neglected him and didn't love him and these feelings changed him gradually. Alice said to William, about his paranoia, that the ghosts in the house have a much a right to be there as they do, and that they laugh at William's attempts at privacy. William suggested that it is Lovelock's steps that he heard on the gravel every night. William said that he does not understand Alice.

After returning from a walk, William spoke in a voice that didn't seem his own. He said he saw Alice walking at the pond with someone at five o'clock. Alice said it was no one, no one living, and that if he saw her with someone that it was probably Lovelock.

"...I did not trust Mrs. Oke. That woman would slip through my fingers like a snake if I attempted to grasp her elusive character."

The narrator and William went on a walk, in the direction of Cotes Commons. On the way he became obsessed with the hops, saying they were doing bad this year, yet, yesterday, he said the hops were doing better than they had in years. William asked the narrator for advice about Alice; he suggests that Alice is surrounded by someone else and won't say. The narrator tried to calm him down, but William ignores him. He said that this was all Lovelock's fault; that he was causing her to "dishonour" herself, and that he has to save her. The narrator analyzed the couple, to William, and offered to take him to a doctor in town. William said that the narrator was right and admits that he feels crazy sometimes, that he does not want to fulfill the prophecy. He wished that Alice wouldn't mock him with Lovelock.

**Part X**

The narrator was giving Alice a sitting and she seemed unusually happy and as if she were waiting for something to happen. She was reading "Vita Nouva" and the discussion of "whether love so abstract and so enduring was a possibility" arose.

"Love such as that...is very rare, but it can exist. It becomes a person's whole existence, his whole soul; and it can survive the death, not merely of he beloved, but of the lover. It is unextinguishable, and goes on in the spiritual world until it meet a reincarnation of the beloved; and when this happens, it jets out and draws to it all that may remain of that lover's soul, and takes shape and surrounds the beloved once more."

A couple days later, the narrator heard no mention of Alice or Lovelock and William seemed happy and back to normal. That day, Alice, feeling ill, returned to her room, and William was off on business. The narrator spent time rummaging through the drawing-room, when William appeared at the doorway, not entering, and told him to follow him. William appeared ill. He said he had something to show the narrator. He led outside, to the bay window of the yellow-drawing room. He led him to the window. The narrator saw a dark room and Mrs. Oke sitting on a couch in the white dress and "her head slightly thrown back, a large red rose in her hand." William said that he was going to get whoever he thought was in the room with Alice, and the narrator said that it didn't sound like William. The narrator and William struggled outside, but William got in through the window, and the narrator followed him.

"As I crossed the threshold, something flashed in my eyes; there was a loud report; a sharp cry, and the thud of a body on the ground."

William shot and killed Alice. There was smoke around him. Alice was on the floor and blood was collecting under her.

"Her mouth was convulsed, as if in that automatic shriek, but her wide-open white eyes seemed to smile vaguely and distantly."

William turned around and laughed. He curses the person for getting away and fooling him again. He unlocked the door and rain out of the house crying. That night, he tried to him himself but just fractured his jaw and died a couple of days after.

The narratoe went through the legal trouble associated with the deaths and it was decided that William went crazy and killed his wife. The narrator's maid brought him a bloody locket from around Alice's neck. Inside was "some very dark auburn hair, not at all the colour of William Oke's. I am quite sure it was Lovelock's."
The sunlight lay in yellow patches under the oaks of the pasture-lands, and burnished the green hedges. The air was heavy and yet cold, and everything seemed preparing for a great storm. The rooks whirled in black clouds round the trees and the conical red caps of the oast-houses which give that country the look of being studded with turreted castles; then they descended—a black line—upon the fields, with what seemed an unearthly loudness of caw. And all round there arose a shrill quavering bleating of lambs and calling of sheep, while the wind began to catch the topmost branches of the trees.

Lee writes with a style that today's screenplay writers might envy. She conjures scenes one frame at a time, and depicts each moment in a way that presents it as a work of art in its own right yet always ensures a relevance to the greater story is present. Lee describes the above landscape in a way that manages to externalize William Oke's ongoing emotional turmoil as well as his more immediate anxiety over whether he ought to confide in the artist and seek his advice. At the same time the paragraph mentions the "turreted castles" which remind the reader of the elusive and often illusionary nature of an individual's sense of perception, a major theme in the storyline as well as in the world of Victorian art criticism.

…it seemed quite preternaturally high up, giving a sense that its extent of flat heather and gorse bound by distant firs was really on the top of the world. The sun was setting just opposite, and its lights lay flat on the ground, staining it with the red and black of the heather, or rather turning it into the surface of a purple sea…

Lee seems to imbue certain textual moments with a greater or lesser degree of detail in an effort to effectively manipulate the pace of the story as the reader watches the narrative unfold. In the above description of Cotes Common, a place soon to be revealed as the site of Lovelock's murder, Lee takes a moment to set the scene. She takes a beat to describe it in detail in order to decelerate the pace from the frantic nature of the narrator's journey as well as to indicate the significance of the location and allow the reader to focus on the account that follows.

An Arist’s Eye: The power of perspective

Like any exciting contemporary thriller, or Victorian romance for that matter, Okehurst adopts an air of mystery which forces its author to hold back certain details from the reader as the plot moves forward in order for them to make their own guesses or draw their own conclusions along the way. This is one benefit of the first person limited perspective voiced in retrospect by the visiting artist. He is only human and is therefore incapable of knowing all yet he lends a certain level of legitimacy to the story’s rich imagery. Readers might be more inclined to believe that such sensory details were retained in the mind of such a character because of the artistic and poetic inclinations inherent in his nature. The fact that the story is being retold leads them further to understand that the details given by his account are all somehow relevant to the arc of the story and compels us to examine his tone for clues and pay attention to his descriptors as hints to the mystery surrounding the Okes.
Interpretations of the Ending

The ending of “Oke of Okehurst” is abrupt, thus leaving the reader with unanswered questions. Since most of the action takes place in the last couple of pages of the short story, the narrator does not have time to give us his viewpoint of these events, thus leaving the story finished but not concluded.

Alice: Pushing Oke to Madness

One possible interpretation of the ending could be that Mr. Oke’s murder of Mrs. Oke was caused by Mrs. Oke intentionally, as if something she had been pushing him to it throughout the entire story. There is much evidence that supports this claim, and it is spread around in various parts of the story, as if a constant reminder of Mrs. Oke’s pushing. The narrator notes that Mr. Oke was “consumed with a fear of making a fool of himself before me and his wife…[a] shyness…inspired…by his wife.” Mr. Oke is uncertain of himself around her, due to the “bullying.” It is Mrs. Oke who “simply passed over his existence” and who knew her husband yearned for her attention, thus her constant ignorance of him caused insecurity within him and a yearning to please her. An example is when Mr. Oke’s lifts Alice from the carriage when she and the narrator return from their trip to Cotes Common and she tears herself away from him, as if “recoil[ing]” from him. When the narrator starts to notice changes in Mr. Oke, he asks him if he had seen ghosts around, and this is the point where Mr. Oke is still sane, answering “I hope not.” This scene shows the potential Mr. Oke has for change and for becoming an interesting character to the narrator. The scene that causes the final push in Mr. Oke is when Mrs. Oke dresses in the old Alice’s riding attire, causing Mr. Oke to become as “white as ashes” and pressing “his hand almost convulsively to his mouth.” It is then that the narrator notes that he feels as if he were in a madhouse, and it is this inciting incident that causes Mr. Oke to remain mysterious and alert for the rest of the story, building now intensely, his frown forming more and more often into “the double gash [that] painted itself scarlet between his eyebrows.” As Mr. Oke builds to the final scene, his actions and thoughts begin to revolve not so much about Alice, but about Lovelock, whom he has chosen to be the person he was ultimately in pursuit of.

Oke: Insanity Inevitable

Another possible interpretation of the sudden ending of “Oke of Okehurst” is that Mr. Oke’s decision to murder Mrs. Oke in the end was not due to some sudden lapse into insanity, but rather the point to which his mental state had taken him to, something that had always been present and had been built up to this climax. The narrator’s misinterpretation of Mr. Oke at the beginning, calling him “uninteresting from the crown of his head to the tip of his boots” sets up the remainder of the story to be a contradiction to this, with pieces coming through, building up a case against this initial claim. Soon after this statement, the narrator notices Mr. Oke lying for the first time, and “a very odd nervous frown between his eyebrows,” something like a “maniac-frown.” This is repeated numerous times after it has been noted, and the narrator seems to not think anything of it, at least not enough to dwell on. As time continues, this frown becomes “a permanent feature on his face” and starts to have characteristics that determine it to be more than just a look of annoyance. Mr. Oke is also called unusually white, having a “soul…brimful of pain,” jumping, crying out, running after unseen things as if trying to catch them, “unstrung,” and “a hysterical woman”, a term used in the 19th century to describe an insane woman. It can be read that Mr. Oke was mad from the beginning, and that anything could have caused the plight he took, for it would have ended the same way: with him dead.

Insanity: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

The ending also seems to be something that was destined to happen, with the prophecy of the Okes being set in the 17th century, which stated that the end of the Okes would come when another “master of Okehurst” married another Alice Oke. Mrs. Oke said that she believed this to be true, since they never had any children, but another angle that could be taken with this prophecy is that not only would it be the end of the Okes altogether, it would also be as tragic as the end of Nicholas Oke himself. If this were the case, then both Mr. and Mrs. Oke would have been insane, allowing for their deaths to be complicated, painful, and incomprehensible, somewhat like the lives of Nicholas, Alice, and Lovelock. Only in this circumstance could the prophecy truly come true.
Cross Dressing

When Alice Oke dons her "mannish little coat and hat" and insists on taking a drive, she transforms from the "delicate, morbid, hot-house creature, unable to walk or do anything," into a coach driver of "utmost skill" who goes on "chattering like a girl of sixteen" and whose normally pale face is noticeably "flushed with movement and excitement".

It seems important to note two things, one being the fact that this scene occurs immediately after Alice goes on a feverish flurry of housekeeping in preparation for visitors, a task that distracts her from any mention of the old Alice or Lovelock, something that puts William in high spirits. In taking on her traditional role as lady of the house she gives off the impression that "all that craze about Lovelock had completely departed, or never existed".

It is also worth noting that despite Alice’s masculine attire and, by the painter’s estimation, masculine behavior, she is described with feminine terminology, though in more innocent or topical forms of femininity than ever before, Alice is said to go on "chattering like a schoolgirl of sixteen," and laughing "her childish laugh".

Since Lee worked in largely male dominated fields (art theory and criticism/writing) one has to wonder whether she was indirectly addressing the issue of her own masculine nom de plume, perhaps explaining through Alice that her male name had made her contributions to both literature and critical discussion possible. Perhaps Lee was attempting to explain that cross-dressing her image was necessary in order for her to pursue the work that seemed to make her "flush with movement and excitement" all the while remaining true to her identity as a woman through the content of the work itself.

Alice as the Spouse in Control

- Able to easily manipulate William
- William remains under the illusion (or pretends) that he serves as Alice’s ‘protector’ and head of the household by dismissing her issues as symptomatic of an illness of some kind
- The closing scene in which William is depicted as suffering from some kind of mania or insanity normally associated with women; see similarities between the woman in The Yellow Wallpaper and William Oke at the very end of each story.

A Blatant Disregard

Alice Oke is presented with an attitude new to the Victorian literary scene. The late 19th century began to witness the emergence of female protagonists who related to men on a more equal level. Think of Elizabeth Bennet's remarkable capacity for intelligent, witty, and humorous conversation. Her character is defined by lively dialogue and readers come to love and admire her long before any prospect of a romance arises with Mr. Darcy. Vernon Lee took this feminine independence to an extreme in Alice Oke and applied it in a vastly different capacity. Alice seems to spend much of her time ignoring the existence of her husband, choosing instead to dwell on their family's infamous past, one which she knows to be the bane of his very existence. She refuses to take her husband's feelings of shame and superstition into account in displaying her obsession with this macabre fantasy, there is no effort to spare his feelings through discretion because she refuses to acknowledge his position altogether.

A Self Destructive Independence?

While Alice can be viewed as someone taking this attitude of independence to a new, and perhaps ugly, level, she might also be viewed as an embodiment of the clash between the conventional representation of the Victorian woman and ideas of the New Woman. As mentioned, Alice Oke shows an almost total disregard for her husband's opinion of her, yet she rebels against convention by obsessing over one particular moment in familial history. She strives to mimic the physical, as well as attitudinal example set by the original Alice which limits any potential for original thinking or expression. One might ask what difference exists between Alice's idolization of the first Alice and any other woman of her time's efforts to fit the Victorian model of perfection through obedience and propriety. Both represent a kind of obsessive conformity. Unlike upstarting women like Ms. Bennet in possession of hopes and dreams, Alice does not seem to have any prospects for the future. The artist indicates through the novel that fulfilling the fatal Oke prophecy, a horrific and self-destructive resolution, is our heroine's greatest ambition.

Her mouth was convulsed, as if in that automatic shriek, but her wide-open white eyes seemed to smile vaguely and distantly.
Possession/Obsession in "Oke of Okehurst"

In "Oke of Okehurst," characters seem to not just be obsessed, but to be possessed by their obsessions which inevitably leads to two deaths.

• Mrs. Oke is obsessed with the love story of Alice and Lovelock, and more specifically, with the idea of Lovelock. Mrs. Oke of Okehurst is the most prime example of a person possessed by her obsession. All of her actions, thoughts, and feelings can be drawn back to this. A reason it is so prominent is because the narrator focuses all of his attention on Mrs. Oke, causing the reader to inevitably do the same. The narrator notes the physical attributes of Mrs. Oke having "strange cheeks, hollow and rather flat," a "strange whiteness," and "wide-opened eyes" perfectly set up for the likeness between her and Alice, which is first acknowledged with: "There were the same strange lines of figure and face, the same dimples in the thin cheeks, and the same wide-opened eyes, the same vague eccentricity of expression". This leads the narrator to the conclusion that "Mrs. Oke distinctly made herself up to look like her ancestress, dressing in garments that had a seventeenth-century look; nay, that were sometimes absolutely copied from this portrait [ of the old Alice ]." Because the narrator notes early on that Mrs. Oke strives to be like the dead Alice, he is then attuned to other similarities between them and other instances of the past interrupting Mrs. Oke’s future. Her preoccupation with the old Alice also connects her with Lovelock, and it is in this tie that her obsession lies. Mrs. Oke does many things throughout the short story that indicate that she’s obsessed with Lovelock, some of which include: wearing Alice’s wedding dress, speaking about Lovelock as if in the “third person, of her own feelings”, the emphasis on “still loved” in the thought the narrator has: “did it all mean that Alice Oke had loved or still loved some one who was not the master of Okehurst,” and wearing the outfit that Alice probably wore when she killed Lovelock. All of these, and many more, are examples of how her obsession can be seen through her thoughts, words, and mainly action.

• Mr. Oke is obsessed by the idea that Lovelock is still lurking around, and potentially stealing his wife from him. Mr. Oke’s obsession is very different since it is caused more by Mrs. Oke intentionally than by Mr. Oke himself. Because Mrs. Oke spends a lot of her time talking about Lovelock and Alice, it is nearly impossible for her husband to not think about them as well. She pushes him to accept the story of Lovelock and Alice as true, and to acknowledge that they are not dead or gone from their house. Eventually, even the narrator notices that “every time that the poor fellow [ Mr. Oke ] gave one of those starts of his, or turned crimson at the sudden sound of a footstep, Mrs. Oke would ask him, with her contemptuous indifference, whether he had seen Lovelock.” With constant pushing from Mrs. Oke, Mr. Oke becomes obsessed with Lovelock, starting to mention “steps or voices he had heard…figures he had seen sneaking round the house.” In the end, Mr. Oke’s obsession leads him to the jealousy he has for Mrs. Oke’s attachment to Lovelock, starting to believe that the two are spending time together, as if Mrs. Oke were cheating on him, just like the old Alice did to her husband. Thus, Mr. Oke’s obsession leads him to inevitable insanity.

• The narrator is obsessed with Mrs. Oke: The narrator’s obsession with Mrs. Oke is the weakest obsession out of the three because the narrator acknowledges it consciously, allowing him to remain lucid and controlled throughout the story, never letting the obsession take over him, as it did to Mr. and Mrs. Oke. He noted that for him, Mrs. Oke “seemed always to be present in one’s consciousness”, thus admitting that he constantly thought about Mrs. Oke. The narrator also feels that he knows the woman better than anyone else, including her husband, which is reaffirmed with “I doubt whether any one ever understood Alice Oke besides myself.” He makes strong statements about his relationship with Mrs. Oke, such as “I doubt whether any one ever understood Alice Oke besides myself;” and “I became interested in Mrs. Oke as if I had been in love with her; and I was not in the least in love…. But I had her on the brain. I pursued her, her physical image, her psychological explanation, with a kind of passion which filled my days, and prevented my ever feeling dull.” His obsession is strong, somewhat fueled by Mrs. Oke’s strange behavior, and somewhat by the narrator’s obsession with painting her in the exactly right angle that he wanted to in order to make the portrait perfect. The narrator makes hundreds of sketches of Mrs. Oke when all he did for Mr. Oke was paint him, without even a sketch. He justifies his focus on Mrs. Oke with art and the strive for the perfect painting of her, when instead the true reason is that he wants to spend more time with her, to observe her and to be able to understand what it is that she obsesses over, for the narrator does not notice Mr. Oke’s obsession until nearly the very end.
The Landscape of Okehurst

This picture shows how the Okehurst estate might have looked.

Malvern Hall in Warwickshire by John Constable, 1809. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Elements of Victorian Gothic in Okehurst (Gothic archetypes present)²

Isolated setting:

It must be a good mile and a half since we had passed a house, and there was nothing to be seen in the distance—nothing but the undulation of sere grass, sopped brown beneath the huge blackish oak-trees, and whence arose, from all sides a vague disconsolate bleating.

The Fallen Hero: Though Alice Oke is the focus of much of the narrative, it is the whole family that is doomed by her actions. The first Alice’s sins lead to a fall from grace for her entire family and ultimately ruins them for good.

The Wanderer figure:
Lovelock: Condemned for his affair with Alice Oke, he roams the countryside or house in solitude as a kind of exile.
William: Believes himself condemned for the sins of his ancestors, Alice won’t let him forget the shame of it—a kind of emotional exile for William.

An ancient prophecy:

A prophecy that when the head of his house and master of Okehurst, should marry another Alice Oke, descended from himself and his wife, there should be an end to the Okes of Okehurst.

Suspense: this is established not only with the eeriness of the setting as described by the painter, but in the immediate implication that the figures in the story die suddenly of unnatural causes. Readers don’t just suspect something horrific will happen; rather they are certain it is coming, it is the mysterious nature of the events which drives the suspense.

Androgyny: The otherworldly depictions of Alice Oke coupled with cross-dressing instances complicate the aesthetic representation of the woman and contribute to the blurring of gender lines through the narrative.

Doubling: There is an uncanny resemblance between the Alices, not only in name but in physical nature and costume as evidenced by the portraits.

Concludes with reunion between loved ones: Alice and Lovelock, Alice smiles and is wearing a lock of Lovelock’s auburn hair. It appears as a sort of reunion of lovers in death.
Mystery

This story is in many ways a mystery tale. From our first introduction to Alice Oke, the reader gets the sense that there is something going on at Okehurst, or at least there is something being hidden. The narrator, and so the reader, act as investigators, slowly learning and revealing the past Alice and Oke’s actions and the curse. But even after having discovered this, it still feels like there is more to be discovered. We never do find out the complete truth about exactly how or why Lovelock dies, but through the narrator’s experiences we are left wondering about plenty of other things as well. Among them, there are the questions of: will the curse be fulfilled, is there something supernatural occurring at Okehurst, why exactly is Alice Oke obsessed with her ancestors, and towards the end, does William really see someone with Alice in the yellow room? Not all of these mysteries are solved, but the murder at the end of the story is a classic ending technique of a mystery, resolving the fates of the characters.

The main component, however, that turns this story into a mystery one is the feeling of suspense that it inspires. Its dark and gloomy descriptions create malevolent undertones, which when Alice comes to the party dressed in the groom’s clothes that her ancestor might have worn when she murdered Lovelock, create a sense that bad things are about to happen. The further crazed delusions of William add to this, and the shade of Lovelock that haunts him makes us wonder if perhaps it really is a ghost coming to haunt him from the grave, while also giving the reader the suspicion that perhaps it really is just a regular man that might provide a logical explanation for events. We do not get this answer, but in the end, William’s actions lead him to be the ultimate culprit, and perhaps victim, of the story.

Madness: Psychology in Oke of Okehurst

Psychological Analysis

Throughout Oke of Okehurst, the narrator, an artist, analyzes Alice Oke not only physically as one might expect from an artist, but mentally. He constantly tries to describe her personality and her mental state, as a psychologist would. In the late 19th and early 20th century, advances in the field of psychology were highly publicized and discussed. The narrator’s evaluation of Alice could be a direct result of Vernon Lee’s wish to legitimize her narrative. It could also be seen as a critique of that same culture. This artist, who is by no means an actual psychologist, claims to understand Alice, and to be the only person who understands her. This is very presumptuous, and could represent people that Vernon Lee may have encountered in real life. The narrator, later in the story, also seeks to calm the increasingly delusional William by explaining his wife’s eccentricity and by trying to convince Oke that he is merely being paranoid. These explanations do not work, and it is only “…when I got on to the tack of his duty towards his wife and himself, and appealed to his moral and religious notions, I felt that I was making an impression”(149). Lee seems to be making the argument here that it is not the current, cold psychological analyses’ that hold power, but the emotional and moralistic arguments that do.

One thing to consider, if this is indeed the commentary that Lee intended to make, was that it is widely believed that Lee was a lesbian. At this time, there was a great increase in the psychological community of research into the “lesbian brain” and “lesbian mind”[3]. At this time, psychologists deemed this sexual orientation as a “perversion”, and thought of a lesbian as a masculinized female. They were also struggling to prove how this did not, in turn, make her like or better than the (considered) more powerful male gender. It is worth considering that Lee may have been indirectly critiquing this type of research. Lee herself was one of the leading developers of the Aesthetic movement, which was about analyzing how art affects each person and promoted the idea of art for art’s sake, and was itself a form of psychological analysis. But unlike the scholarly psychological doctrine, this movement focused on the intangible feelings one has rather than the “empirical” and patriarchal-ly slanted research being done at the time.

William Oke’s Descent into Paranoia

In the story, William starts out as the typical, “conscientious young Englishman”(117) that the narrator finds boring. Compared to his wife, who entrances and inspires the artist, William Oke seems to be a shade, hardly worth noting in the story except for his reactions to his wife’s jibes. But as the story progresses, and Alice Oke’s antics become bolder, we begin to see that William’s odd frown, which the narrator almost always notes, might have more significance than we were originally led to believe. We learn that Oke refuses to stay in the yellow drawing room alone because of the story that it might be haunted. This robust young man, who had at one time been a “great sportsman”(110), had exhibited a “listless, puzzled look, very much out of keeping with his evident admirable health and strength”(110) from even before we are introduced to Alice. So, while his mental state does notably decline, we can also assume that part of his mania has existed in some form since before this story’s beginning. The narrator in this story likes to analyze Alice, and her form of eccentricity, but it is not Alice who falls apart. In the story, William began to see visions, and to think that someone was sneaking around the estate to be with his wife. These phantoms disturb him, and no reassurances would comfort his mind. This is when Oke finally begins to submit to madness. Paranoid, he ends up not only ranting and spying on his wife, but shoots her when he tries to kill the man he had thought was in the room with her. Oke began in this story as a man who loved and wanted to protect his odd wife, but by the end is a madman who murders her. Alice’s preoccupation with the past, and constant provoking of William may have played a part in this degeneration, but William’s own fears, obsession, and possibly repressed or latent madness also led to the tragedy at the end.
Oke of Okehurst vs The Yellow Wallpaper

The Yellow Wallpaper is a short story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, featuring the first-person narrative of the woman who, despite the discouragement from those around her, transforms from a weak, disabled, child into an empowered, active woman. The narrator is a woman who has been labeled as ill by her male relatives and male doctors and moved to a house, into a room, that becomes her prison. She is forbidden from writing but sneaks and does so. She becomes obsessed with the woman behind the wallpaper and tried to free her. When she finally takes control of her life, she becomes the woman from behind the wallpaper and when she frees that woman, she frees herself. Click here for more...

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the ending of the short story so sudden and what could the fact that it’s a twist ending have to do with it?
2. Are there many indications before the fifth section that Mr. William of Okehurst is the one that is mad /going mad?
3. Why is the majority of the story focused on Mrs. Oke of Okehurst being the one to go mad? Could this be a simple trick on the reader to make the ending more dramatic, or is she mad as well?
4. Does the narrator’s personal opinion of the other characters heavily change what the reader thinks of them or is it possible for the reader to form their own opinions regardless of this?
5. How are Alice of Okehurst’s actions being dictated by the dead Alice? Is there any justification for William of Okehurst’s jealousy of Lovelock? Could it have anything to do with the hair that was found in Alice’s locket that is presumed to have been belonged to Lovelock?

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References

