
PSYCHOLOGICAL ENTRAPMENT AND SPATIAL POLITICS IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER*

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Abstract

This article examines the dialectical relationship between psychological entrapment and spatial politics in *The Yellow Wallpaper* to critique the domestic ideology of nineteenth-century America. The study explores how domestic and social spaces restrict women's agency, ability, and well-being through patriarchal expectations embedded within the home. Using theories of psychological entrapment and spatial politics, the analysis focuses on the protagonist's confinement in the nursery room, where surveillance, enforced isolation, and patriarchal control gradually lead to her psychological breakdown. The room and the yellow wallpaper symbolize the oppressive structures imposed on women, while simultaneously becoming sites of resistance. As the narrative progresses, the protagonist increasingly recognizes and resists the forces that confine her, culminating in the symbolic destruction of the wallpaper. The study argues that Charlotte Perkins Gilman transforms domestic space from a site of oppression into one of psychological and symbolic resistance. By connecting mental confinement with domestic spatial control, the article demonstrates how the story remains a significant feminist critique of patriarchal ideology and domesticity.

Keywords: *Charlotte Perkins Gilman; entrapment; politics; psychological; the yellow wallpaper.*

1. Introduction

By the turn of the nineteenth century, greater numbers of women took to education and gainful employment, but prevailing social attitudes isolated woman in the home as her natural and rightful place. The domestic space is depicted as a refuge, sacred and moral ground that provided women with fulfillment, yet served also to regulate the lives of women restricting their needs for intellectual and emotional self-determination. Enabling external gaze was portrayed as weakness, therefore bolstering the trapping of women within domesticity. While home can be restrictive, it was also a site for contestation where women negotiated, and resisted patriarchy through subtle manoeuvring.

Space, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* exemplifies, operates in a powerful role within the realm of women's psychological experience and social identity. Published in 1892, this story is recognized as one of the seminal works in American feminist literature. Trapped in an upstairs nursery as part of the "rest cure," Gilman uses the first-person perspective of a woman sedated by both medical and domestic practice to reveal

damaging institutions that stripped women of control over their own bodies and minds. The narrator's increasing obsession with the wallpaper shows us exactly how stale sitting and constrained environment is a morose agent of frustration.

Space is a highly contested political arena (Lamphere 2024): one on which economic, psychological and gendered effects overlap. This lens is particularly relevant to Gilman's text, in that the home interior serves as a cage not only literally but allegorically as an enclosure on male performance. Likewise, Nicklaus (2010) declares *The Yellow Wallpaper* needs to be interpreted systematically as a text based on the hot images and inner subjectivity of its narrative structure with underlying tensions from perhaps hidden visual readings. This concept further solidifies the need for exploration of these spatial arrangements and how they both enable mental degeneration and provide grounds for opposition to oppression.

It is possible to analyse it somewhat critically, in fact, feminist literary criticism has done just that pretty well. Some scholarship sees the wallpaper as a literal depiction of female oppression and madness and rebellion while others view Gilman's critique of nineteenth-century medicine and gender ideology. By this framework, the present study theorizes and discusses the sense of psychological enclosure that domestic space induces, expanding on Ghafoor Raouf and Sherko Ali (2018) grounding description in a metonym for American domestic novel canon/tradition. While this scholarship has cast light on the text, it often addresses domestic space and psychological decline as disparate concerns rather than mutually reinforcing forces.

Chapters on feminist reading in *The Yellow Wallpaper* have appeared from many angles of inquiry, but few of those individual works treat psychological entrapment and spatial politics as composite canon. Although much existing scholarship already examines the interplay of confinement, insanity and resistance it does so to a lesser extent with regard to how exactly in this case the physical environment actively constitutes both her mind and acts of resistance. And that this limitation implies a complete valuation of how Gilman transmutes the domestic realm into an active battleground for women's concurrent ideological assault and defense.

The article analyzes Gilman by using spatial politics to discuss the psychological entrapment of this protagonist and her negotiation and eventual resistance to domestication. Specifically, it investigates the symbolic purposes of the room itself and windows and walls as if they were material audiences of patriarchal oppression and collective psychological deterioration. Drawing on an examination of the relationship between spatial repression and mental perception, this study intends to demonstrate that the protagonist's madness is just as much a thread of resistance against the domestic ideology modeled by confinement.

A feminist literary criticism that investigates the confluence of psychological entrapment and spatial politics unveils how the two operate in succession to interrogate domestic ideology of the nineteenth century. This is how *The Yellow Wallpaper* turns not just into one story of an individual breaking down but also a counter-narrative of women that turn these places of oppression into affirmative landscapes.

2. Literature Review

The body of knowledge on this subject matter provides readers with a wealth of intellectual resources that serve particular function in putting the current investigation of psychological entrapment in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* into historical context. The complicated relations that occur between gender and spatial dynamics actually

constitute an important framework for exploring how this story brings together issues of gender, mental health — and institutional power. They are each set down in relation to both the wallpaper and the room itself (and also the very act of observing) through Gilman's deft symbolism. At the level of idea, critical stances toward home reinforce claims about how people (particularly women) are mentally trapped in physical spaces that oppress them as presented in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Hanna, 2023).

The idea of home, one that many of you, like me associate with a place of safety, security and nurture is one often addressed throughout feminist writing. Scholars contend that although the domestic sphere is culturally constructed as a site of refuge for women, it often operates as a source of oppression. Émile Zola offered a quiet critique of institutions that kept female shop workers apart from men in his *The Ladies' Paradise*. Written works of the loud suffragists, including Caroline Norton, Harriet Martineau, and Harriet Taylor Mill also demonstrate how deeply ingrained this expectation was in the public consciousness that a woman's place is 'in the home' – her sphere being naturally sacred (Arabovna & Rashidovna 2024).

Beliefs about women's separate sphere reached their zenith in the 1850s and 1860s, as the image of the home was framed ever more sharply against that of men's busy world. This ideology was often so powerful that it obscured the social realities of women from the consciousness, especially those of working-class women who struggled to be published in top journals. This idealization of domesticity drowned out the voices of many women and hid the conditions under which their lives were constrained (García, 2021).

So let us tackle the section about historical accounts of domestic space; Traditionally, representations of the home depict it as a domain with men behind the wheel in control. This conception is illustrated by midnineteenth-century periodicals and early twentieth-century fiction such as the writing of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. The public sphere was considered male territory, and ideal middle-class homes were becoming a sanctuary in a world dominated by work and industry. In this time period, when *The Yellow Wallpaper* was produced, the view that women were saved from loss of morality within the home was common. While this separation was intended to protect women from the supposed dangers of public life, it also severely limited their independence. In this way, even if having a private room in their own home, they do not have autonomy and control (Ghafoor Raouf & Sherko Ali, 2018).

2.1 Gender, Mental Health and Institutional Powers

The information discussed on the contemporary notions surrounding gender and mental health along with an invigorated academic interest in *The Yellow Wallpaper* render a new reading of the tale especially timely. The narrator is clearly suffering from what we now know as Postpartum Depression, but the so-called medical and social institutions of her time do not acknowledge it as a valid illness. The domestic sphere has emerged as the main focus of academics and activists alike, who have either emphasised women's entrapment here or her potential to offer resistance.

Gender, mental health and institutional power are still probably the most important components of this tragedy. Her husband is the ruler of her life, of what she can offer socially and flourish creatively. Insofar as her confinement comes from the dual presence of patriarchal and medical oppression, it is understandable that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar would characterize the narrator as a victim (Cuadrado Garcia, 2019). In fact, Gilman herself went through a similar experience when prescribed the infamous "rest cure" and had

also been written about critically in Watt's 2023 (Waham, 2023) research article as a critique of nineteenth century medical practice since women's mental health was simply ignored.

Drawing on key selections, they show that *The Yellow Wallpaper* represents domestic life and institutional care as both productively shaping the narrator's subjectivity and proudly robbing her of agency. Simultaneously the text articulated possibilities for resistance and negotiation, depicting home as potential prison and site of nurturing new female consciousness. The irony of the narrative voice and the open ending complicates any straightforward psychosocial classification or assessment (Herrity & Warr, 2023).

2.2 Symbolism and Narrative Technique

The Yellow Wallpaper is about the narrator being kept in an isolated room with barred windows while her symptoms of postpartum depression emerge. But even as modern medicine grew aware of the dangers of social isolation, nineteenth-century psychiatric protocols mandated rest and solitude for nervous malfunction without significant scientific documentation of utility.

The story is told from the first person perspective of an anonymous woman through her private journal entries. In this way, the narration provides an outlet for a narrator who cannot say those thoughts aloud; it also serves as a written record of her growing consciousness of the oppressive forces surrounding both her husband and society. The story is centered around the narrator and her slowly psychological deteriorating condition, with the yellow wallpaper itself being its representative and encapsulating both an enclosure or imprisonment of herself growing to realize this decomposition.

Its chaotic detail represents an image of imprisonment. Middle-class women were often written out of public life, but mental illness was a way their pain could come into the public eye. Conceptual Information The barred windows and the nursery background take over much of the narrator's mind-space, and this makes her ruminate on female creativity-set against the backdrop of women who stay in confinement (Ghafoor Raouf & Sherko Ali, 2018). In doing so, Gilman utilizes symbolism and the narrative form to comment on domestic entrapment, whilst being cognizant of the struggle with voice that women endure.

2.3 The Yellow Wallpaper in Critical Discourse

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's '*The Yellow Wallpaper*' continues to be a cornerstone work in all literary analysis, but especially regarding insanity, female authorship and gender oppression. The richness of themes and complexity of text has led to several major critical approaches. The first turns femininity and madness into a reading of the narrator's breakdown as an act of defiance. The second develops the autobiographical traces and the link of this story to both Gilman herself and her physician, Silas Weir Mitchell. A further frames this in broader cultural/political discussions of home, spatial control and closure (Ghafoor Raouf & Sherko Ali, 2018)

The scholarships are a testament to the fact that entrapment is an intricate concept that exists not only along emotional but also spatial and discursive planes. Authoritative systems regulate this voice so that her experience and the shape of the story are reintegrated into an inseparable whole. In this way, Gilman gives us an important example to sort out the relations between discourses of confinement, domestic control and female agency.

Thus, critical analysis usually worked through three questions: What historical meanings fall under the term entrapment; what spatial mechanisms sustain strategies of

domestic control; and how does voice relate to discourse and agency in its own telling (Gilman, 2022)?

3. Methodology

The current study utilizes qualitative textual analysis as the main methodology to explore the way psychological entrapment and spatial politics are represented in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. It is well-suited for literary research specifically because it allows you to do a close, systematic analysis of narrative structure, characterization, symbolism and thematic development. The method is concerned with interpreting the meaning that is created through language and form, not measuring numerical quantities of data. This method is applied in this study to explore how the second wave of a feminist writer, Gilman represents the psychological torment of the narrator caused by domesticity specifically through her nursery room and its strange wallpaper.

The theoretical framework for this study is situated between feminist literary criticism, spatial theory and psychological interpretative framework. Feminist criticism provides understanding (theoretical/practical) and establishes an appropriate framework, with the emphasised theory of incredibility in Butler's reading, to understand how local ideologies rooted in patriarchal space repression compel women into roles of dependency; having stripped them of their intellectual and emotional independence. The concept of space as both a social and political construct is fully theorized in the writings of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, which makes them theoretically useful for analyzing how power exerts itself through individuals' experiences in space and what strategies they then use to contest it. Psychological reading is used to chronicle the psychological downfall of the narrator and how external constraint and internal fragmentation are related. As such, these theory frontiers enable us to explain how domestic space functions as a psychological apparatus.

This type of analysis gets bolstered by strong examples taken from the primary text. I then pick out and analyze key excerpts showing the nursery, the wallpaper, entries from her diary and events depicting her husband. One tracks through this minute examination of diction and imagery, symbolism (both politics as a dirty image and physicality) narrative voice itself and fractures. Particularly focused on is the episodic and, at times, more fragmented first-person narration of the story as it reflects both the narrator's waning sanity and enhances his sense of entrapment. In effect, this makes textual evidence consistent with ideas of entrapment, surveillance and resistance

The study adopts a close reading as well as thematic analysis of the data sets in an interpretive strategy. Unlike close reading which interrogates language and form, thematic analysis pulls terms that reappear in relation to themes — domesticity; gender oppression; madness; confinement. The analysis traces the escalating viewpoint of the narrator in the room from passive discontent with it to actively identifying with the woman trapped behind the wallpaper. This turn is interpreted not only as psychological collapse but also an act of sexual rebellion against male power. By means of textual particulars and theoretical elaboration, the research reveals how Gilman critiques versus ideological female domesticity simultaneously as it exposes the complex interrelations between space, power and subjectivity.

The study shows how *The Yellow Wallpaper* fleshes out the domestic space as a site of both repression and transformation by employing this rigorous methodological framework. The narrative shows that the very act of creating systems of abuse and

patriarchal power can be acts of psychological captivity while simultaneously hinting at how those being oppressed might foster imaginative methods for survival. This approach of measuring the accuracy of the writing offers a formal and scientific understanding, and in turn lends authenticity and substance to the exploration of what this can mean.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The *Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a very eloquent demonstration of the traumas of domesticity that speak loudly to the reader even today when the focus on the home as the most perfectly created environment in which women can thrive is a strong theme of the Victorian age and the critical discourse of the present-day era that criticizes the complexities of power relations of space. The book eloquently captures the bleak seclusion of the main hero in an isolated rural estate, which strongly brings to mind the contemporary notions of the 19th century regarding housewifery and social roles women were supposed to fulfill. The wallpaper that captures her sight eventually becomes a sophisticated means to her personal and interpretative freedom and self-exploration. All through the text, this brilliant work of Gilman therefore places the phenomenon of entrapment either within the space of the home or within the spatial constraint or in regard to the feminine subject within its imaginative relation to the politics of the domestic space in a much broader context.

The strata of meaning involved in the fight against such entrapment highlight the fundamental struggles of the women who existed then and which are still relevant today with regard to the realms and roles that women now assume in the modern society. (Molesworth, 2021). The short stories of Gilman can be placed in a historiography in which the content and role of domesticity were in flux that was used to mark out a specific set of normative social expectations with regard to gendered space in particular. These traditionalized norms, both informal and formal, hold a strong force upon the habit of inhabiting spaces, and remain invested with an exemplifiable discursive existence which echoes across the modern-day feminization of domestic spaces and places. The *Yellow Wallpaper* stands out as a result of these multifaceted cross-over of these habitual practices, as well as a shared anxiety about ideas of female autonomy that are formed in particularly recognizable ways in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As the narrator actively interacts with the world around her she is watching the more arboreal and nearly suffocating manifestation of the domestic landscape that constitutes her life; the house itself is becoming the locus of her captivity and a means through which she tries to write and trace her own autobiographical text of domination of her own incarceration. Such a feeling of quarantine, pre- and post-natal, is revealed as a limitation that has a very strong influence on her own identity. Thus, the text carefully traces an ambivalent path to a more personal freedom, which is told in an increasingly dialogic and exploratory interaction with the spaces and objects around her, allowing her to have a more profound reflection on herself and emotional terrain. (Ghafoor Raouf & Sherko Ali, 2018)

4.2 Discussion

In response to the theorization of domesticity and an assessment of the centrality of space in a selection from *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the concept of psychological entrapment and spatial politics emerges as a zone worthy of further inquiry. The following section expands on these insights. Psychological entrapment denotes a continuum facilitating a tenuous stability among competing normative demands exerted by others in pursuit of the

individual's commitment in a variety of domains, including authority, social roles, and availability (Ghafoor Raouf & Sherko Ali, 2018). Spatial politics signifies contestation over access to and control of space and, hence, the potential for being enabled or constrained the potential for political power (舞, 2012).

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, psychological entrapment resides at the intersection of the domestic routine of social roles and the architectural constraints of space, creating a situation of restricted agency and control over the self. Both confinement and a history of socially mandated obligations sculpt the protagonist's entrapment. Because space operates as a conduit through which entrapment is negotiated and expresses simultaneously a means of potential resistance, a second dimension of analysis reveals that space designates a site of political power. At various moments, the protagonist's desires about space reflect efforts to transcend her domestic role and find a substitute a site traditionally associated with creative expression. By illustrating how these dimensions weave together, the analysis indicates that *The Yellow Wallpaper* extends consideration of domesticity beyond prevailing interpretations to encompass a broader understanding of space as a mechanism of control and, simultaneously, a zone of potential agency.

4.2.1 Entrapment and Domesticity

The mundane domesticity that the protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is repeatedly told she must "rest" for, to avoid stimulating her oppressed brain, is a microcosm of the wider structures trapping her. This social control plays upon and bolsters the architectural control inherent in the domestic built environment. Yet at the same time as the protagonist looks firstly in less concrete terms at the house itself — both it as a home, and as a prison, but also hints at perhaps intolerable constraints of both domesticity and architecture within that framework; she starts to formulate strategies of negotiation or resistance against her subordination. These factors are indicative of the constraining dimensions of domestic space that must be central to any understanding of the entrapment depicted in Gilman's text—an entrapment which has important implications for a conception of the political.

[The house itself, full of "rest cure," gradually holds her captive captive, through rest from writing, from exercise and from her own narrative desires. Between rest, of which writing is prohibited, the house begins to emerge as prison, as home that is both refuge and captivity. The initial description asserts and welcomes its qualities; domesticity unfolds further.] In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, therefore, domestic space emerges as a primary site through which the narrator is entrapped. Control supersedes the domestic routine itself; she is locked into space through the demands of domesticity. An architectural safeguard against illness becomes, in effect, a trap. The characterization of space may reflect forces of restraint, yet she attempts (albeit unsuccessfully) to negotiate its terms. Domesticity is both a condition and a register. *The Yellow Wallpaper* depicts the interplay involving domesticity, control, and enclosure by representing distinctive remarks and elements linked to space, enclosure, and transgression.

Through the imposition of domesticity, control begins early in the narrative, limiting and confining even the very manner in which the character can articulate her own desires and experience. Only observe in silence or within strictly regulated hours; any expression beyond is forbidden. Charted and calibrated. First via the inventory enumerated in the opening, which manifests as the continual and rigid regulation of an imprisoned mind. Domesticity signifies that to which the character is resigned. Contagion of hysteria infects narrator's discourse. She is cautioned against freedom, treated by the brother-practitioner

as patient, infantilized and, above, entrapment within domesticity. (Ghafoor Raouf & Sherko Ali, 2018).

4.2.2 Space as Power and Resistance

As I argue in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, space functions as both a site of and an imaginary realm through which we can work against power. The way that the heroine is caged in a plain white-walled room denotes the normalisation of domesticity based upon prevailing normative beliefs; so the redemptive power her husband sees in it is compromised and systems of surveillance and control are allowed to creep into domestic, intimate spaces. The analysis shows that even under this widespread and seemingly impenetrable social control, the protagonist has lines of flight and the ability to produce strategy. Space is utilized as an implement of control and an instrument for agency throughout the text. Control happens via domestic order and site-specific politics, while lines of flight also appear based along the way that tell a strikingly different story about dwelling. Home becomes a zone of negotiation between contradictory forces; space secures surveillance, but also serves as a site where one can conduct elusive subversion in relative privacy. Gilman presents an inscape marked by signification, through which the text interrogates domesticity's relationship to both agency and identity.

The text consistently conveys the view that space constitutes a major vector of power. Setting and milieu play an instrumental role in shaping individual lives, limiting opportunities for imagination, travel, sociability, and large-scale cultural engagement, whether through journeys abroad, movement through city streets, or participation in public rituals. Confinement to a single dwelling, room, or surface strips the individual of access to transformative experiences absorbed through broader textures and patterns of cultural traffic. Prose mimics the scale and stylisation of graphic invitations. At the same time, space delimits the package of possibilities conferred on the subject. In contrast to Emmeline Pankhurst's calls for radical action, *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the writings of contemporaneous poet T. Sturge Moore advocate a reconciliation of time and attention with property, reality, and constraint. (Ghafoor Raouf & Sherko Ali, 2018).

4.2.3 Narrative Voice and Subjectivity

Gilman creates this immersion in the protagonist's fragmented subjectivity through the first narrative from an unnamed woman, producing an intimate alignment between narration and psychological disintegration. The heroine of the story has what is described as 'temporary nervous depression', a diagnosis from the nineteenth century which closely matches our present examples of post-partum depression and female hysteria within patriarchal medical definitions, leaving her with her husband in the country and locked in an attic.

While a Foucauldian reading would claim the domestic space is operating as a disciplinary device upon its subject—a mechanism registering via surveillance, structuring through spatial restraint and medical authority, controlling both body and mind. The husband's role as doctor is amplified in relation to this arrangement, placing the narrator within Foucault's concept of 'biopower', whereby knowledge governed by medical regimes becomes a tool for regulation. In so doing the attic room becomes a micro-panopticon and the protagonist is able to internalise surveillance such that external forces are psychologically self-sustaining.

The narrator's voice, as hampered by her body, continually oscillated between a veneer of normalcy and the internalized anxiety that is constraining her conduct, which was distributed working under the societal model of an obedient Victorian spouse at first. But here, from a psychoanalytic reading, normality easily becomes unmoored by the return of the repressed; as hallucination and symbolic projection rise to fill her increasingly anxious mind, so too does obsession with the wallpaper. These manifestations are signs of a slow disintegration of ego due to imposed suppression and confinement.

The mood changes in the narrative reflect this growing conflict between achieved domesticity and a gradually disintegrating inner life with an emerging psychic fragmentation. The cage-like room, with cross-hatched windows and visually restrictive design, is both a physical enclosure and a metaphor of patriarchal subjugation. Nonneutrality of domestic space Within feminist spatial theory, whereby domestic space is understood as an ideologically produced form, it takes on a gendered architecture and ultimately limits the terms of female identity to passivity, compliance with power and emotional regulation. Noted scholars including Henri Lefebvre and feminist geographers have drawn our attention to the fact that space is socially produced, and we can think of the production of feminine docility — through spatial design — of the attic room as this.

The established control within the marital relationship precisely indicates where institutional (medicine, marriage, and domestic ideology) authority subsumes female agency. Strangely enough, it is this enclosure that creates the very possibility of resistance. The narrator starts to identify with the woman trapped behind the wallpaper, in a split subjectivity, where the unconscious creates another self that rejects symbolic order. The two conflicting positions of submission and rebellion embody what psychoanalysis defines as a disturbance in the symbolic father function, this being carried out by the husband;

On its own, one reading of the text through the combined lenses of entrapment theory, Foucauldian discipline, feminist spatial politics and psychoanalytic subject formation is inadequate; readers may nuance their understanding of spatial control in relation to female subjectivity alongside an understanding of this interrelationship. At once constraining, and simultaneously producing (in almost a paradoxical distortion of effect), the psychic rupture that heralds fragmented forms of agency; behaviour constituted through educational and domestic models. So much of the narrative exists between a normative and a subversive space, reflecting aspects of the feminine experience as regulatory and resistant (Hill, 1990).

5. Conclusion

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman writes about psychological entrapment and spatial politics. Psychological entrapment refers to the process whereby a person loses voluntary control over thoughts, behavioral patterns, and perception. Space politics revolves around the power mechanisms that control and define spatial configuration. The main research questions tackled in this analysis are the following: how does Gilman's work construct psychological entrapment and space politics? What broader theoretical questions can her novel address?

The general theoretical framework which governs this study is in line with feminist theoretical traditions. The purpose is to add to the feminist or female fiction studies through analyzing how the creation of female entrapment always comes with a parallel talk of space and how this can be politicized.

Space construction thus offers an opportunity to ask more general questions regarding power, agency, and resistance possibility. On a close examination of the text, entrapment, space and female subjectivity are constructed in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, using three interconnected axes. The domestic space and subjectivity can be observed by the wider historical situation in which actions of women were restricted to maintain order in the households. Institutional control is represented symbolically by the confinement room and the wallpaper. The shift of the first-person narrative position, voice, and tone develops as being a form of subjectivity that the female character is struggling with as trapped.

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