



Feminist Perspectives on Mental Health and Marriage in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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Abstract: An important writer who highlighted the topic of women and rooms is Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a journalist and a feminist intellectual in her time. Mainly, she had an interest in political and social justice, but the inferior status that women had inside the marital relationship was the central objective of her writing. In various works, Gilman claimed that women's requirement to remain in the context of marriage deprived them of the opportunity to explore their full creative and intellectual potential, while also depriving society of women with skills suitable for public and professional life. She argued that the traditional family hierarchy was something that did not make any family member content - neither the husband, who was transformed into a master, nor the wife, who had become an unpaid domestic worker, and certainly not the children, who were subordinated to both of their parents. She also had a strong opinion on women's economic freedom, firmly believing that it could be beneficial to society itself. By promoting those ideas, Gilman was a predecessor of Virginia Woolf's concepts and thoughts in *A Room of One's Own*.

Keywords: feminism; mental health; mental illness; depression; rest cure; gender inequality; patriarchy; self-expression; women's subordination; literary criticism; psychological horror; stream of consciousness.

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Introduction

Gilman is predominantly remembered for *The Yellow Wallpaper*, an astonishing and eye-opening story, which shocked readers at the time and continues to do so up to the present. It is a brief fictional story about an unbalanced relationship in which the wife is ruined by her unfulfilled need for self-expression, while also addressing the same concepts and issues as Gilman's nonfiction, but in a far more personal way, as it is based on a very traumatic event in the author's life. She suffered from a serious case of depression, a condition that was worsened by the presence of her husband and her baby daughter, as she states in *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, a 1935 autobiography. Her doctor, a male, considered that depression was caused by too much mental activity and not enough focus on household matters, particularly in the case of his female patients. In such circumstances, his prescription was a rest cure, which was a complete catastrophe for Gilman. She experienced a nervous breakdown after being prohibited from working for too long. During her worst phase, she even began creeping into closets and under beds while holding a rag doll. Her state ameliorated after she stopped taking the rest treatment, even though she believed she would be affected by the trauma her entire life. Soon after that, she started writing *The Yellow Wallpaper*, using her individual experience to produce a story that is a terrifying portrayal of one woman's descent into madness, as well as a striking metaphorical narration of the destiny of talented women suffocated by a patriarchal civilisation. The dramatic force of Gilman's story is an anticipation of the emotionally taxing story of Judith Shakespeare in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

The story is written through the eyes of an insane narrator. Its storytelling approach aims to realistically represent a character's cognitive process. On account of the internal monologue, it reports the narrator's thoughts very quickly as time passes, proceeding towards the stream-of-consciousness narration, also applied in the works by twentieth-century writers, such as James Joyce or Virginia Woolf. Readers can follow our protagonist's thoughts in real-time through stream-of-consciousness writing, allowing them to comprehend not just what they do, but most importantly, why they do it. It captures the continuous course of a character's psychological state, wherein ideas, reactions, or thoughts may all occur at the same time without any meaningful or reasonable transition. This term was first applied by William James in his most significant written work *The Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890. He was the first to characterize consciousness as a stream, a series of interconnected experiences:

"Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is

mostly naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.” (239, ch.9)

With the aid of this method, *The Yellow Wallpaper* portrays the story of a young woman's constant decrease into madness. Considering it was written before women were afforded the right to vote in the United States, it is frequently considered an early feminist work. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a part of the first wave of feminism, and her works addressed the causes of women's subordination, especially in marriage. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is no exception, since it uses psychological horror story themes to criticise women's roles inside the marital relationship, particularly as conducted by the “honorable” classes of their society. When it originally came out, most readers thought it was just a scary fiction about a woman falling into madness. Interpretations of the story have become more nuanced since its resurrection in the twentieth century. The rigorous division between the “domestic” responsibilities of the female and the “productive” duties of the male, according to Gilman, guaranteed that women continued to exist as second-class citizens in nineteenth-century middle-class marriages. This gender separation, according to the narrative, kept women in a state of subordination and prevented their full advancement. Convinced that he “helps” his spouse, John's arrogant assumption about his own superior intelligence and maturity causes him to misunderstand, underestimate, disrespect, and manipulate her: “John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him” (7). When she expresses her anxieties, both actual and those that occur as a consequence of her depression, he dismisses her complaints and laughs at her: “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (1). Additionally, she even avoids informing him what is happening to her, out of fear that he would not take her seriously: “I had no intention of telling him it was about the *wallpaper* - he would make fun of me” (17). The narrator is reduced to behaving like a querulous, irascible child, still unable to assert herself unless appearing irrational and ungrateful. She has no influence even in the tiniest parts of her own existence, so she withdraws into her compulsive daydream, the only situation where she has command and therefore is able to exert her mentality. Upper-middle-class women, such as the narrator, can go for long stretches of time without going out in public. According to the narrative, this system forced women into a posture of ignorance, helplessness and naïveté. As a result, she seems to have no control over anything in her life, along with her own mental condition, feeling powerless to object:

“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? [...] I

sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus - but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad.” (4)

The essential parts of the narrator’s struggle are represented in this paragraph, which is written near the opening of the chapter. Her spouse, family, and the medical system all speak loudly and authoritatively, urging her to be inactive. Her personal view, on the other hand, is that she requires the exact opposite - engagement, activity, and encouragement. Her ideas have little significance from the beginning. She uses the term “personally” a few times, indicating that she dislikes her treatment, but she has no opportunity to alter it. Gilman also manages to describe the narrator at this point. The mistake about the “phosphates or phosphites” suggests that she is unconcerned about the factual precision. The abrupt flow of the words, which are sometimes fragmented within one paragraph, evokes the narrator’s hasty writing in her private journal, in addition to her unsettled mental state.

With regard to identity and self-expression, the mental limits imposed on the narrator, rather than the physical ones, are what eventually send her into a rage. All through the text, the narrator is forbidden from doing what she enjoys and what feels natural to her, such as writing. She is always looking for emotional and intellectual outlet, and she even keeps a private notebook, which she has described as a relief for her mind on several occasions: “ ... but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind” (3); “I don’t know why I should write this. I don’t want to. I don’t feel able. And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think in some way - it is such a relief!” (12). Despite how comforted she feels when writing, she knows that her husband would not appreciate her disobedience of the treatment.

Consequently, she hurriedly stows her diary away on several occasions when John or anyone else approaches: “There comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word” (6); “There comes John’s sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing” (9). To give the impression that she has been healing, she presses herself to act joyfully and comfortably, which is far worse. Additionally, she is obliged to conceal her worries and questions with a focus on maintaining the appearance of a healthy marriage. She tries to be a wonderful partner in the traditional sense, but she finds it difficult to adjust, particularly with almost nothing to do. The rest cure has pushed the narrator into solitude and obedience, and she urgently needs an emotional and mental escape. The most excruciating features of her treatment are the forced silence and inactivity. Unfortunately, she is not given one and it is obvious that this kind of cure is problematic. She feels lonely and tries to keep her feelings hidden from John and everyone else so that she does not give the impression of still being ill: “I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time. Of course I don’t when John is here, or anybody

else, but when I am alone". Her mental state is exacerbated by the fact that she feels surrounded by individuals she cannot confide in. John advises her repeatedly that she must exercise self-restraint in order to retain her imagination. Needless to say, the narrator's ultimate lunacy is the result of her creative talent being suppressed rather than expressed. A mind confined in a position of imposed idleness, according to Gilman, is condemned to self-destruction.

An important symbol in Gilman's short story is the narrator's journal. She utilizes it to give the narrative a sense of deep intimacy, particularly when it is disturbed by John or his sister's coming. These disruptions wonderfully reflect the protagonist's limitations imposed by them, who tell her not to worry about her "condition." The narrator writes to herself in epistolary fiction. Gilman used this style to portray the protagonist's journey into insanity both from a subjective and an objective perspective. The readers would just not understand the confusion if the author had presented her narrative in a typical first-person style, recounting incidents from within the narrator's mind and the woman from the inside of the wallpaper may appear to truly exist.

The sociopolitical implications of the narrative would have been hidden if Gilman had recounted it from a neutral, third-person perspective, without exposing the narrator's feelings. An additional symbol is represented by the wallpaper. As a consequence, its meaning grows throughout the short story. It appears merely ugly at first glance, while it is shredded, stained, and a "smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight" (6). The seemingly amorphous design is the worst aspect, which intrigues the protagonist, as she needs to find out how it is put together. She looks at it for hours and, behind it, she notices a shadowy sub-pattern discernible just in a particular light. Ultimately, the sub-pattern emerges as a terrified woman, creeping in search of a way out from the main pattern, which has taken the appearance of cage bars: "This is why I watch it always. [...] At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be." (15-16) This cage, according to the narrator, is embellished with the skulls of several women, who were all strangled as they attempted to make a bolt for freedom.

Undoubtedly, the wallpaper reflects the narrator's imprisonment inside the structures of the patriarchal society. Gilman masterfully portrays it as a metaphor of the household lifestyle that captures far too many women. In the climax of the story, the protagonist has accomplished to pull off the necessary part of the wallpaper, just before her husband ultimately gets into her room, and the lady she spotted underneath has become free. Now, the two women are one and the same. "I don't like to look out of the windows even - there are so many of those creeping women,

and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did? But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope - you don't get me out in the road there" (22). This is the precise moment of the ultimate recognition: the narrator eventually understands the connection she has ignored throughout the story, a connection that the reader has thus far followed. The one "stooping down and creeping" (13) behind the pattern was, in fact, herself. She admits that there are a lot of women in a related position, a great number of women, so many that she cannot look at them, as she is too frightened. Her inquiry is deep and complicated: did they all have to go through what she went through? Were they also confined to houses that served as prisons? Was their condition also worsened by the people who were supposed to help them? Did they all have to destroy their lives to achieve freedom? As the protagonist has issues with answering these questions, she leaves them for the reader to analyze. I strongly believe that all those women are one, and one is all women, as they all have this horrible experience in common. Gilman firmly highlights that this case is not a particular one and that there are many women out there who cannot be themselves in a society that was organized in a misogynistic way.

Another significant writing tool in Gilman's story is irony. She utilizes this as a technique for conveying several levels of meaning which contrast or confuse one another via the use of words. These words are commonly used orally to express the absolute reverse of their original meaning. The protagonist frequently utilizes verbal irony in her diary, particularly in relation to her partner: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (3). However, none of this is expected in a successful and good relationship. "I am glad my case is not serious" (7), she adds later, when it is evident that she is anxious since her condition is quite concerning. An additional type of irony is the situational one, which occurs when a character's efforts have the contrary consequence of what they have planned. John's prescription, for example, spirals out of control, increasing the misery he was attempting to address and turning his wife to complete madness. Furthermore, the manner in which the protagonist's destiny unfolds is full of irony. Only through abandoning her consciousness and rationality does she achieve a sense of empowerment and discernment. When the reader's knowledge differs from the awareness of the characters in the text, dramatic irony arises. "The Yellow Wallpaper" makes considerable use of dramatic irony. In the passage where the protagonist originally mentions the bedroom John has picked for them, she describes strange aspects and concludes that it must have formerly been a nursery.

"It was a nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls. The paint and paper looks as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off - the paper- in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach,

and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.” (6)

From the beginning of the story, the readers can tell the difference between reality and the protagonist's thoughts: they can interpret another reasonable clarification for this kind of room - it could have formerly been home to a lunatic individual. The narrator delves deeper into her delusion while the reader is capable of observing her behavior from the outside, this only making a bigger impact towards the end of the narrative. Although the readers could already have their own perceptions regarding the end of the story, they can sympathize with the narrator when she finally resonates with the captive woman she witnesses in the wallpaper, along with John's amazement at what he discovers when sees his wife. “Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time” (23). This is the passage that marks the end of the story, where irony is employed once more. The fact that the woman cannot understand the reason why her husband has fainted and continues to creep over him illustrates the difference between the readers' and her perspective. They can identify the reason for her husband's fainting, but she is not able to acknowledge her descent into madness.

Conclusion

Using many representative symbols, such as the room, the wallpaper, or the journal, “The Yellow Wallpaper” educates readers on women's mental health, maternity, mental illness and treatments, feminism, and gender inequality in late-nineteenth-century America. During the period when Perkins Gilman published this short story, commenting about a woman's mental health was seen as a daring move. Society thought that writing about women's lives was irrelevant and could be destructive to a writer's career. On the other hand, “The Yellow Paper” has managed to become one of several classic masterpieces of feminist literature, while representing a significant examination of women's roles in marriage and society.

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