

## **CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN**

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### **"THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"**

**Gil 1.** Berman, Jeffrey. "The Unrestful Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" In *The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis*. New York: New York University Press, 1985. Pp. 33–59.

*The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* discusses events in Gilman's life that are relevant to understanding "The Yellow Wallpaper." Her father, soon to become a prominent librarian, deserted the family upon learning that his wife, for health reasons, was advised not to bear more children. Gilman's mother withheld affection from Charlotte, one of two surviving children out of four, reasoning that if the girl did not expect affection then she could not be hurt in the future (34–35). In response, Charlotte created a dream world that sustained her until her mother told her it was wrong to fantasize; the thirteen-year-old girl obeyed (36). Even though she had misgivings about the institution of marriage, she, at twenty-three, wedded Charles Walter Stetson (37) and ten months later bore a daughter and immediately entered into a severe depression (38). Seeking a change, she left for California and improved. Upon arriving home and feeling the depression returning, she sought the help of the well-known neurologist S. Weir Mitchell, who prescribed a rest cure (39). For months she complied. Realizing, however, that her condition was deteriorating and that marriage and motherhood were the sources of her affliction, she divorced her husband (39). Motherhood for Gilman represented "weakness and passivity" (39) and was "the ultimate human sacrifice" (40). Gilman's life affected her writings, both the nonfiction, which gained her fame, and the fiction, especially "The Yellow Wallpaper." Especially relevant to the development of her theories concerning women and their relationship to the culture was the trauma caused by her parents' actions (40–45). S. Weir Mitchell, a well known psychiatrist (author of numerous standard medical texts) and fiction writer (nineteen novels), introduced the rest cure, with its components of bed rest and minimum stimulation (46). Although most of his patients were women, he held conservative views concerning them and their roles (47). Information concerning Mitchell's treatment of Gilman comes from her own autobiographical writing (49).

Turning to Mitchell after three years of depression, she entered into the rest cure confident that it would alleviate her problems (49). After a month, Mitchell sent her home with explicit directions, among which was "never touch a pen, brush or pencil as long as you live" (50). After three months, she rejected Mitchell's advice and began writing, immediately making gains toward a recovery (50). Perhaps the rest cure failed with Gilman because although Mitchell supported the idea of motherhood, she did not: "She was attempting to flee from the domestic prison of the mother's world—the parasitic world of abject dependency upon men, the depressing routine of endless drudgery, screaming babies, intellectual impoverishment, and helpless resignation. Mitchell's paternalistic therapy locked her into the mother's role" (50). As Gilman herself acknowledges, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a fictionalized version of her breakdown and treatment, with the ending suggesting the outcome for Gilman had she continued Mitchell's regimen (51). Comparing the autobiographical account of the breakdown and cure with the fictional version suggests that the short story is more direct and honest (52). In the autobiography, Gilman describes her husband as being without fault, but in the story the narrator's husband, insensitive and patronizing, forbids her to write (52). For Gilman writing leads to salvation; when the fictional narrator is denied writing, her recovery becomes impossible (53). The home, both for Gilman—as evident in her later tome *The Home: Its Work and Influence*—and for the narrator, is seen as a prison, as is suggested by the bars on the nursery (53). The wallpaper, a projection of the narrator's fears, symbolizes her conflicting emotions about motherhood and marriage (53–55). Indeed, "the wallpaper recreates the mother's inescapable horror of children and her regression to infancy. The pattern and sub-pattern mirror her terrified identification with the abandoned child and abandoning mother" (55). The wallpaper also suggests the narrator's uneasiness about sex, an uneasiness also seen in her desire to sleep downstairs in a room with a single bed (56). Stating that she wrote the story "to convince him [Mitchell] of the error of his ways" (58), Gilman sent him a copy and later discovered that he subsequently changed his treatment (58). **HIST**

**Gil 2.** Feldstein, Richard. "Reader, Text, and Ambiguous Referentiality in 'The Yellow Wall-Paper.'" In *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Eds. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989. Pp. 269–79.

In the manuscript of the story the word "wallpaper" appears three different ways: wall paper, wall-paper, and wallpaper. Editors, however, without justification, have imposed consistency in publication (270). Feldstein argues that the ambiguity is intentional, for the word refers to something that "resists analysis" (270), much as the narrator

resists her husband's analysis. She "produces a feminist counterdiscourse" (271) that opposes his traditional, patriarchal one. Many critics argue that because the narrator succumbs to madness (as is indicated, for instance, by her gnawing of the bedframe and her crawling around the room), she cannot be a feminist (271). However, the ending seems ironic, and the narrator's madness seems questionable (273). The narrator's actions provide an ironic alternative to the world view of John (273). Although he treats her as a young girl, she responds by resisting his authority in many ways, feigning sleep at night, pretending not to write, and refusing to respond to his treatment (273). Reading the story as a narrative of the mental breakdown of a woman is to accept the authorities' view. But reading it as a narrative of a woman's resistance brings into question the culture's assumptions about madness and women (274). The narrator identifies with other oppressed women as represented in the wallpaper (275). Her creeping is a form of resistance and revenge (275). If the narrator and protagonist are identical, the ending takes on additional meaning, for the protagonist must have recovered sufficiently from her madness in order to write an account of it (277). **HIST, FEM**

**Gil 3.** Golden, Catherine. "'Overwriting' the Rest Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Literary Escape from S. Weir Mitchell's Fictionalization of Women." In *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. Ed. Joanne B. Karpinski. New York: G.K. Hall, 1992. Pp. 144–58.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was just one of many well-known writers, such as Walt Whitman, treated by S. Weir Mitchell, a famous neurologist and novelist, or treated according to his rest cure therapy, such as Virginia Woolf (144). Gilman not only rejected Mitchell's therapy and his orders not to write but also created a story that criticized his methods and included him in it (145). Gilman "'overwrote' Mitchell's efforts" to make her into a compliant female patient (145). The rest cure relies on secluding the patient for six to eight weeks during which time the patient is allowed no stimulation such as visits from friends, diversions, such as sewing or exercise, and is given a high fat diet (147). Even so, Mitchell's treatment was more progressive than others which relied on ovariectomies to relieve depression (146). Although Mitchell did not write about Perkins in his fiction, his protagonists, most often passive females who depend on strong males, frequently suffer from mental problems and are treated by the rest cure (145–47). "The Yellow Wallpaper" takes the same themes and situations found in Mitchell's fiction but suggests different results and conclusions (151). Gilman's protagonist at the outset is as passive and submissive as Mitchell's heroines, but through her madness she gains strength (151). John, her husband, has the confidence and authority seen in Mitchell's male characters (152),

but his fainting at the conclusion illustrates his failure to understand his wife (152). The narrator, at first, resists his orders: she secretly writes in her journal and pretends to sleep (153). However, because she is entrapped within the house, her recovery is doomed, and she chooses madness over becoming the submissive woman that John and Mitchell in his novels and practice prefer (154). The story thus illustrates the damage done to women who accept the patriarchal view (154). Literature offered Gilman "an opportunity to challenge the restrictions imposed upon women" (155). **FEM, HIST**

**Gil 4.** Hedges, Elaine R. "'Out at Last'? 'The Yellow Wallpaper' after Two Decades of Feminist Criticism." *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. Ed. Joanne B. Karpinski. New York: G.K. Hall, 1992. Pp. 222–33.

An overview of the criticism of Gilman's story since its re-publication in 1973 shows that the work is now firmly established in the literary canon and has been the subject of numerous critical studies with often widely divergent interpretations (222). The two prime areas of contention concern the symbolism of the wallpaper and the meaning of the conclusion, in which the mad narrator creeps over her husband (who has fainted). The first critical studies considered the story as a woman's attempt at achieving autonomy while facing limitations set by society. The wall paper, then, becomes a symbol of oppressive traditional gender roles (223) and the conclusion, then, is seen as a victory since the narrator escapes from them (224). The mid-eighties saw readings based on the ideas of Jacques Lacan. In these, the narrator does not achieve a semblance of autonomy but instead is oppressed by male discourse, from which she escapes only by moving from the Symbolic realm back into the Imaginary one of an infant (224–25). These readings consider the color and odor of the wallpaper; both relate to the culture's repression of female sexuality, resulting in the narrator's inability to accept her sexual nature (225). The conclusion is seen in a negative light. The narrator is unable to accept her sexuality, or (if one considers the organic quality of the wallpaper) she is unable to accept motherhood (226). The nineties brought articles that, challenging the earlier critics, argued that "The Yellow Wallpaper" should not be read as containing a message for women. Such a reading, which assumes that all women share certain characteristics, is essentialistic (226). Rather, the story should be read as a product of the culture in which it was produced. Thus, the wallpaper with its yellow color and strange smell symbolizes the fear at that time of overwhelming immigration from southern Europe and Asia (227). Other critics discover in the story an indictment of capitalism (227). No longer is the narrator seen as on a journey towards selfhood; instead, she is a victim of the "culture of consumption" (227). The changing interpretations reflect the different historical periods of the critics them-

selves. The year that "The Wallpaper" was reissued was the year of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, a period in which women's fight for autonomy was achieving some victories (229). Thus, reading the story as a woman's attempt at creating an identity seemed natural (229). The more recent critical approaches come out of changes in the political and intellectual climate (230). The failure of the Equal Rights Amendment, among other events, helped create a climate of "skepticism or disillusionment about women's power to create and sustain significant political and social change," and the new (post-structuralist) critical theories question the concept of identity and the ability to control one's life (230). While some recent critics read the conclusion as the defeat of the narrator, most see the text as succeeding in its critique of the culture (230). **FEM, PSY, PLUR, NHIST, HIST**

**Gil 5.** Hume, Beverly A. "Gilman's 'Interminable Grotesque': The Narrator of 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 28 (Fall 1991): 477–84.

The narrator becomes a grotesque figure, representing the general state of women in the nineteenth century (477). Although the narrator fights the social forces that oppress her, ultimately she is defeated (477). One source of oppression is John, the narrator's husband, who maintains traditionally paternalistic views (478). Although the narrator rebels against him, her rebellion does not lead to freedom but to defeat and insanity (480). Ironically, when John realizes the extent of his wife's madness, he faints, a stereotypic response of a nineteenth-century woman (478). The narrator, untraditionally for women, uses writing to try to understand her difficulties, which she sees as stemming from a situation with gothic qualities (479). The narrator's writing and the wallpaper have certain commonalities: they are both seemingly random at first reading but on a deeper inspection have a grotesque pattern (480). The narrator wants to interpret the pattern in the wallpaper, but it is difficult to comprehend the grotesque, with its "elements of humor and horror" (483). Eventually in her attempt to unravel the wallpaper's design, she "merges into it, and in effect, becomes it—as the woman in the wallpaper" (481). Through her intense desire to understand the grotesque, the narrator becomes part of it herself (482). **THEM, HIST, FEM**

**Gil 6.** Jacobus, Mary. "An Unnecessary Maze of Sign-Reading." *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. Pp. 229–48.

Gilman wrote a gothic tale that "tapped male hysteria about women" (235). The female body is seen by the culture and John as "repugnant," and thus female desire is oppressed (235). Therefore, when John finally confronts his wife and the feminine other she represents, he faints (236).

Madness, which John will not accept, is attributed to women by the culture: knowledge is the province of men, while subjectivity (with its closeness to madness) is the province of women (237). Gilman links the gothic, the oppression of women, and the repression of the feminine in the story (239). The narrator illustrates the oppression by first accepting her husband's authority and then literally by creeping (239). The gothic or uncanny is incorporated into the story by the questions it raises. Was it the narrator or a previous tenant who gnawed the bedstead? Was the room used as a nursery or as a prison for another mad woman? Is the past being repeated by the narrator? (240). John faints because he is confronted by "an embodiment of the animality of woman unredeemed by (masculine) reason" (241). The narrator represents male fears about femininity and female sexuality (242). Represented in the story by the color yellow and the smell of the wallpaper, female sexuality is a subject not allowed in literature of the late nineteenth century (242–43). Although the wallpaper suggests female sexuality, it also represents a text that cannot be read, even though the narrator attempts to do so (245). And at the conclusion, she becomes a figure in her own reading of the text: she sees herself as the woman imprisoned behind the bars of the wallpaper (247). **FEM, HIST, THEM**

Gil 7. Johnson, Greg. "Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 26 (1989): 521–30.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" contains several elements of a gothic tale: "the themes of confinement and rebellion, forbidden desire and 'irrational' fear ... the distraught heroine, the forbidding mansion, and the powerfully repressive male antagonist" (522). Gilman uses gothic conventions to relate her tale of the oppression encountered by a nineteenth-century woman (522). The narrator, caught between the practical world of her husband and her own imaginative one, attempts to save herself through writing, detailing her journey inward to discover her selfhood (523). Because her husband John has no tolerance for the narrator's imagination, he represses her, treating her like a child (524). She, however, "creat[es] a Gothic alternative to the stifling daylight world of her husband and society at large" (524). Her imaginative growth and developing selfhood are seen in her growing awareness of the wallpaper (524). At first, in daylight, she sees the suggestion of a pattern in the wallpaper; then, at dusk, the pattern becomes clearer; finally, in the moonlight she discerns a woman trapped beneath the paper (524–25). She then identifies with the woman and realizes that the source of her own power lies in her imagination (525). Neither the imaginative nor the practical world can comprehend the other. Since the rational cannot comprehend the imaginative and vice versa, the narrator must supply her own text in defiance of John (527). She does this by writing her

journal, an act of disobedience (527). Another text in the story—the wallpaper—tells the story of oppression, with which the narrator comes to terms in her journal (528). The conclusion, in which she has liberated the figure imprisoned within the wallpaper, seems positive. The narrator's crawling suggests "insistent growth into a new stage of being" (529). Developing from a helpless individual in bed (similar to an infant), she has progressed to a crawling child (529). John, in a reversal of the roles typical of a gothic tale, faints at the sight of her (529). **HIST, THEM, FEM**

**Gil 8.** Kasmer, Lisa. "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper': A Symptomatic Reading." *Literature and Psychology* 36 (1990): 1–15.

Unlike the male editors and readers who disapproved of the story in the late nineteenth century (1), contemporary feminist readers have canonized it (2). Recent feminist critics see the narrator's husband's inability to understand her as typifying earlier readers' inability to understand the story, and the narrator's search for freedom, which she finds by pulling down the wallpaper, as representing women's search for freedom (2–4). The text reveals feminine "moments ... that disrupt the male desire, allowing the desires of the woman to emerge" (4). The moments are found in the "symptomatic points, or the impasses of meaning, in [the narrator's] journal" (4). The narrator, although slightly questioning John's prescribed treatment for her, acquiesces to his diagnosis on the basis of his authority; in doing so, she accepts his discourse, which considers her as a child who must be protected and cared for (4–5). According to Jacques Lacan, a child, entering into language, acquires the prevailing discourse, even though it does not completely represent the child (6). The language that the narrator has accepted is a patriarchal discourse that assumes male as the standard and female as the other and that typifies the nineteenth-century view of women as inferiors who need guidance and protection (6). The feelings that the narrator is unable to express in the patriarchal language are evident in her journal as symptomatic points, such as when she conjectures that perhaps the reason that she is not improving is related to the fact that John is a doctor (7). After failing to convince John of her condition, she focuses on the wallpaper as if it holds a key to understanding herself (7). On one level the wallpaper represents the oppressiveness of her marriage; on another level it offers freedom from such oppression (8). The wallpaper, suggesting *écriture féminine* as discussed by Helene Cixous, represents a discourse that is not contained by male discourse and is opposed to it (8). Because of the connection between the wallpaper and the narrator, the implication is that the narrator is disrupting male discourse and is doing so in a discourse that arises from her desires and her body (9). The emotions she attributes to the wallpaper are ones that

John would have her deny (10). Her language begins to change as she describes the wallpaper. Instead of using short declarative sentences, she employs complex ones filled with phrases (11). Her description of the wallpaper also aptly describes herself imprisoned in an oppressive marriage (11). However, instead of seeing the wallpaper as a symbol, she sees it as reality; she has regressed to the state of a child, leaving the symbolic realm behind (12). The conclusion does not imply liberation; instead, the narrator is trapped in the imaginary realm, without access to the symbolic, and thus has lost the ability to communicate (12). However, Gilman, unlike the narrator, does communicate successfully (through her use of symbols) information about her own mental breakdown (13). **FEM, READ-R, PSY**

**Gil 9.** Shumaker, Conrad. "'Too Terribly Good to Be Printed': Charlotte Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *American Literature* 57 (1985): 588–99.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" was rejected by one editor because of its possible impact on the audience; later it was included in a collection by William Dean Howells with the comment that it is "too terribly good to be printed" (588). What the readers were objecting to was the subject: mental breakdown in a middle-class woman (589). More contemporary readers find the story to be a condemnation of gender roles (589). The story presents a particular world view (589): women represent imagination whereas men typify rationalism and realism, conflict and tension being created by the opposing forces (590). Gilman, as a young girl, was ordered by her mother to forego daydreaming; she complied. Likewise, the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is ordered by her husband John to rest; she, however, mentally begins to explore the wallpaper (590). John does not understand, nor can he accept that work (or in her case writing) can be therapeutic and that rest can be detrimental (591). He fears her imagination and sees madness as a result of too much imagination (591–92): "Imagination and art are subversive because they threaten to undermine his [John's] materialistic universe" (592). John's attempts to have the narrator ignore her imagination ironically result in her destruction (592). Traditional gender roles promote fear of the imagination because it is assigned to women, who are considered to be inferior (593). The narrator understands John's stance, but she is unable to communicate her position and instead uses her journal to discuss what she cannot discuss with him (593). Because he represents reason as opposed to her imagination, the narrator doubts herself and is not capable of questioning John or the society that supports his position (594). But he is as much a prisoner of society's views as she is (595). Gilman uses the structure of the story to emphasize her themes. Foreshadowing suggests that the narrator is mad (even though she is unaware of it) and suggests that she is separating herself from the traditional role of wife

(595). The pattern of the wallpaper and the bars on the window suggest the trapped nature of female gender roles (596). The window symbolizes freedom, but her only freedom is to creep (597). Madness also affords another type of freedom; she has freed herself from her roles as wife and mother, and no one "not even Jane—the wife she once was—can put her back" (597–98). The unpopularity of the story when it was first published can be attributed to the sharp criticism it contains of nineteenth-century attitudes (598). **THEM, FEM, FORM, HIST**

B.W.

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