

TEARING IT DOWN: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S 'THE YELLOW WALLPAPER'

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Abstract

First published in 1892 by American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' has been acknowledged as the perfect representation of women's gothic literature during the Victorian age. Despite having founded its fame in the history of horror fiction, Gilman's short story was later re-established as a proponent of feminist literature. With its strikingly female-focused approach, the display of patriarchal norms and rules, and the narrator's descent into madness, the story's feministic nature pervades all the other elements. Over a century later, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' proves relevant even in contemporary times, making its analysis a rather fitting addition to the study of Gilman's short story.

Keywords: Feminism, Feminist Criticism, Madness, Hysteria, Patriarchy, Freedom, Gender Roles, Gender norms, Victorian

INTRODUCTION

Feminism has often been associated with revisiting and revising past literature in search for traces of the suppressed female voice. This search has led to the discovery of many prized works of literature, one of which is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. The story, in its essence, follows the feminist journey of finding one's voice: from the narrator trying to fit into her husband's shadow, to her noticing the flaws in her society, to finally finding the freedom of expression.

Written in the Victorian era, Gilman met the standards of the society's taste; she created a gothic tale of a haunted house and a woman going mad. But the real meaning, much unwelcome by society and men, was camouflaged under the perfect representation of Victorian morality. The struggle, the voicelessness, the isolation, the control, and the madness—this was the truth of women in the patriarchal society. Showalter, in her essay 'Literary Criticism', describes the analysis from a feminist critic's perspective where "The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint." (qtd. in Showalter, 1981, p. 204) Using the lens of feminist criticism, this paper aims to analyse the narrator as a woman of the society and a woman of her own. Various symbols of patriarchy, oppression and female emancipation will also be analyzed in this study.

ANALYSIS

The Victorian morality, which defined the set norms and rules of the age, piled excessively on the female race. Women were expected to be a representation of grace, delicacy and elegance. The Victorian woman is often seen in the image of a child: young, innocent, naive, and incapable of independence. The reliant nature follows through every step of her life, from depending on her father, to brother, to husband to son; the cycle is endless. The lack of agency impels women's thoughts and actions to fit into the mould created by their male counterparts. Men, as manufacturers and maintainers of the patriarchal norms, display complete control over every image and aspect of womanhood. As the picture perfect reflection of Victorian society, the narrator in Gilman's story counteracts each of her personal observations with what "ought to be" (Gilman, 1892, p. 4), or with what her husband "expects from her" (p. 14). Her inability to make a decision for herself despite having a mind of her own displays a fear of being rejected, both by the society and by her lawful patron. She repeatedly wonders "what is one to do?" whenever contested with her husband's 'better' knowledge.

The character's authority and reliability as a narrator is also questioned throughout the story. She makes wild observations about the house, the wallpaper, and the people around her. Though the story clearly directs us away from the supernatural and towards her gradually developing madness, one must ask the question: Is she really mad? Her speech and action, although losing sense and reason towards the end, show her in complete freedom from control. Only when she starts losing her sanity is she seen, and heard. The act of repeatedly negating and inferiorizing her experiences began way early, before she displayed any of the symptoms for madness. Women were simply ignored because they were women. The essence of womanhood brings with it

an air of instability, inferiority and unreliability. Her declining mental health and obsession with the wallpaper add to her inconsistency, providing a foil to her ever-reasonable and very practical husband, John. This is a relevant theme in many Victorian novels, where the woman's voice is made unreliable by putting her in a position of impaired judgement; for example, Mrs. Bennet, the first female character presented in *Pride and Prejudice*, is described as a woman of "mean understanding and uncertain temper" who when discontented, "fancied herself nervous" (Austen, 1813, p. 5). Such stereotypes formed the base of Victorian womanhood. Though common in the age, they now represent the social condition of the era, showcasing women's lack of voice.

The Victorian woman's identity was defined by her devotion as a daughter, sister, wife and mother. Her life revolved around her family. Any deviance from the set gender norms was seen not just as indecent but also as a scar upon one's honour. When this pure and good image was threatened by a change in the female nature, hysteria became a riskless label to define this divergence. Furthermore, women's sex organs were condemned to be the cause of their mental and emotional turmoil, and "unnatural" behaviour. In order to 'cure' this sickness, women were either prescribed a period of inactivity, or performed a hysterectomy on, getting rid of the inflicted organ itself. In 'The Yellow Wallpaper', the narrator's physician husband shifts her to a country home for a 'rest-cure' which, in reality, worsens her mental condition, leading to her eventual emancipation. Instead, it is her husband who, at several points in the story, reprimands her for engaging in any "fancies" such as writing, or even thinking, because these would worsen her health. (Gilman, pp. 13, 14, 32).

In her 1981 essay, Showalter writes "The nineteenth-century woman writer inscribed her own sickness, her madness, her anorexia, her agoraphobia, and her paralysis in her texts". This is the truth with American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who revealed that the short story was loosely based on her own experience as a patient of nervous condition. Scharnhorst suggests this was originated by Dr. Weir Mitchell, a renowned physician of the age, who used "rest-cure"—a treatment that suggests consistent inactivity—in female patients with nervous disorders or "hysteria" (1985). This treatment, once prescribed to Gilman, almost led her to madness, inspiring the creation of the gothic tale.

Writing, especially as a way of income, was reserved only for men. Female expression and employment through literature was looked down upon and often associated with prostitution. In a letter to Charlotte Bronte, writer Robert Southey wrote "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it even as an accomplishment and a recreation" (qtd. in Buzwell, 2020). This describes the reproach and admonition women writers received from the Victorian society, and the same can be observed in John's disapproval of the narrator's interest in writing. His distaste of the female expression becomes clear through the narrator's speech "he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman, 1892, p. 9).

The Marxist-feminist angle suggests that men, being the dominant class, try to control and manipulate the outflow of creativity and literature from the oppressed class of women, so as to keep the power in their hands intact. This also asserts a complete authority over history, created only from the experiences of men, while "women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism or circumlocution." (Showalter, 1981, p. 193). Women are not given a chance to relay their alternate truths, which differ from the totalizing masculine truths. The narrator, being denied a chance at creative release, suppresses her rage and frustration to the point of breaking. This breaking point defines her final act of freedom and agency.

John's speech displays a lot of manipulation and deception, what one would call in contemporary times as 'gaslighting'. John keeps coaxing his wife into believing that she is indeed getting better, that his prescribed mode of treatment has been successful; but the narrator knows—and even mentions—that her health is the same, if not worse. The husband legitimizes himself and his words by patronizing and chiding his wife, "you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know." (Gilman, 1892, p. 30). Since women were generally considered incapable of knowing and understanding things better due to their smaller brain sizes, their suggestions and decisions were ignored, coerced, or rejected by men. When the narrator in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' asks to change rooms, her demand is swayed with sweet words of manipulation. "Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he would go down cellar, if I wished, and have it whitewashed into the bargain." (p. 12) Unlike Clara from 'David Copperfield' who lets her husband and sister-in-law push her around, the narrator in this story does not lose her identity, but is rather strengthened to pursue her obsession further (Dickens, 1849).

The narrator's obsession with the wallpaper is contrasted by her husband's obsession with reason and rationale. As the narrator descends into a state of rightful chaos and opinion, her husband loses his sweet coaxing nature to a more disciplinarian role. He chides her for acting wayward, and continues to tell her "You really are better, dear" when they both know the truth. (Gilman, 1892, p. 30). Up until the very end of the story, the husband does not, for one moment, even pretend to listen and care about the narrator's delusions. He rejects them, using reason and logic to deny anything that threatens his knowledge. The narrator makes an observation about it: "John is a physician, and perhaps ... that is one reason I do not get well faster." (p. 2). John, instead of providing support and confidence to his wife, latches onto reality and empiricism to keep safe his own sanity.

The narrator's relationship with the wallpaper is the most complicated of them all. She begins by hating the pattern because it commits "every artistic sin." (p. 8). Gradually, the wallpaper becomes less an object of hatred, and more a medium of curiosity. The narrator describes the patterns on the wallpaper as something "not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of." Finally, she grows fond of the paper, to a point of obsession. "I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wall paper, perhaps because of the wall paper." (p. 21).

In retrospect, the wallpaper represents herself bound in the restraints of patriarchy. The 'sinful' pattern portrays her deviating mind, where her personal thoughts do not fit into the moral code of her society. The pattern, with its lack of order and structure, defines the patriarchy, whose emergence and establishment are not based on any fact or reason. The disgusted fascination with this rather unexplained pattern (of ideas) shows the feminist urge to root from and criticise Patriarchy. "The feminist obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanizing or even attacking the male critical theory keeps us dependent upon it and retards our progress in solving our own theoretical problems." (Showalter, 1981, p. 183). As the narrator's perception of the pattern becomes clear, she finds a woman, symbolic of herself, trapped inside "bars" (Gilman, p. 34). Contradictory to Showalter's notion, it is the realization that she is trapped within her society which finally helps her break out of the restraints. Women, as a part of the cultural institution, need to learn, evolve and digress from the structures which previously defined them.

Rocherfort explains that "[...] it is, in a sense, the literature of the colonized." (qtd. in Showalter, p. 197). Much like the colonized, women absorbed the culture of their colonizers, men, to create an identity of their own. In this way, they create a sort of meta-colonialism, using the colonization to speak, and succeeding in destroying, colonization itself. Language plays a crucial role in the story. Showalter, in her 1981 essay, writes "[...] all language is the language of the dominant order, and women, if they speak at all, must speak through it." (p. 200). Gilman uses the language of patriarchy; "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage." (p. 1). The colonization and oppression of the woman is defined, not by her protest, but by her compliance.

The smaller, almost negligible examples of a private rebellion are visible through the cracks of her perfectly composed gracefulness: "I did write for a while in spite of them [...]" (p. 3). It presents a palimpsest, where the woman's identity has been erased and rewritten by the standards of patriarchy, yet her voice is not completely dissolved. She makes use of humility and naivete, features fitting the Victorian delicacy of womanhood, to mock and criticize her husband. "I am glad my case is not serious!" (p. 10). This is analogous with Madeline Miller's rewriting of the Greek mythology 'Galatea' where the narrator tells the reader how she 'ought' to behave, making the societal expectations explicit (2013, p. 9).

Halfway through the story, the narrator mentions a baby, bringing her condition's vague and uninformed diagnosis to a distinguishable label of Postpartum depression. PPD and other conditions were generalized as hysteria and treated in the same manner. A 2022 article by Healthline media insists that a PPD patient "avoid isolating oneself", which is the exact opposite of the narrator's case.

Gynocritics assert a connection between women's bodies and their writing. Gilbert and Gubar ask "If the pen is a metaphorical penis, from what organ can females generate texts?" (1979, pp. 6-7) Gilman's story suggests it is the womb. It is through motherhood that the narrator finally escapes the structures of society, releasing herself and her creativity in the process. Though many factors contribute to her decline, it is essentially through motherhood that she becomes mad.

The theme of madness is introduced through the narrator's growing obsession with the yellow wallpaper of her room. As previously established, the pattern represents patriarchy; but it is through the narrator's speech that one realizes the extent of control it has over her. The "absurd, unblinking eyes" watch her every movement, representing Foucault's theory of a panopticon where the prisoners find themselves under surveillance all the time. The narrator, hence, is a prisoner in the room (Foucault, 1975). The initial description of the room, which is in fact a nursery, depicts all the features of a prison, with its barred windows and nailed-down bed. (Gilman, 1892, p. 7) The wallpaper around the bed is peeled as far as the narrator, a woman, can reach. Later, at the climax of her madness, the narrator herself peels the wallpaper (p. 51). She further complains about the gnawed bed frame, and follows immediately by gnawing on it herself (pp. 50-51). This repetition seems less likely to be a co-incidence made by the author, and more a chance that another woman was previously "made" mad here.

The nursery also represents the state of regression in the process of madness. The narrator is made to live in a nursery with crib-like barred windows, and the wallpaper as her only means of entertainment. She stares at the wallpaper, making an observation about how she used to do this as a child (p. 16). Finally, as she identifies with the woman in the wallpaper, she begins to creep around the room, something only babies or toddlers do. Finding herself in the youngest stage of existence which gives her the utmost freedom, the narrator succeeds at breaking herself out of the social bounds that restrict adults.

The narrator's madness permeates throughout the story in allusion to the popular madwoman in the attic, Bertha Mason (Bronte, 1847). A queer mystery shrouds the narrator's individual life, which she makes no special mention of, except when she makes wild assertions about the things and people around her. "I thought seriously of burning the house," she mentions casually, to rid herself of an odor. The narrator belongs to the spectrum of madness alongside Bertha, but on a precedent stage of thinking, while Bertha presents the

execution. The narrator also considers suicide, not as an escape, but as “an admirable exercise” (p. 52). In a mad attempt to fully express themselves, the narrator and Bertha Mason both blur the lines between expression and injury, hurting themselves and those around.

The figure in the wallpaper, first a formless being, slowly develops into a woman who the narrator first tries to understand, then free, until finally she starts thinking of herself as the woman in the wallpaper. The woman in the wallpaper shows herself in the dark, or at night—just like the narrator’s individual thoughts (Gilman, pp. 39- 42). Pretending to be the perfect wife and woman, the narrator remains restrained in the social prison throughout the day. It is only during the night that the narrator finds herself; the wilderness where she enjoys femaleness spatially, experientially and metaphysically (Showalter, 1981, p. 205). When her personal space is threatened at night by John: “He might even want to take me away.” (Gilman, 1892, p. 38), she becomes desperate and starts “creeping in the daylight” (p. 45). Women’s need for a space of their own becomes significant here. The narrator’s madness becomes a result of this solitary prison, finally making her forget her own identity in the midst of the woman in the wallpaper. In the concluding paragraph, the narrator addresses her own self, Jane, as an antagonist alongside John (p. 55). Jane can thus be seen as the socially constructed woman, while the woman in the wallpaper is her alternate, and real self.

CONCLUSION

The short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is, against Victorian belief, much more than a gothic tale of horror. It presents elements not only suited to the women of the age, but are relevant even today. The universality and relatability of the story is both commendable and shocking. More than a century later, the themes are still found compelling and sympathetic by women. The prevalence of patriarchy continues to persist decades down the line, but it is through feminist criticism that the female voice is found and given the power to shine through the dark curtains of male hegemony. “The Yellow Wallpaper” continues to remain a classic example of female expression and emancipation, and a lot more left to decode.

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