



The Position of Women in 19th century America: Reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'

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Abstract

This article explores gender norms as seen in 19th century America through a critical reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892). A pioneering feminist work of American literature, the text draws upon the autobiographical elements of the author's life to engage with the dominant notions that surround women within the male-dominated realm of medicine. By analysing how 'hysteria' became a blanket term for a host of 'women-centric' mental health issues and 'rest cure' a popular treatment for the same, the underlying oppressive patriarchal structure of society is highlighted. This is further linked to fixed gender roles as seen through the institution of marriage, which represses women by stripping them of physical and intellectual freedom. This article explores the impact of this confinement and through it foregrounds the act of writing as one of self-assertion and self-expression, which allows breaking free of social conventions.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender roles, Mental health, Oppression, Self-expression



The patriarchal structure of society rests on the essentialist notion of gender. This involves an equation of sex with gender and the belief that the nature of males and females is determined biologically, not culturally. Using this theory, male and female stereotypes have been established in society as mutually exclusive binaries.¹ Further, based on the opposing characteristics attributed to each sex, a hierarchy is established and traditional gender roles are defined. Julia Kristeva engages with this idea by borrowing James Joyce's phrase "Father's time, Mother's species",² and through it delineates two distinct dimensions that humans occupy. While men inhabit the public space of culture and history, women are relegated to the private realm of the household. As opposed to linear time, this realm is defined in terms of cyclical and monumental time. Women's role is hence seen in terms of recreation of old, repetitive activities – cooking and cleaning, or birthing and the generation of species. The inability to enter the public socio-political domain, that is, the realm of the logical and the ontological, signifies oppression and a lack of voice.

The discriminatory patriarchal norms that led to the confinement of women and the consequences of the same have been explored extensively in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's most celebrated work, 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. The story revolves around an unnamed protagonist, who, having been diagnosed with neurasthenia or 'a temporary nervous depression' by her physician husband is prescribed 'rest cure',³ wherein she is isolated from the public space and kept away from all intellectual endeavours. Thereafter, the story traces, through a first-person account in the form of journal entries, her increasing obsession with the sickly-yellow wallpaper in her room and eventual descent into madness. The text draws upon autobiographical elements of Gilman's life, who suffered from postpartum depression and was misdiagnosed and mistreated by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the founder of the 'rest cure' protocol. She stated that the real purpose of the story was to convince the renowned physician of the error of his ways. Through it, she engages with the dominant notions surrounding women within the male-dominated realm of medicine, wherein a host of women's mental health issues were misdiagnosed as hysteria. Not only did the 19th-century medical establishment not have an insight into women's psyche, but the differences in the cure for the same neurasthenic symptoms experienced by men and women also bring out its prescriptive nature. The 'rest cure' prescribed to women stressed upon complete physical rest in isolation, confined within the domestic sphere. It also prohibited all intellectual activities and Dr. Mitchell himself instructed Gilman to "live as domestic a life as possible" and "never to touch a pen, brush or pencil again".⁴ On the other hand, men were prescribed 'West Cure', that is, they were encouraged to travel out West, engage in vigorous physical activity in the midst of nature, and write about the experience. This clearly showcases reinforcement of what was seen as 'proper' sexual behaviour based on biological essentialism. Not only did this lead to a clear division between the domains of the sexes, but also led to the domination of men over women's bodies, intellect, and psyche. This is highlighted by Jane F. Thairkill who presents a feminist reading of the text. She states that Gilman's treatment at the hands of Mitchell is "paradigmatic of the patriarchal silencing of women."⁵

In the story, the enforcer of patriarchy is the protagonist's husband, John, who is also her physician. Hence, he represents the amalgamation of two oppressive structures—the 19th-century medical establishment and the institution of marriage—that together undermine the narrator's voice and her thoughts. Presented as the paragon of rationality, he holds a materialistic worldview, treating



only physical symptoms of his wife's illness, while dismissing her notions that the sickness might be of a psychological nature. He states, "...there is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as your physician when I tell you so?"⁶ While she has doubts about the treatment meted out to her, which she expresses in her writings, she constantly undermines herself by finding fault with her own sensitivity. She also asserts that her husband knows what is best for her as he is guided by reason—"Comments such as these reveal more powerfully than any direct statement could the way she is trapped by the conception of herself which she has accepted from John and the society whose values he represents."⁷ This is the result of the constant condescension she is met with by John, who treats her like a child, referring to her as 'little girl' and 'blessed little goose'. This effectively dismantles any authority she holds over her own body, feelings, or thoughts. He disregards all her ideas as being the result of her 'imaginative power' and 'excited fancies', and views them as the prime reason for her 'nervous condition'. This once again showcases the rigid gender norms, which create a hierarchical binary between reason and imagination. According to Elizabeth Carey, 'imagination' is a decidedly gendered term, associated with that which is feminine and hence weak.⁸ For the masculine rational world, it represents something that cannot be understood and hence must be curtailed. Therefore, John prohibits the protagonist from writing, which forces her to maintain a journal surreptitiously.

The narrator is hence not only subjected to physical isolation, but also, her intellectual impulses are so greatly repressed and life so devoid of stimulus, that she becomes more and more obsessed with the yellow wallpaper in her room. In the beginning, she finds the colour repulsive and the pattern full of aesthetic contradictions. Jurgen Wolter explores how the protagonist maps onto the wallpaper and its 'suffocating, strangling patterns', her own history and that of the women in 19th century America.⁹ Thus, she sees a female figure, which soon turns into many such figures, lurking behind the front pattern, shaking the bars, wishing to escape. Initially seen as revolting, the wallpaper is soon appropriated by the narrator who showcases ownership over it. It is transformed into a text waiting to be deciphered as she continues to record all her thoughts regarding the same in her journal. She decides to free the woman behind the wallpaper, which becomes a means to gain freedom for herself as the two figures conflate into one. This is made evident when she addresses John and says, "I've got out at last...And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"¹⁰ The story ends with the narrator creeping over her fainted husband. She seems to have broken free from the societal conventions that have fettered her. But the dominant reading of the text is that the freedom she gains is limited in nature as she is still confined within the room. Furthermore, the oppression she undergoes loosens her grip on reality. However, Monika Fludernik claims that despite being mentally imbalanced, the protagonist is intellectually in control of her narrative; while Denise D. Knight reads the narrator's behaviour not as a sign of insanity, but rather as "an expression of tremendous rage she feels towards her husband."¹¹ Such readings of the text expose the importance of writing as a means of self-assertion. Gilman conceived of the protagonist not just as a narrator, but as a writer who "reads the wallpaper with her own code and writes two highly subversive stories: one in her diary, and the other one on the wall as a palimpsest."¹² Through this, she gains the agency to create a room and a text of her own, uncontrolled by John and the patriarchal system that he represents.

Despite having been written more than a century ago, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' continues to be relevant in starting a conversation regarding gender, as all over the world many women still



continue to struggle for agency over themselves, their bodies, and minds. Taking control of one's narrative thus becomes a crucial part of gaining autonomy. Furthermore, highlighting women's voices is critical to addressing and understanding the patriarchal structure of society that binds us all. It is only through this that the rigid gender norms can be questioned, and the existing hierarchies dismantled.

Notes

¹ Gender essentialism attributes certain fixed qualities to men and women, based on the idea of biological essentialism. Thus, gender is commonly perceived as something natural and innate as it is closely associated with one's biological and physiological makeup. However, according to Judith Butler, gender is a construct. It is not propelled by an underlying essence or behaviour, but rather, it is in "performing gender" (which is based on ritualised repetition) that the notion of "gendered beings" is created, reproduced and sustained. She claims, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results." Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 33.

² Kristeva, Jardine and Blake, "Women's Time," p. 15.

³ 'Rest cure', developed by Silas Weir Mitchell, was used to treat neurasthenia, the result of an exhausted nervous system. It was also used as a treatment for hysteria in women, for which Dr. Mitchell was widely criticized by feminists. The cure consisted of "a regime of forced bed rest, restricted diet, and a combination of massage and electrical muscle stimulation in place of exercise." Harris, "From rest cure, to work cure," p. 26.

⁴ Stiles, 'Go rest, young man,' p. 32.

⁵ Thrailkill, 'Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' p. 11.

⁶ Gilman, 'The Yellow Wallpaper', p. 11.

⁷ Shumaker, 'Too Terribly Good to be Printed', p. 594.

⁸ Carey, 'Controlling the Female Psyche.'

⁹ Wolter, 'The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses,' pp. 195–210.

¹⁰ Gilman, 'The Yellow Wallpaper', p. 18.

¹¹ Wolter, 'The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses,' p. 205.

¹² Ibid, p. 203.



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