



“Subverting Patriarchal Control through the Construction of Meaning in "The Yellow Wallpaper"”

by Nikolas Oliver

There is much to be made of mental illness in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," especially of whether the narrator is, or becomes, mentally ill. It would, however, require a skilled critic and psychoanalyst to wholly prove that the story's narrator is not. Gilman further complicated this task when her article "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper?" was published. In this article, she detailed how she was given a treatment regimen like that of the story's protagonist, and how it pushed her "so near the border line of utter mental ruin that [she] could see over."¹ It is not, temptation notwithstanding, within my qualifications to act as any person's psychiatrist, even if that person is fictional. Mentally ill or otherwise, however, the narrator is not either of those two things exclusively. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the story of a woman who, while under patriarchal control, constructs and instills a meaning upon the environment around her, which allows her to subvert partially that control.

Marriage and family have robbed the narrator of self-determination. The

story begins with the unnamed narrator completely under the control of her husband, John. The power dynamic between them is like that of a parent with a child. He is both the person who gets to make determinations regarding her medical care, as well as the one who communicates her present physical and mental state to friends and family members.² Moreover, when she expresses any feeling that does not conform to John's lack of "patience with faith...[and his] intense horror of superstition," he "scoffs openly."³ At times he "laughs at [her]," but the narrator has learned not to take offense to it, as "one expects that in marriage."⁴ The narrator suspects, however, that John's governance of her care contributes to her slow recovery. She remarks, "[p]ersonally, I disagree with their ideas," but she is in no position to challenge them.⁵ John is a physician, and, ostensibly, is qualified to prescribe a treatment method, as is her own brother, whose diagnosis and recommendations mirror what John's dictates. In the story's initial segment, the narrator writes the phrase "what is one to do?" several times, but, considering

¹ Charlotte P. Gilman, "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper?" in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, ed. Dale M. Bauer (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 349.

² Charlotte P. Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, ed. Dale M. Bauer (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 41.

³ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 41.

⁴ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 41.

⁵ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 42.

that her medium is a journal, the question is necessarily rhetorical: at present, she does not have the means to escape this control.⁶ John's selection of a room with barred windows for her temporary residence, despite her wishes, is therefore a fitting choice for making clear the manifold ways in which the narrator is imprisoned.

The narrator is also denied, to the best ability of her husband and brother, any means of self-expression, and her external stimulus is extremely limited. She remarks that she "did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal," but the source of her exhaustion is not the writing itself, but the hiding of it.⁷ The reader observes this hiding at numerous points in the story, such as when the narrator must cease journaling because of another character's approach. John explains that "with [her] imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like [hers] is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that [she] ought to...check the tendency."⁸ He believes that writing would exacerbate her illness, a diagnosis with which the narrator disagrees, but the

exhaustion she feels from doing so generally succeeds in preventing her from writing often.

All that remains to her are short and restrained periods in which she is able to leave her bedroom because John believes that exposing her to too much sensory input would also contribute to her illness. This method of treatment becomes suspect if one considers philosopher David Hume's bundle theory, which states that humans have no continuous self and are nothing more than a bundle of successive perceptions.⁹ Hume argues that the self cannot be continuous and is instead ever changing because, for the self to be continuous, it would be necessary for one to have at least one sensory perception that is "constant and invariable," and that no such thing exists.¹⁰ From a Humean perspective, John's limitations over that to which the narrator may be exposed accomplishes two things. The first is that, by narrowing her sensory exposure, he literally narrows her existence into being whatever he wants for her to be. The second is that, by exposing her only to the same sets of sensory inputs, she is essentially unchanging; therefore, the

⁶ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 41-42.

⁷ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 42.

⁸ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 46.

⁹ David Hume, "The Self," in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of*

Philosophy, ed. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau, 15th ed (N.p.: Cengage Learning, 2013), 377.

¹⁰ Hume, "The Self," 375.



treatment cannot possibly hope to work.

The narrator is able to subvert the limiting treatment of her husband, however, by her examination and gradual destruction of the yellow wallpaper. Reduced to being nearly unable to self-express through writing, and exposed to very little stimuli, the wallpaper becomes her best available means of creating meaning. Writer Jonathan Culler, in his explanation of reader response theory, adequately explains what the narrator does over the course of the story:

...the meaning of a text is the experience of the reader (an experience that includes hesitations, conjectures, and self-corrections). If a literary work is conceived as a succession of actions upon the understanding of a reader, then an interpretation of the work can be a story of that encounter, with its ups and downs: various conventions or expectations are brought into play, connections are posited, and expectations defeated or confirmed. To interpret a work is to tell a story of reading...¹¹

Some liberty must be given to apply this logic to what the narrator is doing – the

yellow wallpaper is not a work of written literature, after all – but if one agrees with Derrida, everything should be considered as text.¹² It is a certainty that the narrator imposes meaning on the wallpaper over time.

Occasionally, the narrator sounds rather like a reader response theorist herself: “There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.”¹³ Furthermore, she is dependent on the wallpaper being a text, rather than something blank. Knowing that it gives her some amount of trouble, John offers to white wash it for her. She says that she “would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim,” but to reduce the walls to a state of blankness would eliminate her ability to react to them as a reader and impose meaning upon them in that manner.¹⁴ If she were to impose meaning onto a white washed wall, free of the already present markings on the yellow wallpaper, what she would be doing would be writing, an action from which she is both restricted by John and unable to do without considerable effort and fatigue. As a reader, the narrator gradually inserts a version of herself into the yellow wallpaper.

¹¹ Jonathan D. Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 64.

¹² Jonathan D. Culler, *Literary Theory*, 12.

¹³ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 50.

¹⁴ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 44.



After her initial revulsion to it, she finds that it lingers in her mind.¹⁵ She comes to see what might be a “faint figure behind [who] seem[s] to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out,” and it does not take a great imaginative leap to conceive of the narrator and the woman in the wallpaper as paralleling one another.¹⁶ She continues her attempts to analyze the paper’s appearance, but its pattern is “torturing. You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault.”¹⁷ Over time, however, her mastery of the text grows, as does her certainty that she is interpreting correctly the appearance of a trapped woman.¹⁸ She comes to observe that the woman is “trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so,”¹⁹ just as the narrator is unable to “jump out of [her] window...[because] the bars are too strong to even try.”²⁰ After she fully accepts the interpretation that there is a trapped woman within the paper, she chooses to destroy it in an attempt to release her. However, the trapped woman is only present because the narrator interprets her to be by

completing the meaning of the text with the experience that she has herself brought. In destroying that text and freeing the confined woman, she frees herself, telling her husband “I’ve got out at last...And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!”²¹ Interaction with a text as a means of self-expression becomes a means of self-liberation.

One might argue that the problem with this reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is that every vision the narrator experiences of the trapped woman could very easily be written off as the consequence of mental illness; perhaps it says something negative about reader response theory to suspect that the actions of a reader completing the meaning of a text are comparable to the hallucinations of an insane person. Nevertheless, application of that specific critical lens both is fair to the text and allows for a reading in which the narrator, mentally ill or otherwise, is enabled to subvert patriarchal control. Perhaps it is that very uncertainty, that very blurring between the enactment of analytical power and insane deconstruction that captures the essence and appeal of

¹⁵ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 48.

¹⁶ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 50.

¹⁷ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 51.

¹⁸ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 52.

¹⁹ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 55.

²⁰ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 57.

²¹ Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 58.



reader response theory at large. Surely, nothing could be more alluring than a critical mode that validates one's own opinions and experiences in conjunction with a text. Few things could, at least in a certain light, be more maddening.

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