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Madness as protest: Charlotte Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' as a subversive text

Abstract:

My paper analyses Charlotte Gilman's short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) using feminist theories of the body that argue that the body is inscribed by culture, is both a site of surrender and of resistance, and that madness (a bodily condition) - an outcome of repressed conflict - is a form of protest. The story undermines a patriarchal structure through a convincing depiction of the suppression of women in the Victorian era and of the descent into insanity - an outcome of this suppression. The subversive power of the story is increased by the strategies - both overt and covert, structural and stylistic - Gilman employs. The use of first person narration, in particular of the journal form, allows a subversive subtext and creates an intimacy between the reader and the narrator. The use of symbols and ironical statement, apart from supporting the subtext, allows, as does the open ending, the reader's imagination to play a role and invites her/him to participate in the creation of the text.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Feminist - Body - Surrender - Resistance - Madness - Sub-text - Symbolism - Irony

Charlotte Gilman's celebrated short story, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1899)ⁱ is a classic example of a subversive text. Written during the Victorian period – a period when, despite some advances in women's rights, women were expected to be, as Virginia Woolf puts it, the 'angel in the house' (1941 in Gilbert and Gubar 2007) - it suggests, through a powerful portrayal of a descent into insanity, the tragic outcome of a construction of femininity that suppresses the real needs of women. The story's specific focus is the 'rest cure', the standard treatment of the day prescribed for women diagnosed with hysteriaⁱⁱ. Its wider purpose, clearly, was to question the suppression of women in the Victorian era, including the complicity of the medical profession, the 'rest cure' - which entailed a denial of mental stimulation and self-expression - being, in fact, a means of controlling women. The strategies – overt and covert, stylistic and structural – that Gilman employs to achieve this purpose increase the impact of the story.

Early analysts of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' see it as a gothic tale – gripping, disturbing, but little moreⁱⁱⁱ. It is only after its rediscovery in the early 1970's that the readings become more complex and it is read from a feminist perspective^{iv}. Some critics argue that Gilman found in the conventions of the Gothic genre a forum to question the subordination of women. As Angie Pazhavila (2007) argues, the Gothic genre provided women writers the ideal medium in which to conceal radical critiques of the gender politics of their age. This paper draws on the feminist analyses of 'The Yellow Wallpaper', but goes further, in that it reads the protagonist's madness as a form of protest – protest against a social order that truncates women's development – albeit a self-destructive form of protest. It uses feminist theories on the body that argue that female neurosis – which is an expression of repressed elements through a rupture of the rational self that is fashioned by society - can not only be read as the eventual outcome of the manipulation of women to meet the interests of society/men, but also as a form of protest against this manipulation. Susan Bordo (1997) and Dianne Hunter (1997) argue that in neurosis, conventional constructions of femininity are inscribed in extreme form on the woman. However, it is a condition that reflects not only acquiescence but also rebellion. Femininity being in essence a tradition of imposed limitations, a refusal to limit oneself, even in the pursuit of femininity, breaks the rules. Neurosis can also be read as protest in the sense that the pursuit of cultural ideals to excess exposes their destructive potential. This form of protest, however, is counter-productive, being made through the language of femininity, that is, by following conventional feminine behaviour. Neurosis is not merely a rejection of the symbolic order of the patriarchy, but also a collusion with forces that sustain the oppression of women, irrationality being a stereotypically 'feminine' trait.

'The Yellow Wallpaper' depicts the suppression of women in the Victorian era through the situation of the protagonist. The protagonist's husband John, a doctor, does not take her seriously. She says, "John laughs at me, but one expects that in marriage" (297). Suffering from postpartum depression, she has been diagnosed with 'a slight hysterical tendency' and prescribed the 'rest cure'. She has no control over her own treatment. As she states, 'I take phosphates or phosphites – whichever it is... and am absolutely forbidden to work until I am well again' (297). Every hour of her day is planned by him: she must lie down for a large part of the day and not read or

write or have stimulating company, although she herself believes that more 'society and stimulus' (297) would do her good. In this way she is confined to the realm of the domestic. Each time she attempts to talk about her condition, John insists that she practise self-control and not let her imagination run away with her. In a patriarchal culture female self-expression is - for obvious reasons - generally denounced as dangerous. 'The Yellow Wallpaper' portrays the crucial role gender plays in medical diagnosis and treatment.

John's language, when addressing her, is paternalistic in the extreme: 'What is it, little girl? Don't go walking about like that - you'll get cold' (303). As Dale Spender (1986) points out, language does not merely describe reality, it produces it. To address a woman as 'little girl' is to infantilise her, to deny her the maturity of an adult. He trivialises her concerns. When she tells him that she is not better, he insists that she is. When she perseveres, he humours her as one might a child 'Bless her little heart! She shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning! (303)' Simone de Beauvoir (1953) argued that man subordinates woman by instating himself as 'self' and woman as 'other', and that man gains from woman's otherness, for constructing her as weak/emotional/dependent allows him to see himself as strong/rational/independent in contrast. It is clear that the protagonist does not make any headway with her husband. As Paula Treichler puts it, 'her complaints are wholly circular, merely confirming the already-spoken patriarchal diagnosis' (1984, 71).

The protagonist, at one point, thinks that it is discouraging not to have any advice about, or companionship for, her work. Phyllis Chesler (1972), writing about the struggles of women writers in the late nineteenth century, states that male writers have always been indulged and supported by society. Female writers, on the other hand - disapproved of for attempting to enter the 'male sphere' - become isolated.

Gilman was aware of many feminist concerns much ahead of her time. In 'The Yellow Wallpaper', she undercuts the male tendency to rely solely on what is observable, scientific or demonstrable through facts. John 'scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures' (297). Because of this inability to give credence to intuition, he remains out of touch with his wife's condition. As she states, 'John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him' (299).

Although the writer throws light on the situation of women in a patriarchal culture through the protagonist, she is not a representative character. The reader's access to her inner life gives depth to her character. One is able to identify with and be moved by her suffering as she wavers between feelings of rebellion and guilt: 'He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction. I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more' (298). As Virginia Woolf (1931) states, the struggle of women is not only with the outside world but also with their own self. Writing about the situation of women in the Victorian era, she states that women were conditioned to not let anyone suspect that they had a mind of their own^v. Even today women are often torn between being 'proper women' and being true to themselves. At times they acquiesce; however, as a feminist reading of Freud suggests^{vi}, this capitulation is at a superficial level; at a deeper level, they reject the cultural

construction of femininity, although the price of this rejection is psychic disintegration.

It is not individual men but the whole system, including the medical profession, that Gilman questions. The protagonist's brother, who also is a doctor, concurs with John regarding her illness and its treatment. John threatens to send her to Weir Mitchell, the physician with whom the 'rest cure' originated, if she does not improve. The psychiatrists of the day were often, as Phyllis Chesler (1972) points out, agents of the husband^{vii}. Today it is widely accepted that the patient must have a say in his/her own treatment. This was far from the case for female patients then. For the physician cure meant a woman's realising the folly of attempting to enter the male domain through writing and accepting the role prescribed for her by society by returning to domesticity.

Through the character of the protagonist's sister-in-law, Jennie, who clearly has been stationed in the house to ensure that the protagonist follows the 'rest cure', Gilman highlights the complicity of women as well. Jennie is a woman very much shaped by the cultural mores of the time. The protagonist states: 'She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!' (300). de Beauvoir (1953) states that often women themselves adopt the status of 'other', that they are complicit in their subordination.

The story is written in the first person and in the form of journal entries, a form that allows the reader to get inside the mind of the narrator (who is also the main character) and share her suffering. It is as if the reader is travelling with the narrator instead of looking in from the outside. Narration in the first person, in a sense, creates a double layer. The layer above shows the surface action of the story while the layer below the narrator's secret thoughts and feelings – in this case, her dissatisfaction with the treatment prescribed by her husband and her lack of control over it. There is, in a sense, a movement to the layer above each time there is an interruption, which occurs when her husband or her sister-in-law appears, for she stops writing. 'There comes John, and I must put this away – he hates to have me write a word'"(298). And on another occasion she hears her sister-in-law on the stairs: 'There's sister on the stairs!'(300). The writer is able to convey the sense of alarm through the use of short sentences and a shift to direct speech. The reader, as Treichler (1984) puts it, is the protagonist's confidante from the beginning, 'implicated in forbidden discourse' (65). The surface layer enacts gender relations in Victorian society – when physically with her husband, the narrator's manner is docile - the layer below her rebellion against the cultural construction of femininity. As Treichler continues, 'she develops an artificial feminine self which reinforces the terms of her husband's expert diagnosis... This male-identified self disguises the true underground narrative' (65). At a superficial level, the story appears to endorse John's handling of the protagonist's condition; however, at a deeper level, it condemns his manipulation of her perception of reality. The discerning reader's sympathies are very much with the narrator, who, denied self-expression, can only confide in her journal.

The protagonist's protest initially takes the form of a questioning of the prescribed treatment and distress at John's refusal to allow her to express the way she feels. As her condition deteriorates, and, having no outlet for self-expression, she becomes

increasingly obsessed with the wallpaper in her room, she begins seeing her husband and sister-in-law as adversaries – at which point her perceptions become unreliable. At no stage is John - convinced by her apparent docility - aware of her rebellion. His fainting in disbelief, at the end of the story, at seeing his wife creeping around the room on all fours - proving the failure of his treatment - confirms this. Apart from the systemic silencing of women, this suggests that, in a patriarchal society, women's protest is often covert as open protest could have dire consequences for them.

It is clear right at the beginning of the story that the protagonist is convinced that the treatment that has been prescribed for her - and over which she has no control - is not the treatment she needs. Protest in the story against the silencing of women in a patriarchal culture, however, takes place through symbolism and irony rather than direct statement. This invites the reader's participation in the creation of the text. The isolated mansion into which the couple move with her recuperation in mind, the bars at the window, the locked gates, the nailed down bed, are all suggestive of entrapment. The wallpaper, which to the protagonist appears to have strangled heads, can be read as symbolic of the social order of the time - an order that suffocated women. The bars she sees on the wallpaper and the woman behind the bars, struggling to free herself, is again symbolic of women's imprisonment by the system. The all-pervasive smell of the wallpaper suggests an inescapable oppression.

On several occasions, the protagonist's statements suggest the opposite of what they state. At one point she states, 'It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise and because he loves me so' (302). This statement is self-contradictory. The writer makes the point obliquely rather than directly that one way of suppressing women is denying them a voice. On another occasion the protagonist says, 'I am glad my case is not serious' (298), although she is aware - at a deeper level - that her condition *is* serious. Here she is simply the vehicle through which the view of John, who has refused to see the seriousness of her condition, is expressed. This is an indirect way of saying that - in a patriarchal society - men construct women in accordance with their own needs/desires and pre-fixed ideas about women's nature.

The reader is drawn into the text by the compelling depiction of the protagonist's descent into madness. All the elements of psychological deterioration – obsession, projection, horrific imaginings, irrational behaviour, increasing suspicion of the motives of others, the merging of illusion and reality – are present. The way she perceives the room she is in - which she imagines was formerly inhabited by children – reflects her own torment:

I never saw such ravages as the children have made here. The wall-paper . . . is torn off at spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother – they must have had perseverance as well as hatred . . . the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there . . . (300).

The wallpaper comes to occupy her entire reality. She is unable to stop herself from studying it: 'I determine for the thousandth time that I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion' (301). Such an obsession suggests a desperate need to gain control of one's life. Her seeing bars and a woman behind these bars on the wallpaper is a projection of her own sense of imprisonment. The way she

perceives the pattern of the wallpaper tells one as much about her tortured mind as it does about the pattern. Here the language grows intense. The wallpaper takes on life: 'This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had! There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down' (300) and 'the bloated curves and flourishes go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity . . . the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase' (301). The smell of the wallpaper, she believes, is 'hovering in the dining room, skulking in the parlour, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for [her] on the stairs' (305). She even contemplates burning the house down to reach the smell. When pulling off the paper, she states, 'It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!' (307). The story's powerful imagery gives life to the depiction of the descent into madness. The protagonist's behaviour becomes increasingly irrational. At one point, in sheer frustration at her inability to move the heavy bed, she chews a corner of it. She becomes suspicious of both John and Jennie, imagining that they are studying the paper – which, now, she alone is determined to unravel: '. . . no person touches this paper but Me – not alive' (307). Ultimately reality merges with illusion and she comes to believe that the woman behind the bars is her. At the end, as she creeps around the room, she tells John, 'I've got out at last in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back' (308).

The ending leaves much to the reader's imagination. It can be read both as a triumph and as a tragedy for the protagonist. It is a triumph in that she has, in a sense, freed herself from the imprisoning feminine role in a patriarchal culture - and her creeping over the prone body of her husband suggests that - for once perceived as mad, she is no longer expected to meet society's expectations. But it is a tragedy in that her freedom has been gained at the expense of her sanity. The story ultimately suggests that, nonetheless, it remains protest in that it is an indictment of a society/culture that silences women, of a society in which the only path to freedom for women, it seems, is madness.

Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' undermines the patriarchy through its portrayal of a woman's entrapment by the social structure of the time, and of an uncannily real descent into insanity. It suggests that the body is inscribed by culture and that madness (a bodily condition) - an outcome of repressed conflict - can be read as a form of protest against this entrapment. Gilman's structural and stylistic techniques contribute in no small way to the impact of the story and to supporting the theme. Her use of first person narration, in particular the journal form, enables an underground narrative that undermines the surface text – a text that reflects the mores of the time. Ironic statement, apart from adding force to the protest, suggests the contradictory pressures on women – the pressure to acquiesce and the pressure to resist. The powerful symbolism and imagery of the story create an atmosphere that supports the dark sub-text. The ending suggests strongly the overthrow of the conscious self - a self shaped by culture - by the subconscious, which rejects the cultural construction of gender.

‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ continues to hold our interest not only because the suppression of women in a particular historical period is convincingly depicted, but also because much of what it suggests is still relevant for us. In the Victorian era, the only path to freedom for women, the story suggests, was madness. Today, women have many more avenues of expression. However, as Robert Shulman states, ‘the pattern’ may have changed less than the details of Gilman’s narrative (1995). And, the phantom of which Virginia Woolf spoke (1942 in Gilbert and Gubar 2007) still haunts most women. The need to question the cultural construction of not just femininity but also masculinity remains. ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ is also well-crafted, a genuinely literary text.

Endnotes

ⁱ All references to the text are from this edition: Gilman, Charlotte 1892 ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, in Gioia, Dana and Gwynn, R.S. 2006 *The Art of the Short Story*, New York: Pearson Longman, 297-308

ⁱⁱ Significantly derived from the Greek *husterikos*, meaning uterus, the word ‘hysteria’ was first used to describe problems of the womb. Over the ages, hysteria has been regarded primarily as a woman’s ailment, in the nineteenth century being synonymous with femininity. With the rise of Christianity and its emphasis on sin, the distrust of the body and woman’s particular guilt, hysteria came to be regarded as punishment for Eve’s role in the fall of mankind. The condition itself was viewed as “possession by the devil; the figure of the witch was superimposed on that of the hysteric”. See Borossa Julia 2001. *Ideas in Psychoanalysis (Hysteria)*, Cambridge: Icon Books

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example Lovecraft, H.P. 1927 *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, The Recluse, Recluse Press. Ryan, Alan 1988 *Haunting Women*, New York: Avon Books

^{iv} See for example Ford, Karen 1985 ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and Women’s discourse’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*: University of Tulsa. Hochman, Barbara 2002 *The Reading Habit and ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’*, Duke University Press. Lanser, Susan 1989 ‘Feminist Criticism ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, and the Politics of Color in America’ in *Feminist Studies* 15: 3 Fall 415-441. Cutter, Martha 2001 ‘The Writer as doctor: New Models of Medical discourse in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Later Fictions’ in *Literature and Medicine* 20: 2 (Fall) 151-182

^v See Woolf, Virginia 1942 ‘Professions for Women’ in S. Gilbert and S. Gubar (eds) *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English II*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 244-247. Woolf suggested that to achieve anything outside the domestic sphere, women needed to kill the phantom (within them) that prompted them not to challenge male opinion and speak the truth as they saw it.

^{vi} See Rose, Jacqueline 1980 *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London: Verso. In her defence of Freud, Rose points out that what is radical in Freud and crucial to feminism, is that the unconscious, according to his concept of it, refuses to submit to the symbolic order, the discipline of language and culture. At the unconscious level, women resist the cultural construction of femininity, although the price is psychic disorder. In this sense, hysteria, which is an expression of repressed conflict, is rebellion.

^{vii} During the Victorian period, it was believed that hysteria was the result of too much education. In fact, many of the diseases associated with women were seen as due to a lack of self-control. Treatments such as bed rest were a way of ridding women of rebelliousness and forcing them to conform to social roles. See Cutter, Martha 2001 ‘The Writer as doctor: New Models of Medical Discourses in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Later fiction’ In *Literature and Medicine*, 20: 2, 151-182.

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