Chapter III

YELLOW WALLPAPER - A DOMESTIC UTOPIA
Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s fiction was an important vehicle for the popularization of her ideas. They envision new roles for female characters in fiction. Gilman did not call herself a feminist, but insisted that her society was androcentric, man centred. Gilman’s fiction can be interpreted as a protest against this andro-centricism which keeps women both literally and figuratively imprisoned in the home.

The short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* is considered Gilman’s best work of fiction. She emerged as an acknowledged force on the literary scene with her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”. The story describes a young wife’s struggle for her sanity after her physician-husband practically incarcerates her in an attic room. Gilman’s personal experiences with the rest cure administered by the prominent psychiatrist S. Weir Mitchell forms the basis of this story as discussed by Gilman herself in her autobiography. The narrator discovers a woman’s figure in the wallpaper pattern and starts identifying herself with the woman in the wallpaper. The woman’s fight for and with the woman in the wallpaper symbolize her eagerness to fight for and with other imprisoned women. The yellow colour also implies something strange and something terrible about female procreation and female physiology. Though it is a story about the nineteenth century white middle-class woman, it addresses woman’s situation in so far as women as
a group must still contend with male power in medicine, marriage and culture.

When S. Weir Mitchell diagnosed Charlotte Perkins Gilman (then Stetson) as Suffering From a variation “nervous Prostration,” or “neurasthenia,” as outlined in his *Fat and Blood* (1877) he prescribed what many nineteenth century physicians (including Freud) believed to be the necessary recuperative regimes rest. Included in Mitchell’s Rest Cure treatment were locking Gilman away in his Philadelphia Sanitarium for a month, enforcing strict isolation, limiting intellectual stimulation to two hours a day, and forbidding her to touch pen, pencil or paintbrush ever again. Mitchell believed, Catherine Golden tells us that both companionship and work proned a detriment to his patient’s recovery, further taxing her nerves already frazzled form a admixture of hysteria and postpartum depression (Golden, “overwriting…. 146). Gilman dramatized her experience with Dr. Mitchell in “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), a journalistic/clinical account of a woman’s gradual descent into madness (or is she mad at the beginning and is pathologically reliving the descent that has already taken place?) at the hands of her husband John, a doctor who subscribes to the Mitchell treatment.

Gilman’s narrator is isolated “three miles from the village” (p.11) in an upstairs nursery of a “colonial mansion” (p.9), its windows barred and its walls covered in a faded yellow wallpaper whose “sprawling
flamboyant patterns" commit "every artistic sin" (p.13) imaginable. It is a room whose wallpaper reduces an artistic and articulate woman to a beast, stripped entirely of her sanity and humanity and left crawling on all-fours in circuits, or smooches, about the room. For this reason, feminist critic Elaine Hedges wrote in 1973 that the "paper symbolizes her situation as seen by the men who control her and hence her situation as seen by herself" (52-53.55), a view echoed by later critics. "The Yellow Wallpaper," then, became a feminist text that indicted the men who were responsible for the narrator’s physical confinement and subsequent mental demise. But this is also a room not unlike that described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), patterned after Jeremy Bentham’s eighteenth century panopticon, originally designed to replace the dark and dark "houses of security" So common throughout England with the bright and salubrious "house of certainty" (Foucault 202), the panopticon developed into an unscrupulous method of inquisition that perpetuated fear and bred paranoia. Like the room that confines Gilman’s narrator, the panopticon proved to be not a utopia for prisoners, mental patients, and school boys, but "a cruel, ingenious cage" (Foucault 205) that misjudged human reaction to unabated surveillance. Yet what Gilman critics for the most part have (until recently) tended to neglect, and what this interpretation will stress, is that narrator, despite her doctor’s ill-advice and her husband’s dehumanizing imprisonment, is successful in freeing
herself from her male imposed shackles, her panopticon. Such a view supports the feminist label already attached to "The Yellow Wallpaper" but counters the premise upon which the arguments of Hedges and others are based that she "never does get free" and, in fact, "has been – defeated" in the end – in short, "destroyed" (afterward, 52-53, 53).³

The benefits of the panopticon over the prisons, factories, and psychiatric wards of his time, Bentham, argued were several. Its primary goal though, was to generate a symbiotic relationship between the observer and the observed. In reversing "the principle of the dungeon," the panopticon, an instrument of power and observation, would provide the intermed with a clean, well-lighted, and relatively pleasant environment, and the warden with the most efficient means of control through minimal effort (Foucault 200). Wheel-like in structure with a central tower at its hub and connecting cells, like spokes, protruding from its middle, "the panoptic mechanism," Foucault writes, "arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately (200). Thus one person alone could oversee from the central tower, thereby eliminating the need for a large, possibly corrupt or incompetent, work force. The beauty behind Bentham's structure was that, despite the shared "pleasantries" between inmate and warden, authoritative power was irreversible. The panopticon's directive would be to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning
of power” (Foucault 201). The goals to achieve this power were two-fold: to make the subject visible and the observer’s presence unverifiable. Identical in principle to a two-way mirror, the panopticon utilized the transparent cells to keep the prisoner at all times in sight, and the prisoner knew this. Moreover, since the prisoner had no means of counter surveillance, he could not tell when he was or was not, being observed: Foucault writes,

Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon.

Unverifiable: the inmate must never knew whether he is being looked at any one moments but he must be sure that he may always be so. (201).

While this power was good for the observer, it was not for the observed. The paranoia resulting from this constant surveillance affected the inmate’s psychological health more adversely than the damp conditions of his erstwhile cell did his physical health.

Panopticism as a tool of observation, then, soon became a focus of research: “it could be used as a machine to carry and experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals” (Foucault 203). Functioning as a laboratory of power, the panopticon “programmes at the level of an elementary and easily transferable mechanism, the basic functioning of a
society penetrated through and through with disciplinary mechanisms” (Foucault 209). As a result, panopticism grew literally from a “house of certainty into a societal mode of inquiry and inquisition reminiscent of Orwell's Big Brother of Fitzgerald's Doctor T.J.Eckleburg. Clandestine operatives, with “Thousands of eyes posted everywhere” provide a "faceless gaze" that Foucault says inculcated clients of fear and paranoia, not just in the observed but also in the observers, since they too did not knew when they were being watched (214).

This political power “had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible” (Foucault 214). Though its intent was to arrest anarchy by providing a symbiotic relationship between the observer and the observed, removing all the ill-effects attributed to former instruments of incarceration, panopticism soon “constituted the technique, universally widespread of coercion” (Foucault 222). What began as a tool of benevolent control, therefore, had developed into a weapon of disciplinary power placing “individuals under ‘observation,’” Foucault argues, creates “a natural extension of a justice imbued with disciplinary methods and examination procedures” (227). Surveillance, whether it is indeed present or merely treated, proved to be more detrimental to the prisoner than his previous cold, dark cell had been.
Gilman's narrator, once placed in a similar dubious environment, supports Foucault's contention that the individual is more ill-served by the surveillance of the panopticon than by the unhealthy or unappealing environment of the prison or mental ward he or she would have typically encountered under the unerring scrutiny of the "two bulbous eye" in the yellow wallpaper, the narrator passes through stages from concern to paranoia and finally, to madness. During the entire Journey, we are reminded of Foucault's description of panopticism's "Faceless gaze" with "thousands of eyes posted everywhere" (214). By placing her in this room, John, the narrator's husband, resembles the penal officers of the eighteenth-century psychiatric wards or penitentiaries, whose credo Foucault describes: "project the subtle segmentations of discipline onto the confused space of interment, combine it with the methods of analytical distribution proper to power, [and] individualize the excluded..." (199).

Palatial as the mansion to which John takes the narrator may be, she still confronts external instruments of restrain suggestive of a prison or a mental ward. On the outside, she pauses through a series of gates and locked doors before arriving at her room, the hedges and walls of the grounds, the locked front gates of the path, the gate at the head of the stairs outside her room, and the locked door to the nursery once inside she is further confronted by objects of restraint: the "rings and things in the walls," which she assures ces were cesed by the children in their "playroom
and gymnasium” (12) but we later realize were used instead to secure her; the pinioned bedstead; and the windows, “barred for little children” (12). (John calls her, after all, his “little girl” [23]). Among all of these external devices of restraint, however, only the yellow wallpaper, the object of surveillance with its “bulbous eyes;, has an adverse effect upon her. She can stand the barred windows, as she can look out them and see the arbor or the bay; she is bothered by the immovable bed but gnaws on its leg to free it; and she even remains curiously dispassionate about being shackled with the rings. What she cannot stand, though, is the wallpaper and the panoptic eyes that she imagines are watching her unceasingly.

In her description of the wallpaper and its hunting patterns the narrator’s comments resemble those Foucault uses to describe Bentham’s panopticon:

> There is a recurrent spot where the pattern like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.... Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere, there is one place where the two breaths didn’t match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other. (p.16)

Despite committing for her “every artistic sin,” the paper does, not yet disrupt the narrator’s psychological balance. “I’m really getting quite fond
of the big room,” she writes, “all but that horrid paper” (p.15). What begins as a perfunctory dismissal of the paper’s “optic horror,” however, gradually develops into a paranoia that Foucault says is inevitable with unabated surveillance. She soon writes in her journal after all.” This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had!” (p.16).

Once aware of the “unblinking eyes,” the narrator then believes that there is something behind the paper, “a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one…” (p.18). It is this sub-pattern, this fear of what lies behind the eyes of the paper, that consumes and ultimately presses her to madness: “If only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one!” (p.31). She can deal with the outer-pattern, which “becomes bars!” (p.26) in the moonlight, because, like the external restraints that confine her in the mansion, it only represents imprisonment of the body and not of the mind. In fact, she says that she sees a woman, or women, behind these bars. This “faint figure” (presumably her Doppelgangers or a manifestation of her psychosis), who shakes the bars “just as it she wanted to get out” (p.23), is invariably the narrator herself, trapped inside a panopticon. In objectifying herself through this imaginary woman, the narrator can free herself, if only in mind, from the external prison her husband places her in. Therefore, she thinks this woman does get out in the daytime, having seen her walking under the “grape-covered” arboos (p.11). The figure’s freedom is important for the narrator because
that is what she wants freedom, not from the room’s confinement but from
the wallpaper that she believes is monitoring her every move.

She grows to hate the wallpaper so passionately both its
“smouldering unclean” (p.13) color and its rancid “yellow smell” (p.29),
that the wallpaper itself becomes “torturing,” a Foucauldian epithet for the
panopticon. She is driven finally to claw and tear at the wallpaper, as if by
removing is she will cease its surveillance of her and thereby end her
internal entrapment of the mind. But she cannot remove all of its “strangled
leads and bulbous eyes” (p.34): “I pulled and she shook, I shook and she
pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper” (p.32).
Failing to remove the panoptic wallpaper and its hold upon her completely.
She must infiltrate it, climb into it, pass through her cell and into the
central tower itself where her observers are: “I wonder if they all come out
of that wallpaper as I did? ... I suppose I shall have to get back behind the
pattern when it comes night ...” (p.35).

She is mad, of course, by this time, reduced to a paranoid
Schizophoenic who writes, “I’ve got out at last ... in spite of you and Tam,
and I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (p.36).
“Tane,” Here, is arguably herself, estranged now not only from John but
from her own identity as well. But in believing that she has finally broken
free of this internal prison – the Victorian mind. Set her patriarchal society
has instilled in her. She has essentially released herself from the external
bars and rings that John (or all nineteenth-century men, for that matter) uses to restrain her. To be sure, an individual subjected to observation can become paranoid and succumb to madness and separation: first from society, then from self. Yet, despite these traditional views of madness, which have sparked some critics to see Gilman’s protagonist as defeated or destroyed by the end, John’s wife/patient/prisoner ultimately transcends all levels of consciousness, hence denies the panopticon’s reality upon her and thereby eliminates its control.⁴

Ours is a society “not of spectacle, but of surveillance” (217), Foucault writes, and the infamous surveillance room he describes, Jeremy Bentham’s penopticon, is identical to the room to which Gilman’s narrator is confined in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. Bentham wrote in his preface to Panopticon that the goals of his “inspection house” were “Morals reformed — health preserved industry invigorated instruction diffused public burthens lightened...”.⁵ But Foucault says that, Bentham’s intent notwithstanding, the panopticon became more a laboratory than a corrective institute, proving as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar contend, “The cure ... is worse than the disease...” (p.89).

Gilman’s narrator dramatizes Foucault’s caveat that subjecting a human being to Bentham’s inorganic panopticon (or to Dr. Mitchell’s dehumanizing treatment) was more pathogenic than antigenic. In fact, Gilman wrote in her autobiography, The Living of Charlotte Perkins
Gilman that her intended reason for writing this Gothic tale was "to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways" (p. 121). Yet, the madness to which Gilman's narrator is led through her encounter inside the panopticon, through her struggle to authorize her own life's text in light of her society's attempt to ghost write it for her, paradoxically frees as it destroys. Though externally she is clinically insane, unable to ascertain why her husband should be floored by her aberrant behaviour, internally she is, for the first time, devoid of that identity that her husband (and his patriarchal society) had inscribed upon her.

Although critics of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" have noted "the dark incongruities between the narrator's implications to an understanding of narrative." More typically, critics of this "rediscovered" realistic narrative (Schopp-Schilling) interpret the narrative as one that offers the detailed and chilling account of a woman's entrapment, defeat, and movement toward madness. One caused by patriarchy, that is, by obtusely sexist men such as the narrator's husband John or nineteenth century psychiatrists like S. Weir Mitchell. In a more recent Lacanian revision of this feminist critique, Jeanette King and Pam Morris argue that the narrator displays psychological shortcomings, "misreads the yellow wall paper, her otherself, and in this way seeks to limit the play of its signifiers" an error, they maintain, that readers of the text should not make. In this essay, I further their argument that the
narrator misreads the yellow wall paper, but not because of her psychological aberrations. Rather, I maintain that, as a writer she fails to recognize the significance of the comically grotesque texteme of her tale. Because of this artistic failure, she assumes the grotesque proportions of the yellow wall paper, becomes a grotesque figure and in so doing, transforms her narrative into a disturbing, startling and darkly ironic tale about nineteenth century American womanhood.

Having suffered a continuous, repeated devaluation, Gilman’s narrator details a struggle both with and against herself, one that results not only in the madness like the narrator of Gilman’s satiric “When I Was A Witch”, the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” grows consistently more aggressive toward those ills that oppress her; not only men like John and S.Weir Mitchell, but women like her sister-in-law Jennie and any other woman who not “realized womanhood” – including horribly, herself. Unlike the narrator of “When I Was A Witch” and some of Gilman’s other satirical narrators, however, the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” does not defeat these dark social forces; instead, she becomes absorbed by them though her author, Gilman does not.

In her autobiography, Gilman claimed to have based “The Yellow Wallpaper” on her experience with S.Weir Mitchell’s arrest cure treatment, observing that the “real purpose” of the story was “to reach Dr.S.Weir Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways” (p.121). Despite her
stated didactic intent, there are marked discrepancies between Gilman’s autobiographical account of her nervous breakdown and her narrator’s in “The Yellow Wall paper”. Although Gilman describes her husband as one more victimized than victimizing the narrator of “The Yellow Wall Paper” directly implicates her husband John, along with Jennie, S. Weir Mitchell, and others suffering from gender-encoded misconceptions, in her movement toward madness. Whether Gilman understood the complexity of this narrator’s madness remain uncertain. However, between her penchant for didactic satire and her personal anguish, Gilman did create quite consciously, but does so in grotesquely comedic terms.

John is mechanistic, rigid, predictable, and sexist, he “combines,” as Rachel Duplessis notes, “the professional authority of the physician with the legal and emotional authority of the husband”8 eventually to become a caricature of both. “John is practical in extreme,” Gilman’s narrator candidly observes. “He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he Scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (p.3). Accordingly when the narrator suggests to her ever-practical husband that she senses there is something wrong with the house, that there is something queer” about the house, he “laughs at me, of course” (4, 3, 6). Neither does he take her anxiety about the paper seriously and when she frantically expresses a desire to move down stairs, he persists in his laughter, calling her a “blessed little goose,
and [saying] he would go down cellar [Sic] if I wished and have it white washed into the bargain” (p.8). He also does not permit her to have companions and when she inquires about visiting with “Cousin Henry and Julia”, he boorishly quits that he “would as soon put fireworks in my pillow case as to let me have those stimulating people about now” (p.7).

As the narrator’s understanding of the meaning of “the Yellow Wall Paper,” so does her irritation with John, who remains doggedly true to his limited perspective. When John is finally made aware of the severity of this wife’s “disorder”, he reacts by “fainting” altering his conventional role as a soothing, masculine figure to that of a stereotypically weak nineteenth century female. To intensify the irony of his transformation, Gilman has her narrator aggressively express her annoyance that John has fainted she now has to run “right over him.” He is now in the way of her “creeping,” an activity she earlier attributed to the woman in the wallpaper, an activity that seems not only subversive, but also undefined, repetitive and comical – or, to use Henri Bergson’s words, like “something mechanical encrusted onto the living.”

At the same time, Gilman grants her narrator an artistic sensibility one that evidently begins to resurface the moment that John locks her away to effect her “cure.” At the beginning, she briefly contemplates using the gothic genre to explain her dilemma, a genre in which not only ghostly presences live in ancient, decaying mansions, but conventional mad
women flourish as well. "It is very seldom," states the narrator with her first utterance,

that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral falls in the summer. A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house and reach the height of romantic felicity but that would be asking too much of fate! (p.3).

Unlike the helpless heroines of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, of Poe's "A Predicament," or of other parodic gothic fiction, narrator is not confused by gothic conventions, but alludes to them to suggest that they do not explain her situation. The "place has been empty for years," she declares, and this "spoil my ghost theory."¹⁰

Knowing as she begins that her tall is not conventionally gothic, the narrator next challenges her readers to unravel the bizarre relations between John and Lee illness, and between her illness and the "disturbing" pattern of the yellow wall paper, "one of these sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (p.5) a pattern that she initially rejects, but eventually details in a manner that defiantly commits many more such sins "there is," the narrator observes,

something dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to irritate and provoke study and when you follow the lame
uncertain curves for a little distance, they suddenly commit suicide plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves unheard of contradictious. (p.5)

Similar observations were made by reviewers of “The Yellow Wallpaper” (Kolodny 51);11 and the narrator’s sentences, which sprawl from section to section resistant, breathless, digressive offer conflicting comment, as other critics have noted, upon her own suicidal plunges”12

The narrator does, however finally define the nature of her narrative. After her initial uneasiness, she begins to perceive new figures in the wall paper and to “grow fond” of her room, “perhaps because of the wall paper” (9). The paper becomes comic to her; more, it becomes grotesque. There is, she states, a “recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down” (p.7). This figure has a certain “impertinence and everlastingness” that follow “you everywhere with absurd unblinking eyes” (p.7). Later, training the pattern becomes “as good as gymnastics, I assure you (p.9), as the narrator not only presents Lee interests as a game, but details her amused impressions. Its patterns, she says, are a “kind of ‘debased Romanesque’ with delirium tremens that go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity” (p.9). Then the narrator not only clarifies the design of the wall paper, but of her fiction: “I can almost fancy radiation after all – the interminable grotesque seems to
form around a common center and rush off in headlong plunges of equal
distraction” (p.10).

Gilman’s narrator uses this “interminable grotesque” to further her
contrast between the rigidly mannered and socially acceptable behaviour of
Lee husband (and less emphatically of Jennie) and her increasing
dissatisfaction with such behaviour. Her description of the grotesque comes
at the end of the third section of her six narrative segments, offering the
reader a structural pattern that, like the narrator’s wall paper, is given
coherence by a “common center,” even as it rushes off in Lead long
plunges of equal distraction” (about John), herself, Jennie’s spying, the
woman in the wall paper, and so forth. By self consciously defining her
narrative as a rebellious work that is unified by a central grotesque image,
the narrator not only reveals her unconscious awareness of her fictive
design, but also leads her readers towards an understanding both of the
terror and dark amusement she feels as she confronts herself a prisoner
inside the yellow paper, an unsavory social text created and sustained not
only by men like John but by women like Jennie, and, most horribly,
 herself. Instead of being freed by this aesthetic and potentially liberating
confrontation, however, she is defeated, destroyed and driven to madness –
enabling her author, Gilman, not only to transform her into a grotesque
figure, but to make a pointed, darkly satiric, comment against these
conventional gender patterns that have imprisoned hej
The confessional tale frequently appears in grotesque literature (Bunwick 10-11) with the narrator often appearing as a distorting mirror of his or her experience (O'Connor 78), but Gilman's narrator is unusual in that she attempts, finally, to integrate the symbolic significance of the yellow wallpaper. She attempts to read, or interpret it in a manner befitting an aspiring author. In so doing, she attempts to do, what is virtually impossible: "to apprehend," as Geoffrey Harpham phrases it, "the grotesque directly." "Whereas most ideas are coherent at the core and fuzzy around the edges, the grotesque is the reverse, it is relatively easy to recognize the grotesque in a work of art," but difficult to pin it down, define, or interpret its significance (Harpham XVI). Ignoring Gilman's narrator's clear fascination with so defining the grotesque, Kolodny compares this narrator's situation to that of the narrator of Poe's "The pit and the pendulum," arguing that while "both stories ... involve a same mind entrapped in an insanity inducing situation...," the narrator of Poe's tale is finally "released both to sanity and freedom" by the French revolution, whereas the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not, since "no equivalent revolution for women had taken place" (p.51). The problem with this comparison is that Poe's narrator is not, like the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," an artist, nor is he attempting to do more than survive his nightmarish sense that some grotesque horror may (or may not) be
present; he does not want to apprehend, integrate, or even see this horror, but merely to survive it Gilman’s narrator, to her destructions wants none.

Gilman’s narrator does show the reader, as king and Morris argue, “how not to read [her] text” not because, as they argue in their analysis, the wall paper represents to the narrator her “redressed other” (p.30) or “suppressed self” (p.31), but rather because she attempts as an author, to bring the grotesque to life, to consciousness itself. He inability to do so does not reflect merely her regressive psychological state but rather her failure to recognize the complex nature of the problem. In his analysis of the grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser makes the common place observation that writers use the grotesque in an “attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world,” and that in spite “of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation” for “where the artistic creation has succeeded, a faint smile seems to be this “secret liberation” that Gilman’s bemused, and at times, amused narrator initially seeks and perhaps even temporarily feels that she is not able to sustain it. Instead, Gilman’s narrator attempts to clarity definitively the meaning of the grotesque, merges into it, and, in effect, becomes it as the woman in the wall paper.

Because of her representation and implicit perspective on the grotesque in “The Yellow Wall Paper,” Gilman does not seem to be

93
primarily concerned with patriarchy, as many recent critics have argued. Like Jennie, the complying housekeeper, and the narrator herself, patriarchy's, in the context of "The Yellow Wallpaper," only an aspect of the "interminable grotesque" that permeates the narrative; and it is, like the grotesque represented as an inexplicable, unreadable force. That is, it is meant to be felt, to have an impact, but not to be explained or comprehended rationally."

Commenting upon why she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" Gilman observed, "it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" (p.20). Through her narrator, Gilman does suggest why women have been defeated by cultural or psychological circumstances; that is, either failing to see or becoming unduly preoccupied with the grotesque nature of such circumstances, they move toward an increasingly distorted understanding of themselves. In the case of Gilman's narrator, the specific circumstance is that of the impact of gender stereotypes and medical ignorance upon a normal but relatively intelligent nineteenth century woman, a married and literate woman with a penchant for the pen. Both the structure and the narrator's felt dilemma in "The Yellow Wallpaper" suggest that Gilman felt that the brutality of such a circumstance could be best represented through a darkly humorous treatment of a domestic situation, one in which a husband's rigid and mechanistic sense of propriety is juxtaposed against his wife's increasingly
distorted relation to the hideous yellow wall paper in her room. As Gilman's narrator moves toward insanity and a strangely grotesque status, however, Gilman's narrative enables her readers to see that status in a startling social perspective. For when Gilman's narrator asks her final question, "Now why should that man have fainted?" it reveals not only her transformation into a grotesque figure, a mad woman, but also, in the context of Gilman's conscious use of the "interminable grotesque," the darkly ironic nature of such a transformation.

Like Gilman's other fiction, "The Yellow Wallpaper" was avowedly didactic, a work of "pure propaganda" as she once described it to W.D. Howells. The narrator, at the reader soon discovers, suffers from severe postpartum depression. With her husband John, a "physician of high standing" who has diagnosed her malady as a "slight physical tendency," she has moved for the summer to a rented seaside estate when she might enjoy complete rest. She has been relieved of all domestic duties, including child care and house-keeping, and "absolutely forbidden to 'work' until I am well again." Much as Mary Perkins and Weir Mitchell had earlier counselled the author to abandon her imaginary world and to renounce her artistic ambitions, the narrator’s husband cautions her "not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies" (CPGR, 7). In case of protected recovery, he has promised
to “send me to Wier Mitchell in the fall for further treatment of the same kind. But the narrator objects to this therapy, however well-intentioned, and quietly rebels against the authority which sanctions it. She believes “that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.” Indeed, “I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideal and rest me” (CPGR, 7). Like Mitchell, however, John “hates to have me write a word” and “started the habit of making me the down for an hour after each meal.” Despite the prohibition on mental labor, she records her impressions in a diary.

At John’s insistence, the narrator settles into an old nursery in the garret of the mansion, a room replete with barred window opening on to the gardens below, an immobile bedstead, and patterned yellow paper peeling from the walls. At first the wall paper, repels her: “It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following pronounced enough constantly to irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the same uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angle, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions” (CPGR, 5). As India Gilbert and Suban Gulab suggest that “paper surrender the narrator like an inexplicable text, censorious and overwhelming as her physician husband. In the course of several torpid weeks, however, she begins to discern a “sub pattern in a different shade” hidden in the paper. “There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me,” she writes. In present she
says “a strange, provoking, fearless sort of figure that seems to skull about behind that silly and conspicuous found design’ (CPGR, 8). She lies on the immovable bed by the hour and contemplates the pattern. “I start, “as she explains, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it has not been touched, and I determine for the thousandth time that I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion” (CPGR, 9). Every few days, she writes of her discoveries in the diary she otherwise conceals in her room. Thus the reader may trace the trajectory of her descent into madness.

The narrator gradually detects the distinct pattern of a crouching woman whose image is infinitely multiplied in the dine shapes. In the moonlight, when the shadows of the bars on the windows fall across the walls the woman seems to be imprisoned and “in the very shady spot she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.” But in daytime the woman seems to escape. “I have watched her sometimes away off, in the open country creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a wind” (CPGR, 16). Eventually the narrator begins to project her own identity on to the figure. One night she’ they peel yards of paper from the walls of the garret prison. As the story ends, the physician husband breaks into the room to discover the narrator, whose identification with her Doppelganger is complete, creeping about the floor on all fours. She even refers to her “other” self, John’s wife in third person: “I’ve got out at last,” she declares, “in spite of you and lane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me
leach! In an ironic reversal of the clichéd feminine swoon, the man faints to the floor. “So that I had to creep over him every time!” (CPGR 19).

Obviously, like her other early fiction, “The Yellow Wallpaper” was loosely based on Stetson’s own experience. So her credit, however she crafted the tale with care “when my aweful story “The Yellow Wallpaper” comes out, she proudly wrote Mastha Luther Lane, “You must try and read it. Walter says he has read it four times, and thinks it the most ghastly tale he ever read, says it beats Poe, “Whose tales she had recently reread.” According to her manuscript has on 17 June 1890 she mailed a copy of the story to the editors of the scribers, who quickly declined it. On 28 August she mailed the manuscript to W.D.Howells, who had recently written to express his admiration of her work. Howells forwarded it to Horace Scudden, his successor as editor of the Atlantic Monthly who, to Howell’s dismay, Austin to whom she sent the manuscript in October 1890, Gilman eventually placed the story with the New England, where it appeared in the January 1892 issue.

The story sparked immediate controversy. Although a reviewer for the Boston Transcript dismissed it in one sentence at’ very paragaphic and very queer generally, “many early readers considered it a tale of the grotesque, “the Fall of the House of Usher “told from the point of view of the Lady Madeline. Howells shivered over it in manuscript, while Anne Montgonleies wrote in the consequator that the “simple, serious, sly,
fascinating, torturing story “growth and increases with a perfect crescendo of horror” and a reviewer for literature deemed it “worthy of a place beside some of the weird masterpiece of Hawthorne and Poe.” A physician wrote the transcript to complain that it hold[s] the reader in morbid fascination to the end” and to ask whether such literature should be permitted in print,” at least “without protest, without severest censure.” On the other hand, another physician wrote the author to command her “detailed account of incipient insanity, “Stetson sent a copy of the story to Weir Mitchell, who designed not to replay, although years later he reportedly told a friend, “I have altered my treatment of neurasthenia since reading “The Yellow Wallpaper.” If that is a fact, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman added in her autobiography. “I have not lived in vain” (L, 121).

Certainly the story attracted a cult of readers. It was reprinted in 1899 by Small, Maynard & Co. of Boston as a chapbook bound in sulphossus-yellow beared covert resembling the wallpaper. Howells wrote the author a few months before his death in 1920 to request permission to “use your terrible story of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ in a book which I am making for Messrs. Boni and Liveright... You will be in the best company I know, and I hope you will not curdle their blood past liquefying. I wish to pay due recognition to the supreme awefulness of your story in my introduction. Gilman ever “pleased and honoured” to grant permission; and Howells was as good as is word, including the tale in his collection of
Great Modern American Stories (1920). H.P. Lovecraft subsequently pronounced it one of the great "spectral tales" in American Literature (CPGR, XVII). The story was again reprinted in Golden Book in 1933 and in a Finnish translation in 1934. With the revival of interest in Gillman’s works over the past decade, it has been increasingly anthologized.

Unfortunately, the autobiographical source of the story have led some modern readers to conclude that “The Yellow Wallpaper” is unvarnished memoir. “The story was wrenched out of Gilman’s own life,” Elaine Hedget aver, for example. I am taking the liberty of using ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ quite literally as autobiographical material,” Mary A. Hill similarly acknowledges. Ironically, the author earlier warned readers to beware the temptation to commit this autobiographical fallacy. Though the narrator suffers from an illness “beginning something as mime did” and which is “treated as Dr. S. Weir Mitchell treated me.” Stetson imagined in the story the “inevitable result” of the regimen she had abandoned after three months (L. 119). In “A Walk for Two” she had envisioned an alternative past in the person of a protagonist who refused to marry at twenty-one. In “The Yellow Wallpaper” she conceived an alternative future through the eyes of a narrator who continued the rest cure until she was consumed by insanity. As she explained, “I wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper with its embellishments and additions, to carry out the ideal.” She explicitly noted discrepancies between her own experience and that of
"Jane". I never had hallucinations or objections to my rural decorations (CPGR, 20).

Incredibly, the story "anticipated" its own reception," as Amette Kolodny has suggested. Much at the narrator strains to decipher the hieroglyphics she discerns in the paper, early readers of the tale discovered only the conventions of horror and some later readers recognized only the elements of autobiography in it. Even Gilman professed to have written "The Yellow Wallpaper" simply to protest Mitchell rest cure. None of these interpretations, however, fully comprehends the story. No reader at least," "made the connection between the insanity and the sex, or sexual role, of the victim" and "no one explored the story's implication for male-female relationships in the nineteenth century. Only feminist readings recently advanced by Kolodny and others, it would seem, adequately decode the fiction.

The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" as these readers emphasize, is trapped in a prison which is at once marital-institutional and linguistic. She is "in duty bound" by the authority of her physician husband to forsake book and pen. John both reads to her and forbids her from writing whereupon Jane begins to read in the patterned wallpaper dim inferences or "sprawling outlines" of her own predicament and to record in her diary her desperate bid for emancipation. As Kolodnef observes, the narrator has been denied freedom to read and write "ostensibly for her own
good” and “in the course of accommodating herself to that deprivation, comes more and more to experience herself as a text. From her fixed bedstead, symbol of her static sexuality, she watches “her own psyche writ large” on the wall. Peeling away the paper is tantamount to crumbling the wall of her linguistic Jeucho. Thus the narrator’s descent into madness becomes, according to Jean Kennard, “a way to health” “a rejection of and escape from an insane society.” Her triumph is symbolized by the overcoming of John, who is last seen fainting on the floor as his wife creeps over him.” Neither morbid nor grotesque the story at its close seems to fulfill Stetson’s earlier prophecy in the poem. “The Walketh Veiled and Sleeping.” “Slow advancing, halting, creeping, comes the woman to the hour.!!”

Significantly Charlotte Perkins Gilman would not write again a story as good as “The Yellow Wallpaper”, as if she belatedly heeded, however in consciously the earlier demands that she restrain her flights of fancy. Even as she was writing the story, she wrestled with the private demount that visited her during the summer of 1887. A week after completing the final draft, she noted in her diary that she had accidentally taken an “overdose of acid phosphate,” a stimulant, which unsettled, her nerves. Like many another Victorian, she seems to have equated madness with inspiration. To organize her life, she soon turned from imaginative
recreations of personal experience to activism on behalf of social and political ideals.

Forbidden to write, the narrator-protagonist becomes observed with the room’s wallpaper, which she finds first repellent and then riveting; on its chaotic surface she eventually deciphers an imprisoned woman whom she attempts to liberate by peeling the paper off the wall. This brilliant tale of a white, middle-class wife driven mad by a patriarchy controlling her “for her own good” has become an American feminist classic.

The canonization of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is an obvious sign of the degree to which contemporary feminism has transformed the study of literature.

The theoretical portions that “The Yellow Wall Paper” helped to shape and perhaps to reify may be clearer if we recall some of the critical claims with which U.S. academic feminist criticism began. In the late sixties and early seventies, some academic women, most of them trained in Anglo-American methods and texts, began to take a new look at those works by men and a few white women that comprised the standard curriculum. Feminist criticism was bound to challenge this marginalization.

The editor of the Atlantic Monthly had rejected “The Yellow Wallpaper” because “I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself!” Howells reprinted Gilman’s story in
1920, he wrote that it was “terrible and too wholly dire,” “too terribly good to be printed.” “Feminists could argue convincingly that Gilman’s contemporaries, schooled on the “terrible” and “wholly dire” tales of Poe, were surely balking at something more particular, the “graphic” representation of “raving lunacy” in a middle-class mother and wife that revealed the rage of the women on a pedestal.19

“The Yellow Wallpaper” quickly assumed a place of privilege among rediscovered feminist works, raising basic questions about writing and reading as gendered practices. The narrator’s double-voiced discourse— the ironic understatements, asides, hedges, and negations through which she asserts herself against the power of John’s voice came for some critics to represent “Women’s Language” or the “Language of the Powerless.” With its discontinuities and staccato paragraphs, Gilman’s narrative raised the “law uncertain curves,” “outrageous angles” and “unheard of contradictions” of the wallpaper came for many critics to symbolize both Gilman’s text and, by extension, the particularity of female form. The story also challenged theories of genius that denied the material conditions—social, economic, psychological, and literary.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” has been evoked most frequently, however, to theorize about reading through the lens of a “female” consciousness. Gilman’s story has been a particularly congenial medium for such a re-vision not only because the narrator herself engages in a form
of feminist interpretation when she tries to read the paper on her wall but also because turn-of-the-century readers seem to have ignored or avoided the connection between the narrator's condition and patriarchal politics, instead praising the story for its keenly accurate "case study" of a presumably inherited insanity. In the contemporary feminist reading, on the other hand, sexual oppression is evident from the start: the phrase "John says" heads a litany of "benevolent" prescriptions that keep the narrator infanticized, in mobilized, and bored literally out of her mind. Reading or writing herself upon the wallpaper allows the narrator, as Paula Treichloo puts it, to "escape" her husband's "sentence" and to achieve the limited freedom of madness which, virtually all these critics have agreed, constitutes a kind of sanity in the face of the insanity of male dominance.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" showed that to the extent that we remain unaware of our interpretive conventions, it is difficult to distinguish "what we need from how we have learned to read it."20 "Yellow Wallpaper" was dramatically transformed into feminism's endlessly fascinating tale.

The narrator is faced with an unreadable text, a text for which on one of her interpretive strategies is adequate. At first she is confounded by its contradictory style; it is "flamboyant" and "pronounced," yet also "lame," "uncertain," and "dull." Then she notices different constructions in different places. In one "recurrent spot" the pattern "lolls," in another place "two breadths didn't match," and elsewhere the pattern is torn off. She tries
to organize the paper geometrically but cannot grasp its laws: It is marked critically by “bloated curves and flourishes,” diagonally by “slanting waver of optic horror like a lot of wallowing sea-weeds in full chase,” and horizontally by an order she cannot even figure out. There is even a centrifugal pattern in which “the interminable grotesque seem to form around a common center and rush off in heading plunges of equal distraction.” She notices that the paper changes and moves according to different kinds of light. And it has a color and smell that she is never able to account for. From all this, indecipherability, from this immensely complicated text, the narrator by night, no less finally discovers a single image, a woman behind bars, which she then expands to represent the whole. This is hardly a matter of “correct” re-reading then, but of fixing and reducing possibilities, finding a space of text on which she can locate whatever self-projection will enable her to move from “John says” to “I want.” The very excess of description of the wallpaper, and the fact that it continues after the narrator has first identified the woman behind the bars, actually foregrounds the reductiveness of the interpretive at. And if the narrator, having liberated the paper woman, can only imagine trying her up again.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” has come from white academics and that it has failed to question, the story's status as a universal woman’s text. A feminist criticism willing to deconstruct its own practical would reexamine
our exclusive reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” rethinks the implications of its canonization, and acknowledge both the text’s position is ideology and our own. That a hard look at feminism’s “Yellow Wallpaper” is now possible is already evident by the publication.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is through the yellow wallpaper itself. For Hedges and for Gilbert and Gubar, the wallpaper signifies the oppressive situation in which the woman finds herself; for Kolodny the paper is the narrator’s “own psyche writ large”; for Treichler it is a paradigm of women’s writing; and for Fetterley it is the husband’s patriarchal text which, however, becomes increasingly feminine in form.”21 They confronts the contradiction, seeing the wallpaper as both John’s and his wife’s discourse, because the narrator relies on the very binary oppositions” that structure John’s text.

It seems then, that just as sit is impossible for the narrator to get “that top pattern ... off from the under one” (p.31), so it is impossible to separate the text of a culture from the text of an individual, to free female subjectivity from the patriarchal text.

If we accept the culturally contingent and incomplete nature of readings guaranteed only by the narrator’s consciousness, then perhaps we can find in the yellow wallpaper, to literalize a metaphor of Adrienne Rich, “a whole new psychic geography to be explored.”22 For in privileging the
questions of reading and writing as essential “woman questions,” feminist criticism has been led to the paper. Gilman’s story within the “psychic geography” of Anglo-America at the turn of the century, we locate it in a culture obsessively preoccupied with race as the foundation of character, a culture desperate to maintain Aryan superiority in the face of massive immigrations from Southern and Eastern Europe, a culture openly anti-senitic, anti-Arian, anti-Catholic and Jin Crow. In New England, where Gilman was born and raised, agricultural decline, native emigration and soaring immigrant birth rates had generated. In California, where Gilman lived while writing “The Yellow Wallpaper,” mass anxiety about the “Yellow Peril” had already yielded such legislation as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Across the United States, newly formed groups were calling for selective breeding restricted entry, and “American Protection” of various kinds White, Christian, American-born intellectuals, novelists, political scientists, economists, sociologists, crusaders for social reform – not only shared this racial anxiety but, as John Hingham puts it, “blazed the way for ordinary nativists” by giving popular racism an “intellectual respectability.”

There “intellectual” writings often justified the rejection and exclusion of immigrants in terms graphically physical. The immigrants were “human garbage”: ready to “pollute” America with “non-Aryan elements.” Jack London describes a Jewish character as “Yellow as a sick
persimmon" and laments America’s invasion by “the dark-pigmented things, the half-castes, the mongrel-bloods,” Frank Norris ridicules the “half-breed” as an “amorphous, formless mist” and contracts the kindness and delicacy of Anglo-Saxons with “the lot, degenerated blood” of the Spanish, Mexican and Portuguese.24

Implicit or explicit in these descriptions is a new radical ideology through which “new comers from Europe could seem a fundamentally different order”, then called “native Americans”. The common nineteenth-century belied in three races - black, white, yellow - each linked to a specific continent, coal reconstituted so that “White” came to mean only “Nordic” or Northern European, while “yellow” applied not only to the Chinese, Japanese, and light-skimmed African-Americans but also to Jews, Poles, Hungarians, Italians, and even the Irish, Crusaders warmed of “yellow inundation.”

If “The Yellow Wallpaper” is read within this discourse of racial anxiety, certain of its tropes take on an obvious political charge. The very first sentence constructs the narrator in class terms, imagining an American in which, through democratic self-advancement, common Americans can enjoy upper class privileges. Although the narrator and John are “mere ordinary people” and not the rightful “heirs and coheirs, they have secured “a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate,” in whose queerness she takes pride; this house with its “private wharf” stands “quite alone ... well back
from the road, quite three miles from the village” like “English places that
you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock and lots
of separate little houses for the gardeners and people.”

In the wallpaper, the political unconscious of a culture in which an
Aryan woman’s madness, desire, and anger, repressed by the imperatives
of “reason,” “duty” and “proper self-control” are projected onto the”
yellow” woman who is, however, also the feared alien. When the narrator
tries to liberate the woman from the wall, is trying to purge her of her
color, to peel her from the yellow paper, so that she can accept this woman
as herself. The wallpaper is at once the text of patriarchy and the woman’s
text. Perhaps the narrator is both resisting and embracing the woman of
color who is self and not-self, a woman who might need to be rescued from
the text of patriarchy but cannot yet be allowed to go free. The narrator’s
pervasive horror of a yellow color and smell that threaten to take over the
“ancestral halls,” “stain everything it touched,” as the British-American
fear of a takeover by “aliens.”

Despite her socialist values, her active participation in movements
for reform, her strong theoretical commitment to racial harmony, her
unconventional support of interracial marriages, and her frequent
condemnation of America’s racist history, “Gilman upheld white protestant
supremacy, belonged for a time to Eugenics and nationalist organizations;
opposed open immigration; and inscribed racism, nationalism, and classism into her propel for social change.

For Gilman, patriarchy is a racial phenomenon; it is primarily non-Aryan "yellow" peoples whom Gilman holds responsible for originating and perpetuating patriarchal practices, and it is primarily Nordic Protestants when she considers capable of change. The text singles out the behaviour of "savage African tribes," laments the customer of India, names the "Moslem" religion as "rigidly bigoted and unchanging," and dismisses "to the limbo of all outworn superstition that false Hebraic and grossly androcentric doctrine that the woman is to be subject to the man." Gilman declares that "the women are comparatively independent and honored," nearly all "savages" are decadent, and grossly androcentric.25

Gilman's wallpaper becomes not only a reputation of patriarchy but also the projection of patriarchal practices onto non-Aryan societies. Such a projection stands, of course, in implicit tension with the narrative, because it is the modern-minded, presumably Aryan husband and doctor who constitute the oppressive force. And Gilman's boast that "The Yellow Wallpaper" convinced S. Weir Mitchell to alter his practices suggests that like Van, the sociologist-narrator of two of Gilman's feminist utopias, educated, white Protestant men could be taught to change.
"The Yellow Wallpaper" calls upon us to recognize that the white, female, intellectual-class subjectivity which Gilman’s narrator attempts to construct, and to which many feminists have also been committed perhaps unwittingly, is a subjectivity whose illusory unity, like the unity imposed on the paper, is built on the repression of difference.
References


