

**"Much Madness is the Divinest Sense":
Madness in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The
Yellow Wallpaper"**

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ABSTRACT

It was commonly reflected in the literature of 19th century that men assumed any stress in a woman's life was the direct result of her having acted outside of her domestic sphere . If a woman tried to partake in "male" activities, such as writing, or go beyond the norm, it was sure to have an ill effect on her, because she was designed to act solely as mother, wife and home-maker.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" shows the status of nineteenth-century woman within the society, her feelings of fragmentation and rebellion against her confinement and submission to laws established by and for men. This research tries to show that madness works in this story to reveal the oppressive control of gender on woman of the nineteenth-century. The woman, in an attempt to escape her confinement, may flee into madness. This use of madness appears to transform the negative construct of female insanity into a necessary affirmation of the female self, breaking the shackles of isolation and oppression that enslaved her.

كان من الشائع في ادب القرن التاسع عشر ان اي توتر او مرض نفسي يصيب المرأة يعزى الى عملها خارج اطار المنزل. واذا حاولت المرأة العمل في اعمال خاصة بالرجال مثل الكتابة او تبتعد عن وضعها الطبيعي كام و زوجة او مديرة منزل فانها بالتاكيد ستصاب بشتى الامراض النفسية . تعرض قصة شارلوت بركمن جلمان "ورق الجدران الاصفر" حالة المرأة في مجتمع القرن التاسع عشر و مشاعرها المجزئة بين رغبتها الشخصية وبين مايريدة المجتمع منها وتمردھا ضد حجرھا واستسلامھا تجاه قوانين التي وضعت اساسا من قبل الرجل و للرجل نفسة.

ويحاول هذا البحث ان يبين بأنّ الجنون استخدم في هذه القصّة لكشّف السيطرة المستبدّة للجنس على امرأة القرن التاسع-عشر. فقد تلجأ المرأة الى حالة الجنون في محاولة منها للهروب من الحجر بسبب قوانين المجتمع. ووظفت الكاتبة الجنون في محاولة لتحويل التركيب السلبي للجنون النسائي إلى وسيلة ضرورية لتأكيد وتعزيز شخصية المرأة وذاتها وايضا لكسر قيود العزلة والظلم اللذان استعبداها.

Madness has probably afflicted people since the beginning of mankind. It has often been exploited in literature to convey and expose deeper, metaphorical implications. So it is not surprising that the theme connected with the human psyche and especially with its darkest sides has been explored by a great number of writers in different epochs. The subject of madness and mental disorders is touched by such remarkable artists as Shakespeare, Melville and Virginia Woolf. As artists, however, they not only discuss this problem but use it to transmit implicit, metaphorical messages. In their works madness or the state of insanity is used as a symbol of a superior cognition of the world or deeper sensitivity. The motif of madness as a symbol is also often exploited by women writers in the nineteenth century.

For centuries women in life and literature were often portrayed as submissive, docile, and obedient to men. Focusing primarily on the nineteenth century, literature of the period often characterized women as victims oppressed by society, culture, as well as by the male influences in their lives. Many of the female characters suffered the effects of isolation brought on by constant oppression and subservience driving them insane and mad. The views of women in early literature were often silenced and their opinion's disregarded by a dominant patriarchal society. If a woman happened to aspire for such features like independence, self- sufficiency and self-fulfillment, which were reserved only for nineteenth century men, this woman is considered "selfish, unwomanly, and unchristian".¹ However it was so common in literature of the 19th century using terms like "hysteria" or "monomania" to indicate madness.² The term

hysteria was especially used for women who do not follow the norm of 19 the century, of what is called as "the Cult of True Woman".³

So, quite often nineteenth century female writers project into their works mad diabolical heroines to discuss problems that women from Victorian times encountered in their everyday life. Those women writers most frequently are the counterparts to the main characters of the literary works. They represent deeper nature of the main heroines, their desires and needs. Moreover, the mad protagonists can be seen as the authors' doubles reflecting also their rebellion against and opposition towards the patriarchal system by which they were surrounded. In this respect the critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* point out that the female writers and characters are usually torn between the desire to remain themselves and the desire to fulfill the social expectations. These critics clarify this by saying that

By projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them. What this means, however, is that the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in some sense the *author's* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. Indeed, much of the poetry and fiction written by women conjures up this mad creature so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be.⁴

Thus, according to Gilbert and Gubar, the mad heroine is not only the counterpart of the main character but she is also the author's double. This figure expresses anxiety, rage and the dilemma of nineteenth-century women writers. Madness is used by them as a symbol of women's rebellion and anger. Accordingly madness can be described as a state where person almost lost his control over his action or deeds The nineteenth-century female writers wanted to escape from the constrains created by men through their madness to be beyond control, able to express their rage and to take action, which was almost impossible in the real life where women were locked within male houses ruled by men's laws.⁴ Such pattern is used by many nineteenth-century

writers⁵ like Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1930) in her story entitled "The Yellow Wallpaper"(1892)⁶.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a leading feminist of her time and contributed an important 19th century short story dealing with madness. She had married quite unwillingly at the age of 24 because. She was worried about pursuing her ambition as a writer while fulfilling her duties as a woman and a wife. After the birth of her only child she faced a serious depression, hence the specialist ,Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, who treated her prescribed a complete bed rest "rest cure" for several weeks . The doctor sent Gilman home with the strict suggestion that "live as domestic life as far as possible". Further, she was prevented from making any intellectual actions or "touch pen, brush, or pencil again"⁷. And this for any writer is worse than to be sick. Seven years later in 1892, Gilman wrote this story to show the doctor who was a writer at the same time that how bad his treatment was for her as a woman and a writer.

The opening scene of this semi- autobiographical story describes how the unnamed narrator, her husband John, who was a doctor and their baby have recently moved into a rent mansion, which she finds a strange. When she tries to communicate her thoughts on the matter to her husband he laughs at her. She reminds herself that "one expects that in marriage" (p.322). This is the first of many unhappy statements expressed by the narrator, conveying how severely dissatisfied she is with the expectations imposed upon her by the society, and more importantly by her husband. Although the narrator claims to have been happy with her husband, who was a tender" and "devoted", she soon begins to experience psychological depression: "something was going wrong from the first" (p.323) as she describes it. When the narrator tried to tell him what she thought was good for her, but not appropriate to the husband's opinion, the husband used sweet words to force his idea toward the wife:

“My darling,” says he, “I beg of you, for my sake and for our child’s sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! ... Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?” (p.328)

The narrator is prevented from performing any useful task by her husband under the guise of caring for her. John has confined her imaginative prowess leaving her with no intellectual stimulation and freedom. It shows an attempt to dampen her

creativity. That creates boredom to her which is a major part of the problem; the narrator says:

[I] am absolutely forbidden to 'work' until I am well again. Personally I disagree with their ideas. Personally I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change would do me good. (p.322)

The husband, with his authoritarian position and sanity decided that his wife's writing in her journal would make her depression worse so that he asks her to stop writing and stop having "illusion" about the house. In the husband's eyes, that the house is haunted is only his wife's illusion. On the other hand, for her, it is a fact. In her journal, she writes the reasons why she thinks that way—the house is untenanted for so long and rented cheaply. Furthermore, she writes:

I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. (p.322)

The critic Elaine Showalter notes in her study *The Female Malady* that "Biographies and letters of gifted women who suffered mental breakdowns have suggested that madness is the price women artists have had to pay for the exercise of their creativity in a male-dominated culture"⁸. The narrator does not agree that this activity would worsen her condition; on the contrary, she feels it could help her, but her arguments are not taken into consideration. Thus the narrator is obligated to create a secret life as a writer, hidden from every one else, because the other characters blame her illness on the work of mind. For her husband and her brother, who is a doctor also, "writing which made her sick" (p.322). However, the result of her taking writing is that "it does exhaust her a good deal- having to be sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition"(p.322).

The norms of society which require her to be a good woman, wife and mother set up considerable obstacles to her expressions of her self. It seems

that the narrator, caught between the practical world of her husband and her own imagination, attempts to save herself through writing, detailing her journey inward to discover and find her selfhood⁹. Every time she wrote in her journal, she had to stop herself when her husband arrived, “There comes John, and I must put this away, --he hates to have me write a word.” (p.323) or when she saw Jennie her, sister-in-law coming to her, “there comes John’s sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing.” (p.325).

The narrator really wants to do one thing she likes—writing, and she perceives that by writing she could express herself well and it even could help her cure herself. She says in this respect "I think sometimes if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me" (p.324). As Gilman clarifies in an article entitled "why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper", "work [is] the most important activity in defining a sense of self, because what we do is greater than what is done to us" ¹⁰. However, she could not do that freely, because her rest-cure treatment prohibited her to do that. And as a true woman, she has to obey what her husband said to her.

In her journal, commenting on Jennie, the narrator writes, “She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession” (p.325). The narrator compares it to her writing journal that she considers as her work. She realizes that the best profession for women in that era is to be homemaker, according to the Cult of True Womanhood. But still, she criticizes it. Besides that, she also knows that she opposed the society norm that condemned novel writing. She kept on writing her journal. She wrote, “I verily believe she (*Jennie*) thinks it is the writing which made me sick!” (p.325) Jennie who thought that housekeeping is the best profession for women often looks at the narrator oddly. Jennie does not understand why the narrator does not conform to the society’s norms. If John represents the oppressive males in society, Jennie represents all the women who are ignorant of society’s oppression toward

women and who are satisfied by their state. Jennie believes, like all submissive women of her time, that women are created to be inferior and men superior.¹¹

Since the beginning of the story, John always tries to make his wife submissive and selfless. He designs a treatment to pressure the narrator into concluding that something is wrong with her, not with her husband nor the people around her nor the values people adhered to at that time. When she tries to be assertive, to express her feelings and thought toward her husband, he cruelly asks her to control herself. "... so I take pains to control myself—before him, at least, and that makes me very tired." (p.323). By "proper self-control", John means to control the possibility that the narrator has her own version about her sickness and decides her own treatment to cure herself.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" fully demonstrates literal and figurative confinement experienced by the nineteenth century women. The narrator, who suffers from psychological depression, lives as most women in her era in her husband's house which reveals that her living space is confined to the size of the estate. She is entrapped as she can not make her own decision. She is unable even to choose the room in which she would like to live, her husband John does it for her, using indirect persuasion, saying "there was only one window and not room for two beds and no near room for him" (p.324). John places his wife in the former nursery room which symbolizes her status within society. By placing her heroine in this place, Gilman illustrates that women of her time were treated like children who have to live in a room full of "rings and things" (p.324).

As a child she needs to be protected, controlled and keep a way from any harm. Her husband gets used calling her "little girl?"(p.328) and his "blessed little goose" (p.324). The husband's need for control over her is proven when the writer admits that John "is very carefully and loving, and hardly lets (her) stir without special direction"(p.327).

John says that they came to that house merely on the narrator's account so that she would get better soon. However, he ignores what his wife wants. He

denies her request a room on the first floor with access to the air outside, and confines her in the 'attic' instead. When the narrator feels troubled with the wallpaper and asks her husband to change it, he says that he would even whitewash the cellar if the narrator asks him to do it. However, he does not do anything about it. He goes on forcing his wife not to give fancy toward the wallpaper and the house.

The husband encourages her to avoid expressing negative thoughts and fears about her illness; she says that "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason for suffer and that satisfies him" (p.323) she is also urged to keep her fancies and superstitions in check. In other words, it can be said that the husband defines what sanity to his wife is, and what his wife feels and thinks as insanity. Sanity for a woman is that she has to believe in and agree with what her husband says; she has to be quiet, selfless, and submissive. On the other hand, when a woman has her own feeling and thought that opposes to her husband's desires and feelings, she is regarded insane.¹²

The husband keeps telling her that all he does is for her benefit, because he loves her. Troubled with the idea of "true woman" and believing in what her husband says to her, the writer writes in her journal "He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick." (p.327)). However, it is obviously seen that what he does toward his wife does not show his loving character. It even shows his egotism and arrogance. He does not show any genuine empathetic towards her. He never listens to what his wife says and wants. His imposing his wife to believe in what he saying to her and asked her to do what he thinks the best for his wife even makes his wife's depression worsened quickly.

However, the description of the nursery room is very significant in the development of the unnamed woman condition. The windows of the room are barred, which drives one to think that this woman lives in a prison. The room also has two windows, one- window looks out to the "wharf" (p.324), and the other looks out to a very beautiful garden and abandoned green houses. Perhaps

all these beautiful things are reminders of the beautiful places were she cannot go and hope to go freely. "This room looks very empty and depicted with nothing really to stimulate the mind except *the yellow wallpaper*"(p.323 emphasis is mine). Gilman describes the yellow wallpaper with great detail that might drive one's imagination insane. This paper is

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly 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 in unheard of contradictions. The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others. (p.323)

Being imprisoned is supposed to 'cure' the author of her wild thoughts, but instead, the yellow wallpaper nourishes the author's imagination, which is so hungry that it constantly feeds off the slightest peculiarity in the room or on the other side of the windows. One such peculiarity the author describes is a woman that creeps by daylight, a woman she spies out her window and out every window simultaneously. The writer believes that this woman is trapped in the patterns of the wallpaper by day and she "shakes it" (p.313) at night in an attempt to free herself. "I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind that sub- pattern, but now I quite sure it is a woman" (p.329).

With the obvious lack of companionship, she finds a new friend in the woman and undertakes to free her from the wallpaper. She later mentions that she often sees the woman creeping outside. She begins to hallucinate revealing the madness that is controlling her and her faculties. She also begins to show signs of paranoia by locking the door as she watches the woman creeping and while she tears away the paper so John will not discover it. She no longer goes outside nor does she allow anyone to come in to her warren of madness but

rather works at freeing the woman so she can surprise her husband." [The] author articulates for herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be constrained" ¹³. The woman remarking about her disgust with even looking out the windows mirrors this concept. "I don't like to look out the windows even- there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast." (p.232) .This reveals the madness brought on by society to women, to be accepted or to practice freewill, they must creep to get around.

By analogy, the woman from the paper expresses Gilman's discontent with women's oppression. Using her person, the author presents how she perceives women's situation within society. Namely, they are constantly moderated and repressed by invisible bars that stop them from moving forward. Furthermore, by the character of the woman enslaved within the yellow wallpaper she shows the way all women should take to make a change. She shows her persistent fight with the pattern. The narrator creeps by daylight behind locked doors allowing the madness to rule her every action without society seeing her condition. She is faced with freeing her imaginary friend from the paper before her husband arrives back to the house to make their departing arrangements.¹⁴

In the night, the narrator tries to help the woman become free and says, "As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper"(p. 323). By looking closely at this quote, it is apparent that the author becomes one with the creeping woman. It is also realized that the entire idea of the woman resulted from the author's repressed situation. The creeping woman is the author's way to reveal this repression to herself, for she is the woman, forced to creep in the daylight in secrecy with the doors locked, and left to desperately try to free herself at night. It can be seen that "temporary nervous depression" (p.324) of the main protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" worsens as she gets to know

the woman from the wallpaper.¹⁵ She submerges entirely into madness after she becomes one with the woman imprisoned behind the “outside pattern” (p.333).

It can be concluded that the woman from the wallpaper is a counterpart to the narrator. Both of them are imprisoned, and both of them try to violate the restrictions by which they are surrounded. The narrator of the story tries to do it by the act of writing. In this way she opposes her husband’s rules and finds her own space, her own imaginative world. In turn, the woman from the paper sometimes escapes from her confinement and creeps around the summer estate. She also shakes the pattern to destroy it and to be free forever. When John discovers his wife creeping, he is horrified and says, "For God's sake, what are you doing!" The narrator says that she kept on creeping just the same, but looked over her shoulder and said, "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!" (p.334).The wallpaper, like John and the house, is oppressive, but in a more abstract and personal manner. The wallpaper literally surrounds her but represents, instead of the physical world, personal things and " the make-created world in general"¹⁶ she must overcome.

These facts and the creeping of the woman from the wallpaper suggest a conclusion that she is also insane. Only when she transfers her madness to the main heroine and joins with her into one person, the narrator attains victory and starts to creep over the body of her unconscious husband. It can be concluded that the example of the woman from the wallpaper is introduced by Gilman into the story to inspire also other women to oppose the stagnation and demeaning position in which they had to live. She also represents the author’s own battle with the patriarchal system in which she uses her work to awaken women’s awareness , the narrator finally succeeds in freeing herself one evening and can now comfortably creep in the light because the yellow wallpaper, her prison, is off of the walls.¹⁷

Gilman's short story is not only about a lonely woman's descent into madness, but is symbolic of Victorian women writer's attempt to overcome the "madness" and of the woman writer who wishes to free herself from the conventions of the male dominated literary world. By not allowing her to write he asserts enormous power over her: it crushes her self-expression. For males who do not believe in the genius of female authorship, it would be far easier to stop their production of writing, than to waste time censoring work.

The ending of the story aims to present that in the patriarchal system there is no satisfying place for women as a result of "her static nature of the expression and the product of her [gender]"¹⁸. Charlotte Perkins Gilman presents the heroine who cannot find her own role within society created by men. The narrator cannot become a real mother as she is deprived of adult responsibilities and duties. She cannot become an artist as she is forbidden to write. As a feminist writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman suggests that women cannot live in harmony with roles imposed on them by men. She presents the woman that is "locked" inside the male perspective that female authorship is inferior to male. It is from this soiling prejudice that she must "free" herself. When the narrator locks herself in the room she faces it on her own. No one but her can change it. The act of tearing it down symbolically rescues her from becoming yet another would-be women writer. Gilman's proposes that women can achieve such status that they deserve, but that they must first acknowledge and see truthfully the "madness" surroundings, the tenets created by men, and become driven by the "madness" to overcome it. Society says that the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is mad, but it is exactly this madness that gives her the strength to destroy her husband's authority over her. This struggle is established through the symbol of the wallpaper and the woman hidden therein, as the narrator creates a connection between herself and the woman.

The narrator in her creeping state would not be accepted by society, it is true, but she is creeping towards freedom, and society is not.¹⁹

Notes

¹ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own. British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.22

² Beverly A. Hume, "Managing madness in Gilman's" *The Yellow Wall-paper*", *Studies in Fiction V*: 30 (2002)

³ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" [http:// www.pinzler.com/ushistory/cultwo.html](http://www.pinzler.com/ushistory/cultwo.html) June 18, 2005.

⁴ Hume, Beverly A.

⁵ Susan M. Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1984, p. 78

⁶ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper", in *Literature and Ourselves*, Gloria Mason Henderson et al (eds.), New York: Longman, 2001. All subsequent quotations refer to this edition. The number of the pages will be enclosed in brackets in the text.

⁷ Hume, Beverly A.

⁸ quoted in YIN Cai-qiao, " Women's repression, rebellion and quest for the "true self": *The yellow wallpaper* as the epitome of the female Gothic novel" , (Nov. 2008), V: 5, No.11, <http://www.linguist.org.cn/doc/su200811/su2008>

⁹ John S. Bak, "Escaping the jaundiced eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper", *Studies in Short Fiction*, V: 31 (1994).

¹⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Why I Wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" " Forerunner (October 1931):p. 19 -20

¹¹ Deborah Thomas, "The Changing Role of Womanhood: From True Woman to New Woman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"" <http://itech.fgcu.edu/faculty/wohlp/ara/gilman.htm>

¹² Hume, Beverly A.

¹³ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 85

¹⁴ Lorelee MacPike, "Environment as Psychopathological Symbolism in *The Yellow Wallpaper*" in *A Captive Imagination. A Casebook on "The Yellow*

Wallpaper". New York: The Feminist Press 1992, p. 137

¹⁵Hume, Beverly A, "Managing madness in Gilman's" *The Yellow Wall-paper*"

¹⁶ MacPike, p. 138

¹⁷ Elaine, Showalter, p. 22

¹⁸ MacPike, p. 138

¹⁹ Elaine, Showalter, p. 34

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