



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Behind The Wallpaper

The Feminist point of view in the story "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Helga Sigurðardóttir

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Summary

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a very effective writer in the beginning of the 19th century. She was an outspoken feminist and fought for women all her life. She wrote stories and articles in newspapers about women's condition in the male dominant society. She is most often remembered for her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" which emphasized on the terrible effects that enforced isolation can have on women when they are forced to lie in bed for a long time with no stimulation of any kind. Gilman herself had a very similar experience as the narrator in the story "The Yellow Wallpaper". She suffered from postpartum depression following the birth of her daughter. She was treated by a well known physician Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell with the so called "rest cure" treatment, which meant that the patient had to stay in bed for a long time doing nothing. This method was very popular and many women suffering from mental illness were treated by it in Gilman's time.

Gilman decided to write the story "The Yellow Wallpaper" in order to get her point across that locking women inside a room for a long period of time, leaving them alone with their own thoughts and without any connection to other people could have devastating effects on their mental health. Gilman used a powerful symbol in her story, the wallpaper in the protagonist room, to make the story more horrifying and to show how the narrator's madness slowly becomes clearer. But most of all she wanted to point out to the world women's poor situation in a world controlled by men.

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Introduction

In the beginning of the 19th century, women in America and of course all around the world did by not by any means have equal rights to those of men. They were expected to stay at home and dedicate all their time to their husbands and children. Women had no rights whatsoever and they had no power over their personal properties after their marriage. Many women were victims of isolation; they were often forced to stay at home, expelled from normal human contact. Dr Silas Weir Mitchell was a very well known physician in the 19th century and he was the designer of the so called “rest cure” treatment. He suggested that women who had mental illness should be imprisoned at home with no connection to the outside world and should live in absolute solitude, for days, weeks months or even years. Such isolation can obviously cause deep depression and today this kind of method would never be accepted. Today we all know that if someone with mental illness is forced to lay in bed for a long period of time without any connection to other people the situation will get worse.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a prolific writer. She believed strongly in women’s right and fought for them all her life by writing articles in newspapers and writing stories about women’s condition in society. The story “The Yellow Wallpaper” was written with the intention of criticizing Dr Silas Weir Mitchell’s method. Gilman had experienced the method herself when she was treated by the physician when suffering from postpartum depression after giving birth to her daughter. This method nearly drove her completely insane and she presumably never forgave Dr Mitchell for his treatment. The story was also written with the intention of criticizing how men regarded women as inferior and not as intelligent as themselves. Gilman uses a powerful symbol in the story, the wallpaper in the protagonist room to show the young woman’s terrible circumstance and to make the story more effective.

She also writes the story in horror style to invoke a strong reaction in her readers.

In this essay I want to look at the story “The Yellow Wallpaper” from a feminist perspective. I will begin by discussing the writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman. I will examine her background and what effect it had on her writings. Then I intend to go back in time and examine “the man made world” in the 19th century America. I shall ask why the white man was the center of everything and also discuss the enforced isolation that women had to put up with in that time and what consequences it had on them. I shall also argue how Gilman uses the isolation to make her story more effective. Finally I want to examine how Gilman uses the yellow wallpaper in the narrator’s room as a symbol in her story and how she manages to get her readers to respond with both horror and also sympathy towards the protagonist.

Chapter I: The writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

The story “The Yellow Wallpaper” was written in 1890 by the writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It was first published in May 1901 in *New England Magazine* (Lane 124). The story describes a young woman who is locked in an upstairs bedroom in an isolated country summerhouse which her husband who is a physician has rented. The room she lives in is not very pleasurable. “[T]he windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls. The paint and paper look as if a boy’s school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed” (Gilman 314).

The purpose of the narrator’s isolation is to cure her from illness her husband calls “temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency” (313) and he claims that the only thing she can do is to rest in this room all alone and to have very little communication with other people. The young woman accepts this explanation and feels ashamed when she thinks that this method is wrong. “[H]e takes all care from me, and I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more” (314). The longer she stays isolated in the room with nothing to inspire her, she begins to concentrate on the wallpaper and starts to imagine that there are women behind it creeping inside trying to get out and she starts to believe that she is one of them. She locks herself in the room and refuses to leave it. At the very end of the story her husband finds her creeping around the room, completely insane from the isolation she has to suffer “But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way”(324).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born 1860 in Harford, Connecticut. She was the daughter of Frederick Beecher Perkins a librarian and a writer and Mary Perkins. Frederick Perkins left his family when Charlotte and her brother were small children. After her father left, Mary Gilman lived in poverty along with her children and moved very often between places to live with her relatives temporarily (Schwartz ix). It must have been hard in those days to be a single a mother and presumably that put a mark on her mother because Charlotte describes her as a very cold and emotionless woman.

Her method was to deny the child all expression of affection as far as possible, so that she should not be used to it or long for it. “I used to put away your little hand from my cheek when you were a nursing baby.” she told me in later years; “I did not want you to suffer as I had suffered.” She would not let me caress her and, would not caress me unless I was asleep. (xi)

I think because of her poor and strict childhood Charlotte used her imagination a lot, perhaps to get away from the hard real world that she lived in. As she grew up she realized that she could use her imagination and put it on a paper and so she began to write. She was interested in learning and was mostly self educated. When she was 18 she went to Rhode Island School of Design and studied art and paint (xii). She supported herself the next two years by writing short stories and articles in newspapers. In 1884 she met Charles Walter Stetson who was an artist and they married that same year. Together they had one daughter Katharine. After the birth of their daughter Charlotte suffered from depression and began treatment with Dr Silas Weir Mitchell. His advice to her was to live as domestically as possible and he told her that she should not touch paper and pen for a long time. This treatment he recommended was called “rest cure” and was very popular in that period of time, especially for women (xiv). “The cure consisted of the patient’s doing nothing, certainly no more than an hour’s daily reading or writing or stimulating talk”(xv).

From that experience Charlotte got the idea to write the short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. The story is mostly based on her own experience and received many critical responses from her readers and also doctors who were very familiar with the "rest cure" (xv). "'Such a story ought not to be written,'" one reader wrote. "'It was enough to drive anyone mad to read it'" (xv). Gilman answered her readers with a personal statement:

Using the remnants of intelligence that remained, ... I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again—work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper a parasite -ultimately recovering some measure of power.... It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked. (xv)

Gilman and Stetson separated in 1894 and Charlotte moved to California and married her second husband George Houghton Gilman. Over the next years she worked as an editor and published many interesting books. Her first book *In this our world* came out in 1893 and is "a collection of satiric poems with feminist themes" (Gascoigne). She also gave lectures about women's issues and human rights (Gascoigne).

Gilman was a nationalist and a revolutionist along with being a feminist. She was a very independent woman and wasn't afraid to express her opinions to others. Gilman wrote in 1915 a utopian novel *Herland* (Schwartz xxi). In the story three young men discover a peaceful society, settled completely by women. They soon find out that in this world there are no wars no deceases no conflicts and motherhood is the only thing that matters. In Gilman's book *Herland* the narrator in the story, who is a man, describes what he experiences in that lost civilization:

As I learned more and more to appreciate what these women had accomplished, the less proud I was of what we, with all our manhood had done. You see, they had no

wars. They had had no kings, and no priests, and no aristocracies. They were sisters, and as they grew, they grew together –not by competition, but by united action. (Gilman105)

Gilman's best known work and most generally read is *Women and Economics*. In the book she argues about women's position in the society and their social roles. She attacks the male dominant hostility regarding women. She says that women are economically dependent of their husbands; they are forced to stay inside the home and live a domestic life as slaves. (Schwartz xix). According to Gilman: "[T]he female of the genus homo is economically dependent on the male. He is her food supply"(xix). She said that if women had economic independence they would gain freedom and the freedom would bring them self confidence and women and man could live together on an equal basis (xx).

Gilman lived the last years of her life in Norwich Connecticut. In 1932 she discovered that she had a breast cancer. Her husband died in 1934 and after that she moved back to California to live near to her daughter (Gascoigne).

After reading all this about Gilman's life it is not difficult to see that she was an astonishing character and was very much ahead of her time. She seems to have always followed her instinct and to have a strong sense of justice. She fought for the rights of women and never gave up although she had lot of readers and critics who didn't like what she was writing. It shows how amazingly strong and brave she was when she decided to end her life instead of dying slowly in a painful way. It must have been difficult in the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th to be diagnosed with cancer, a great deal harder than it is today because of much lower life expectancy. Doctors did not know as much about cancer as nowadays and the treatment was not on a high scale. Gilman wrote these powerful words in her diary shortly before she died: "The time is approaching when we shall consider it abhorrent to our civilization to allow a human being to die in prolonged agony...Believing

this open choice to be of social service in promoting wise views on this question, I have preferred chloroform to cancer”(xxvi).

Chapter II: Man Made World.

In the 19th century when the story “The Yellow Wallpaper” was written, the ruling class of America consisted only of white men. Even though today white men seem to dominate most aspects of American life, in Gilman’s time their power was absolute. “American citizenship rights had been constructed as “manhood” rights which inhered to white males only” (Bederman 20). On the other hand African American men were placed in the same category as women “Negro males, whether free or slave, were forbidden to exercise “manhood” rights— forbidden to vote, hold electoral office, serve on juries, or join the military”(20). Black men were regarded lesser than white men in every way and all that was decent in our civilization was thought to have come from white men (21). Many articles in popular magazines like the National Geographic described white men exploring the primitive lands of Africa and they were regarded as heroes (23). Pictures from these adventures in darkest Africa adorned the pages and Bederman describes one of them as follows: “A tall white explorer, dignified, blond carefully clad in jacked, hat boots, socks and knickers, carrying a state of the art rifle, is flanked—and implicitly contrasted with – two black “pygmy trackers” Savage-looking, naked and armed only with bow and arrows, the pygmies reach barely to his shoulders” (22).

It was the dominant thinking in the 19th century that white men were the only human beings who were able to think and make logical decisions. They were the ones who could be depended on. Women, African American men and Native Americans (Indians), were lesser and should obey and listen. White men were the rulers of America (23).

Men dominated women completely. While women did their duties in the domestic field, men could do whatever they wanted. They could meet other men and enjoy their company,

go to the market place where they could share their opinions. They made decisions that improved their position in the society and they identified themselves as the masters of the universe (Thomas). On the other hand at that time women were only servants, they lived in an unjust world and their position in the society was equal to domestic pets. The possibilities for women of receiving higher education were little or none as they were excluded from attending universities. Women were supposed to find a husband and to take care of his daily needs by staying home and taking care of their children and family.

At the beginning of the century, women enjoyed few of the legal, social or political rights that are now taken for granted in western countries; they could not vote, not sue or be sued, could not testify in court, had extremely limited control over personal property after their marriage, were rarely granted legal custody of their children in cases of divorce, and were barred from institutions of higher education.

(Women in the 19th century)

Men defined women's role. They were obliged to live in a domestic sphere and not join the public area where they did not belong. Men regarded women inferior and not as intelligent as themselves. Women were expected to remain good, pure and passive. They were not supposed to have opinion on society and political issues. They had to be pious and faithful to their husbands in every way. Debora Thomas describes the "Cult of True Womanhood" which was a general view in the 19th century:

Men perpetrated an ideological prison that subjected and silenced women. This ideology, called The Cult of True Womanhood, legitimized the victimization of women. The Cult of Domesticity and the Cult of Purity were the central tenets of the Cult of true Womanhood. Laboring under the seeming benevolence of the Cult of a Domesticity, women were imprisoned in the home of private sphere, a servant tending to the needs of the family. Furthermore, the Cult of Purity obliged women to remain

virtuous and pure even in marriage, with their comportment continuing to be one of modesty. (Thomas)

Gilman fought for white women of her time and she tried to show hard it was for them to pass through barriers if they wanted to take part in the world outside their homes (Bederman 167). “Probably no feminist theorist of her day was more influential or convinced more American women to embrace the cause of women’s advancement” (167).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses the story “The Yellow Wallpaper” to demonstrate this terrible arrogance and domination toward women and the story also show the lack of understanding that women had to suffer from men. After reading the story I was thrilled, both because of its horror tale but mostly because of the author’s extreme feminist point of view.

Chapter III: Enforced isolation.

Isolation is a terribly difficult situation for any human being. It obscures a person's thinking in every way. An individual who is isolated from others and has no chance to share his feelings or opinion to anyone, especially when he has not even the chance to write down his thoughts, might in the end become completely insane.

The story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is told in first person and in the form of a series of journal entries and the woman who suffers so much in the story is unnamed. It starts when the narrator is locked inside a summerhouse which her husband has rented. The reason for it is because of the narrator's mental health. She suffers from a mental illness which today would be diagnosed as postpartum depression and is a generally accepted disease. "About one in ten women experience severe postpartum depression in the first few months after giving birth. This might seem like strong evidence that hormonal changes play a role in women's depression because this is a period of great hormonal change in women's bodies" (Nolen-Hoeksema 297). Because of ignorance and conceit toward women in 19th century the sickness was not diagnosed as a serious health problem. The narrator's husband who is a physician thinks that the only way to cure his wife's illness is complete rest.

The rest cure was a treatment for what was deemed hysteria in women. It had great popularity in the 19th century as a way to treat women with mental illnesses that might later be termed generalized anxiety disorder or major depression. It might also be applied to women of the upper classes who were simply exhausted by the chores of raising children, overseeing large households, or who were suffering postpartum depression after the birth of a child. (Christensen)

Dr Silas Weir Mitchell was a very well known physician in the 19th century and he was the designer of the so called “rest cure”. He recommended that women who had mental illness should be imprisoned at home with no connection to the outside world whatsoever and live in absolute solitude. They were not allowed to engage their minds by reading writing and they should not restrain their brain too much. The women’s husbands made all decisions regarding their wives and could come to a conclusion that the rest cure was suitable for them (Christensen).

John, the narrator’s husband, thinks that it is his job to protect his wife and as a highly regarded physician he is working according to his best knowledge, and according to the social rules which were prevailing at that time. He seems to care very much for his wife and feels responsible to her but in a superior way. It shows clearly: “‘bless her little heart!’” said he with a big hug, “‘She shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let’s improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about in the morning!’”(319). He is convinced that he is doing the right thing for his wife. According to the narrator, her husband and the narrator’s brother do not take her sickness seriously and the male dominant thinking is brilliantly described by Gilman when the narrator says:

You see he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do? If a physician of high standing and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do? My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing. (313)

The narrator tries to convince her husband that the “rest cure” is not the right method for her. She tells him that she believes that any work of excitement and activity will do her good instead of lying in bed all day doing nothing. She also tries to tell him that she needs to connect with people and have a stimulating conversation with others. “I sometimes fancy that

in my condition if I had let 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”(313). John shows no attempt to do what his wife asks him. His ignorance and arrogance towards his wife is so obvious in the story and so well described, that it has without doubt invoked feelings of anger and injustice among women readers throughout the years.

The narrator does not like the room that her husband had forced her to stay in. She especially notices the wallpaper in the room which she doesn't like at all. “The paint and paper look as if a boy's school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life” (314). She tells her husband that she doesn't like the room and asks him if he might change the wallpaper. He refuses by explaining to her that after the wallpaper has been changed she would ask for more changes in the room. And that is not a good idea because the atmosphere in the room should get her better and a patient is supposed to have no such fancies and thoughts. “At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies”(315). With this declaration he shows her that he controls her completely.

Instead of confronting her husband the narrator just relies on him and follows his rules in every way. “I think sometimes if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me”(316). As the story progresses the narrator's isolation begins to have an effect on her mental health. John takes away her only pleasure which is to write; he tells her that writing will just confuse her and corrupt her imagination. In other words he does not believe in her at all and does not think of her as a creative and an independent human being. The writer and editor Rena Korb refers to Virginia Woolf's famous essay “A Room of One's Own”:

([I]n order to write, a woman must have money and her own private room. Perhaps implicit in Woolf's word it that women also need to be accepted for what they are: creative independent, thinking creatures. For Gilman's narrator, having, money, a private room, and the necessary leisure time certainly was not enough to sustain her as a writer and as a person; she was lacking that other essential element: A family who believed in a woman's right to creativity and self-expression. (Korb)

The narrator's constant feeling of guilt, the lack of power and insecurity is very prevalent in the story. She is afraid that her husband finds out that she is writing and also she feels guilty for not doing the things that her husband tells her to do." I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already" (314).

The only people the narrator associates with are John's sister Mary and the nurse Jenny. These two women seem to be on her husband's side and are doing exactly what he tells them to do and they appear to believe that writing is what makes the narrator sick. John's sister seems to be a typical 19th century woman who thinks that her place is to live in the domestic sphere by doing things for her brother whom she regards as a very highly respected doctor. She takes care of the narrator's baby and seems to be a perfect housekeeper. "She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for not better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing, which made me sick!"(316).

The narrator longs to have an intellectual motivating talk with other people. One can imagine how horrible it is to have no one to talk to and no one to share one feeling and to have a discussion on equal level. It doesn't help to interact with someone who thinks nothing of you and believes that most of the things you say are just nonsense which comes out of an insane person. It must be terribly hard not to have a real friend to lean on when feeling as awful as the narrator felt. She even suggests to John they go and visit her cousin Henry and his wife Julia, but he refuses her immediately "But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to

stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished”(318).

John treats his wife like a child and he seems to control her every move and there is nothing she can do other than to obey him in everything. This manipulation is very well described by Gilman in the story and it shows all the way through, for example when he says: “What is it, little girl?... Don’t go walking about like that— you get cold” (319). Another example of this is when the narrator tells his husband that she is getting better in her body but not in her head, he looks at her accusingly and comments: “‘My darling’” said 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! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?”(319). This statement shows how awfully manipulating man John is. The narrator describes this herself by saying: “He hardly lets me stir without special direction. I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care of me” (314).

At the end of the story when the narrator becomes completely mad by the isolation and the manipulation from her husband, John seems suddenly realize that this “rest cure” method he was treating her with is not working at all. He sees his wife creeping around the room as it was her final journey into her own madness. He becomes terrified and faints in front of her. John, the husband and high regarded physician, suddenly becomes weak. Yin Cai-qiao who is a female English teacher analyzes the situation at the end of the story from a feminist perspective in an interesting article called “Women’s repression, rebellion and quest for the “true self”:

Sun is the symbol of men while moon is always associated with women, therefore, when it is daylight, men are dominated and women have to struggle to escape men's dominance which will certainly make man angry. Besides, in men's eyes, only the behavior that follows men's rules is normal while woman's struggle and rebellion against men is abnormal. So that's why the narrator is sure that the pattern is a woman only when it is moonlight. In moonlight, men's action and involvement is weak, women becomes the queen of the night, and Gilman's arrangement of the appearance of the shape of woman in moonlight symbolizes that woman have been liberated from men's dominance. (51)

Gilman is perhaps showing this kind of situation in the story when John faints this disastrous night at the summer house and there was a possibility for the narrator to regain her freedom. The last sentence in the story describes the narrator madness and Gilman's sarcasm when narrator says: "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!"(325).

A child birth is very emotional in every woman's life and many women get "post partum depression" as the narrator had. Gilman strongly criticizes the "rest cure" which she had to experience herself. She even mentions her doctor's name in the story which must have been very shocking for her readers and the doctor himself who was very highly regarded at that time for his method. "John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall."(318). When "The Yellow Wallpaper" was published Gilman sent a copy to Weir Mitchell himself and she was very thrilled when she heard years later that Mitchell had changed his treatment on nervous prostration after reading her story (Gilbert and Gubar 869). "If that is a fact, "she declared, "I have not lived in vain" (869).

As a conclusion to this chapter I would like to state that there is no human being, man or a woman, who deserves to be locked inside a room for a long time. No individual who deserves to be isolated from friends and relatives whom they care for and not to have the freedom to even write down their own feelings. No human being deserves to be oppressed by another person or to be treated as a powerless human being who has been secluded from creative freedom and intellectual inspiration. Unfortunately women in that period of time were treated like that in the patriarchy society which was prevailing in the 19th century. “The narrator almost forgets who she is, for she loses strength and spirit in her efforts to conform to her husband’s view of who she should be, and how she should behave” (Cai-qiao 50).

Chapter IV: The Yellow Wallpaper as a symbol of freedom.

In the late 1960's as Cai-qiao remarks (49), the concept of the female Gothic came to be theorized as a horror genre. It uttered women's dark protests and fantasies and before its theorization, this convention was adopted by many women writers in their works. These stories were often written by female authors and about female protagonist.

Popularized by an increasingly literate middle class, the female gothic is a horror Genre comprised of texts written by women authors about a female protagonist.

Distinguishing conventions include, in addition to the stereotypical ominous mansion or castle, a combination of uninhibited elements such as romance, abduction, insanity, murder, doppelgangers, and supernatural apparitions. (Cai-qiao 49)

These women writers wanted to lead the reader into the world of horror, danger and mystery.

They also used this Gothic genre to express their thoughts and to criticize the society.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a typical example of this rebellious method. Gilman uses the wallpaper in the protagonist room as a symbol of her terrible circumstances (Cai qiao 49).

It is very interesting to consider why Gilman chooses the wallpaper as a symbol in her story. Gilman maybe uses the wallpaper as a symbol to show the narrator's horrifying condition in the room she dwells in. The wallpaper is ugly, dirty, and all torn apart. The narrator describes the paper: "The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smoldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sculpture tint in others"(314). According to Gilbert and Gubar the narrator finds herself in terrible condition and Gilman uses the wallpaper as a symbol of the society (868).

This paper surrounds the narrator like an inexplicable text, censorious and overwhelming as her physician husband, haunting as the “hereditary estate” in which she is trying to survive. Inevitably she studies its suicidal implications—and inevitably because of her “imaginative power and habit of story-making,” she revises it, projecting her own passion for escape into its otherwise incomprehensible hieroglyphics. (Gilbert and Gubar 868)

The narrator tries to follow her husband’s rules by staying in the room all day without stimulation of any kind, except when she writes in her diary in spite of her husband’s strict rule of resting all day in the bed doing nothing. The readers of the story soon realize that the narrator is an intelligent and creative woman and when people like that are locked inside a room for a long period of time their mind begins to search for something to focus on and even if the person tries to avoid letting their imagination loose, their mind just rebels. “I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy—store” (317).

An active imagination is at the heart of creative thinking. For the young child, fact and fantasy, dreaming and waking, wish and reality, one's own view and “the truth” are all without clear distinction. This frame of mind is essential to remaining open to creative possibilities. But our “grown-up” society has strong feelings that children must fit in and be like everyone else. For example, it's okay for a two year old to develop imaginative and unusual uses for mother's saucepans (they can be hats, cars, anything), but later their use must be restricted to cooking and household tasks. (Presbury and Benson)

The human brain is unpredictable and one can never know what is going on inside of someone’s head as the reader finds out while reading the story: “The human brain is an

absolute miracle in its construction, an organ that is unique in the material universe among things animate and inanimate. There is nothing else known to man that compares with the human brain for intricacy” (Campbell).

As the story progresses the narrator begins to turn attention to the ugly wallpaper and begins to examine it very carefully and all of a sudden the wallpaper becomes the key point in the story: “This paper looks at me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had! There is recurrent spot here the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down... I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before and we all know how much expression they have!” (316).

The more the narrator focuses on the paper, she begins to see all kinds of patterns and creatures in it and she even starts to find a terrible smell of it. This describes well the deterioration of the narrator’s condition. “But there is something else about the paper—the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here. It creeps all over the house “(321). It becomes even more horrifying when Jenny the housemaid finds out that there are stains from the paper in all the narrator’s clothes .That shows how fascinated the narrator is by the paper and also how madness is slowly taking over the young woman’s mind. “Then she said that the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches on all my clothes” (321).

As the story progresses it becomes more and more appalling and the narrator begins to see women creeping around inside the paper searching for a way to get out:

“Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast and her crawling shakes it all over. Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard” (322).

One can imagine that time goes by slowly when someone is locked inside a room for a long time. The longer the narrator is locked in that room the more captivated she is by the wallpaper and the women creeping inside it. She gradually goes deeper and deeper into the world of madness. Her mind cries for freedom. For example just to go out and breathe fresh air. Sometimes she sees just one woman and I assume that this particular woman is a symbol of her desire. That woman dares to go out in daytime and she creeps.

I think that a woman gets out in the daytime! And I'll tell you why—privately I've seen her! I can see her out of every one of my windows! It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight. I see her in that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape arbors, creeping all around the garden. I see her on that long road under the trees creeping alone and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines. I don't blame her a bit. I must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight! (322)

It is very interesting to consider why these figures behind the wallpaper or these crawling women are so prevalent in the story. Gilman allowed herself to use her emotions and to pull out hidden fears and hidden memories. She had the same experience as the narrator in the story when she had been suffering from depression after giving birth and was treated by Dr Mitchell (Lane 128). One can presume that she wants the reader to understand what a horrible time she had when she was forced to stay in bed for a long time doing nothing. By using these crawling creatures she gets the reader's attention by awaking feelings of horror and misery (128).

The language and the imagery she used in the story allowed her to express buried fears, fear of her own baby, memories of childhood's blank walls, walls that did not encompass mother—love or father—love, fear of being strangled devoured, violated

by those who pretend to love and by those whom one is supposed to love and protect.

(128)

As the days pass the shape of the wallpaper gets clearer and the narrator just wants to be left alone in the room so that she can concentrate on the wallpaper. She doesn't even want her husband inside because she thinks he is getting odd and suspicious and she thinks he knows something about the women behind the wallpaper. She doesn't sleep anymore because at night she is completely captivated by the wallpaper which she stares at all night and concentrates on the pattern. "The front pattern does move and no wonder! The woman behind it shakes it!" (323). The end is extremely tragic as the reader can see that the narrator is absolutely insane. She shows an attempt to escape by trying to move the bed inside the room but she forgets that it is nailed to the wall. When she discovers that she can't move the bed she gets angry and bites a piece of it in one corner, hurting her teeth. She even tries to jump out of the window but "the bars are too strong even to try" (324). "The remaining escape is another route to self—destruction. It is madness. She is now surrounded by creeping women, and she is one of them, but unlike the others, she will not stop her creeping at night to crawl back into the wall" (Lane 127). When all this is happening John is outside with an axe trying to get inside the room and when he enters he faints. She creeps over him and she is temporarily the winner.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman creates the young woman in the story to help her to satisfy her feeling of anger, bitterness and pangs of conscience. She had a child which was raised by its father because she was sure that she would never be a good mother, and the child would be better off without her (Lane 129). She never got over it and the pangs of conscience followed her all her life. "The conflicts triggering her breakdown were never resolved and spells of morbid depression continued to plague her" (Schwartz xiii). She was also very angry and bitter toward Dr Silas Weir Mitchell for treating her with this so called "rest cure" which

nearly drove her mad. She presumably never forgave him. Seemingly these feelings inspired Gilman to write the story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (Schwartz xv).

The wallpaper symbolizes every human being’s need to have the freedom and ability to create, write, enjoy nature, breathe fresh air and to do whatever a person is interested in. And it symbolizes also the domestic situation which many 19th century women found themselves trapped in and could not get out of. The crawling women symbolize all the women of the era that were searching for freedom. They symbolize their desire to escape the suppression their husbands and the society submitted them to. As Schwartz says,

In naively ironic fashion, the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” simultaneously chronicles and reflects her voyage to insanity. A virtual prisoner of her husband, a supposedly well meaning physician, she queries innocently. With her environment restricted to her room. She grows mesmerized by its patterned wallpaper, at first merely sinister, then gradually an emblem of confinement. In the end, reality and symbol hurtle into each other. (xv)

After studying this story so closely I have often ask myself what would happen to me if someone forced me to lie in bed all day and forbade me to read or write, talk to my friends or go outside and jog which I normally do every day and is a part of my lifestyle. What would happen if I were forced to lie in bed all day which was nailed to the wall and the only thing I could do was to watch some hideous wallpaper. If someone had mental control over me and forbade me to have intellectual conversation with other human beings. I would without any doubt become utterly and completely insane, not unlike the young woman in the story “The Yellow Wallpaper”.

Conclusion

After studying the life of Charlotte Perkins Gilman I can see clearly that her works are very much influenced by her childhood and her own personal experience. She was abandoned by her father when she was very young and her mother had to support their children in spite of her poverty. I think that is the reason why she became so independent. She must have found out that in order to survive she had to depend on herself and that there was nobody who could help her other than herself. At least she must have found out that she didn't need a man to help her get through life. Later in life she had a terrible experience with the physician Weir Mitchell when he treated her with the "rest cure" This method was very popular in Gilman's time and lot of women who had mental illness had experienced. That experience was obviously the reason why she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper". In the story she harshly criticizes the method and she also focuses on how women in the 19th century were treated by the society and by their husbands. She wrote the story to demonstrate how women were helpless in that time and could not act against their husbands in any way and also to bring to the attention of the public that men should tread their wives like equals, not as domestic pets or dolls.

Gilman uses the narrator in the book to focus on the isolation a woman has to suffer by the "rest cure" treatment. She shows the readers what can happen when somebody is isolated for a long time and without any human contact and how that can lead to a terrible insanity by having the narrator tear the yellow wallpaper into pieces because she believes that she is trapped behind it.

In order to make her point Gilman uses the yellow wallpaper as a powerful symbol in her story to express her thoughts. By describing the wallpaper so very well in the beginning she wants to make the readers of the story aware of the fact that they were stepping into a world

of horror and madness. The narrator's conditions are horrifying. Her husband controls her completely, she is totally isolated and she has to look at the ugly paper all day. All this is very clear to the reader. He soon realizes that there is no way of turning back with a happy ending. Gilman also uses the wallpaper to express the narrator's desire for freedom. Her mind cries for freedom and I assume that the women behind the paper are a symbol of her desire for freedom.

After reading the Story "The Yellow Wallpaper" I am certain that Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an amazing woman, and much ahead of her time. She wanted to point out to the world women's poor situation, based on white man's narrow minded angle. Her story is still relevant because even today women's situation hasn't changed dramatically in many countries in the last 100 years.

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