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## **THE SILENCED DISCOURSE IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"**

**Abstract:** The paper discusses Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" in terms of the American feminist literature and early discursive practices seen in the journal entries written by a woman forbidden from doing anything artistically stimulating. This silenced female voice of the nineteenth century found only comfort in writing. This was highly frowned upon, and the subsequent result was the complete repression of woman's imaginative power. The mental constraints placed upon the narrator, lack of any kind of intellectual outlet, and the internalization of the overall state of the society, led to the complete silencing of this female voice. The paper will also reflect on the aspects of feminine discourse in the wake of First Wave Feminism.

**Key words:** "The Yellow Wallpaper", Gilman, "First Wave Feminism", silenced discourse, "The Cult of Domesticity", "écriture féminine"

### **1. Early Discursive Practices**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" was published in the wake of the First Wave Feminism. It presents an example of early discursive practices of American feminist literature. Not only does the story portray the victimization of women through imposed domesticity, yet, at the same time, it portrays a woman who uses the very weapons of patriarchy to commence her own revolt. The story has placed gender structure under a new light and the entire effort is seen as a galvanizing moment in the late nineteenth century feminist discourse. "The Yellow Wallpaper" defies the grand narrative by placing the discourse of the silenced at center. It portrays a distinctly silenced and repressed female voice that mirrors the painful silence of numerous women driven into dire psychological conditions by the inferiority of their place in society. Gilman herself said that "it is a pretty poor thing to write, to talk, without a purpose," (Gilman 1935: 121). Thus, she created "The Yellow Wallpaper", a short story that presents the narrative of *the Other*. The story endows *the Other* with a voice and its purpose is to create a narrative that would stand out from other conventional grand narratives.

The narrator of the story is both a woman and a writer. She resists her husband's prohibition on writing and documents the progress of her illness, as well as her own attempts to articulate and describe that same illness, trying to assert her own views against those of her husband and the society at large. The unnamed female narrator,



representing every single woman in the world that is stripped of her own voice, manages to find her voice by cleverly interconnecting two discourses at the same time. She employs the irrational discourse expected of women and the rational discourse of patriarchy. The text itself presents a condemnation of the nineteenth century medical profession, and protests against the medical and professional oppression of women. It is illustrative of the difficulties that concern women's literary creation and patriarchal society.

Literature and the overall canon of grand history were greatly influenced by patriarchal ideology, and many books were "lost" in time, including "The Yellow Wallpaper". The patriarchal ideology determined the works' content to be disturbing and offensive, and, thus, it was discarded as unimportant. Earlier examples of female discursive practices were most seen in the works of women who advocated women's rights and values. Thus, Mary Wollstonecraft published her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, and Margaret Fuller published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in 1844; both Wollstonecraft and Fuller were accused of disrupting the natural order of things. However, early advocates of feminist discourse were not only women. John Stuart Mill and Friedrich Engels have also made a huge impact on women's writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Due to the fact that "The Yellow Wallpaper" was published in 1892, the readership of the time was quite stunned with the material it offered. However, today's audience recognizes the meaning of postpartum psychosis, and reads the text as a possible vehicle of expression. The journal entries that Gilman presents in "The Yellow Wallpaper" do not follow the linear structure associated with masculine writing. Instead, Gilman creates a cyclical and repetitive prose. Overtly short paragraphs indicate narrator's inability to appropriate her thoughts into conventional forms of discourse. It is also interesting that often after the narrator delivers a statement, that same statement is immediately questioned in the following sentence: "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. So I will let it alone and talk about the house" (Gilman 1997: 2). Gilman has recognized the difficulty of uttering personal experience that stands outside of society's determined standards. She finds herself confined in a male definition of femininity, completely restrained and incapable of writing. This notion is also suggested in the image the narrator sees on the wall.

Women writers and theorists have just recently begun to problematize the ideas of whether woman's narrative could ever be told through conventional narrative forms. There has been much interest recently in the concept of narrative as well. Theorists strongly question its form, its function and its limitations, and feminist thought has also made its own contribution to the deconstruction of the conventional narrative representation. This is seen, in the works of poststructuralist French feminists, as the beginning of "écriture féminine". Gilman's story, with the use of its structure, poses a question of whether a woman's experience could ever be narrated through the use of language controlled by male definitions. "Écriture féminine" presents a link between women's discourse and self-discovery. The term was first coined by Hélène

Cixous in her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, published in 1975, where she also acknowledged that woman must write herself into being and bring women to writing. American feminist critic Elaine Showalter defined this movement as “the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text” (Showalter 1986: 249). “Écriture féminine” privileges the non-linear, cyclical writing that evades “the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system” (Cixous 1981: 253).

The journal entries of “The Yellow Wallpaper” are quite illustrative of the specific anxiety that was present at the time of its publication, an anxiety perceived as a haunting fear of women’s individualism. This individualism is seen in women’s ability to speak and write. The narrator’s husband is also the one who endeavors to deny the narrator her voice by forbidding her to write: “There comes John, and I must put this away, – he hates to have me write a word” (Gilman 1997: 3). Thus, there were very few female authors, especially those who lived off their writing. If a woman deviated from the pattern, she deviated from the society.

However, the feminist criticism sought to denounce this ideology and to re-discover the “lost”, marginalized and silenced stories. Therefore, “The Yellow Wallpaper” was revealed as a short story that challenges both the canon and patriarchal society.

## 2. Engaging the Canon

Written in the first person narrative, the short story portrays a fictionalized account of Gilman’s mental breakdown after giving birth to her only child. It is a collection of journal entries, and it deals with the same concerns and ideas as Gilman’s nonfiction. The short story perfectly illustrates Gilman’s zealous belief that “we live, humanly, only through our power of communication” (Gilman 1971:89). Prescribed the “rest cure” by the physician S. Weir Mitchell, Gilman was forbidden to do any intellectual or physical work. Thus, she was forbidden to read and write. Mitchell, a representative of every other man of the period, thought of women mainly as mothers, far from being independent or intellectual in any way, and he told Gilman to “live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time [...] Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours’ intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live” (Gilman 1935: 96). She expressed her own thoughts concerning this matter at the very beginning of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, where the reader finds first linguistic contradiction in her discourse, a contradiction that would eventually lead to her private revolution: “Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.” (Gilman 1997:1)

The female narrative voice is presented as unreliable from the very beginning, from the first paragraphs of the story. Her extreme sentimentalism about the summer house seems to be reminiscence of gothic fiction: “A colonial mansion, a hereditary state, I would say a haunted house and reach the height of romantic felicity [...] Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it” (Gilman 1997:1). When



“The Yellow Wallpaper” was first published, readers sensed that Gilman was writing in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe. Truly, the story does resemble some of Poe’s tales of horror and psychological madness. However, it is known today that the primary grounding of the story is found in questioning the predicament of women. Unlike Poe, Gilman and other women writers experienced the perils of gothic horror. In many cases, gothic fiction presented literal reality for women. Women writers were confined all the time, both physically and mentally. Caging was not metaphorical for women, yet quite actual, and there was no one who could rescue them from this enforced confinement but themselves.

The gothic irrationality of the narrator contrasts with her husband’s rational language as a doctor and the first paragraphs of the story also illustrate that the narrator has no identity of her own, that she depends on her husband completely:

John is practical in the extreme. 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 [...] 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? (Gilman 1997: 1)

By portraying her own apprehensions as particular delusions of a mad woman, Gilman was able to present the ultimate truth of female experience and still remain safely concealed behind the conventions of the horror tale, an accepted literary form. She was in a desperate need the present both her personal truth and the truth of women in general. In *Man-Made World*, Gilman states that “[w]oman’s love for man, as currently treated in fiction is largely a reflex; it is the way he wants her to feel, expects her to feel” (Gilman 1971: 98) In “The Yellow Wallpaper” she attempted to present the true voice of a woman, with all of her unconventional, closeted thoughts and actions.

Through the seemingly unconscious use of language by the narrator, the story itself highlights the narrator’s self-abnegation and dependence: “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (Gilman 1997:1). Due to the compulsory silence and idleness of the “resting cure”, the narrator was forced to hide her anxieties and fears. Her insanity is a direct product of the repressed imaginative power. Although Gilman uses this story to illustrate her “muteness” during her first marriage, this was actually not the only time Gilman felt silenced. Gilman was forced to obey to the extreme patriarchal society norms throughout her childhood, as did most women. When she was only thirteen, her mother demanded that she close off “by far the largest, most active part of [her] mind” (Gilman 1935: 23), thus banning the “chief happiness” (Gilman 1935: 23) of her life, the only comfort she had in an otherwise unwelcoming family household. In this particular environment of silenced female voice, Gilman’s psychological problems were created, as well as her worries that language could never convey her feelings effectively. She saw the traditional literary forms and conventional methods of storytelling quite inadequate when it comes to the portrayal of individual and collective female experience. The

mental constraints placed upon the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” ultimately drive her insane, and the text itself presents a form of rebellion. Gilman’s narrator directs the attention of the text to the consequences of men’s narrative and men’s control of the language; the psychologically troubled woman is trapped in a male narrative. She does everything to break out from that same narrative, as well as to strip off her mental constraints placed by the grand patriarchal narrative. The narrator attempts to write herself into history by writing a secret journal, which symbolically illustrates the beginning of an emotional and intellectual outlet; she attempts to write herself into being. By doing this, the narrator subverts the social norms. Women were not supposed to work because it could eventually lead to self-sufficiency and individualism. Their primary obligation was to remain in the domestic sphere. This mundane task has robbed them of any kind of congenial work right from the start. Thus, many women have experienced mental breakdowns due to the oppressive forces of the patriarchal society. The values of patriarchal society were most compellingly internalized in what Barbara Welter called “The Cult of Domesticity” or “The Cult of True Womanhood”.

### 2.1. The Cult of Domesticity

“The Cult of Domesticity” illustrates a particular nineteenth century value system, most common among the upper and middle classes. It advocates the separate spheres ideology and it places the woman in the household, that is, in her “proper sphere”; woman has to run the household, rear the children and take care of the husband. According to the system, “true women” were supposed to possess four cardinal virtues: “piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness” (Rorty 2008: 21-22) Although all women were supposed to emulate this ideal of femininity, the ideal was not imposed on African-American, working class, or immigrant women, because they were not seen as “true women”. “On the whole, one can have the impression that sex was hardly spoken of at all in these institutions. But one only has to glance over the architectural layout, the rules of discipline, and their whole internal organization: the question of sex was a constant preoccupation.” (Foucault 1978: 27-28)

Gilman skillfully uses the image of the wallpaper, a symbol of economic status and standardization of domestic life, to portray a trapped woman. The wallpaper presents a narrative that the protagonist must interpret. After the narrator sees a trapped woman in the wallpaper, she realizes that she can no longer be confined behind bars by the society. At the end of the story, she crawls over her unconscious husband, metaphorically rising over him and everyone else who, at one point or another, made her feel silenced and confined. The wallpaper patterns that rapidly converge and disappear serve as a fitting image for the structure of the story that deconstructs itself. At first, the wallpaper seems merely unpleasant and the protagonist attempts to figure out how it is organized. A ghostly sub-pattern comes into focus as a desperate woman, constantly “stooping down and creeping about” (Gilman 1997:8), looking for an escape behind the main pattern. The main pattern has come to resemble the

bars of a cage, and the wallpaper itself represents the patriarchal structure of the society. The narrator is symbolically placed into a prison. The portrayal of her room, as well as the portrayal of the wallpaper has clear connotations to a prison surrounding: “[T]here are hedges and walls and gates that lock [...] the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls” (Gilman 1997: 2-3). As a domestic prisoner, the narrator becomes obsessed with the wallpaper and its patriarchal connotations. The narrator hallucinates and sees numerous women trapped inside the wallpaper. This image suggests that Gilman wants to present a collective plight of female gender, and their collective, as well as individual, silence.

The values of this patriarchal society are also seen in the image of the protagonist’s husband. He is the main authoritarian figure in the text since he represents the superior sex. Yet, he further upgrades his position by fulfilling his role as a husband and a breadwinner. He is not only a breadwinner, yet he is also a man of profession, a physician. By establishing his superiority in all of his male duties, he portrays a perfect American as well, since he is representative of a pragmatic and practical man. However, his wife has no profession and he constantly patronizes her. She is seen as childlike (lives in a former nursery), incompetent, irrational and defined exclusively in opposition to man. This presents a traditional gender dichotomy, where masculine rationality is contrasted with feminine irrationality. According to French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, “man occupies the role of the self, or subject; woman is the object, the other” (Beauvoir 2011).

Married women presented the largest segment of the female population in the late nineteenth century and Gilman was particularly concerned with the unequal status of women within the institution of marriage. She was concerned with political inequality in general, and she argued that, as a result of women’s dependence on men, women had weakened physically and mentally.

### 3. Distinctive Tradition of Women’s Writing

Being an author of five books on social criticism, eight novels, numerous short stories and dozens of lectures and articles, Gilman has paved the way for radical expressions of female consciousness. This was first seen in early discursive practices of daring women. Thus, Virginia Woolf has expressed her own concerns with women’s material disadvantages, as well as with the lack of female literary tradition in one of the key texts of feminist theory, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” expresses her personal concerns that directly relate to Woolf’s arguments: “I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal – having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (Gilman 1997: 2). Woolf argued that women’s writing should “explore female experience in its own right and not form a comparative assessment of women’s experience in relation to men’s” (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker 2005: 118). Foreshadowing Woolf’s essay, the narrator of Gilman’s story finds the means to turn the oppressive environment into a room of her own. The initial “dead paper” (Gilman 1997: 1) has transformed

into a secret journal that contains narrator's own voice. The symbolic prison of her room eventually becomes a bare room that she feels comfortable in:

[N]ow she is gone, and the servants are gone, and the things are gone, and there is nothing left but that great bedstead nailed down, with the canvas mattress we found on it [...] I don't want to go outside ... For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow. (Gilman 1997: 14-15)

The intricate discourse of the story presents an elaborate decoy that disguises a rational attempt to rebel against the system by using its own tools. Women had always faced social and economic obstacles to their literary ambitions. They were constantly conditioned by their lack of proper education and distinctive literary tradition. Gilman protested against male standards and values, and advocated women's rights and values. Yet, she did not tackle the issue of woman's position in literary tradition. For all of her publishing success, Gilman felt as if she had no control or command over language. For Gilman, the language did not present an adequate tool when it comes to dealing with or expressing the traits of psychological pain. Frustrated by her inability to express her pain through the use of language, Gilman felt that her pain was locked away and silenced. She started to doubt whether language, story-telling or other traditional forms of literature could ever authentically portray a true woman's inner experience. No narrative form could fit Gilman's desires and she had to elevate the conventional narrative with her deconstructing of the male discourse. Having found conventional techniques irrelevant to her own and many other women's experience, Gilman attempted to create a new kind of story in "The Yellow Wallpaper". She wanted to give an inside account of the experiences of a woman confined and silenced by her own family; she wanted for her story to be didactic. For Gilman, literature presented "the most powerful and necessary of arts" (Gilman 1971: 93), and she saw fiction in her day as "heavily and most mischievously restricted" (Gilman 1971: 94). In her story *The Man-made World: Or, Our Androcentric Culture*, Gilman goes so far as to outline few innovative topics that fiction should address

First, the position of the young woman who is called upon to give up her 'career' - her humanness - for marriage, and who objects to it. Second, the middle-aged woman who at last discovers that her discontent is social starvation ... Third, the inter-relation of women with women ... Fourth, the interaction between mothers and children ... Fifth, the new attitude of the full-grown woman, who faces the demands of love with the high standards of conscious motherhood. (Gilman 1971: 105)

Gilman wrote her own fiction following these instruction and she tried to explain her own struggle with language by saying: "[t]his will convince any one who cares about it that this 'living' of mine has been done under a heavy handicap" (Gilman 1935: 104). There is also a revealing moment in "The Yellow Wallpaper" where Gilman symbolically speaks of the role of the woman writer:

[John] 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, and that I ought to



use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try .... It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. (Gilman 1997: 4)

Gilman suffered a drug overdose just few days after finishing “The Yellow Wallpaper”. This presented a clear indication of the unutterable and overwhelming despair that she felt. In spite of the fact that Gilman continued to feel overpowered by the society, she relentlessly insisted on the importance of equal rights and devoted all of her future writing to that particular goal. Thus, her writing clearly has a distinct purpose. Her biggest achievement is seen in the fact that her writing provides an illustrative model for all contemporary writers and theorists who problematize the contemporary and historical phallogocentric language. Due to the efforts and studies of contemporary feminists, “The Yellow Wallpaper” still presents a profoundly relevant and important work of women’s writing, and its status is not diminished or overlooked when compared to other relevant texts from the same period.

Susan S. Lanser admires these contemporary feminists in her article “Feminist Criticism ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, and the Politics of Color in America”. According to Lanser, Gilman’s short story presents a “particularly congenial medium for such a re-vision [...] because the narrator herself engages in a form of feminist interpretation when she tries to read the paper on her wall” (Lanser 1989: 418). Lanser also argues that the narrator was able to find “a space of text on which she can locate whatever self-projection” (Lanser 1989: 421). Feminists have made a great contribution to the study of literature and feminist criticism has placed “The Yellow Wallpaper” on the standard curriculum. However, according to Lanser, “[i]f we acknowledge the participation of women writers and readers in dominant patterns of thought and social practice then perhaps our own patterns must also be deconstructed if we are to recover meanings still hidden or overlooked (Lanser 1989: 422).

Gilman laid the foundations of contemporary women’s literature, paving the way for future writers such as Kate Chopin, Betty Friedan, Alice Walker and Sylvia Plath, Kate Millett, and Naomi Wolf. These female writers problematize the same concerns regarding women’s rights and values, yet they place the highest emphasis on the distinctive tradition of women’s writing, drawing only on female experience as the sources of an art.

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## **SKRIVENI DISKURS U KRATKOJ PRIČI „ŽUTE TAPETE“ ŠARLOTE PERKINS GILMAN**

Rezime

Predmet istraživanja ovog rada jeste kratka priča Američke spisateljice Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Šarlot Perkins Gilman). „The Yellow Wallpaper“ ili „Žute Tapete“ predstavlja jedan ilustrativni primjer samog početaka feminističkog diskursa u devetnaestom stoljeću. Književno stvaranje je bilo onemogućeno ženama radi nedostatka adekvatnog obrazovanja, nepostajanja književne tradicije, te same društvene nejednakosti. Gilman pokušava prikazati frustrirajući položaj žene u patrijarhalnom društvu, te podariti moć izričaja svojoj junakinji, kako više ne bi bila gledana samo kao Drugo. Književnost je oduvijek privlačila pažnju feministkinja koje su uviđale moć književnosti da stvori sliku o nečemu. Gilman je među prvima koja želi prikazati pravu sliku žene, tj. sve ono s čime se jedna žena u devetnaestom stoljeću susreće. Dakako, s vremenom, feministkinje će razotkriti sve ideološke mehanizme s kojima je književnost bila na strani patrijarhalnog društva, te započeti diskurs o ženskoj književnosti i ženskom pismu.

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