



Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper":

Defending Women's Writing as a Feminist Interjection

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Abstract:

In patriarchal ideology and practice, women's writing has been considered a danger to societal order as writing by women destabilizes, critiques, and questions the male-chauvinist discourse and norms. As a result, women have been prohibited from engaging in any intellectual pursuits, including writing, in most societies since time immemorial. From a young age, girls are indoctrinated into thinking that their purpose in life is to please their parents or spouses and that obedience and submission are essential parts of this process. As a result of growing up in such a cruel, sexist society, girls are taught that they should never dream of achieving anything beyond conforming to masculine norms and expectations. People are led to believe that women who try to do things differently are insane and in need of unique treatments to help them regain their sanity. This oppression of women is portrayed in "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and is universal to patriarchal cultures around the world. This paper aims to examine Charlotte Perkins Gilman's narrative to understand better the cultural taboo surrounding women writers and how those women who dared to challenge this taboo were stigmatized and confined to the attic due to their perceived insanity.

Keywords:

The Yellow Wallpaper, Feminism, Gender roles, Gilman, Madwoman in the Attic, Victimization, Women's Writing

Women have been barred from writing or any other intellectual activity as women as "thinking subjects" have always been thought to be a threat to the dominant patriarchal discourse and its practices. Women are always taught from childhood that their education is meant to make them pleasing to their respective partners/husbands, and they should learn not just to obey them but also to submit to their whims and wishes. In such a vicious male-chauvinist culture, women are made to grow up with no



intent/desire of their own – not even the desire or the capability to express themselves. They are made to believe that any woman who tries to do otherwise suffers from particular lunacy and needs to undergo treatments to cure them of their madness. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “Yellow Wallpaper” is a rendition of this victimization that women go through in every patriarchal culture, whether in the West or the East. The paper “Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper: Defending Women’s Writing as a Feminist Interjection” seeks to explore Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story to understand how women’s writing has been a taboo in most cultures and how the women who thought of breaking free from this taboo were locked up in the attic by terming them as mad.

The protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” suffers from post-partum depression when we meet her first in the narrative, and her physician husband, in conjunction with her brother, had advised her of a change of weather to come out of her depression. So, she is being put on medication and rest mode in an attic room in a supposedly picturesque place so that her spirit revives. As we move further the narrative, we learn that it is also advised that she does not write as writing may cause her to get into further depression. With such injunctions from the physician-husband, she tries to battle her supposed depression in a room that has wallpaper of a dim yellow color with a sub-pattern in it.

The story seems to be about the protagonist’s suffering from post-partum depression and how she deals with the yellow wallpaper, which, in the first instance, she dislikes heavily and then gradually finds a liking for it as she imagines a woman in the sub-pattern which helps her revive herself to a certain extent. Though the story has been viewed by many as a tale of women’s suffering and also a tale of patriarchal victimization, there are more shades to the story as the dim sub-pattern in the yellow wallpaper, which requires more and more readings and retellings to fathom the depth of the narrative voice and her rebellious critique of the patriarchal modes of existence which has been internalized by gendered education to such an extent by most of the females that they are not able to see how they are being subject to victimizations and gendered stereotypes by myriad ways.

One such example in the narrative is the protagonist's sister-in-law, who appears in the story with dialogue only once. The sister-in-law is a stark contrast to the protagonist as the sister-in-law has seeped with the patriarchal norms and gendered behaviors to such an extent that she cannot see the protagonist’s suffering due to the gendered victimization. She also thinks that her writing has made her suffer in such a fashion. Very few women’s writingsexist today, except the recent ones. It often makes one wonder how women did not write when they were going through many oppressive times throughout the history of human civilization. It is a fact that women were barred from studies, and thereby, their potency to express



creatively had been, to a greater extent, crippled in a patriarchal society. Even if few women learned to read and write and wanted to express themselves, there were not enough material conditions for them to get into the act of writing, as Virginia Woolf speaks about in her famous non-fictional writing, *A Room of One's Own*. Despite all odds, if women delved into writing, then every attempt was made to somehow not just stop them from expressing themselves but also to stifle their voices. In a patriarchal setup, women cannot have a voice as that voice necessarily will be in opposition to the male-chauvinist culture. So, stifling that voice had been a necessary aspect of patriarchal society so that it could perpetuate its hegemony and carry on producing submissive and subjugated females.

When women did not adhere to such dictums of patriarchal dictates, they were forced to be locked in an attic room, as evident in the character of Bertha Mason in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, which made Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar name their feminist book *Mad Woman in the Attic*. All women who dared to write and criticize and question the patriarchal parameters and gendered norms were locked in the attic room. When one reads the state of the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper," one is immediately reminded of the figure of a mad woman in the attic who is deliberately being termed a lunatic as that is the only way her voice can be stifled, and she can be subjugated with violence.

Thus, the female narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" lives in tangible confinement and is watched by her physician husband to ensure she acts appropriately. While the narrator's seeming insanity frees her from patriarchal notions of proper feminine conduct, the terror of being under continual surveillance drives her insane. Gilman intended to caution her doctor, Dr. S. Weir Mitchel, against making inaccurate diagnoses of women's ailments, as she revealed in her autobiography (Bak 6). This fictional piece is semi-autobiographical.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman sought therapy from Dr. Mitchel after she complained of sadness. She suffered from "postpartum depression" after giving birth to her daughter, according to her doctor. Therefore, as part of his treatment, he made Gilman sequester from all contact with loved ones and the outside world; she was compelled to spend her entire day in bed. In addition, her physician cautioned her against engaging in cerebral pursuits like writing or painting. This story by Gilman shows the horror of such treatment and how a person, especially a woman, might go completely insane when cut off from everyday life (Korb 284). The story does not focus on improving women's lives; instead, it addresses the limitations imposed on women by rigid gender norms.



The narrator, her husband, and sister-in-law live in parallel but distinct realities in the story. Throughout the story, the husband constantly tries to stifle his wife's imaginative tendencies and labels them as problematic. What is more, his institutional diagnosis attributes her declining health to her creative power. Nevertheless, the narrator subtly fights against her husband's critical remarks while she tries to satisfy her growing need to escape into a fantastical realm (Johnson 524-525). She begins to identify a sub-pattern as she gazes at the wallpaper and gradually immerses herself in her imaginative realm.

The story berates the nineteenth-century society's oppressive attitude toward women and the materialism underpinning civilization (Shumaker 598). Gilman has pointed out the sad reality that all women, including the narrator, have accepted patriarchal norms as inevitable as John has forbade his wife from committing to any writing. At the same time, the narrator praises her sister-in-law for being "so good with the baby" (31) and for being a "perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper and hopes for no better profession" (33). Further, the narrator says that her sister-in-law shares the narrator's destructive belief that writing is the only cause of her illness.

According to Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*(1977), working women essentially labor for the benefit of others. Because of this, any work that promoted individual growth would go against the prevailing feminine value, which emphasized submission and subjugation. Writing, an ego-centric profession, was seen as a danger since it encouraged bolstering one's ego rather than bringing it down (Showalter 22). Thus, it is understandable that her sister-in-law and husband are so happy about her being better off without writing; moreover, she is censoring herself when it comes to writing because she does not want anybody to know that she is keeping a journal. So, Gilman aimed to keep her story's protagonist writing despite all the obstacles. Her goal was for her character's feminine imagination to squirm under her skin and gather all her strength before the last scene when it could rebel against repression. If women do not want to conform to patriarchal male norms, they should not think and speak like men, according to Helena Cixous's theories. Cixous challenges women to take stock of their hidden identities and ideologies and to use a writing technique that rejects phallogocentric discursive norms. Cixous argues that traditional forms of writing have many characteristics with an objective converse that challenges patriarchal discourse by voicing support for women's bodies and expressing views about them. Consequently, Cixous calls on all women to record the feminine form.

At first sight, the wallpaper is "repellent" and "revolting" (31) to Gilman's protagonist. Still, when the narrator tears it off the wall, its intriguing universe and hidden corners and patterns become



apparent—things that patriarchy ignores, suppresses, or fails to notice altogether. In addition, the fact that she is associated with the wallpaper makes her embody a profession that women no longer have access to writing (Treichler 62). The narrator has some initial discomfort with the wallpaper. However, as soon as she notices the two sets of patterns on the wallpaper—one depicting prison bars and the other a woman "stooping down and creeping about" (31)—shaking the bars and attempting to escape her cell—she instantly identifies with the image and her initial disgust fades away. The fact that she noticed the wallpaper's sub-pattern shows her growing sense of identity (Johnson 523). However, by the story's conclusion, the anonymous narrator—who stands in for all women of her time—has discovered an escape hatch; in other words, by beginning to sneak around the chamber, she has transformed into the woman attempting to escape from prison. Strangely, the patriarchal ruler who once oppressed her—her husband—is now nothing more than a lifeless relic in her path.

In conclusion, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is less a piece of fiction and more a political statement by feminists demanding women's independence. Additionally, it tries to save women from the slow descent into lunacy. It frees women from the shackles of patriarchy's stifling philosophy. It effectively denounces sexist ideas and provides a path out of the confusing maze of dominant masculinity.



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