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# Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in The Yellow Wallpaper

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[In the essay below, Johnson discusses “The Yellow Wallpaper” as an example of a Gothic Allegory, noting in particular its themes of rage and regression.]

In the autumn of 1830, shortly before Emily Dickinson's birth, her mother made an unusual request. At a time when her pregnancy—or as it was then called, her “confinement”—might have been expected to absorb her attention, Mrs. Dickinson abruptly demanded new wallpaper for her bedroom. Apparently dismayed by this outburst of feminine whimsy, her stern-tempered husband refused, prompting Mrs. Dickinson to her only recorded act of wifely defiance. Though “the Hon. Edward Dickinson would not allow her to have it done,” a neighbor's descendant recalled, “she went secretly to the paper hanger and asked him to come and paper her bedroom. This he did, while Emily was being born.”

To place this incident in context, we should be note that Mrs. Dickinson, aged twenty-six, had just moved into her father-in-law's Amherst mansion and now faced the grim prospect of living with her husband's unpredictable relatives, along with the even grimmer perils of early nineteenth-century childbirth. Although Mrs. Dickinson was by most accounts a submissive, self-abnegating, rather neurasthenic woman—in short, the nineteenth-century ideal—it is tempting to read the wallpaper incident as a desperate gesture of autonomy and self-assertion. Emily Dickinson's most recent biographer, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, suggests that “The little explosion of defiance signaled fear and distress, and it was the prelude to unhappy, silent acceptance.”

Though the color of Mrs. Dickinson's wallpaper went unrecorded, the anecdote forms a striking parallel to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “**The Yellow**

**Wallpaper**,” first published in 1892 but, like Emily Dickinson's work, under-appreciated until decades after her death. Both the domestic incident and the terrifying short story suggest the familiar Gothic themes of confinement and rebellion, forbidden desire and “irrational” fear. Both include such Gothic staples as the distraught heroine, the forbidding mansion, and the powerfully repressive male antagonist. If we focus on the issue of the Gothic world and its release of imaginative power, however, the stories form a dramatic contrast. A woman of ordinary abilities, the unimaginative Mrs. Dickinson would later represent the nadir of female selfhood to her brilliant, rebellious daughter. “Mother does not care for thought,” the poet remarked dryly in 1862; and by 1870, she could issue this blunt dismissal: “I never had a mother.” But Dickinson surely would have admired the unnamed heroine of “**The Yellow Wallpaper**,” who willingly accepts madness over repression, refusing a life of “unhappy, silent acceptance.” The poet would have especially responded to the woman's identity as a writer, and to the way in which her story adroitly and at times parodically employs Gothic conventions to present an allegory of literary imagination unbinding the social, domestic, and psychological confinements of a nineteenth-century woman writer.

Rather than simply labeling the narrator a madwoman at the story's close, we might view her behavior as an expression of long-suppressed rage: a rage which causes a temporary breakdown (like those actually suffered by both Dickinson and Gilman) but which represents a prelude to psychic regeneration and artistic redemption. This reading accounts for two elements of the story usually ignored: its emphasis upon the narrator as a writer, who is keeping a journal and putting forth her own text—“**The Yellow Wallpaper**”—as an antithetical triumph over the actual wallpaper that had nearly been her undoing; and its brittle, macabre, relentlessly satiric humor that suggests, in the story's earlier sections, her barely suppressed and steadily mounting anger. As in many of Poe's tales, this seemingly incongruous humor serves only to accentuate the Gothic terror of the narrator's situation.

In their pioneering study, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have examined the ways in which nineteenth-century women writers—Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*, for instance—express forbidden emotions in powerful but carefully distinguished forms. Just as that other

Mrs. Rochester, Bertha Mason, may be read as a raging doppelgänger whose burning of Thornfield Hall expresses her alter ego Jane Eyre's forbidden anger and allows her the Victorian redemption of blissful marriage, so are the maddening frustrations of Gilman's heroine allowed their fearsome release, resulting in her triumph over her husband in the story's unforgettable final scene. (At one point in "**The Yellow Wallpaper**," too, the narrator has fantasies of burning the house down.) Unlike Jane Eyre, however, Gilman's heroine identifies wholly with the raging "madness" of the double she discovers locked within the tortured arabesques of the wallpaper. Her experience should finally be viewed not as a final catastrophe but as a terrifying, necessary stage in her progress toward self-identity and personal achievement. Four years after her breakdown, Gilman is clearly allegorizing her own rage and justifying her defiant choice of art and activism over conventional feminine endeavors.

The narrative focus of "**The Yellow Wallpaper**" moves relentlessly inward, detailing the narrator's gradual absorption into the Gothic world of psychic chaos and imaginative freedom; but Gilman controls her heroine's deepening subjectivity through repetition, irony, parodic humor, and allegorical patterns of imagery. The two worlds of the story—the narrator's husband and sister-in-law's daylight world of masculine order and domestic routine, and her own subjective sphere of deepening imaginative insight—are kept clearly focused and distinct. Most important, Gilman reminds the reader frequently that her narrator is a habitual writer for whom "**The Yellow Wallpaper**" is a kind of diary, an accurate record of her turbulent inward journey. Drawing on Gilman's experience of post-partum depression and breakdown, the story is far more than an indictment of nineteenth-century attitudes toward women and an account of one woman's incipient psychosis. Gilman made her heroine a writer for purposes of art, not autobiography, and the story as a whole describes a woman attempting to save herself *through* her own writing, to transform what she calls "dead paper" into a vibrant Gothic world of creative dreamwork and self-revelation.

Two of the story's major structural devices are its contrasting of the husband's daylight world and his wife's nocturnal fantasy, and the religious imagery by which she highlights the liberating and redemptive qualities of her experience. When the story opens, she acknowledges that the idea of

their rented summer house as a Gothic setting is laughable, a romantic fancy of the kind her husband wishes to repress. The allegorical opposition is quickly established: her husband (named John, suggesting a male prototype) is a “physician of high standing,” a figure of dominance in every sense—social, domestic, intellectual, physical. He is a thoroughgoing empiricist who “scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.” Throughout the story John, along with his like-named sister and housekeeper Jane, is associated with the rigidly hierarchical and imaginatively sterile daylight world that ridicules Gothic “fancies” and represses in particular the “hysterical tendency” of women. Before the story opens, the narrator had abandoned her own social responsibility of motherhood, and the object of this summer retreat is a “rest cure” (of the kind made popular by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the famous Philadelphia neurologist who treated Gilman during her own depression, and against whom the story enacts a brilliant literary revenge). That her husband exerts his tyrannical control in the guise of protectiveness makes the narrator feel all the more stifled and precludes outright defiance. As she remarks sarcastically in the opening section, “He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.”

It is the daylight consciousness of late-Victorian America, of course, which has designed the flamboyantly hideous yellow wallpaper that the narrator initially finds so repulsive. Even John wants to repaper the room, but after his wife complains about the wallpaper, he benevolently changes his mind, since “nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies.” Associating her nervous illness with her “imaginative power and habit of story-making,” he forces his wife into daily confinement by four walls whose paper, described as ‘debased Romanesque,’ is an omnipresent figuring of the artistic degeneration and psychic chaos she fears. It is here that John makes a significant error, however, as he underestimates the very imaginative power he is seeking to repress. By placing his distraught wife in a nursery, he is merely following the nineteenth-century equation of non-maternal women—that is, spinsters and “hysterics”—with helpless children. Yet he is unthinkingly allowing her the free play of imagination and abdication of social responsibility also characteristic of children. Thus as the story progresses, the narrator follows both her childlike promptings and her artistic faith in creating a Gothic alternative to the stifling daylight world of her husband and the society at large.

The story's terrific suspense derives from the narrator's increasingly uncertain fate and from the considerable obstacles blocking her path from one world to the other, not the least of which is her own self-doubt and debilitating psychic exhaustion. Near the end of the next section, she glimpses a subpattern in the wallpaper, which can be seen only “in certain lights, and not clearly then”; beneath the “silly and conspicuous front design” is a figure she describes as “strange, provoking, formless.” These three adjectives suggest a notably ambivalent attitude toward her own inchoate, slowly emerging selfhood; but significantly, she notes that she is viewing the pattern by sunlight. Near the end of the next section, at sunset, she can “almost fancy” a coherent design in the wallpaper. Yet immediately after using her husband's forbidden word, she feels an emotional and psychological depletion that is emphasized by a series of brief, depressed paragraphs:

It makes me tired to follow [the pattern]. I will take a nap, I guess.

I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!

But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief.

This passage describes the narrator's spiritual nadir, and may be said to represent her transition from conscious struggle against the daylight world to her immersion in the nocturnal world of the unconscious—or, in other terms, from idle fancy to empowering imagination. The nature of Gilman's allegory becomes especially clear when, for the first time, the narrator watches the wallpaper by moonlight and reports with childlike glee: “There are things in the paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.” Yet the transition is incomplete and puzzling. While John sleeps, she lies awake “trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately,” noting that “by daylight” the pattern is a constant irritant to a “normal mind.” Then comes the moment of terrified but thrilling revelation:

By moonlight—the moon shines in all night when there is a moon—I wouldn't know it was the same paper.

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern, I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.

The remainder of the story traces the narrator's gradual identification with her own suppressed rage, figured as a woman grasping the bars of her prison and struggling frantically to get free. Sleeping during the day, since “By daylight [the woman] is subdued, quiet,” the narrator comes to life at night, struggling past the stifling outer pattern of the wallpaper to free the sister, the twin, the mirror image, the lost self. “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." In this process of ecstatic reciprocity—"I pulled and she shook. I shook and she pulled"—the narrator destroys the wallpaper and expresses her desperate rage, finally integrating herself and the woman trapped in the paper into a single triumphant "I." Yet instinctively she recognizes that her access of power has its source in the unconscious (she had once called the wallpaper "a bad dream") and that she is temporarily confined to the Gothic world of her own making: "I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night," she exclaims, "and that is hard!"

But the writer's own patterns—especially her imagery of liberation and redemption—suggest otherwise. In a story focused upon a woman's enforced dependency, for instance, it's not surprising that the narrator takes special note of the Fourth of July. As the holiday approaches, she begs her husband to invite her cousins Henry and Julia, lively people who are presumably supportive of her writing, to visit her; but he refuses, instead inviting "Mother and Nellie and the children," a group which suggests conventional domesticity. As for Henry and Julia, she reports her husband's saying that he "would as soon put fireworks in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about." This startling phrase, "fireworks in my pillow-case," is a brilliantly concentrated figure for the imaginative "independence" soon to begin as the narrator lies watching the wallpaper by moonlight beside her sleeping husband.

Because such independence represents her personal salvation, the narrator images her intense suffering in terms suggesting a religious allegory and recalling Dickinson's self-assertion as "Queen of Calvary." Although it is John who has "no patience with faith" and the wallpaper which commits every "artistic sin" it is the narrator who endures hellish pain while confined by her husband and his punishing walls. The windows of her room are barred, and just outside the door is a gate at the head of the stairs, as though to separate an Edenic green world ("full of great elms and velvet meadows") from her infernal cell. Her bed, nailed to the floor, suggests a sexual crucifixion, while inside the wallpaper, its color a "lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others," she sees suicide victims with broken necks and bulbous eyes, and senses in the paper's general effect of horror an "everlastingness." And the narrator underscores her own sense of guilt (is it possible that she deserves this torment?) when she mentions



that the woman caring for her temporarily abandoned baby is named “Mary,” imaging the spiritual and maternal perfection which the narrator so conspicuously lacks. The narrator, her identity in turbulent flux, fits nowhere inside this theologically and socially determined allegory and is appropriately nameless.

Despite the demonic forces marshaled against her, the narrator continues to rebel; it is important to stress to extent to which she chooses to suffer rather than accept the artistic sin of the wallpaper. Clinging to the faith her husband disavows, she instinctively attempts to save herself, as it is her visionary penetration of the paper's menacing reality that locates her own long-suppressed rage and allows its redemptive expression. But, as William Patrick Day notes in his comprehensive study of Gothic literature, the function of imagination in such works is not only therapeutic; it also initiates an analytic resolution: “the Gothic fantasy can localize imagination. It cannot be a complete escape, only the prelude to an understanding of the links between the imagined and real worlds.” Since both the daylight world and the Gothic world are “mad” when experienced in terms of the other, it is the narrator's own text which represents her potential triumph, not the ghastly, merely rhetorical gloating of the final scene in which, lost in fantasy, she crawls repeatedly over the body of her prostrate husband. If we focus upon the competing texts offered by the story—that of the wallpaper itself and of the revived “dead paper” the narrator uses to inscribe her powerful vision—we can see Gilman wrestling with the ambivalence toward imaginative power that is central to the American Gothic tradition and is particularly intense in the case of a woman who denied throughout her life that her work possessed any genuine literary value. In the text of “**The Yellow Wallpaper**,” in short, she allows her heroine a furious and uncompromising rebellion that she could never acknowledge fully as her own.

As Gilman's narrator begins surreptitiously writing the text eventually to be titled, triumphantly, “**The Yellow Wallpaper**,” she stresses its value as simple therapy, “a great relief to my mind.” The first two sections end abruptly with statements emphasizing both the immediacy and covertness of her writing: “I must put this away,—[John] hates to have me write a word” and “There's sister on the stairs!” Despite her outward acceptance of her rest cure, the text has already assumed the character of a subversive

document. An experienced writer, she understands the healing power which inheres in the act of writing and recognizes intuitively that her physician husband's rest cure can lead only to her psychic degeneration. After describing the wallpaper, she recalls her own imaginative power as a child, when she needed only "blank walls" (just as now she needs only "dead paper") to empower her imagination: "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." The phrase "entertainment and terror" suggests, of course, a child's version of Gothic—the imaginary ghosts, bogey men, and other invented horrors populating a typical child's bedroom. In adulthood, however, her blank childhood walls have become inscribed with what represents, essentially, an unchosen fate demonically opposed to her childlike imaginative freedom; simply put, this fate is her psychological confinement and torture as a woman desiring creative autonomy in nineteenth-century America. As Annette Kolodny writes, the narrator begins "reading" in the wallpaper the underlying if unacknowledged patterns of her real-life experience" and "discovering the symbolization of her own untenable and unacceptable reality."

Rejecting this text and its meaning, the narrator continues doggedly with her own antithetical text, constantly fighting—as we have already seen—the debilitating exhaustion of her struggle. In a key phrase, she notes that "I don't feel as if it was worth while *to turn my hand over* for anything" (my italics). This recalls Sylvia Plath's famous poem "Tulips," whose speaker has become an invalid in circumstances not unlike the narrator's and who wants "to lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty." Gilman's narrator, however, refuses the passivity of those upturned hands; whenever she can avoid the watchful eyes of John and Jane, she does turn her hand over and continue writing. Her short paragraphs and clipped, declarative sentences—in such marked contrast to the rolling, baroque periods and effusive style of a more typical Victorian Gothic—suggest the frantic intensity not only of her experience but of her writing process itself. An obsessive writer, she gradually confronts in her own text the threatening, demonic text inscribed upon the wallpaper.

Before examining that text, we should note that the narrator's frequent sarcasm and macabre humor also suggest her developing anger and the

effective, opposing power of her own writing. The caustic tone is especially apparent when the story is read alongside Gilman's non-fictional and autobiographical writings. Shortly after finishing "**The Yellow Wallpaper**," for instance, she wrote her friend Martha Lane: "When my awful story '**The Yellow Wallpaper**' comes out, you must try & read it. Walter says he has read it *four* times, and thinks it the most ghastly tale he ever read." She added dryly: "But that's only a husband's opinion." At times the narrator's sarcasm is equally patent, as when she remarks that "John is a physician, and *perhaps* ... that is one reason I don't get well faster"; or when she calls herself "unreasonably angry" and "basely ungrateful" as a wife and patient; or when she mocks her husband's empiricism by developing her own "scientific hypothesis" about the wallpaper; or when, contemplating suicide, she says that "to jump out the window would be admirable exercise" but that "a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued." Likewise the central symbol of the story ironically equates her crisis with an item of feminine frippery—mere wallpaper—that is far beneath serious male consideration. More subtly, she also takes an ironic view of the Gothic conventions she is employing, revealing anger at her own role as a helpless and distraught Gothic heroine. In one of several passages verging on parody, she mocks both her husband's extreme condescension and her own "feminine" dependency. They're lying in bed, and John has just expressed optimism about her improved appetite and health:

"I don't weigh a bit more," said I, "nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening when you are here but it is worse in the morning when you are away!"

"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 it in the morning!"

“And you won't go away?” I asked gloomily.

But if Gilman parodies the conventional Gothic in such scenes, it is only to underscore her narrator's isolated confrontation—once John has fallen asleep—with the very real terrors of the wallpaper.

When she first begins “reading” the paper, she notes that the children who once occupied the nursery had stripped it off in great patches around the head of the bedstead, as if instinctively preserving their healthy imaginative autonomy. Clinging to her own autonomy as an artist, she first judges the wallpaper on aesthetic grounds; it not only contains “one of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin,” but also embodies “unheard-of contradictions.” Its color is “repellent, almost revolting.” Here she is reading the text objectively, in essence, as an artist confronted by bad art. But as the story proceeds, aesthetic distaste turns to outrage: “I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.” (These are precisely the laws, it should be noted, that govern her own artistically successful text.) Gradually the wallpaper becomes nightmarishly unreadable, with its “great slanting waves of optic horror,” and the narrator begins to hallucinate menacing toadstools, fungus, and other unspecified “old, foul, bad yellow things.” In her fear and panic, she endures a synaesthetic disorientation in which she can smell the paper and see it rub of into her clothes. The more confused she becomes, however, the clearer her vision of an emerging “subtext,” in which her imprisoned double is frantically shaking the bars of her prison.

As we witness the narrator in the final scene, creeping along the floor, we might recall once again that her bedroom is actually a nursery. The fact that she is crawling on all fours—as opposed to lying still and docile under her husband's “rest cure”—suggests not only temporary derangement but also a frantic, insistent growth into a new stage of being. From the helpless infant, supine on her immovable bed, she has become a crawling, “creeping” child, insistent upon her own needs and explorations. (The parallel with Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, who likewise crawls on all fours and exhibits similar destructiveness, is surely deliberate.) To the daylight world, of

course, this transition is terrifying; poor John, in Gilman's witty inversion of a conventional heroine's confrontation with Gothic terror, faints dead away. Seizing rather than surrendering to power, the narrator is thus left alone, the mad heroine of her own appalling text.

Although Gilman's Gothic allegory so powerfully demonstrates that writing is her only salvation, the poignant facts of her own biography point to her internalization of the restrictions enforced by John in her story and by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell in her life. A compulsive writer who produced scores of volumes and earned a worldwide reputation as an eloquent advocate of women's rights, Gilman discredited the value of her imaginative writing throughout her career; she wrote to William Dean Howells, who asked to reprint "**The Yellow Wallpaper**" in a collection of American masterpieces, that the story was "no more 'literature' than my other stuff, being definitely written 'with a purpose' "—that purpose being to demonstrate to Dr. Mitchell the cruelty and inefficacy of the rest-cure. (She sent him a copy of the story upon publication, but received no response.) Patricia Meyer Spacks, in an incisive discussion of Gilman's curiously impersonal autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, notes that although Gilman's breakdown led her to abandon marriage and motherhood, become a professional writer, and devote herself to social causes, this self-determination was limited strictly by her continuing need to be "good" and necessarily precluded the acknowledged use of her own imaginative power.

Thus Gilman's life story became, as Spacks asserts, "a paradigm of feminine anger," what Gilman herself called "a lifetime of limitation and wretchedness." Denied the artistic redemption that Emily Dickinson had achieved by renouncing the world, as well as the conventional satisfactions of nineteenth-century housewifery and motherhood, Gilman uneasily compensated for her denial of creative selfhood with the fulfillment of useful work. Committing suicide not because her inoperable cancer caused her pain but because she felt her "usefulness was over"—the phrase comes from her suicide note, a poignant last text of self-effacement—Gilman stayed true to her own daylight world of feminism, social commitment, and constant hard work. Still under-read, still haunting the margins of the American literary canon, Gilman and the full scope of her achievement await their due recognition. Reading "**The Yellow Wallpaper**," we can only guess at the furious effort, and the constant bargaining with her own

demons, by which that achievement came into being. (pp. 521–30)

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