

How The Horrors of The Yellow Wallpaper Still Resonate Today: A

Deep Analysis of The Cautionary Tale

Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote the influential novella *The Yellow Wallpaper* in 1892. It has become one of the most widely studied feminist and gothic stories for countless reasons. There is deep historical significance beyond the text as well as an intriguing analysis of Gilman's very early and still uncommon use of experimental modernist ideas. I will be discussing why this piece of literature is so notorious in literature with its innovation compared to other feminist gothic texts, as well as why it should still be read today. The cautionary tale still resonates today, as many women still struggle with the ignorance of female mental health struggles, and the text provides not just the shocking result of it but also a gritty and authentic experience that many women can relate to.

This novella is essential to discuss not just once, but multiple times. Every time *The Yellow Wallpaper* is read and analyzed, more can be pulled from the text and dissected. What Gilman has given us is a timeless classic that can be looked at and appreciated for its historical significance, its influence, its stunning authenticity, and how it still relates to many individuals today.

A Feminist Horror Ahead of Its Time

Feminist literature, especially in the Victorian Gothic subgenre, is not new in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Gothic and horror stories from 1837 to 1901 often revolved around the theme of the supernatural and detective novels; villains and monsters were usually seen as an icon for a greater societal issue. It's a sensational novel that uses the confinement of people into

societal roles, sometimes depicting the darker themes of marriage for women at the time. Scholars are right to assign revolutionary status to Gilman's points of discussion. However, she was not the first feminist Gothic novel. Carol Margaret Davidson studies each stage of Gothic literature in her book *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature 1764-1824* (2009). She talks about the different tropes and motifs found in various Victorian novels that connect to larger horror themes that mirror societal discussion. *The Woman in White* (1860) by Wilkie Collins is referenced as it combines "everyday people and extraordinary or supernatural circumstances" (Davidson 224). When doing this, Collins also makes a commentary on larger issues in marriage for Women, as it shows the entrapment and disregard of women through the lens of mystery, deception, and thrillers. The image of the imprisoned, mysterious, or mad woman is a standard for Victorian female gothic writers as they "deploy the supernatural for psychological and political ends to advance a gender-aware commentary on women's roles and the dreaded husbands" (Davidson 223-24). Similarly, in the scope of feminist gothic is Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847), which showcases Bertha, the wife of the novel's love interest, imprisoned after supposedly going mad. The scene when Bertha is discovered chained up in the attic is reminiscent of the woman in Perkins' novella, as she crawls around on all fours. Each novel has a shocking scene where readers are face-to-face with the extreme representations of gender power dynamics and female oppression.

So what makes *The Yellow Wallpaper* different? Charlotte Perkins Gilman's use of modernist elements not only helps set it apart from the other Victorian Gothic and feminist pieces to be studied, but it also creates urgency in her societal critique. During modernism, many horror stories swayed away from the typical use of the supernatural in physical form and instead moved towards psychological

perspectives, adapting the use of the unreliable narrator. All artists of different mediums were attempting to push themselves beyond the rules of creation, as famously stated best by Ezra Pound, “Make it new.” Poets stopped using specific meters or rhyme schemes, and novelists forced their readers to look beyond the fractured narration and ambiguous words to develop their own understandings. Despite the height of modernism being 40 years later, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was experimenting in her writing with her fragmented and unreliable storytelling, a unique female rebel, and her disregard for Freytag’s Pyramid. Starting with the way the story is told, Gilman tells the entire account through the perspective of the ambiguously identified protagonist in her journal entries. All the events in the novel have supposedly already taken place as she writes about them in secret afterward. Not only is the story being told from a single first-person perspective, allowing room for bias, but it is also murky due to it being reflected on memory. This style can be reminiscent of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald, who tells the entire novel through the fuzzy memory of the protagonist Nick Carraway—a notable example of modernist literature. The human bias, though not an honest account of events, it is more authentic to the human experience, which Gilman uses to capture the understanding of women of the time.

The protagonist of the novella differs drastically from other notable heroines; she is a scarcely identifiable woman of the time, and, though rebellious in her own way, she also becomes her own antagonist. Barely named Jane, she is a female rebel icon; however, she is without the same triumph as other figures. Gilman showcases small acts of agency while the main character is still under the rule of the men in her life; the focus is less on the liberated woman and instead on the inner thoughts and psyche of the imprisoned woman. The ambiguous mother in Gilman’s story can be seen as a parallel to

Bertha, the main antagonist of *Jane Eyre*, or other villainous manifestations of past gothic novels. Jane ends up becoming both the victim and the danger rather than the hero of herself and others. In modernist literature, and mainly seen in the gothic stories of the era, there is less focus on the supernatural and romance, and a push in the direction of the human psyche and naturalism. This can be seen in the way that the horror elements in the setting, such as how the wallpaper comes to life. It isn't literally supernatural but instead an example of the protagonist's deteriorating mental health due to her circumstances. This can be seen as an early use of naturalism by Gilman with the way Jane's mental health changes the world around her, and she uncontrollably loses herself in it. Jane, due to conditions beyond her control, imagines the world around her in a threatening illusion and slowly becomes a part of it, shifting away from the familiar heroine and instead to the disturbed fiend.

Gilman skews away from Freytag's Pyramid with an unsettling ending that ends at the climax with no falling action or denouement, a plot structure that is still uncommon today. Many stories seem to have an open ending to add to the mystery and keep readers engaged after finishing the story. Gilman, however, pushes this to the extreme. She ends the story at the peak climax, where Jane's identity is entirely lost in the wallpaper, and her husband faints. It is the moment the book had been leading up to, with it at the peak of its intensity. Before this, Gilman had stuck very close to the flow of the pyramid with the clear exposition as Jane explains her circumstances in her first journal entry. The opening line quickly gives readers a brief understanding of the setting and the mystery of it: "It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer" (Gilman 1). Instantly, we know that they are staying in a different house for the summer, we don't know why, but there is a feeling of abnormality and the uncanny with the use of the word 'seldom.' Gilman also

initiates the idea of them being average people of society and keeps Jane undescribed until briefly at the end to foil themselves against the ghostly backdrop of “ancestral halls.”

The inciting incident follows quickly after, and although nothing happens yet, the way Jane views the wallpaper foreshadows what’s to come and leaves the readers with a sense of doom. She describes bars on the windows, hooks in the walls, and the wallpaper pattern as “suddenly committing suicide” (Gilman 3). The flow of the pyramid is rapid, and the rising action is found soon after as the wallpaper further personifies and Jane begins to imagine a woman trapped behind it, and her psychosis worsens. Finally, in the climax, she sees herself as the woman in the wallpaper, completely losing her sense of self, and as John sees how bad it has gotten, she faints. The story ends there without John waking up or Jane getting better. Unlike other gothic feminist stories that came before, Gilman showcases the true horror of gender-based oppression by cutting off the happy ending and instead forcing readers to see the complete loss of self in the authenticity of mental illness.

Unseen Illness: Psychosis and the Unreliable Mind

Gilman uses the changing setting to showcase the different stages of Jane’s deteriorating mind. We see the beginning setting of her forced rest and the infantilization by her husband, Dr. John. She is forced to stay in a room she doesn’t like, describing the room like a prison as “the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls” (Perkins 2). Jane describes a bedroom with a history worn out by children, a gymnasium, and a nursery. As readers, we don’t know for sure what the room was used for, but Jane’s feelings of being controlled and infantilized bleed through her emotions onto the setting of the room. She creates a history in her imagination, forcing the reader to imagine a

room made for children that she is now entrapped in. She feels trapped in it as the windows are “barred” compared to the room downstairs that she wanted, which has “roses all over” (Perkins 2).

Jane first writes about the wallpaper early in the story, showcasing her disdain for the pattern and the color after being forced to live in the room with it; “It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide - plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions” (Gilman 2). Early in the description, she describes how the wallpaper is almost impossible to ignore, a constant “dull” irritation. Dull is often a described feeling of depression, and she finds no amusement or joy in the paper. Yet, she can’t stop trying to follow it. Then, it takes a sudden, drastic turn. It becomes violent out of nowhere as it “commits suicide.” Not only does this represent her current state, the boredom and melancholic isolation of the rest cure, but it also foreshadows the later sudden change and the way she “destroys” herself as she “plunges” into psychosis.

Through Jane’s perception, we see the physical change of the wallpaper as it becomes a personification of her entrapment while her mind falls deeper into obscurity. Jane begins to believe there is a “creeping woman” in it that “shakes the bars” of the paper (Gilman 8). Much like Jane, the creeping woman is trapped behind barriers. Even if the woman could get past them, she could not escape with its strong hold on her; Jane observes that “nobody could climb through that pattern - it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads. They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down and makes their eyes white” (Gilman 8). The paper and her surroundings have turned from the original despair into something violent. The paper is no longer dull

or ugly to look at, but is now personified and murderous of women. It “strangles” them, and their heads hang dead “upside down” in the pattern. Jane becomes obsessed with the “creeping women,” seeing them everywhere and becoming desperate to free them as she wishes to free herself from her isolated rest cure.

Throughout the novella, Jane and the wallpaper have slowly become more and more intimate, the thin paper representing the flimsy separation between her and insanity. In the end, she easily tears it down, losing herself in the process and becoming a part of the wall. Now fully intertwined with her delirium, she has become the creeping woman. So inseparable from it, Jane becomes the creeping woman, believing to have been freed from the wallpaper. “I’ve got out at last,” said I, “In spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (Gilman 15). Jane references herself in the third person, completely losing any sense of identity she had. The protagonist of the story, after being forcibly confined in a room, slowly goes mad; the thin wallpaper inciting her down this path is the flimsy barrier between her and insanity during her imprisonment. In the end, Jane tears down the paper, “so you can’t put me back,” a tragic double-entendre, as it can symbolize both her inability to come back from her mental break, forever being lost in hallucination, as well as this delirium being her own escape from imprisonment.

Trapped by Care: Control, Domesticity, and Infantilization

There is an essential historical component to be studied in reference to *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the rest cure, and the impacts it had on women of the time. It is hinted throughout the story that Jane was suffering from post-partum depression after having a new baby, which was diagnosed as a nervous

disorder. John, her doctor and husband, doesn't believe she is sick beyond a "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman 1) and prescribes her the rest cure. This 'cure' was a culmination of rest, isolation, messages, and over-feeding. Explained by Anne Stiles, this is because the father of the rest cure, Silas Weir Mitchell, saw that "many nervous women looked thin and anemic" and he believed that lack of exercise and an excess of food would allow for my fat and red blood cells to cure their 'nervousness.' Mitchell also believed that women needed to be isolated because drama and beseeching for pity would harm both the patient and her relatives. The cure is layered in medical misogyny and the disregard of women. The devastating consequences of this isolation and infantilization can be seen authentically through Gilman's writings.

Gilman is able to showcase the dangers of the rest cure and the disregard of women's health in such a genuine light because she too followed a similar fate as Jane. Gilman also suffered from post-partum depression and was prescribed the rest cure. In many autobiographies and articles, she describes her time with it and how she felt that she was on the brink of insanity, "a vivid picture of what the rest cure may have been like for some nineteenth-century women" (Stiles). Despite admitting to never having hallucinations, Gilman still showcases the dread of the rest cure and how damaging it was to her mental health. With this experience, she wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* to more dramatically showcase the horror she faced within herself and, in turn, also represented the cautionary tale of medical misogyny in the popularized beliefs of Silas Weir Mitchell.

The Jane of Today: Why the Story Still Matters

The topic of postpartum depression and the critique against a prolific doctor and his widely accepted research was already taboo in the time of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Still, however, there seems to be ignorance of women's health and a disapproval of postpartum episodes today. According to the UK charity organization that is designed to help improve health, Future Care Capital, recent surveys showcase that women's mental health is still not taken seriously despite the growing number of suicides. In their page titled "Young women who ask for mental health help are called 'dramatic', survey finds" the recent survey that asked over 2,000 women about their experience when asking for mental health help, "A third said they were asked if they were 'overthinking things,' while 20% were asked if they were on their period and 27% were told their issues could be hormonal. The survey found that 22% of the women feared being seen as 'attention-seeking'." Women are still facing the same disregard, only now it is hidden behind new misogynistic scapegoats. Our menstruation, our weight, our busy or overthinking minds, or that we're simply lying.

The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman represents many important notes of research. It can be analyzed in literary terms, its use of early modernism, the fascinating ways the setting parallels psychosis, and the way Gilman spoke out against the treatment of women in medicine. However, this cautionary tale is still relevant today, as it still warns against the dismissal of psychological and emotional support. Depression and anxiety are still rarely taken seriously, and seldom talked about are manic and psychotic episodes, despite the large population of bipolar disorders and postpartum mental disorders. The warnings of Jane need to be highlighted as she can be

seen as an allegory for other women, ambiguous Jane Does who are still being ignored as their sanity slips further and further from them.

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