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# The imprisoned double

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The article discusses feminist theories of psychoanalysis used by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in "The Yellow Wallpaper." The article will highlight, among others, the ways in which gender roles are reflected in American literature in texts written by women who have had schizophrenic, depressive and hysterical mental diseases as part of their lives as well. The yellow wallpaper is symbolic of *The Cult of True Womanhood*, which binds women to home and family. It represents the character's state of mind, the way women were viewed in the nineteenth century patriarchal society, the narrator's own identity and the media of the time. The analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's text focuses on the ambivalence of the main character's struggle with her womanhood and her shifting consciousness by focusing on the transformative power of the double that promotes progressive concepts of womanhood.

**Keywords:** schizophrenia; psychoanalytic feminism; patriarchal ideologies; shifting consciousness; ambivalence/double

Psychoanalytic feminists are critical of Freudian notions of women as biologically, psychologically, and morally inferior to men. There was nothing wrong with women, but rather with the way patriarchal ideologies and modern culture viewed them in the nineteenth century. Sex is inborn, while gender is a cultural construction, which is learned and developed.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a "utopian feminist during a time when her accomplishments were exceptional for women, and she served as a role model for future generations of feminists because of unorthodox concepts and lifestyle" (Oliveira 2011), which are illustrated in her best-known short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), inspired partially from the way she was treated by her first husband, a doctor as well. The story presents her views on marriage, illustrating how a woman's confinement in the domestic sphere, due to the patriarchal ideologies her husband represents, can impact on a wife's mental, emotional, and even physical condition.

## Schizophrenia and the ambiguity of the double

Charlotte Perkins Gilman suffered from schizophrenia, a mental illness characterized mainly by hallucinations and delusions. The nameless heroine's psychological state from Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" slowly deteriorates into schizophrenia (disintegration of personality). It does not imply split or multiple personality; it refers to a double self. The woman-figure behind the wallpaper becomes essentially the narrator's *doppelgänger* or ghostly double.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself was a fervent daydreamer, who could never distinguish



Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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between fantasy and reality, between sanity and insanity. This psychological trauma, due to hallucinations, delusions and disorganized thinking and speech, was the cause of hysteria and depression. Her schizophrenic, depressive and hysterical mental disease as part of her life made her commit suicide in the end.

The power of the double lies in its ambiguity. Gilman's struggle with her own womanhood is an ambiguous, open-ended dilemma. Her hallucinations helped her to think about her condition as a woman in a male-dominated world. The article contends that the reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is neither positive nor negative, but ambivalent. As a psychotic, Gilman herself was uncertain about what was hallucination and what was real. The wallpaper represents an unresolvable pattern as an ambivalent representation of the author's modernist and feminist narrative discourse. The transformative power of the double plays an affirmative role, which promotes progressive concepts of womanhood. The double is the fusion between the narrator (the "I") and the narrator's double (the "she" woman trapped behind the bars of the wallpaper). She becomes one with her imprisoned double. The inevitable question that arises is whether this fusion imprisons her even more in her madness or has a beneficial role resulting in the rebirth of the self. Is it defeat, liberation or victory? The point made in the following lines is that Gilman's condition of being schizophrenic allowed her to escape partially from repressive social structures; the woman's encounter with her imprisoned double, her mirror image, resisted conformity, by being able to escape in a hallucinatory, delusional, imaginary world.

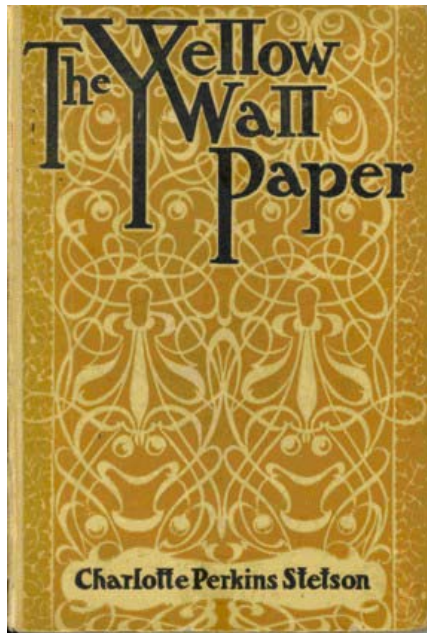
Nineteenth-century American women, although having different views, had to comply with patriarchal expectations and roles. The ideological prison (the nineteenth century American ideal of 'a true woman' as domestic and submissive) is presented by daylight, in which the masculine order prevails, while the rebellious, 'new woman' gets out from behind the bars by moonlight through the empowering unconscious and delusional imagination.

### *The yellow metaphor*

The term of *yellow journalism* was "coined by a newspaper editor in 1897 to describe media practices that exploit, distort, or exaggerate the news" (Edelstein 2007: 74). Yellow is associated with the "publication of cheap sensational literature, particularly in yellow-covered pamphlets" (Edelstein 2007: 76). Although the practice of this type of sensational journalism is supposed to distort reality, the assumption that "The Yellow Wallpaper draws much of its symbolic strength from the imagery and iconography of yellow journalism" (Edelstein 2007: 90) is basically correct.

Yellow may well be associated with inferiority, strangeness, cowardice, ugliness, backwardness (Lanser 2000: 122), also with Gilman's narrow-minded racism (Lanser 2000) and further with feminism. Being aware of her social *inferiority* as a woman, she first feels a *stranger, coward* and *ugly* in her community, due to her mental illness, while, later, she starts reacting to this *backwardness*. She escapes the conventional, male-dominated reality, in which she acts as a domestic, silent observer and apparent submitter (infantile dependency, like the children in the yellow nursery), although she is afraid of future treatment; yet, she makes some positive steps forward, at least, initializing this future and empowering herself to get out from behind the psychological bars.

It is a challenging fear with positive effects, a backlash to her obedient role, a willingness to see what is happening on the other side of that locked door and hidden patterns of the yellow wallpaper. The literary text is like a locked room where she wants to enter and find out what silences women; the moment she gets some clues to these hidden answers, her fearful curiosity will let her reach a relative success in her dialogue with the outside masculine world: "On a pattern like this, by *daylight*, there is a *lack of sequence*, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind. The color is *hideous* enough, and *unreliable* enough, and *infuriating* enough, but the pattern is torturing. You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and



tramples upon you. It is like a *bad dream*" (GYW: 653). The bad dream is actually about the unfamiliar, which scares and confuses her in the beginning.

The first impression of the yellow wallpaper is arousing in her feelings of confusion, irritation, disgust, hatred, anger: "The paint and paper looks as if a boys' school had used it. It is *stripped off* – the paper in great patches all around the head of my bed... I never saw a *worse paper* in my life" (GYW: 648). The paper "*confuses* the eye, *irritates*, and *provokes* study... in *unheard contradictions*. The color is *repellant*, almost *revolting*; a *smoldering* unclean yellow... it is a *dull yet lurid orange* in some places, a *sickly sulphur* tint in others" (GYW: 649). All the adjectives used to describe her reactions to this yellow color are negative at the opening of the story.

The yellow color is also associated with sexual repression and personality refusal: "This paper looks at me as if it knew what a *vicious influence* it had" (GYW: 649). At first, the yellow wallpaper was a "*vicious thing*" (GYW: 655), a lifeless object; then, the yellow wallpaper became a "strange, provoking, formless sort of *figure*" (GYW: 650). The faint *figure* became more and more distinct in 'her' attempt to get out from behind the bars. After the horrid first impression, we get the second impression about the yellow wallpaper; it is the moment when it is brought to life. Being omnipresent, the paper turns into an obsession, a recurrent spot, as "the media of the late

nineteenth century" (Edelstein 2007: 76). The more John restricts his wife's life to a room (a nursery before), the more he aggravates her nervous condition. The worse she gets with her schizophrenic symptoms, the more confused she becomes. Schizophrenia affects her senses. They become more acute. By moonlight, the figure behind the bars becomes a crawling woman or more women: "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." (GYW: 654)

Although in a crawling position, she gradually awakens her senses: "But there is something else about that 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*... hovering... skulking... hiding, lying in wait □ it gets into *my hair*" (GYW: 654). The heroine does not recognize the origin of the smell, although it gradually makes its presence palpable in the house and in her hair as well. It is a *yellow smell* – not bad at first, gentle, hanging over her, then awful at night. She gets used to the smell but she cannot get used to the *color* of the paper.

The yellow represents the character's state of mind. She is confused. Yellow becomes the color of death but also of psychic and spiritual awakening. At the beginning of the short story, she is willing to say what she feels and thinks, although it implies great effort: "It is such a relief! But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief" (GYW: 651). The worst thing she can do is to think about her condition, and she confesses it always makes her feel bad. She is not willing to upset John, her husband, so she'd better let it alone and talk about the house. All she wants is to please John: "Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?" (GYW: 648)

She is emotional and fanciful, but never ambivalent. John stands as a "double authority figure" (Parini 2003: 108), in his quality of both husband and doctor. He is Gilman's symbol of patriarchy, who defined how she should act and behave, while his sister, Jane, who came to take

care of the house while John's wife was ill, is a defender and supporter of patriarchy: "She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession." (GYW: 650)

The moment our nameless heroine enters into contact with her locked room and the yellow wallpaper, she becomes an active thinker; she is in constant need to discover the wallpaper's secrets: "Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be" (GYW: 653). First she accepts the situation, although she disagrees with her husband's medical treatment; gradually, she desires to repress this awareness, by self-expression.

Her ambiguous, open-ended dilemma is highlighted by the opposition between the yellow wallpaper and the unreachable green garden: "There is a *delicious* garden! I never saw such a garden—large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them" (GYW: 648); at first, she cannot find the woman behind the wallpaper in the garden on her short walks outside; as the story unfolds, the woman makes herself more and more visible by daylight, in the garden: "I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes, she hides under the blackberry vines" (GYW: 654). The more she grows fond of the color of the room, the more she *sees* the woman creeping all around the garden. "It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight!" (GYW: 654), she muses. But she does not blame the woman for that. She wants to release her imprisoned double even if she is going to creep by daylight.


The way the room is both infantilized and regenerated is both hated and loved through the various adjectives Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses to describe it – *quiet, empty, clean, I quite enjoy the room, I don't like our room a bit, a big, airy room, a nursery first* and then *playroom and gymnasium, the children hated it*, etc.

When the heroine starts having ambivalent feelings towards the room and the wallpaper, she also changes her attitude and feelings towards her husband. At first, he is presented as a physician of high standing who "is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (GYW: 648). He advises her to take the rest-cure, a transposition into fiction of

Gilman's own experience with Silas Weir Mitchell's rest cure that she was given at the age of twenty-six, when she suffered a nervous breakdown. He hates to have his wife lose self-control, to give way to fancy or tire herself with writing. He is aloof at her inner sufferance, but she still seems to regret being a burden to him.

The first part of the short story abounds in "John says," "John thinks," to show the decisional power of her husband over her life: "John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall" (GYW: 650); "John thought it might do me good to see a little company" (GYW: 650); "John would think it absurd" (GYW: 651); "John says I mustn't lose my strength" (GYW: 651). She calls him "Dear John! He loves me very dearly and hates to have me sick" (GYW: 651); "He said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there" (GYW: 651); "And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head... He said I was his darling" (GYW: 652). He is shown as a caring and loving husband. She depends on him: "I wish John would take me away from here" (GYW: 652). She considers him superior and wiser, because he loves her. As the story moves along, she starts "getting a little afraid of John" (GYW: 653) especially when she catches him several times "looking at the paper" (GYW: 653). He becomes *queer* and she does not want to irritate him: "I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once." (GYW: 654)

### *The literary double: ambiguity and power*

ore and more, she does not like the look in his eyes. He starts being suspicious when she cannot sleep at night. Her attitude and the words she uses start changing: "He asked me all sorts of questions, too and pretended to be loving and kind" (GYW: 9) Her senses of smelling, seeing and feeling grow in intensity, the way she becomes more self-aware of her condition: "As if I couldn't see through him!" (GYW: 9). We suddenly sense in her a note of self-trust and superiority. She becomes confident, she cannot lose her way anymore when she creeps smoothly on the floor. Her husband is



Evelyn de Morgan, *The angel of death*

the same “John dear” when he comes home and finds her locked in the room. He repeatedly asks “his darling” to open the door, first in a tender tone, then on a louder voice, but she does not lose her control this time. She is self-confident and not afraid anymore: “I can’t,” said I. “The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf! And then I said it again, several times. Very gently and slowly, and said it so often that he had to go and see” (GYW: 656). Looking over the shoulder, she shouts out her victory: “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!” (GYW: 656)

At one point in the story, John wants to repaper the room, closing her up again in her traditional gender role, but now she removes the chains of oppression. She manages to remove enough of the wallpaper to free the woman behind the bars and never to be imprisoned again. She seems to be free at last even if creeping (Hume 2002: 11). She looks contemptuously at the fainted *man* at her feet, a stranger now, who dared to stop her on her “path by the wall.” Determined, this time, she “*had to creep over him every time!*” (GYW: 656) The two women (the daylight and the nightlight woman) have become one.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman condemns in her modernist writing women’s confinement in the

domestic sphere. Her wish for self-expression made her invent an imaginary self, an imprisoned double, who managed to escape a woman’s role assigned and defined in the nineteenth century American society.

The yellow wallpaper is “symbolic of the Cult of True Womanhood, which binds women to home and family” (Thomas 1998). It represents a) the character’s state of mind; b) the way women were viewed in the nineteenth century patriarchal society; c) the narrator’s own identity; d) the media of the time.

The analysis of Gilman’s text focused on the ambivalence of the main character’s struggle with her womanhood and her shifting consciousness. It captured the psychological impact of cultural repression and showed how the woman writer, with schizophrenic, depressive and hysterical mental diseases, knew how to use the text of “The Yellow Wallpaper” to empower women through the modernist narrative strategies she used. The fusion between the heroine and her double, while, on the one hand, imprisons her even more in her madness, has, on the other hand, a beneficial role, resulting in the rebirth of the self.

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