

The yellow wallpaper psychosis and feminism research paper

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," a timid housewife is prescribed a rest cure by her physician husband, involving her sequestering herself away from the rest of the world, diving into inaction. As this occurs, and she keeps herself in the bedroom of her summer vacation home, she begins to hallucinate as a result of both the abuses her husband perpetrates against her and the crippling inactivity to which she has been prescribed. Her increasing desire for freedom, as well as distrust and disappointment with her uncaring, unfeeling husband, leads her into complete madness. The protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" experiences both tremendous psychotic episodes and incredible feministic tendencies and desires, exploring them both for the sake of finding her own identity apart from her husband and normal society and demonstrating the importance of activity and feminism in the female mind.

In Gilman's own response article "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" she states that she "suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia - and beyond" (Gilman, 1913). Much like the protagonist, she was appointed to a rest cure, something that isolated her from any other sort of stimulation from friends to artistic expression. This led her to feel even worse until she managed to free herself of those notions and begin working again. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a response to that doctor who prescribed such a toxic and maddening regimen to her, showing the damage that could have occurred had she continued on such a path. She also intended it as a treatise against faulty 19th century medicine, showing that women did not need rest cures in order to cure hysteria; the hysteria was often caused by the same type of remedy.

The sense of isolation that the protagonist feels is not unlike Foucaultian Panopticism, according to Bak (1994). Foucault came up with the idea of the Panopticon, a circular structure that would provide maximum visibility and a completely lack of privacy, as well as the ability for covert observation without the patient or student knowing about it. In this theory, Bak claims that the narrator of the piece “ supports Foucault’s contention that the individual is more ill-served by the surveillance of the Panopticon than by the unhealthy or unappealing environment of the prison or mental ward he or she would have typically encountered” (1994). Unlike placing her in a mental ward, the narrator (like Gilman) was placed in a panopticon-like environment, where she was being observed and noticed, rather than simply hidden away. Over time, much of this surveillance took place merely in the protagonist’s head, through the “ two bulbous eyes” and the “ faceless gaze” that she regularly sees in the yellow wallpaper (Gilman, p. 214). This merely leads to her madness and paranoia, and does not help her already agitated situation.

The primary antagonist of the main character in “ The Yellow Wallpaper” is the husband himself, John. He is a doctor, and a 19th century one at that – at the time, mental illness was not very well known of or talked about, and therefore many of the remedies that were prescribed to those suffering from these maladies were anything but helpful. The concept of a ‘ rest cure’ is particularly bizarre, as it implies that the outside world itself is what needs to be stopped, not the protagonist’s potential sadness (which may or may not be postpartum depression) (Parrishco, 2008).

Despite the protagonist's protests as to the effectiveness of (or desire for) the resting cure, John persists, stating that he knows what is best for her. "Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear, and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time" (Gilman, p. 3). This is one of his many relatively crackpot and holistic theories as to how the protagonist can get better again. However, all this serves to do is bring her further away from everything that still keeps her sane, like her art and painting.

As she continues on this path, the madness and despair get worse. She starts to hallucinate that the wallpaper is watching her, and she wishes to figure it out like a puzzle. All this is evidence of the hallucinations she is experiencing, as well as her further disconnect from reality as a result of the rest cure and her inattentive husband. Feeling separated from this cruel world by terrible circumstances, the protagonist begins to form her very own narrative about what she is seeing. Part of this narrative involves increasable creative leaps, including seeing a woman in the wallpaper – one who is trapped and in need of help. This reflects the protagonist's own desire to be saved from her own boredom and restrictions. She even laments this potential problem, only to shoot it down with her husband's own faulty logic: "I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus – but Jon says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad" (Gilman, p. 3).

In the end, what she hallucinates about and what ends up plaguing her most is the violation of her own rights and privileges as a person and woman. John is domineering and unkind, believing erroneously that he knows exactly what is wrong with her and how to fix it. “ John is a physician and PERHAPS.... that is one reason I do not get well faster” (Gilman, p. 1). Her subordinate status as the woman in the marriage forces her to follow her husband’s lead, especially when he has such a prestigious education and standing in life at the time as a doctor. Things like the rest cure were meant to also demoralize her and make her more docile – her condition merely made it easier to be manipulated. This flies in the face of many feminist ideals, and the story often provides feminism as a solution to the problems the protagonist is experiencing.

There is even a queer perspective on “ The Yellow Wallpaper” – Crewe (1995) writes about the strange relationship and connection that develops between the protagonist and the woman in the wallpaper. They become strangely connected in a way, looking into each other, a very intimate action, and a welcome reprieve from the heterosexual husband John, who seeks to make her “ normal,” which could be interpreted as “ heteronormative.” The fact that she hallucinates a woman is very intriguing; it could be the idea that she needs someone else besides a man to get her through her troubles, or that a woman is the only one who will relate to her plight whatsoever. While claims that the protagonist is queer are premature, there is definitely a rebellion against the male figure present in the work.

Feminism was not entirely present in the 19th century – the domestic picture painted by families in the United States was of women dutifully caring for their home while the men went forth and worked on their own. Women were not allowed to vote, and they were often left powerless by an increasingly patriarchal society. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is meant to be an answer to that, wherein the woman is driven mad by the same thing the man wants her to do, proving that they do not have the ultimate answers for everything. It becomes an expression of the world of the woman, and how it can drive them to desperation and psychological torment (EDSITEment, 2011).

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is an extremely feminist text, according to Haney-Peritz (1986). It “exposes the unheard of contradictions in a man’s prescriptive logic... it also makes the reader aware of gaps in that discursive structure” (p. 117). By showing just how wrong John is in his assessment of the protagonist, and seeing how much his diagnosis hurts her psychologically, we begin to see that it is not a good idea for the woman’s own desires and intentions to be ignored. John would rather be certain of his own superiority, both gender-wise and intellectually, than consider the idea that his wife may know more about her own condition than she does.

The biggest thing getting in the way of this being a feminist text is the relative passivity of the protagonist. For as many people (John included) who make fun of her, there are many more instances where she does not stand up for herself. This is for many reasons – one, it would not have been effective to whine in front of the man who is both one’s husband and one’s health care provider; also, in the 19th century it was important to “hide her

anxieties and fears in order to preserve the façade of a happy marriage, and to make it seem as though she is battling her own depression and living to tell the tale” (Haney-Peritz, p. 114).

In the end, it seems as though the protagonist is forced into this situation against her will, entering into it through a misplaced trust of her husband/doctor’s assessment of her health. The very tenets of the resting cure prevent her from thinking or spending time on intellectualism for very long, almost as if to discourage her from really thinking about what she is doing. This leads her to the type of creative and cognitive starvation that makes her mind start to invent hallucinations such as the woman in the wallpaper.

The woman in the wallpaper could even be seen as her, reflecting her own feelings at the time; some time after she first starts seeing the woman, she notices that the light changing makes the wallpaper seem like bars (Gilman, 1892). She is also trapped behind the wallpaper, and the protagonist feels she needs her help to get out. Along with the woman are the heads of others who attempted to escape from this very same prison (thought to be a commentary on the fact that other women are in similar situations with their husbands). This is evidence of her frustration at her own situation, as well as a feeling of helplessness on her part.

This was not done so much for the sake of female empowerment, but for the lack of inconvenience of the husband. John, for example, did not really want to have to deal with her wife’s hysteria, which is part of the reason for the resting cure; it gets her out of the way so he can have a degree of space

from her problem. This is the subtextual implication of this rest cure; after all, John balks at “ talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (p. 9). He believes that anything not empirically proven is sheer rubbish, especially when it inconveniences him into putting forth extra effort to care for his wife – surely a tall order. “ The Yellow Wallpaper” is the only thing that will listen to the protagonist, instead of her actual spouse. This leads her to a strange cognitive dissonance, allowing herself to become mad and believe the woman in the wallpaper to be real.

Perhaps the most gratifying (yet disturbing) moment for the protagonist in the short story is when she finally succumbs to her madness, falling victim to the patriarchal and homeopathic solution that her husband laid out for her. She writes, “ I’ve got out at last...in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (p. 36). At this point, she fully believes she is the woman in the wallpaper who has freed herself from her own insecurities and manages to survive. However, she can never then regain that humanity, as the Panopticon experience has left her feeling higher than consciousness; she has gone off the deep end, and does not have the appropriate skills or support system (being an isolated woman in the 19th century) to thrive, much less survive.

An unsatisfying, patriarchal marriage, combined with misplaced ideas of what constituted medicine in the 19th century, makes the protagonist of “ The Yellow Wallpaper” descend into madness and hysteria. This is all due to a mistrusted rest cure solution, as well as the subordinate role she and other women had been taking throughout the world at the time. Part of the reason this book was written was to fight against those who attempted to do the

same thing in order to cure Gilman in her time. Her lack of trust and faith in her husband leads her to find a closer connection to the one thing that she can differentiate from him – the yellow wallpaper, which takes the form of a woman. In this instance, there is a bit of queer criticism along with the feminist criticism typically found in analysis of this work.

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