

# The stages of feminine injustice

Literature, American Literature



In the well-known work *Women and Economics*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman emphasizes her belief that “dependence on men not only doom[s] women to live stifled lives but also retard[s] the development of the human species” (Kirsznner 449). Those words support the ideas conveyed in her short story, “A Yellow Wallpaper”. In this piece, the narrator undergoes three stages: first, she develops a mental illness resulting from the constrictions of a male-dominated society; second, she deteriorates due to a worsening environment; and finally, she reaches a state of insanity. Ironically, it is this final stage that symbolizes her freedom. In the beginning, Gilman reveals how the confinements of a restrictive society induce the narrator’s illness. In the opening lines, she immediately points out the imbalance in her marriage: “there is something queer about [this house]...John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (Gilman 450). The narrator implicitly accepts that her opinions are “frivolous”, trying to justify her sense that her thoughts are not worthy of her husband’s respect. She goes on to demonstrate her husband’s dominance in their relationship: “There comes John, and I must put this away – he hates to have me write a word” (451). His domination and her implicit submission emphasize the confinement of her environment. In these two distinct areas, Gilman offers two key assumptions about a patriarchal society: the value of the male mind over the “seemingly weak and foolish” mindset of the female, and the derivation of power in males, who direct the lives of females. Gilman also stresses the nature of female docility and its strong presence within the conventions of society. Furthermore, her illness originates in her restrictive environment. Critic Ann Lane writes that “imaginative women who found themselves with no outlets

for their abilities, while in the larger culture opportunities proliferated for ambitious and imaginative men, suffered particularly” (467). Lane’s analysis implies that the narrator’s restricted writing and her disregard for her own concerns are the primary causes for her illness. In this first phase, Gilman illustrates the detrimental effects that male dominance can have on female health. The narrator’s stifling environment furthers the progress of her debilitating disease. In the first stage, we see how harmful she finds her confining surroundings. It is logical to assume that continued confinement will only harm her further. However, John fails to follow this logic. The narrator repeatedly tries to convey her concerns, but is continually discouraged: “ At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies...Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose” (Gilman 452). The husband discourages the narrator from letting the wallpaper “ get the better of her” – instead of trying to see deeper into her fears, he only disregards them. He forces his opinions and judgments on her while ignoring her needs. John’s disregard is further exemplified by his treatment of the narrator: he calls her a “ little goose”, implying that her fears are insignificant. However, this does not solve the problem, but only forces the narrator to bottle up her feelings. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write, the story is “ a paradigmatic tale which seems to tell the story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their ‘ speechless woe'” (464). Literary women are stifled in much the same way as the narrator, and the anxiety she suffers only makes her situation worse. Later, the narrator admits, “ So of course I said no more on

that score...and lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together” (Gilman 456). Bottling up her feelings and thoughts only increases her problems, and her mind grows even more unstable. Gilbert and Gubar affirm this notion, writing that “ As time passes, this figure concealed behind what corresponds to the faade of the patriarchal text becomes clearer...the wallpaper ‘ becomes bars!’...[and] the narrator sinks more deeply into what the world calls madness” (465). In this manner, Gilman demonstrates how the narrator’s environment hastens her deterioration. The eventual breakdown of the narrator’s mental state into total insanity allows for her ultimate release. Her insanity replaces the conventions of male domination with a new form of reality. The hallucinations created by the narrator’s illness foreshadow a sense of freedom. The woman behind the wallpaper possesses far more freedom than the author: “ I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind” (Gilman 459). The woman has the freedom to travel outside, “ in the open country” – a space with no restrictions. She includes sky imagery such as a “ cloud in a high wind”, images that are typically associated with freedom. In a perverse way, the narrator glorifies her hallucinations and, more importantly, her very insanity. Gilbert and Gubar concur: “ More significant are the madwoman’s won imaginings and creations, mirages of health and freedom with which her author endows her like a fairy godmother showering fold on a sleeping heroine” (466). Additionally, the shift in John’s behavior at the end of the story, when he faints in response to the narrator’s behavior, reveals a role reversal. The male has become weaker and is divested of power, while the

female is set free. The narrator even scoffs at her husband's feminine reaction to her power, recalling John's attitude at the beginning of the story. Gilbert and Gubar add, " Doctor John...has been defeated...[in] John's unmasculine swoon of surprise" (465). Gilbert and Gubar see this moment as a defeat not only for John, but for all men. The narrator's insanity not only shows the inefficacy of the " Rest Cure", but demonstrates how the disease can, paradoxically, have a momentous outcome. The shifts throughout " The Yellow Wallpaper" illustrate the detrimental effects of feminine subordination. Furthermore, they reveal the consequences of male domination, which may in some cases alter the standards of a patriarchal society. In fact, the narrator in Gilman's story accomplishes just this: she is able to effect change in her own society. She has the most success in the case of her former doctor, Silas Weir Mitchell, effectively altering " his treatment of nervous prostration" (Gilbert 466). In response to this, the narrator famously declares, " If that is a fact, then I have not lived in vain" (466).

WORKS CITED  
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