

Depression due to repression in the yellow wallpaper research paper

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



The history of Western civilization, throughout the 19th-20th centuries, can be thought of as the continuous process of people associated with this civilization, growing increasingly aware of patriarchal morality notions' outdatedness.

Whereas; by the beginning of the 20th century, it was considered entirely appropriate for women to be strictly concerned with taking care of purely domestic matter while simultaneously providing their husbands with an opportunity to have a sexual relief. By the end of the same century, the patriarchal view of women as 'natural born housewives' and the objects of men's sexual desire, had lost the remains of its former validity.

However, such dramatic progress would not be achieved without intellectually advanced women actively contributing to the process of Western societies becoming increasingly secularized and less male-chauvinistic. Therefore, it will not be much of an exaggeration to say that the short story *The Yellow Wall-Paper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, provides us with the real insight onto technical subtleties of women's intellectual awakening in late 19th century's America.

Gilman's story begins with the narrator telling readers about the way, in which her supposedly highly educated husband John (a physician) had decided to treat his wife's mild depression.

After having realized that something needed to be done to improve his wife's mental state, John could not come up with anything better but suggesting that there was only one effective way for the narrator to address her mental

anxieties. That is, indulging in bellyful idling while remaining intellectually inactive for the duration of a 'treatment': "I take phosphates or phosphites - whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am forbidden to "work" until I am well again" (1470).

Although the author initially tried to express her growing weariness of a 'treatment' to John, she pleads remained ignored: "John does not know how much I suffer.

He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him" (1471). Just as most socially established men of the era, John never ceased thinking about his wife's mental anxieties as essentially the irrational expressions of her female psyche. That is the reason why, despite possessing a degree in medicine, John could never realize the sheer seriousness of the narrator's depression, while brushing her complaints aside as childish.

As time went by, the narrator's mental state continued to deteriorate rather exponentially, which predetermined her mounting preoccupation with observing 'hidden' motifs contained in the room's yellow wallpaper.

Eventually, the narrator had grown mentally unstable to such an extent that she became utterly withdrawn from the objectively existing reality. At the same time, she came to realize that the ghostly image of a creeping woman, which always lurked behind wallpaper's yellowish distastefulness, was indeed real: "Through watching so much at night, when it (wallpaper) changes so, I have finally found out.

The front pattern does move – and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!” (1479). Even though the story ends on a tragic note – the narrator had yielded to madness, there are clearly defined liberating overtones in how she positioned herself, after having realized the ‘ truth.’

Apparently, the narrator started to think of her marriage to John as intellectual imprisonment preventing her existential psyche from being able to actualize itself socially. And the creeping woman behind the wallpaper became a ghostly extrapolation of her true-self. Therefore, the act of ripping the paper off the wall, on the narrator’s part, should be seen as the metaphorical act of liberation from the constraints of an oppressive marital relationship: “ 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!” (1481). As Treichler (1984) had put it: “ Defying the judgment that she (narrator) suffers from a ‘ temporary nervous depression,’ she has followed her own logic, her own perceptions, her own projects to this final scene in which madness is seen as a kind of transcendent sanity” (67).

Moreover, it should also be seen as the ultimate proof of the narrator’s courageousness, because she was only able to attain liberation at the expense of deciding to get rid of her identity of a subservient housewife. In her case, this meant being deprived of identity altogether.

In its turn, this explains the seemingly odd mentioning of the name ‘ Jane’ in this particular narrator’s remark. Even though many critics suggest that by

referring to Jane, the narrator was referring to John's sister Jennie, there are good reasons to believe that 'Jane' is the narrator herself.

As Thrailkill (2002) had pointed out in her article: "The narrator recognizes the woman in the paper as herself, and suddenly sees her embodied, observing, recording self as the enemy, referring to her in the third person as "Jane." It is the reconstituted narrator, now, who completely enters the text" (551).

Just as the heroine in Kate Chopin's *Awakening*, the main character in Gilman's story came to realize the fact that there was only one way for her to attain existential freedom and self-respect. That was proving to male-chauvinistic society that psychologically, she was more of a male than her rationalistic but boorish husband, whose ignorance prevented him from seeing its wife as anything but 'blessed little goose.'

It is not by a pure accident that in the story's final scene, John faints. Apparently, Gilman strived to show that one's formal affiliation with a 'strong gender', does not automatically endows him with 'manly' virtues of courageousness, rationalism, and intellectual integrity: "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" (1481).

Despite being a fragile woman, the narrator had proven that, within the context of pursuing a marital relationship with John, it was she who should have been wearing pants.

Thus, The Yellow Wall-Paper is best referred to as the story of an intelligent and sensitive woman turning her descent into madness as the ultimate instrument of confronting patriarchal oppression, sublimated in her 'loving' husband's unwillingness to think of her as his intellectually equal life-partner.

That is the reason why, ever since its publishing, Gilman's story never ceased being discussed within the context of the 20th century's feminist discourse. In his article, Jean (2002) had made a good point, while stating: "Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," valued not only for its intrinsic aesthetic merits but also as a site for all manner of feminist debate during the last quarter-century" (399).

Nevertheless, it would be quite inappropriate to refer to The Yellow Wall-Paper as being driven solely by Gilman's aspirations of feminist liberation as 'thing in itself,' but also by author's rather acute understanding of what represents initial stages of woman's descent into madness and how such descent should be dealt with, in order not to let it to become irreversible.

As it appears from the story, the narrator's mental anxieties were perceived by John as the by-product of his wife being exposed to overly intense emotional experiences. This was precisely why he recommended her not to think much, not to write and to sleep for as long as possible: "John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can. Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal" (1477).

It never occurred to John that, while being left alone in the huge mansion during his leaves, his wife would not only be sleeping and 'breathing fresh

air' but also thinking. And, as psychologists are well aware of – once a person grows preoccupied with too much introversive thinking, it becomes only a matter of time before the extent of his or her mental adequacy would be undermined.

The irony lies in the fact that John's ignorance of his wife's full humanity derived not out of his consciously defined and deliberately malicious sense of male-superiority but out of his genuine intention to relieve the narrator's mental insecurities. Yet, it did not help the matters a whole lot.

Gilman was able to show that, just as it is the case with women being subjected to intentional dehumanization, their love-based unintentional dehumanization (such as that of John's) leads to essentially the same set of negative consequences – women become socially withdrawn. In its turn, this creates objective preconditions for them to go about achieving self-actualization in a variety of strongly subjectivized but clearly abnormal ways.

As it was rightly noted by Crewe (1995): “ The Yellow Wallpaper was read as revolutionary in the somewhat ambiguous sense that the oppression represented in the story is not overtly cruel, lawless, or despotic.

Crucially, the oppression consists in the woman's subjection to an ostensibly caring yet abjecting regime in which male conjugal and medical authority fully coincide” (277). Thus, it will not be an exaggeration to suggest that, apart from representing a high literary value, The Yellow Wallpaper represents high scientific value, as well.

The reading of this particular Gilman's story leaves no doubt as to the fact that, in order for physicians to be able to help women who suffer from depression, these physicians can never think of their patients as being somewhat inferior, in the intellectual sense of this word. The fact that Gilman's story conveys an earlier articulated message with perfect clarity can serve as yet an additional proof as to the author's political progressiveness.

Even though she lived in time when women suffered from being exposed to different forms of social oppression, it never affected Gilman's ability to promote the cause of women's liberation as such that has been dialectically predetermined by the laws of history. Although Gilman wrote her story well before the concept of psychology had attained a full academic validity, she had proven herself insightful enough to endorse the view onto the workings of one's mind as being environmentally rather than biologically defined.

This is the reason why story's subtle exploration of the concept of gender egalitarianism can be best referred to as an indication of author's perceptual insightfulness - just as it was the case with other promoters of feminist cause of the era, Gilman was able to show that subjecting women to social oppression should be discussed in terms of an overall efficiency of society's functioning being deliberately undermined.

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