

# The fall of the house of usher and the yellow wallpaper: a comparison introductio...

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" has received wide praise for its accurate depiction of madness and the symptoms attributed to mental breakdowns (Shumaker 1985). While these symptoms may seem obvious from today's psychological perspective, Gilman was writing at the close of the 19th century when the discipline of psychology was still emerging out of a rudimentary psychiatric approach to treating the mentally ill.

Though doctors have attempted to write about the treatment of insanity since ancient Greece, the history of madness has most often been characterized by a series of popular images, images that may have stunted the development of a medical model of mental illness: as a wild irrationality, an imaginative and corrupt gothic horror, a violent cruelty that must be confined in asylums, and lastly as a mere nervous disorder.

The critic Annette Kolodny suggests that contemporary readers of Gilman's story most likely learned how to follow her fictional representation of mental breakdown by reading the earlier stories of Edgar Allan Poe (Shumaker 1985), and indeed we can locate these strata of historical representations in both "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher."

But where Poe's depictions seem to confirm negative - and thus not therapeutically useful - stereotypes of madness, Gilman tempers her representations through the emerging psychological model, which allowed her to articulate a new image anticipating the 20th century hope of curing mental diseases through psychological expression. Background Gilman's story depicts the mental collapse of a late 19th century housewife

undergoing the Rest Cure, who grows increasingly obsessed with a disturbing wallpaper pattern.

It has been suggested that contemporary readers would have read the story as either a Poe-like study of madness, yet most modern critics focus on a feminist reading in which the wallpaper intentionally represents the “oppressive patriarchal social system” (Thraillkill 2002). Jane Thraillkill, in her essay about the psychological implications of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” argues that this feminist reading may actually block the work done by the story to shift 19th century medical conventions surrounding mental illness (Thraillkill 2002).

Gilman stated that everything she wrote was for a purpose beyond mere literary entertainment, and that “The Yellow Wallpaper” was written in order to highlight the dangers of certain medical practices, particularly to convince Weir Mitchell to change the method of his Rest Cure for nervous ailments (which Gilman herself had unsuccessfully undergone) (Shumaker 1985, Thraillkill 2002).

In Gilman’s words, the story was, “...intended... to save people from going crazy, and it worked” (Thraillkill 2002). Like Gilman, Poe may also have suffered from mental illness, but following the concerns of his historical moment, Poe seems to have been more interested in the construction of aesthetic effects instead of how those effects might change social and scientific perspectives.

The only mention of a cure in Poe’s tale is the “vague hope” that reading a book will relieve excitement (Poe 2003). Nonetheless, Gilman’s methods of

representing madness clearly derive from Poe; they both use an “inspired manic voice,” unnamed narrators, nervous characters with no diagnosable illness, a rebellious foregrounding of the imagination, and a haunting mood with rational design that has been considered Poe’s signature style (Davison 2004).

Published sixty years earlier, Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” in particular seems to anticipate “The Yellow Wallpaper” in its manor setting and mad characterizations, and thus can serve as an opening point from which to trace the 19th century transitions in cultural and scientific representations of madness that culminate in Gilman’s tale. Analysis In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” an unnamed narrator, visiting his old friend Roderick Usher, attempts to describe Roderick’s madness through both external and internal signs of irrationality.

Most immediately, Roderick’s hair is described as “wild” and of “Arabesque expression,” which the narrator is unable to connect “with any simple idea of humanity” (Poe 2003). Similarly, Roderick’s manner strikes the narrator with “an incoherence – an inconsistency,” and his voice is compared to that of “the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium” (Poe 2003), all of which mark his social difference as not understandable.

After the entombment of his sister, Roderick’s external madness intensifies: he roams with “unequal, and objectless step,” has a “more ghastly hue” of face, a “species of mad hilarity in his eyes,” a “restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor,” and speaks in a “gibbering murmur” (Poe 2003). But all of these are, as the narrator puts it, “the mere inexplicable vagaries of

madness” (Poe 2003). When it comes to representing the internal process of mental breakdown, Poe (at least in this story) still only describes Roderick’s irrationality from an external and stereotypical position.

Roderick describes his condition as a “ deplorable folly” that will force him to “ abandon life and reason,” he is “ enchained by certain superstitious impressions,” and suffers from “ melancholy” and “ hypochondria” (two terms associated with earlier misunderstandings of madness) (Poe 2003). The only time we see the irrational thought process represented is in Roderick’s monologue about entombing his sister alive, which uses dashes, italics, and capitalization to indicate a nervous desperation, as in Poe’s “ The Tell-Tale Heart”.

In contrast, Gilman drops almost all of these external and stereotypical descriptions of madness in her story, focusing instead on a faithful rendition of irrational thought processes, in particular the narrator’s growing obsession with the yellow wallpaper. Early in the story, the narrator declares that she’s fond of her room, “ all but that horrid wallpaper,” but within a few pages this statement is turned around; the narrator becomes fond of the room “ perhaps because of the wallpaper.

It dwells in my mind so” (236). The wallpaper gradually takes over the narrator’s thought process, breaking into other observations without transition, as when the narrator looks out her window and sees “ a lovely country, full of great elms and velvet meadows. This wallpaper has a kind of sub-pattern...” (235). Eventually she “ follows that pattern about by the

hour” until there are few passages in the text that are not about the wallpaper (238).

As her obsession grows, the narrator becomes paranoid that her husband and stepsister are “secretly effected by it,” and she’s thus “determined that nobody shall find [the pattern] out but myself” (239). Despite her original loathing of the wallpaper pattern, by the end of the story the narrator’s obsession is so consuming that she claims, “I don’t want to leave until I have found it out” (240). Instead of being directly told that the narrator is enchained by her impressions like Roderick Usher, we are more realistically shown those irrational impressions at work in the mind.

Another method for representing irrationality is to cast it against a more rational perspective, which both these stories do. Poe’s narrator, for instance, claims to rationally explain away the otherwise inexplicable events of “The Fall of the House of Usher” while documenting Roderick’s breakdown (Gruesser 2004). The house’s peculiar atmosphere “must have been a dream;” his nervousness is “due to the bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture;” the storm is “merely an electrical phenomena” (Poe 2003).

And yet the uncertainty of events displayed in this narrative unreliability suggests that the narrator might himself be going mad. After describing Roderick’s wild appearance, the narrator says, “it was no wonder that his condition terrified – that it effected me,” and begins to feel “the wild influences of [Roderick’s] own fantastic yet impressive superstitions” (Poe 2003). This inability to rely on his own perceptions causes the narrator to

flee aghast when the house collapses, where a more rational or unaffected person might first summon the servants or police (Gruesser 2004).

According to John Gruesser, the challenge in Poe's use of unreliability is that he sets reason in opposition to the supernatural, straddling the Gothic/Fantastic genre where supernatural events are more likely than their rational explanations. This supernatural possibility seems to lessen the question of whether madmen are always delusional or can speak the truth, which becomes central for Gilman's story. "The Yellow Wallpaper" also uses a rational perspective in the character of her husband and physician John, who is "practical in the extreme.

He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition" (235). Not only does John explain away the unsettling nature of the house as a draught, but he also attempts to explain away the narrator's mental illness, calling it "a temporary nervousdepression- a slight hysterical tendency" (234). As we will see, this explanation of madness as merely nerves will become a large concern for 19th century discussions on mental illness, and as such comes off as far more scientifically realistic than explaining madness through the supernatural.

Gilman also has her narrator attempt to rationalize her own madness, beginning the story with her claim of being "ordinary people," and continuing this attempt to rationalize even through her mental deterioration: "it is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight. Just this nervous weakness I suppose" (238). While this use of unreliable explanations is

similar to Poe's, it reads as more realistic because Gilman frames her story in a way that denies the Gothic discourse of supernatural explanations.

Despite its eventual medical ineffectuality, the label of "nerves" is one of the clearest literary representations of madness attempting to explain or deny its mental character. "True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am;" claims the narrator of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," "but why will you say that I am mad?" (Poe 2003). The Usher family madness in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is likewise coded; Roderick attempts to pass off their "constitutional and... family evil" as a "mere nervous affection" (Poe 2003).

He has an excessive "nervous agitation... and acute bodily illness," and "a morbid acuteness of the senses" that makes most food, garments, odors, light, and sounds intolerable (Poe 2003). Madeline is diagnosed with a "settled apathy, a gradual wasting away," because whatever is actually wrong with her "long baffled the skill of her physicians" (Poe 2003). Whether or not these characters are actually mad, one gets the feeling that the word "nerves" is used by Poe to explain or make legible the Usher family condition for the mid-19th century reader, indicating that it may be a biological rather than moral or supernatural disorder.

The narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" also articulates her condition as nervousness, but within the late-19th century occlusion of madness as merely nerves, this term seems to indicate less an explanation as much as an excuse or denial of any deeper mental problem. As the narrator says in what is easily read as a flippant tone, "I never used to be so sensitive, I



think it is due to this nervous condition,” and “ of course it is only nervousness” that causes her actions to require a greater effort (235).

Though her husband has told the narrator that her nervous case is not serious, she expresses a new dissatisfaction with this diagnoses; “ these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing” (236). This almost ironic but clearly critical representation of nervous disorders marks a break from Poe’s story, but even more importantly indicates the struggle Gilman went through in her own life against the American medical industry’s changing view of mental illnesses.

Though “ The Yellow Wallpaper” was written to specifically address the Rest Cure, as Thrailkill suggests, the story helped shift the medical paradigm from looking at the patient’s body to listening to their words (Thrailkill 2003). The story is permeated with this desire to talk beyond the traditional psychiatric model: not only is the narrator forbidden to write, but her physician husband only sees her physical improvements of “ flesh and color,” paternally dismissing any of her objections (240).

To write, however, is the one thing the narrator consistently feels would make her well; it is a relief to “ say what I feel and think”. Thrailkill offers a reading that Gilman’s narrator at first emulates Mitchell’s physiological approach in looking at the wallpaper, which then shifts to the articulation of a narrative surrounding the woman in the paper, essentially equating the narrator to a medical text (Thrailkill 2003).

We do not need to stretch so far however, as the story is already framed as a diary or journal, that is, it claims to be the expression of a person’s actual

experience. Though the narrator has difficulty writing, she continues to write, honestly detailing the thoughts, feelings, and visions attending her mental breakdown in a manner that anticipates the 20th century psychological recognition that madness contains a truthful lucidity (Davison 2004).

A mentally unstable person's journal thus represents exactly the kind of "irrelevant story" that can cure, and which any sympathetic reader can understand as a valid psychological experience of someone who is no longer seen as socially other or "mad, bad, and dangerous." Consequently, while Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" comes off as simply an entertaining story about some stereotypical madmen, Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is ultimately a psychologically real portrayal of the subjective experience of someone going mad.