

## The Sick Heroine in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The yellow Wallpaper*

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### Abstract

This study attempts to put Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The yellow wallpaper* in the context of contemporary theory of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's psycho-feminist scholarship *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Women Writers and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (2000). The two critics focus on the image of the imprisoned mad women in the attic like Bertha Mason, the mentally ill wife of Mr. Edward Rochester, in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). The image of the sick woman forced into domestic confinement of colors, shapes and wallpapers in an entire seclusion continued right into the twentieth century into the literary product of some of the women writers. According to Gilbert and Gubar, some of those women Victorian writers tried to give voice to those women descending into sickness and mental diseases throughout their endeavor to oppress their awareness of the inner creative power which comes as a part of their desire to accept the limited social role they are trapped in.

**Keywords:** madness, seclusion. Patriarchal society, Gilman, yellow wallpaper.

## 1. Introduction

The paper attempts to apply Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's psycho-feminist theory introduced in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic: Women Writers and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (2000), through tracing the story of some of women writers' heroines. Such heroines yearn to escape entirely patriarchal society with all its difficulties of oppression, starvation and madness. The central confrontation of such women, according to Gilbert and Gubar, is the confrontation with her own imprisoned rebellion and rage. (2000, pp.338-339). Images of the trapped and imprisoned self and soul searching for escape that recur throughout the works of some novelists like Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* continued to recur throughout some other nineteenth and twentieth century women writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Gilman's heroine in *The yellow Wallpaper* shares Jane Eyre's imprisonment in the red room at Gateshead, as well as Bertha Mason in her room at the third floor of Thornfield Hall where the "spirit of the [patriarchal] society in which Jane has no clear place sharpens the angles of the furniture, enlarges the shadows, strengthens the locks on the door." (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p 340).

## 2. Interior Design and Mental Health.

Wall shapes, colors and decorations including wall papers define the character of the place, and state the taste, the social, educational, and economic status of its inhabitants. As late Victorian, the narrator of Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* objects to the yellowish wall paper of the room where she is to stay the whole summer. Her objections do not indicate her modern taste, but rather refers to a more complicated issue entailed with personal choice of certain interior design pattern. Colors and shapes of the room can bring a surprising effect on the mood and the health of the observer. Jürgen Wolter states that by the end of the nineteenth century, the connection between interior decoration and pathology had become common knowledge. Endless multiplications and monotony of design became the source of infinite torture. It could increase and aggravate the sufferings of the sick. Moreover, the meaningless recurrence of angles or curves, or the ever repeated convolvulus could affect mental health. (2009,p., 196). Colors, out of psychological perspective, are capable of introducing unrest, anger, malice and all the negative feelings for victims of weakness and fatigue. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that a nineteenth-century woman writer had to inhabit ancestral mansions (or cottages) owned and built by men. She was also constricted and restricted by the Palaces of Art and Houses of Fiction male writers authored. The two critics decided, therefore, that the striking coherence they noticed in literature by women could be explained by a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society.(2000, p., xii).

### 3. Discussion

*The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), narrates the secrets of a woman suffering of postpartum depression. She is taken by her husband; John who is also her doctor, to spend the summer at a colonial mansion in California. The doctor/ husband keeps her in the room upstairs that used to be a nursery, where she is confined to do nothing but rest. Having nothing to do, the narrator starts secret journals where she describes her obsession with the shape, design and color of the wallpaper of her room.

Though she belongs to the middle class and is not accustomed to live in mansions, the keen eye of the narrator and her intelligence derive her to sense “something queer about it[The mansion]”(Gilman, 1997.p.1), that would explain its long desertion and low rental price. Her husband disregards her observations as he disregards other things concerning their marriage. Jennifer Semple Siegel explains Gilman’s real purpose for writing *The Yellow Wallpaper*. It was to reach to Dr. S. Weir Mitchell and convince him of the error of his treatment of nervous prostration. Dr. Mitchell’s treatment or ‘rest cure’ appears in the story prescribed by the husband to the wife. Gilman’s own experience of postpartum depression and unhappiness in marriage to her first husband, Walter Stetson, resulted in her stay at Dr. Mitchell asylum for the treatment of nervous prostration. The so called nervous prostration was new to the medical profession. Symptoms consist of mental sensation, shame, fear, remorse, a blind oppressive confusion, utter weakness, a steady brain ache that fills the conscious mind with images and distress were recognized only by Dr. Mitchell. After examining her, he assured Gilman that she was suffering of hysteria and a ‘rest-cure’ was prescribed. She was put to bed and kept there. She was fed, bathed, rubbed and within a month of treatment released with a prescription of living a domestic life and never to touch a pen, brush or pencil as long as she lives. After a month of following this regimen, Gilman sank even deeper into depression and mental torment. She decided to cast off the doctor’s prescription that could not reach the root of her problem: her unhappiness with her life in general (1997, pp.46-48).

Unlike the writer, the heroine of the story does not win her own struggle. The two doctors in her life; her husband and her brother, interpret her illness as temporary nervous depression. So she takes phosphates, tonics and is forbidden of any sort of work. The schedule that John prescribes for her each hour, does not only confine her to dullness, but deprives her of her true identity and renders her a prisoner in a room that she dislikes. Wolter supposes that though the room has been used as a nursery, it is not prepared like the standard nursery of the late nineteenth century, which was decorated in thematic or figural pattern. The bared windows, the rings in the wall and the nailed down bed suggest a prison cell or a torture chamber. Perhaps, her husband named it ‘the nursery’ in the line with his attempts to belittle her. He demeaningly calls her little and she accepts this as she accepts her stay at the nursery because she has internalized the male infantilization of women ( 2009, pp.197-198). The room upstairs or the attic folds the most poignant symbol in this story that is the wallpaper with yellow color. She says

the paint and the paper looks “as if a boys’ school had used it. It is stripped off the –the paper – in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life. (Gilman,1997, p.3).

The time, in which the novel was written, the wallpaper became old fashioned due to many reasons. The most important one was the desire to show the real substance and the cracks of the wall it used to cover. Similarly, living in a room covered with wallpaper that is no longer favored stands for the inner wish to reject all that are hidden and denied in the heroine’s life: her lost identity, the failure of her marriage and treatment. Her dislike of the room and the wallpaper stands for her rejection of that denial. Covering up real substances, as in the case of using wallpaper to cover up house cracks, does not mend deformity. Her husband’s denial of her true ailment , and her request for true identity worsen the situation even more , and the heroine’ s keen eye does not miss that cracks in her life as she does not miss the worse paper she has ever seen in her life.

In her secret journal, she starts to compose the day she arrives at the house, the narrator refers her hate of the room upstairs and to the shape and the color of the wallpaper’s pattern. Her artistic vision enables her to trace a design in the wallpaper that provokes and irritates a study. She finds the paper dull enough to confuse the eye of an expert with its “uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide-plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.”(Gilman, 1997, p.3). The descriptions she applies to the angles of the pattern are but a reflection of her inner psychology and feelings. Earlier, she mentions that sometimes she gets angry with her husband when he asks her to control herself and her fancies, something that makes her tired. Her endeavour to be another version of herself to satisfy the husband tortures and exhausts her mentally and physically. She is lost between her awareness of her powerless position in the house and her desire to oppress that awareness. That is enough to fill her with rage that inspires self destruction or suicide. In that perspective, the outrageous angles of the wallpaper picture her inner destructive outrage.

The narrator, also, finds the color of the wallpaper “repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow- turning sunlight. It is dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others”. (Gilman, 1997, p.3). The adjectives ‘repellant ‘ , ‘revolting’ and ‘sickly’ are but other references of the inner fury and hate that urge her to revolt against her entire life. The color Yellow of the wallpaper becomes a source of torture that introduces all the negative feelings inside her weak soul.

Color played an important role in Gilman’s life. She attended The Rhode Island School for design (1878-80), married the painter Charles Walter Stetson, and tutored girls in painting. When she decided to use yellow wallpaper for the symbol of Victorian

patriarchy, she was certainly aware that color was the most powerful mental influence of the home. Furthermore, she must have taken into account the many connotations and silent references of the color yellow, since she wrote the story in a period came to be known as 'The Yellow Decade'. In 1890s, the yellow became the color of the hour, and the symbol of the time spirit. It was associated with all that was queer in art and life. Yellow and decadence were almost synonymous in the public aesthetic discourse at the turn of the century. It connoted inferiority, strangeness, ugliness and was associated with disease, uncleanness and decay. Gilman's 'unclean yellow' with 'sickly sulphur tint' indicates the narrator's furtive rebellion. At the beginning of her mental journey out of her husband's world, she repeatedly emphasizes John's authority; her protest is still suppressed in her subconscious. Its symbol the yellow wallpaper is still repellent to her. Gradually, however, the yellow wallpaper becomes part of her being and thinking. (Wolter, 2009, pp. 200-202).

In the second entry of her secret journal composed two weeks after their arrival to the mansion, the narrator makes a shift in her expression of her repressed anger. The shift is from writing to reading or decoding the wall paper. The process of decoding is a new form of emotionally charged living type of writing that is different of her dead secret journal. (Wolter,2009,p.204). During the past two weeks, the narrator is abandoned day and night to suffer alone. John does not have an idea about her suffering, yet he instructs her to control herself because he believes that her imaginative power and her habit of story making will encourage her fancies. At that exact time, the process of decoding the wallpaper starts:

There is recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down. I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the ever lastingness . Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is no place where two breaths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line , one a little higher than the other. (Gilman,1997,p.5).

By showing the connection between the bodies of soldiers and the nerves of women, Gilman's writings recapture the history of Dr.Mitchell's own idea about nervous disease caused by the civil war. If women are mercurial, it is because the daughter of the soldier inherits her father's pride and courage, and the cowardice of her mother. Diverting a young women's ambition to the quest of a man, and domestic training instills discreet submission to domestic life. Within this environment, the body and the mind of the women adapt by becoming smaller and softer. Married life or the conquest of a man, exacerbates her embattled state, playing her into a home, that for Gilman, is a self war zone. This idea of the home is derived in The Yellow Wallpaper by exposing the traces of conflict in the rented mansion. The wallpaper images of slaughter assert the connection between the domestic sphere and the discord of war. The broken necks, the two bulbous eyes , and the figures that go waddling up and down in the above extract

are not only metaphors for twisted minds and deformed bodies, however, they are catalyst. Just as war makes deformed, hysterical men, the domestic environment materially constitutes women's minds and bodies. The narrator, then, is literally correct when she sees her mental process in the wallpaper's figure. (Thrailkill, 2002, pp. 541-542). Thus, the second entry serves as an introduction to the evolved outrage into war rage that produces deformity. Just as Thornfield's attic becomes the a complex focal point where Jane's own rationality she has learned from Miss temple at Gateshead, and irrationality (rage and rebellion); intersects (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p.348), The nursery room of Gilman's heroine becomes the war zone where her rational thoughts and irrational desires collide.

Having nothing to do in life but rest, the narrator develops a kind of obsession to the wallpaper of her room. It is an obsession enhanced under the effect of the lights. The sun and the moon function as central figures for the story. Under the sun, she begins to see "a strange, provoking, formless figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design"(Gilman, 1997, p.6). This formless figure gets clearer everyday and with the end of the entry four, it turns to be "a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" (Gilman, 1997, p. 8). In entry five and under the moonlight, the faint figure seems to shake the pattern of the wallpaper as if she wants to go out. In entry six, the daylight shows the lack of sequence in this pattern that provokes irritation: "It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you."(Gilman, 1997, p.9). The sun and the moon interchange their effect on the pattern that it changes as the light changes. At night and under any kind of light "twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worse of all by moonlight, it becomes bars" (Gilman, 1997, p.10) and the faint figure behind the bars is a woman. She is subdued and quiet under the daylight. The interesting thing is that the more the narrator decodes the wallpaper, the more she is afraid of John. In entry seven, discovering the logic behind the pattern of the wallpaper becomes the purpose of her life. In entry eight, she sleeps during the day and awakes during the nights to watch the development happening in the pattern. The main development that happens is the smell of the color of the wallpaper: "It creeps all over the house. I find it hovering in the dining- room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs. It gets into my hair. Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it- there is that smell!" (Gilman, 1997, p.11). Gradually, she gets used to the smell, but earlier it used to irritate her that she has seriously thought of burning the house to reach it, which is but a reflection of the inner wrath seeking an outlet.

In entry nine under the moonlight, she finds out that " the front pattern does move...the woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are great many women behind it, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over." (Gilman, 1997, p. 12). In entry ten, at daylight the woman gets out and creeps all around the garden and under the dark grape arbors. She hides when someone approaches, because, according to the narrator, it is very humiliating to be caught

crawling during the daylight. The more the narrator gets closer to the final result of her decoding the wallpaper pattern, the more she identifies herself with the woman who is now creeping faster than a cloud shadow in a high wind and the more irritating her relationship with her husband becomes. In the final entry, at the last day of their stay at the mansion, the narrator starts to help the woman behind the bars, who now shakes the pattern, to get out. Together, they peel off yards of the wallpaper. She closes the door of her room and throws the key in the garden and brings a rope to tie the woman/herself so that she will not be pulled back behind the pattern. The derision of the strangled heads and bulbous eyes get her angry and derive her to jump out of the window, but it is hard. It corresponds with the earlier interpretation of the angles and the curves of the wallpaper that inspire self destruction. Finally, during the daylight, she fully identifies herself with the woman. Instead of referring to the woman, it is she who would go behind the bars during the night. The narrator is reborn free, rebellious and no longer prisoner. According to Beth Brunk –Chavez, The moon and the sun light central to the rebirth of the narrator, become the catalyst for this change. The magnetic power of the moon has pulled her forth, releasing her from her confinement. The pattern of the wallpaper transforms its appearance when the light in the room changes. To move into the sun is to be enlightened, as the sun enables to see the truth. The truth, however, does not apply in this specific case. At first, in the daylight, the narrator appears unable to see or to understand the pattern in the wallpaper for what it really is; she exhausts herself trying to determine its order. She finds that by daylight the pattern is tiresome, perplexing and irritant to a normal mind. This creates a nice parallel to the exhaustion the narrator experiences when she attempts to understand her husband/doctor's diagnosis of-and treatment for – her illness. In the absence of the daylight and most especially in the moonlight, she gets her clearest idea of the pattern that confines and holds the woman back. In the light of the sun, the woman in the paper is subdued. Only away from the sun, the woman in the wallpaper becomes active in her escape. Although the paper remains the same physically, it can be viewed and comprehended differently in different lights.(2003,pp.79-80). By decoding, destroying, and peeling off the paper, the narrator gives birth to a new version of herself in a brand new domain where she switches roles with her husband. She is no longer the little creature confined in her nursery/prison, but rather the free one. Unable to read the new text his wife has composed in her new sphere, the husband loses control and faints. This rebirth is indicated by: "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!"(Gilman, 1997, p.15). Chavez believes that at this moment, the reader understands that the narrator now believes she is the woman previously confined within the wallpaper. In effect, she has achieved the same goal in two ways. As the woman inhabiting the room, she has played the role of midwife by pulling the woman out of the paper. As the woman in the wallpaper, she has freed herself within this assistance. The declaration that she gets out "in spite of you and Jane" supports this reading. Many critics suspect that Jane was once the narrator and

now she refuses to associate herself with that identity. In that case, she is figuratively born into a new self. (2003, pp. 76-79).

## 5. Conclusion

Considering Gilbert and Gubar's Psycho-feminine theory, the following points can thus be concluded: First, most of Victorian women act as keeper of other women, Gilman's heroine acts as a keeper of the woman behind the bars of the wall paper. But both the keeper and the prisoner are bound by the same chain. Both are prisoners in their own dungeon; Gilman's heroine is a prisoner in the dungeon of patriarchal society and the woman of the wall is a prisoner behind the bars of the yellow wall paper. Like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, the heroine is rendered into a life-in-death existence and is driven into insanity. Hence, Gilman questions the institution of marriage and patriarchal authority that might lead desperate women to search for freedom through desperate measures.

Second, on a figurative and psychological level, Bertha Mason is Jane's truest and darkest double that brings her darkest wishes into horrible fulfillments. She represents the furious aspect and the angry secret self that Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead. The woman behind the bars, similarly, is the psychological dark double of Gilman's heroine. She represents all what the heroine wants to do. In Gilman's fiction, the sick heroin employs the domestic elements of her imprisonment represented in the wall paper that is yellow to set herself free of all bonds prolonging her sickness. Breaking the bars of the wallpaper is in fact breaking the bars of the limited frames of her social life that render her sick.

Third, using her artistic talent to create the image of the sick heroine forced into domestic confinement with all its details of sickly colors, shapes and wallpapers, represents Gilman's unique participation in Victorian literature and women studies. She, in fact, reintroduces Bertha Mason with a voice that speaks to all those shadowy women born and die sick in solitude and male imprisonment.



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## البطلة المريضة في ورق الجدران الاصفر لجارلوت بيركنز غلمان

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### الملخص :

يتناول البحث نظرية الناقدتين ساندرا م. جلبرت وسوزان جوبار النفسية - النسوية في كتابهم الموسوم المرأة المجنونة القاطنة في العلية : النساء الكاتبات وخيال القرن التاسع عشر الادبي (٢٠٠٠) وتطبيقها على قصة جارلوت بيركنز غلمان ورق الجدران الاصفر. إذ تركز الناقدتان على صورة المرأة المجنونة المحجوزة في العلية كما هو الحال في شخصية بيرثا ميسن الزوجة المجنونة للسيد ادورد روجستر في رواية جارلوت برونتي جين اير (١٨٤٧). فقد استمرت صورة المرأة المحتجزة والمعزولة تماماً و قصراً في بيئة منزلية مألوفة من الالوان والاشكال وأوراق الجدران بالتكرار في أدب القرن العشرين النسوي . وعلى وفق ما جاءت به كل من جلبرت وجوبار ، حاول بعض من الكاتبات التعبير عن النساء اللواتي يعانين من المرض والاختلال العقلي جراء محاولتهن قمع ادراكهن لطاقتهم الخلاقة المكنونة الامر الذي يعد جزاء من رغبتهن الدفينة بالامتثال للدور الاجتماعي المحدود الذي اقمن فيه.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الجنون، العزلة ، المجتمع الذكوري ، غلمان ، ورق الجدران الاصفر

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