

# ‘JUST AS A SCIENTIFIC HYPOTHESIS’: THE LITERARY LANGUAGE OF MADNESS IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN’S ‘THE YELLOW WALLPAPER’<sup>1 2</sup>

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**Abstract:** The focus of this article will be Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s thoroughly anthologized story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892). Beyond the patriarchal perception of the narrator as progressively falling into madness, this study aims to prove that, in line with some feminist readings of the story (e.g. Haney-Peritz, 1986), the unnamed female protagonist consciously elaborates a mad language and discourse as part of her strategy to fight patriarchy from within. A careful study of this language will break the reader’s initial illusion that the protagonist is mad and will show how she finally embraces the rational discourse of medicine to perpetrate her revenge.

**Keywords:** Gilman, ‘Yellow Wallpaper’, madness, scientific discourse, panopticism, scopophilia

**Título en español:** ‘Como una mera hipótesis científica’: el lenguaje literario de la locura en ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ de Charlotte Perkins Gilman

**Resumen:** El presente artículo explora uno de los relatos cortos más estudiados de la escritora estadounidense Charlotte Perkins Gilman: ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892). Más allá de la percepción patriarcal de la narradora como una figura que progresivamente cae en la locura más absoluta, este estudio pretende demostrar que, siguiendo algunas lecturas feministas del relato (e.g. Haney-Peritz, 1986), la protagonista sin nombre elabora un lenguaje y discurso psicopatológico como parte de su estrategia de ataque al patriarcado desde dentro del sistema. Un cuidadoso análisis de este lenguaje romperá la percepción inicial del lector sobre la protagonista y mostrará cómo este personaje se apodera del discurso racional de la medicina para perpetrar su venganza.

**Palabras clave:** Gilman, ‘Yellow Wallpaper’, locura, discurso científico, panoptismo/ panóptico, escopofilia

The present paper attempts to make a contribution within the late nineties critical tradition that aims to supersede what Julie Bates Dock called ‘The Gilman Hagiography’. This critic links Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s invisibility with that of the narrator in her story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’: ‘Gilman suffered condemnation from editors and readers

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outside the story [which] tidily echoed the narrator's victimization within the story' (1998: 3). Accordingly, scholarship in the 1970s and then in the 1980s and 1990s focuses on the victimization of women by a patriarchal system that practiced what Barbara Welter called and theorized as 'The Cult of True Womanhood' (1966). Any attack to the initial approach to Gilman's studies 'implicitly challenges a school of feminist thought that views the publishing world, the literary canon and, by extension, academe as exclusively patriarchal domains' (Bates Dock 1998: 3).

Gilman is characterized by her constant ambiguities. 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892) is a clear instance as it has led to multiple interpretations from both patriarchal and feminist viewpoints. This writer's indeterminate position within feminism epitomizes her ambiguity. She herself admitted that 'there is no female mind. The brain is not an organ of sex. Might as well speak of a female liver' (1898: 149). However, in spite of Gilman's preference for the label 'humanist' rather than 'feminist', Judith A. Allen quotes Nancy F. Cott to explain Gilman's refusal as forming 'part of the fascinating story of ... the American "birth of feminism" in the 1910s' (cf. Allen 2009: 5). Allen mentions similar figures who equally perceived the term as problematic even though they are nowadays considered as founding figures in feminism, such as Virginia Woolf or Simone de Beauvoir. This explains the current trend that celebrates Gilman's feminism, considering her as '[t]he most significant Western feminist theorist of the period 1890-1920', 'a renowned feminist involved in the era's signature campaigns' (Allen 2009: 1).

If we understand feminism as a trend that provides women with the necessary weapons to break free, Gilman's story is undoubtedly feminist, as beyond the presentation of the victimization of women through imposed domesticity, it displays a woman who cleverly uses the very weapons of patriarchy to undertake a private rebellion. The unnamed protagonist manages to find her own voice by cleverly playing with two discourses: the irrational discourse expected of women (and leading to the much-discussed *écriture féminine*) and the rational discourse of patriarchy that she finally appropriates behind the appearance of being mad. Therefore, the present study of a discourse of madness transcends the perception of female hysteria as a corporeal malady (Showalter 1987) and follows Jane F. Thraillkill: 'the story extends its own physiological logic to the breaking point, producing within itself an alternative way of understanding nervous disease that would come to be codified as psychoanalysis, and which would *understand hysteria as an essentially textual rather than corporeal malady*' (2002: 529, my italics). This study thus joins the trend in Gilman's studies inaugurated by Thraillkill: rather than privileging the muted text over the dominant text, Gilman's story 'helped to effect the move from a materialist paradigm of mental states to a proto-psychoanalytic one. This shift, which unfolds across the text, involved a deceptively simple epistemological reorientation, from looking at a patient's body to listening to the patient's story' (Ibid.).

With a reminiscence of gothic fiction and the traditional gender dichotomy found in it –masculine rationality vs. feminine irrationality–, the female narrative voice is presented as unreliable from the beginning. Her extreme sentimentalism about the house that she temporarily occupies seems to be the product of gothic reading: 'A colonial mansion, a hereditary state, I would say a haunted house and reach the height of romantic felicity' (5). This gothic irrationality contrasts with her husband's rational language as a doctor: 'John

is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures' (5). The first paragraphs of the story abound in the use of the anonymous pronoun 'one' to highlight the narrator's self-abnegation and recognition of her dependence upon her husband. She has no identity of her own, and this is reflected in what seems her unconscious use of language:

John laughs at me, of course, but *one* expects that .... You see, he does not believe I am sick! And what can *one* do? If a physician of high standing, and *one's* own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with *one* but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is *one* to do? (6)

She is rendering herself inaccurate from the beginning and presents her husband—and the rest of doctors in the story, i.e. her brother and Dr. Weir Mitchell—as the voice of reason to be followed. Interestingly enough, a few lines later we find the first linguistic contradiction in her discourse, a contradiction that suggests an inner conflict that will eventually lead to her private revolution: 'Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?' (6). The repetitive use of the adverb 'personally' and of the first person pronoun suggests that, in spite of her dependence, she has an opinion and a prospective voice, but the pressure of the system is unavoidable, and that is why she returns to her self-abnegating discourse by using again the impersonal pronoun 'one'. In addition, she is depicted as completely alien to the medical, rational discourse: 'So I take phosphates or phosphites – whichever it is' (6).

As the story progresses, we realize that she is writing a secret journal, which does not follow the linear structure associated with masculine writing. Instead, she is generating a different prose, cyclical and repetitive, anticipating the so-called 'stream of consciousness'. Following French feminists, Paula Treichler speaks of the creation of an *écriture féminine* that marks the link between women's discourse and self-discovery and the use of language as a powerful and womanly tool (cf. Ford 1985). The narrator herself clarifies this new way of writing that she is using in her journal entries: 'It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight. Just this nervous weakness, I suppose' (18). Curiously enough, she associates her cyclical way of thinking with madness, so that an obvious link between women writers and this disease emerges. In fact, there is a revealing moment in the story where Gilman metaphorically speaks of the role of the woman writer:

I always *fancy* I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to *fancy* in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited *fancies*, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try .... It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. (12. My italics)

The narrator explores the word 'fancy', which is constantly repeated throughout the story. Gilman's intention is to show how the woman writer is perceived as a threat to the domesticity of patriarchy and, therefore, her creativity is presented as a tendency to madness

and is controlled and silenced. This section is extremely revealing to show the marginality of women writers.

To understand the narrator's evolution and her strategic uprising against the system, we need to pay attention to an alternative discourse in the story: the discourse of the look. Laura Mulvey speaks of 'scopophilia' as a type of economy which 'arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight' (1993: 18). Mulvey considers that women have always been the objects of desire within this scopophilic economy, while men are the subjects or voyeurs. Likewise, she argues that 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly' (Ibid.: 19). She elaborates on this idea by stating that woman is 'displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle ... and plays to and signifies male desire' (Ibid.). In turn, Mulvey's economy can be linked with Foucault's concept of Panopticism (1975: 195-228), as an example of a theory of social control. The Panopticon, as designed by Jeremy Bentham, was intended to be a decent alternative to the inhuman prisons of the time. Foucault explains its architectural design:

at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions –to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide– it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap. (1975: 199)

The idea was that there would be less work for wardens to do because the prisoners would regulate their behaviour, fearful that they might be being watched. However, Foucault concluded that it does not necessarily regulate behaviour and create a better-behaved community; rather, it might cause psychological problems.

The link between Mulvey's and Foucault's theories is observed in Gilman's story at a symbolic level. The component of social control is also present. The narrator is symbolically placed into a prison. The description of the house, the room, and the wallpaper has obvious prison undertones: 'there are hedges and walls and gates that lock' (7); 'the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls' (8); 'At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars' (22); 'she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard' (26). Her imprisonment connects the narrator with the figure of the madwoman in the attic as she occupies 'the

nursery at the top of the house' (8) and with a little child.<sup>3</sup> As a domestic prisoner, she becomes obsessed with the wallpaper and its patriarchal connotations. The reference to the eyes is continuous and so is the suggestion that the female narrator is controlled by them. In the following passage, the word 'eyes' is repeated several times:

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down ... Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is no place where two breadths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other. (12)

As a passive recipient of the look, the protagonist feels helpless. Initially she does not perceive any panoptic effect: 'I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation' (16). However, she starts adopting an active role and it is then when she perceives the radiation that characterizes the panopticon: 'I can almost fancy radiation after all – the interminable grotesque seems to form around a common center' (16-17).

Right after the discovery of radiation, the narrator adopts an active look: 'John was asleep and I hated to waken him, so I kept still and watched the moonlight on the undulating wallpaper till I felt creepy. The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out' (19). Instead of passively receiving the look of the grotesque eyes of the wallpaper, now she watches it and this active look is linked with her own desire as reflected upon the woman behind the paper. When she identifies and accepts this woman as her own mirror projection, her strategy against the system that oppresses her becomes conscious: 'And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake – oh, no! The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John. He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look ... I have watched John when he did not know I was looking' (23). The discourse of the look is evident and how the narrator now has control over the situation as she has become the voyeur. She emphasizes this idea when we discover that she has come to love the wallpaper that she used to hate (25), a clear indication of her strategic appropriation of it: 'Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see, I have something more to expect, to look forward to, *to watch*. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was' (24. My italics). The whole situation has turned into a silent war. The narrator now distrusts her symbolic wardens: John ('I believe John is beginning to notice. I don't like the look in his eyes', '[he] pretended to be very loving and kind. As if I couldn't see through him', 28) and Jenny ('How she betrayed herself that time!', 'the sly thing', 29). In John's case, there is an insistence upon the discourse of the eyes with a clear indication of how the narrator is now in control.

The symbolic power suggested by the adoption of an active look is verified when we discover that the narrator also has control over the key of the room: 'I have locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path' (30); 'The key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!' (32). She even controls the woman behind the paper: 'I've got a rope

<sup>3</sup> The process of infantilization of the narrator reaches its peak when, unconsciously using dramatic irony, she concludes: 'I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds ... I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see' (18).

up here that even Jenny did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!' (30). She has become the warden in control of her own prisoner (herself) and the metaphorical weapon against the system has materialized into a real rope. Her discourse *seems* the discourse of a madwoman, but the previous evolution and her strategic stance suggests that everything has been carefully planned. She seems fully aware of her hysterical pose as the weapon to combat and 'astonish' the system when she clarifies her real purpose with a verb of volition: 'I want to astonish him' (30). Indeed, she even adopts the rational discourse that she rejected at the beginning of the story: 'It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis, that perhaps it is the paper!' (23). It is the rational discourse that she has not fully rejected that makes her see with clarity and understand that she needs to use the paper (the system) to her own benefit if she wants to achieve her aim.<sup>4</sup> I agree with Jonathan Crewe and Verena Schörkhuber that the narrator's discourse of madness is just a pose. Her 'stylistic good form is almost exaggeratedly maintained by the fictitious author of the narrative ... as well as by Gilman herself as the "real" author'; in fact, '[n]o linguistic lapse or grammatical breakdown marks the narrator's apparent descent into terminal dementia' (Crewe 1995: 275). Schörkhuber clarifies, in turn, that '[e]ven as her fantasies become more "improperly" violent, the narrator strictly maintains the social speech codes of decorous rationality, trying to appropriate them for the increasingly "insane" view of things' (2008: 9). Obviously, we cannot ignore the domestic imposition of the system and its devastating effect on women,<sup>5</sup> but, in spite of the narrator's final grotesque, animalized, creeping stance, we witness her temporary success over the system, as symbolized by her husband, who faints at the vision of his wife: "'I've got out at last", said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"' (33). Schörkhuber claims for the metaphorical meaning of the wallpaper as a literary text, so that Gilman may well be telling the reader to do the same with the story; namely, to 'peel off' its top pattern to uncover its deeper meaning below (2008: 13, note 41).

Foreshadowing Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*, the protagonist of Gilman's story finds the weapons to change an oppressive environment into a room of her own. The initial 'dead paper' (6) becomes a secret journal that contains her own voice, in spite of the rational wallpaper that she has managed to appropriate –like a scientific hypothesis– and simultaneously destroy. The symbolic prison of her room eventually becomes a bare room –'So now she is gone, and the servants are gone, and the things are

<sup>4</sup> Lois N. Magner explains that the authors of some of the classics of feminist thought, although not scientists themselves or specially trained in the sciences, understood the nature of the scientific method and interpreted and incorporated the scientific paradigms of their times into their works. Gilman is a good example in her use of Darwinism. Whatever idioms and analogies Gilman may have used, her aim was always to promote full equality for women in an evolving, increasingly scientific and technologically sophisticated society (Magner 1978: 72). Gilman's opinion about women and medicine was ground-breaking at the time. Magner explains that '[m]edicine, as Mary Wollstonecraft had also noted, was a more logical choice of profession for women, since they were always involved in care of the sick. And yet Gilman also emphasized the great difficulty that talented women had in approaching the medical profession: 'It is not being a doctor that makes a woman unwomanly', she wrote, 'but the treatment which the first women medical students and physicians received was such as to make even men unmanly'. Indeed, Barrett Wendell of Harvard claimed that 'teaching women weakens the intellect of the teacher' (cf. Magner 1978: 77).

<sup>5</sup> The narrator's diagnosis of the room and its pervasive damages 'describe[s] her condition more eloquently than any medical analysis at the time could possibly have done' (White Hadas 1990: 182).

gone, and there is nothing left but that great bedstead nailed down, with the canvas mattress we found on it' (30). She feels comfortable in the room she has appropriated: 'I don't want to go outside ... For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow' (32). Even the horrid yellow colour of the story has been appropriated and she prefers the yellow of her newly-created room to the green of the external world where she has to creep and be servile.<sup>6</sup> The synaesthetic 'yellow smell' (25) involves a sensory appropriation in the line of women's writing and their attempt to find a place of their own. The quasi-hysterical discourse of the story is just a carcass that hides a rational attempt to both denounce the imprisoning discourse of madness and to rebel against the system by using its own tools. This reading aims at peeling off the surface of a story to go through the looking-glass of a mirror wallpaper.

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<sup>6</sup> The yellow colour of the story has been perceived as containing a racist reference to minority immigrants, primarily though not exclusively Asians, whose invasion, called 'The Yellow Peril', generated psychotic anxiety in California, where Gilman wrote the story. In fact, the Chinese Exclusion Act was generated in 1882. Susan S. Lanser notes that "'yellow' readily connoted inferiority, strangeness, cowardice, ugliness and backwardness' (1989: 427). Her meticulous research reveals that Gilman's later work is replete with evidence of her membership and active participation in racist organizations that supported Protestant supremacy –unconsciously reflected in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. This idea of race is further elaborated by Martha J. Cutter, who sees in the racial undertones of the yellow colour an attempt to escape racism: 'So the yellow wallpaper can symbolize both the narrator's desire to master and enchain a racial "Other" as well as her desire to liberate this racial "Other" who is really not other, her desire to free and liberate all women, whether they be "yellow or white"' (1999: 116).

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