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Veileder:

Dr. Eric Dean Rasmussen

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Stine Hope Blom

Professor Eric Dean Rasmussen

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The Yellow Wallpaper: A Woman's journey into an evolved identity

“When the mother of the race is free, we shall have a better world, by the right of birth and by the calm, slow, friendly forces of social evolution.”

-Gilman, *Women and Economics*, 340

Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a woman with strong ideological and societal beliefs. She was constantly speaking out, through her written work, in support of women joining men in the working world and was seeking a female evolution that could lead to true fulfilment. In the nineteenth century women were expected to be care-givers and take care of the household, whereas men were expected to find a job to provide for their families. Gilman felt that women could also find fulfilment in working in, what at the time, was thought of as a masculine job. When reading Gilman's works of literature there is no doubt that she felt a sense of injustice in the role given to her because she was born a female. One of Gilman's most popular fictional tales is *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Although Gilman struggled to get it published originally it has now become a staple in many universities as an important

American literary work. It is no wonder then that the short story has been analysed in many different ways. I will also use her chapter “Masculine Literature,” which was published in *Our Androcentric Culture; or, The Man-Made World*, to strengthen this argument.

This paper will aim to explore how Gilman’s literary work *The Yellow Wallpaper*, or more specifically how the Narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* relays a message that transcends Gilman’s original message of warning the public of the rest cure, and also seems to delve into the ideological world of finding one’s identity by breaking through the feminine and masculine spheres put in place by society to create a new identity for women, an identity which includes fulfilment by gaining control of different aspects of life that are usually offered only to the male species. By incorporating Quawas’ and Michaels’ analyses of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this paper should be able to complete its aim of exploring whether or not the Narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is delving into the ideological world.

Gilman’s struggle to have her message heard

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) is a literary masterpiece that was originally published in the *New England Magazine*. It was, at the time, a struggle for Gilman to publish her short story as many felt it too real or too harrowing to be considered for publishing. Gilman persevered and her story was eventually published in 1892. The story did not gain any recognition, however, for many decades to come. *The Yellow Wallpaper* depicts a tale of an unnamed woman narrator who is prescribed the rest cure, and we follow her collapse into madness that is brought on by her lack of stimulation. Her dislike of the yellow wallpaper in her bedroom grows into an obsession which leads to her ‘freeing’ a woman she believes to be trapped behind the wallpaper. It is a well-known fact that Gilman herself was prescribed the rest cure by Doctor Weir Mitchell as a treatment for her own mental health and her experience with the treatment was so upsetting it prompted

her to compose *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a warning to others (And to Weir Mitchell) of the damages the rest cure could cause to one's psyche. In "Too Terribly Good to Be Printed": Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*," Conrad Shumaker argues that Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* was unpopular upon release because it was before its time. Gilman's insight into women's mental health and criticism of the rest cure was too real and caused her troubles in getting published. Shumaker's use of correspondents between American realist William Dean Howells and Gilman shows how Howells' considered Gilman's work "Too terribly good to be printed," but even with this praise the short story didn't get the recognition it deserved before decades later. In addition, Gilman had proclaimed to Howells that she did not view *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a work of literature rather a commentary on the dangers the rest cure could have on women. Shumaker continues by sharing Annette Kolodny's criticism to explain the neglect *The Yellow Wallpaper* received by pointing out that "although nineteenth-century readers learned about mental breakdowns from reading Poe's tales, they were not prepared to understand the degeneration in a middle-class mother and wife." (588) Shumaker leaves us with a final thought that "Perhaps the story was unpopular because it was, at least on some level, understood all too clearly, because it struck too deeply and effectively at traditional ways of seeing the world and woman's place in it." (598) giving truth to Howells' comment that Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* was "Too Terribly Good to Be Printed." (Shumaker, 598)

Gilman achieved her goal of getting the message out to society- there is no doubt about that- but many argue that Gilman's beautifully constructed short story can be interpreted in other ways as well. Gilman was herself a middle-class woman living in the late nineteenth century, so by writing an unnamed female Narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this Narrator took a more societal role rather than an individual role, leaving her actions up to be interpreted in regard to the issues of the late nineteenth century.

This paper aims to explore how the role the Narrator's relationship with the wallpaper in *The Yellow Wallpaper* can be analysed to reflect societal issues of the nineteenth century with the help of Rula Quawas and Walter Benn Michaels analysis of the short story.

Spheres, what are they good for?

In order to explore how *The Yellow Wallpaper's* narrator is trying to break through the spheres that were in place in the late nineteenth century, we must first understand the differences in the masculine and feminine spheres. Rula Quawas' article "A New Woman's Journey into Insanity: Descent and Return in *The Yellow Wallpaper*" explores how the narrator's insanity in *The Yellow Wallpaper* "presents insanity as a form of rebellion" (49) towards the masculine and feminine spheres that both sexes were encouraged to live by in the nineteenth century. Quawas states that the feminine sphere Gilman was rebelling against was basically a compound of four ideas; a complete separation between the home and economic world; the home being a women's only true work; "the moral superiority of women; and the idealization of her function a mother and a wife." (36) Quawas continues,

It was believed that while the world outside the home, with its highly competitive character, brutal environment and fluctuating fortunes, was a man's sphere, the home, the moral sanctuary of society, was the temple of woman and her only proper sphere. Books and article written by women and men asked women to be religious, domestic, and womanly and instructed them to glorify their domestic role and to seek fulfilment within their sphere.

(36)

Quawas' article interprets Gilman's short story as an opposition against what the spheres represent and the limitations they have on the female gender. Quawas gives us (the reader) an insight to Gilman's political views and her open commentary about women being

excluded from the economic market and the consequences of the exclusion. Quawas believes that *The Yellow Wallpaper* is “a particularly interesting and rich example of her audacious and defiant writing” (40), Quawas continues claiming the narrator achieves “a superior sanity” and embodies the New Woman who is creating a new identity in society that lies outside the comforts of the ‘feminine sphere’. Quawas notes that,

“Gilman urged the creation of a society in which women could develop their full human potential... Infusing her fiction with socialist and feminist ideologies was a way for Gilman to show how progress and democracy in society could be advanced if only people would act on the need for change.”

(37-38)

It is clear that Gilman used her works of literature as more than just storytelling, but also as a means to comment on ongoing issues within the nineteenth century society. In *Our Androcentric Culture; or, The Man-Made World*, Gilman writes of “Masculine Literature.” Gilman claims that even literature of the nineteenth century is split between the masculine and feminine spheres. Feminine literature being contained to “Kuchen, Kinder, Kirche, Kleider,” all elements contained within the feminine sphere, whereas masculine literature is everything else. It is clear that Gilman feels that females are misrepresented and two-dimensional in not only life but also in literature, she writes, “Men having been accepted as humanity, women but a side-issue, whatever men did or said was human- and not to be criticized.” (Gilman, 571) It was important for Gilman that there exist literature that could help the female character become something more than just a mother or a wife waiting lovingly in the doorway ready to please her family. She wanted literature to represent women as complex, intelligent beings, to show a new woman who was not merely a woman but also a human being, capable of achieving many things. Every time Gilman wrote a piece of literature, she was essentially breaking down those barriers of the definition of what

masculine vs. feminine literature was in the nineteenth century. In Quawas' reading of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, she states that "the interpretation of the narrator's descent into madness as a way to health and wellbeing, as a rejection of and escape from an insane society." (42) She concludes that Gilman "condemns social systems, both political and private, which contribute to women's psychological fragmentation, alienation, and madness." (42)

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the Narrator is a woman whose distain for the wallpaper in her bedroom, grows into an obsession where over time she believes there to be a woman trapped behind the wallpaper, eventually the Narrator 'frees' the woman trapped behind the wallpaper, "I've got out at last" she declares, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman, 26) In Quawas analysis, this quote from *The Yellow Wallpaper* is the perfect metaphor. The Narrator, who Quawas believes to be the Jane person the Narrator refers to has managed to leave behind the two dimensional version of herself that Society has impressed upon her since birth and broken through the feminine sphere into the masculine sphere by creating a new identity for herself, one where she is not confined to societies rules and is rather a complex individual who has taken a stance against a world that is "perceived as a negative, masculine world in which the self can be violated psychologically and spiritually." (Quawas, 49) The Narrator has in essence rejected a world wherein only men can live truly fulfilling lives and has emerged as a new modern woman who also demands her right to fulfilment that is true to herself. So, by reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*, we the reader, can enhance our understanding of societal, or rather-feminine questions that were being raised in the nineteenth century. (Quawas, 50)

Quawas sums it up perfectly by defining the Narrator's purpose, "she serves as a New Woman who claims the ordinary rights of a human being to develop her own individuality in an oppressive, uncomprehending society and to articulate her own stance towards her culture." (Quawas, 50)

The Writer's Mark: An obsession with production

Walter Benn Michael's introductory chapter on 'The Writer's Mark' from his book *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* explores what kind of work writing is, or rather explores if when producing written texts are we producing ourselves and therein both consuming and producing at the same time? Or are we merely giving a part of ourselves when we write? He also explores what identity is and how it is connected to our being. Michael's states Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* can be used as an example to examine the naturalization process a writer goes through when producing. Naturalization is the process of becoming or a state of being. Michaels maintains that although Gilman herself professes her short story to be a work of a woman denied her right to produce, something that is as natural as 'a gland secreting'(3), the Narrator in the short story, however, does continuously produce and is rather a tale of how the Narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* desires to produce so strongly that she ends up writing herself into herself.(Michael, 5) So, through Gilman's Narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* Michael's explores the concept of identity being created and maintained through production. He questions Gilman's view that women are denied their right to produce, and are only valuable as consumers and claims her short story is in fact a contradiction as her Narrator continuously produces throughout the short story, the short story itself is a production by the Narrator as we are reading her hidden diary. Along with the smooches she creates (and receives) on the wallpaper and her clothes, it seems as if the Narrator is constantly producing- although she is not supposed to be producing anything on the rest cure. Michaels therefor questions the theory that the Narrator goes mad due to a lack of production and focuses on the connection between production, consumption, and identity. Michaels' analyses the short story in terms of production and consumption, a process that is essential to capitalism, he writes,

“... what kind of work is writing? Gilman’s own answer is production, and in insisting on herself as a writer she means, as we have seen, to insist on the possibility of women transforming themselves from consumers into producers. But, as we have also seen, in radicalizing writing Gilman reimagines the distinction between producing and consuming, so that if the difference between them does not entirely disappear, the possibility of choosing between them does.” (28)

This reading of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as with Quawas’ reading focuses on the Narrator’s passage through the wallpaper in which she ‘frees’ herself (the woman stuck behind the wallpaper) and emerges with a new identity. Michaels reflects on the Narrator’s journey from a sane docile woman into a woman who terrifies her husband so much that he faints at the end of the short story, as “...the work of something like self-generation and that far from being a story about a woman driven crazy by Weir Mitchell’s refusal to allow her to produce, it is about a woman driven crazy (if she is crazy) by a commitment to production so complete that it requires where to begin producing herself.” (Michaels, 5) He goes onto say that while Weir Mitchell would treat women suffering from “hysterical motor ataxia” by making the women go through a process of infantilization. The women “were given kneepads and taught to balance themselves on all fours before learning to ‘creep’”, oddly enough, Gilman appears to mirror this in *The Yellow Wallpaper* when the Narrator also ‘creeps’ on the floor and takes it a step further by tying herself to the bed with what Michaels refers to as an “umbilical cord.” By doing so Gilman may have been trying to transform “Mitchell’s scene of feminine infantilization into a scene of feminine self-generation.” (Michaels, 6)

Michaels sees the journey of the Narrator as one of creating a new identity through production. The more the Narrator consumes herself with producing, the closer she gets to creating an identity that is true to herself. He also takes on the perspective of production and consumption going hand in hand, something that is remarkably similar to the market of today that was created in the nineteenth century. This may not have been Gilman's goal with the short story, but she herself is a product of what was going on in her society in her time. Low- or middle-class men were able to break through class-barriers that previously had been impenetrable due to the new consumer-production market. There were many changes happening so Gilman's aspirations of change were not far fetched as a new ideology travelled throughout the United States.

Michaels explores the fact that the actions of the narrator are a metaphor for production. Michaels claims that in order to achieve this level of production, consumption must be involved as well and therefore claims that *The Yellow Wallpaper* is undermining Gilman's theory that women are only allowed to consume and because of their lack of producing they gain mental health issues. He believes the narrator is a symbol for the culture of consumption and that in order to produce you are also consuming. He explains,

“One might read “The Yellow Wallpaper” as undermining the gospel it meant to preach. Marking produces a “smooch” on the paper, a residue of one's own body on the paper that is simultaneously an opening in the body, since the wallpaper is figured as skin, and the smooch is thus an orifice- emerges another body: or rather, more body, an important difference, since the narrator is giving birth not to her child but to herself.” (Michaels, 12)

Michaels explores a wide range of different perspectives on *The Yellow Wallpaper*. He also states that Gilman's own interpretation of fulfilment lying in her ability to produce is not exactly correct, as there are many women, for example, farmers wives who produce work

excessively, yet end up with a nervous condition. The work they produce does not consume them.

“... they go crazy because the work they do cannot become the empowering work Gilman wants them to do. Without consumption, no production; without the market, no power. Gilman rewrites the autonomy of self-sufficiency as the autonomy of free trade. The difference between the strangling cradle and the marking paper is the difference between a society where nothing is for sale and one where everything is.” (Michaels, 17)

All roads lead to a New Age identity?

In Jennifer Semple Siegel’s article, “Charlotte Perkins (Stetson) Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”: Fiction “with a purpose” and the Need to Know the Real Story”, Siegel attempts to “...separate the “author’s purpose” from “literary interpretation” (44) by critics. She also examines “...at what point does a critic’s interpretation so interfere with the meaning of the original work that the author’s purpose is submerged?” (44) Siegel proposes that readers and critics of the short story may be losing sight of why Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* in the first place.

Siegel uses a handful of articles written on *The Yellow Wallpaper* to examine and conclude her research question. Siegel claims that *The Yellow Wallpaper* was written primarily as an autobiographical piece and that her political views on social issues come later in her other nonfiction works. She also claims that Gilman’s original purpose for the short story should be compelling and significant enough for the readers and critics (56). Claiming that Gilman’s purpose for writing *The Yellow Wallpaper* is perhaps her own need to write about her own personal experience with Weir Mitchell and the negative affect it had on her well-being. Siegel also states that Weir Mitchell’s cure could not have worked as it was not

treating the root of Gilman's problem, which was her general unhappiness in life. Siegel states,

“It appears that Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* primarily as an autobiographical piece; her liberal political views on social issues would come later in her nonfiction works...and other fictions, such as *Herland* (1915). Lane says it best: *The Yellow Wallpaper*... stands apart from the entire body of [Gilman's] extensive fiction. It is, in my opinion, the only genuinely literary piece she ever created and it is also, of all her fiction, the most consciously autobiographical” (127). The story itself is ambiguous enough to allow room for extensive interpretations of the subtext. Still, I believe, some of the criticism detracts from what Gilman intended, even to the point of insulting the integrity of the text.” (Siegel, 56)

Although Siegel is correct in saying that Gilman had a purpose with her story- to warn against the rest cure- it seems odd to say that Gilman could not have a deeper meaning beneath her intended purpose with the story. Gilman demands complexity and meaning and craves women to be more than two dimensional, so, it would be unusual if any of her works were to be taken directly at face value- to confine them in a sense to it's original purpose. When reading Quawas' and Michaels' analyses of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, it becomes apparent that Gilman's story, or perhaps all stories should be analysed if the story calls for analysing.

In Gilman's chapter “Masculine Literature,” published in *Our Androcentric Culture; or, The Man-Made World*, she explains it in her own words,

“Human life is a very large affair; and literature is its chief art. We live, humanly, only through our power of communication. Speech gives us the power laterally, as it were, in immediate personal contact. For permanent use

speech becomes oral tradition- a poor dependence. Literature gives not only an infinite multiplication to the lateral spread of communication but adds the vertical reach. Through it we know that past, govern the present, and influence the future.” (Gilman, 578)

We are not limited by literature but empowered by it. Literature can incite change in multiple different ways and start a current of change by how the reader of the story perceives it. It can instil new ideas in readers that can develop into an evolved ideology.

As stated earlier, this paper aims to explore how Gilman’s literary work *The Yellow Wallpaper*, or more specifically how the Narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* relays a message that transcends Gilman’s original message of warning the public of the rest cure, and also seems to delve into the ideological world of finding one’s identity. This identity, which represents the new, modern woman is free of social restrictions in place and is able to create a life of fulfilment instead of obligation.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a story written only from the perspective of the Unnamed Narrator, as it is the Narrator’s secret diary we are reading. The narrator has been prescribed the rest cure in order to treat her “hysterical motor ataxia”, a name given to treat a scope of different mental health issues. The rest cure confines the Narrator to the attic, or her bedroom, a room she does not wish to stay in. The Narrator writes, «I don’t like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings! But John would not hear of it.” (3) Already, we the reader understand that the Narrator’s opinions and wishes do not matter much to her husband. Similar to the situation of the nineteenth century woman, who should just be happy to be placed into their life as designed by society. Here we see the Narrator, who represents women as a whole in the nineteenth century is expected to be docile and accept things as they are set up by the male dominant world. Just as John, her husband, knows best, so does the male

dominant world know for woman as a whole. They place the woman where she is desired and expect her to do womanly things and be happy about it.

As the story progresses it is clear that the Narrator has a distain for the wallpaper, at first an annoying feature in her room, it steadily grows into an obsession the longer the woman is left in the room. In this analysis the room is the woman's confinement in the feminine sphere. The expectations placed upon her by society in how she should act and in what she should find fulfilment. The yellow wallpaper becomes the Narrators means to escape the room, or the feminine sphere, her disgust for the wallpaper therefore appropriate, as it represents all that holds her back from finding a true happiness and fulfilment in life.

Later in the story the Narrator writes,

“I don't like to look out of the windows even- there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?

But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope – you don't get me out in the road there!

I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!” (Gilman, 24)

Here the Narrator is ready to break through the barrier of the feminine sphere and into her true identity. As stated earlier, Michaels believes the rope the narrator ties around herself and the ripping out of the wall-paper is the narrator's metaphor for her own re-birth or self-generation. The narrators need to produce has made it possible for her to produce herself and she is now about to break through the threshold in order to gain her true identity. Something, the reader, can perceive to be a pivotal moment in not only the Narrators life but also the changes that were coming to the societal woman in the nineteenth century.

At the end of this harrowing short story, the Narrator finally breaks through the threshold and is no longer confined to her feminine sphere but has entered into the masculine sphere, creating a singular human sphere.

‘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!’

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! (Gilman, 26)

This event is both important to Quawas and Michaels in their analysis as it is to mine. The Narrator has freed herself, broken down barriers and created a new identity for woman as a whole. She has produced herself a new identity with her words. Which is funnily enough what Gilman is also doing by writing this short story. The universal woman has, by breaking through the metaphorical threshold that is the yellow wallpaper, reemerged as New. This new woman is not confined, but is instead able to pursue her dreams, to create an identity that is her through producing and consuming herself. It is an ideological shift that is happening not only in the short story, but also a change Gilman is working hard to achieve in her own society.

Conclusion

Through analysing *The Yellow Wallpaper* and reading Quawas’ and Michaels’ analysis of the same story, it is clear that this story is also a story of the universal woman of the nineteenth century looking for a means to evolve her identity. Quawas stating that the universal woman needed to break free from the confinements of the feminine sphere, and Michaels’ taking it one step further saying that the Narrator embodies the economic world and Gilman’s desire for the female population to be a part of that environment. An environment that could only be entered by consuming oneself by producing oneself by marking this world. Something that is

safe to say Gilman herself has done when writing *The Yellow Wallpaper*. She herself had a great interest in leaving the confinements of the feminine sphere and entering into the economical world, as she understood that that is where true freedom truly lies. The Narrator of this story is not just trying to find fulfilment in being accepted into the masculine sphere, but she is also wanting to share control over the economic environment in order to gain true fulfilment. If it were a case of just wanting to produce, as Gilman herself states, then farmer's wives should have been the happiest people on the planet, day in and day out producing work on the farm. In actuality, what gives the universal woman true fulfilment is producing herself. By creating an identity through her production, an identity she is so proud of that she herself consumes it. This is where the true fulfilment lies. Just as with Gilman and her works, there is not a simple answer to how a woman could find fulfilment in the nineteenth century, more a guide, or a start, as to where the universal woman could begin her search for her true identity leading her to a sense of fulfilment in her life. This is not to say that being a housewife does not lead to fulfilment, but rather to say that for those who want more options should be able to choose those options without restrictions.

Although this short story is fictional, there are several layers of truths in it. It can definitely be read as a story that is warning society of the dangers of the rest cure, and it can be read from a historical perception, giving us an insight as to the genuine frustration a lot of women had in the nineteenth century, in regard to being placed in a so-called sphere. It can be read from a feminist's perspective, showing the reader the ideological and actual changes that were happening in this era. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a short story with several layer just as the author Charlotte Perkins Gilman was as a person. The story cannot be contained to just one analysis as it represents a level of complexity that can be found in every individual as well as in every society. Siegel claims that the story's purpose is singular, does not align with the author as a person. Things are not two-dimensional, so why should a woman, or a story be

two-dimensional? I will end the paper with a quote taken from “Masculine Literature”, a quote Gilman took from Rochefoucauld. “There are thirty good stories in the world and twenty-nine cannot be told to women.” (Gilman, 674)

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