

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S 'THE YELLOW WALLPAPER': ON HOW FEMALE CREATIVITY COMBATS MADNESS AND DOMESTIC OPPRESSION*

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In the nineteenth century domestic confinement and women's oppression were often associated with madness. Many women writers have openly written about them from first hand experience. On occasion, madness was a means of escape but also a way to obtain economic freedom and gain independence from patriarchal structures. The purpose of this article on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is twofold: first, to demonstrate that educated women used writing as a means of healing and liberation from patriarchy; and second, to prove that female breakdown was employed in nineteenth-century literature as a way to degrade women both physically and emotionally. The article shows that when writing about madness, women are able to alter convention and tradition and in doing so take control of themselves.

Key words: *female madness, domestic oppression, creative writing, patriarchal structures, autobiography.*

En el siglo diecinueve el confinamiento doméstico y la opresión de la mujer estaban frecuentemente asociados con la locura. Muchas mujeres han escrito abiertamente sobre ello desde la propia experiencia personal. En ocasiones, la locura no sólo era un medio de escape sino una manera de conseguir libertad e independencia frente a la estructura patriarcal. La finalidad de este artículo basado en el relato breve de Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" tiene una doble vertiente: primero, demostrar que las

mujeres cultas utilizaban la escritura como proceso curativo y de liberación, y segundo, probar que la histeria femenina se empleaba en la literatura del siglo diecinueve como forma de degradar a las mujeres física y emocionalmente. El artículo muestra como, al escribir sobre la locura, las mujeres podían tanto alterar convenciones y tradiciones como ejercer control sobre sí mismas.

Palabras clave: *locura femenina, opresión doméstica, escritura creativa, estructuras patriarcales, autobiografía.*

“I was born at home”, said the American poet E. E. Cummings. The word home for him represented the idea of privacy. Its principal function was to admit whatever might otherwise remain outside. In Jane Austen’s novels, houses symbolize the people and especially the women who inhabit them. For the English author the house was a realm where married women could enjoy a little sphere of sovereignty and freedom away from their parents’ authority. But what happens when a house is a space of confinement and oppression, as it is for the young woman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s autobiographical short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892)?

Women themselves have often been described or imagined as houses. Even today young girls have an amazing interest in domestic enclosures. The female womb has always been a child’s first and most gratifying house, a source of food and security. For many a woman writer the associations of house and self seem mainly to have strengthened the anxiety about enclosure which she projected into her art. On the one hand, female artists knew that they were enclosing an unknown part of themselves that was, somehow, not themselves. On the other, as they were conditioned to believe that, as a house, they were themselves owned and ought to be inhabited by a man, they may have once again seen themselves as inevitably an object. Also, to the literary woman, “the confinement of pregnancy replicates the confinement of society” (Gilbert and Gubar 1978: 89). All these ingredients –confinement in texts, houses and maternal female bodies– were brought together by Gilman in 1890 in an imposing story of female imprisonment but also of escape. Like *Jane Eyre*, “The Yellow

Wallpaper” presents a world in which literary women could speak their voiceless anguish.

In Gilman’s story, the female protagonist, suffering from a nervous depression, is taken by her husband Dr John to live in a rented colonial mansion in the middle of the country in which she does not feel comfortable. The young woman is persuaded to spend most of her time in a room she does not like with barred windows and, most importantly a peeling, faded yellow wallpaper. The story describes a woman’s journey into madness and how the room and its interior decoration begins to mirror her mental state.

Indeed, in the nineteenth century domestic confinement and women’s oppression were often connected with madness. The fact that women were particularly drawn to write about madness is to be seen as one of the most revealing symptoms of rebellion against entrapment. Linda Anderson rightly notes that “feminism has had an almost symbolic relationship with autobiography” (2006: 119). It is interesting to note how many women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Brontë, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton have suffered from mental illness and have openly written about psychological breakdown from first hand experience. Madness was, in some cases, a means of escape, of liberation for themselves. As Elaine Showalter points out in *The Female Malady*, “madness is the price women artists have to pay for the exercise of their creativity in a male dominated culture” (1979: 4). No doubt, women’s creative writing was also a way to obtain economic freedom and gain independence from the dominant patriarchal structures and, especially, a way to provide women with a voice in a world which spoke a male language. In Anne Mellor’s words, “women writers promoted a social change that extended the values of domesticity into public realm” (1993: 3), providing space for the new female subject to emerge.

My contention in this article is two-fold: first, to prove that writing was a process of healing, of emotional release and intellectual stimulation over patriarchal domestic confinement, and, second, to demonstrate that the female breakdown produced as a consequence of female imprisonment was not a positive notion in the literature of the nineteenth century but a way to degrade women. In order to explain

this, I will explore these themes in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper".

Although her "comfort" is that "the baby is well and happy" ("Wallpaper" 1996: 353) away from that room, the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is an absent and inadequate new mother who causes anxiety and is forced to a child-like state. Many doctors recommended marriage as the cure to hysteria—a young woman's disease that was virtually synonymous with femininity—but they also spoke of the dangers of motherhood leading to mental breakdown. A large number of women in asylums in the nineteenth century were suffering from what we would now call postnatal depression, as we can read in Gilman's story. Based on her own experience as a young mother, Gilman demonstrates that motherhood was not a process of emotional release. However, writing was, especially in Gilman's case, with her own philosophical and social works. The novel was much less problematically a woman's occupation. Novel writing was bound up with the notion of a private life. Patricia Stubbs argues that this concept was particularly damaging to bourgeois society women confined to a domestic world because it celebrates private experience and relationships as potent sources of human satisfaction (1979: xi-xii).

Unfortunately the secluded young, intelligent and eloquent woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" was forbidden to write by her husband, a disapproving and paternalistic physician—the conventional nineteenth-century male—who feared that her writing could become a confession, a revelation "of women's destiny under patriarchy and the want for change" (Amstrong 2006:121). She is often left without the company of other adults for long periods of time in that unfamiliar house, in a sinister room, and generally asked to conform to a norm of feminine behaviour and domesticity which suffocates her. Her husband represents the view of society. As the story progresses, the woman loses her grip on the world outside her room. She appears to be mad. The yellow wallpaper in her creepy room, in that alien environment, becomes somehow symbolic of her madness. For Dr John the "rings" and "things" of the room—a former nursery—are reminiscent of a gymnasium. For his wife they are really the paraphernalia of confinement. In the story, what really drives the narrator mad is the confining of her creative imagination.

Gilman makes the reader be sympathetic toward the woman but, similar to Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* and Jane Austen in *Sense and Sensibility*, she does not in any way sentimentalize the theme of madness in the story. The girl is extremely critical of her husband, who is treating her according to methods by which Silas Weir Mitchell, a famous nerve specialist from Philadelphia, treated Gilman herself for a similar problem. In the field of neurology Weir Mitchell became associated with his introduction of the rest cure, later taken up by the medical world, for nervous diseases, particularly neurasthenia and hysteria. The treatment consisted of isolation, confinement to bed, dieting, electrotherapy and massage. Weir Mitchell's treatment was also used on Virginia Woolf, who wrote a ferocious satire of it: "you invoke proportion; order rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six month rests; until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes weighing twelve" (Lee 1996: 194).

Dr John feels that with his wife's imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like hers is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies and that she ought to use her will and good sense to control the tendency. The cure is worse than the disease because the sick woman's mental condition deteriorates rapidly. "I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me" ("Wallpaper" 1996: 350), she remarks, but literally restricted from creativity and threatened by the children's gymnastic equipment, she is definitely imprisoned in a house that is not her own. Even more tormenting, however, is the room's wallpaper –that sulphurous yellow paper, torn off in spots, a threatening element that surrounds the narrator and overwhelms her, as do her husband and the "hereditary estate" (Gilbert and Gubar 1978: 90) in which she is trying to survive.

The young woman revises the paper over and over again, projecting her own desire for escape onto her incomprehensible hieroglyphics. At some point, she discovers "a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to sulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" ("Wallpaper" 1996: 355). As the narrator sinks more deeply into what society calls madness, the figure imprisoned behind the paper begins to invade and haunt the ancestral

mansion. The synaesthetic nature of the wallpaper, that is its “yellow smell” (“Wallpaper” 1996: 356) that “creeps over the house” (“Wallpaper” 1996: 357), floods every room with its slight scent of decay. And the figure, which ultimately appears to be a woman, creeps too—through the house, in the house, and out of the house, in the garden, on the long road under the trees and even “as a cloud shadow in a high wind” (“Wallpaper” 1996: 357). The narrator’s self is clearly fragmented between herself and her double, although this time the fragmentation of the self is quite a positive thing because, at the end of the story she uses this double to escape “from her textual/architectural confinement” (Gilbert and Gubar 1978: 91). Dr John is in some small way defeated and clearly fails on his mission of protecting her from danger and temptation. His own wife wants him to faint while she escapes into the open country. Although sad, the scene is beautiful and its beauty lies in the fact that the cloud and the openness of the countryside where the woman flees away are a metaphor of “the progress of nineteenth-century literary women out of the texts defined by patriarchal poetics into the open spaces of their own authority” (Gilbert and Gubar 1978: 91).

This metaphoric escape from the walls of the room, the walls of the written text and the patriarchal structures have an equivalent in real life. For Gilman herself, this story was a flight from disease into health. “The Yellow Wallpaper” was written between 1890 and 1892. This period was one of the most difficult of Gilman’s life. Following her own nervous breakdown, she went through a series of major changes in her life, including her brave—and for its time scandalous—separation from her husband, a move across America, and a fight to support herself through lecturing and occasional writing. Lizbeth Goodman points out that Gilman’s writing of the story is a “process of catharsis, of emotional release, of healing, of coming to terms with herself and being able to use her knowledge creatively” (1996: 125). No doubt, “The Yellow Wallpaper” helped Gilman to heal. It shows a lot about the value Gilman places on creative freedom and intellectual stimulation over the domestic sphere. For Gilman, the home must not be seen as destructive, “the home is private. Therefore to be in private you must claim to be out of it” (*Home* 1973: 45). The American socialist writer advocates that the house has not developed in proportion to other institutions and warns of its negative

consequences, above all, for women and children. In the same vein, Janet Wolff insists on the limitations of women's access to cultural production and their virtual exclusion from public cultural institutions:

“Women's leisure was confined to the home particularly among the middle-class. ... Women were not able to frequent pubs, coffee houses, or eating places other than pastry cooks' and confectioners' shops. When accompanied by men, however, women might attend the theatre, particularly in the second half of the century when theatres, having excluded the working class by a variety of measures, including the price of tickets, became 'respectable'” (1990: 23).

As Elaine Hedges elucidates in her afterword to the newly republished “The Yellow Wallpaper” in 1973, Gilman was not opposed to the idea of *home*. She believed that it tended to produce such qualities, necessary for the development of the human being such as kindness and affection (*Home* 1973: 55). However, due to economic dependence, women and children were imprisoned and suffocated within individual homes which “protecte[d] the womanliness of women and encourage[d] the manliness of men” (Girouard 1979: 16). The newly-designed downstairs lavatories, billiard, smoking and gun rooms functioned as sacrosanct male domains and members of the gentry redesigned their houses in accordance to the new social arrangements. No doubt, at the end of the story Gilman achieves what she was trying to demonstrate because “The Yellow Wallpaper” closes with “the feeling of loss home” (Jacobus 1996: 137).

By the 1830s the economic profit brought by the Industrial Revolution excluded middle-class women from working outside the house, emphasizing the cult of domesticity and the sanctity and purity of family life. The construction of large Victorian houses in suburbs separated the public and the private lives of women. As Janet Wolff notes, “From the 1830s the more prosperous members of the middle class in the major manufacturing cities began to move out of the town centre” (1990: 14). “The move to the suburbs”, she continues, “entailed a clear separation of home and work, and a firm basis for domestic ideology of home as haven, and of women as identified with

this private sphere” (1990: 15). Women who did continue to work outside the home were just teachers, dressmakers and retailers. Women were excluded from the public world which provided for men a multitude of additional activities such as banks, voluntary societies, political organizations and cultural institutions. Victorian morality supported the idea of the increasingly dominant ethic of the woman’s domestic and subservient role. As Ludmilla J. Jordanova says, “the woman’s power [was] for rule, not for battle, -and her intellect [was] not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision” (qtd. in Wolff 1990: 16). Fortunately, influential writers of the period such as John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle found a strong opponent in John Stuart Mill, who advocated for “women’s proper place and their appropriate education” (qtd. in Wolff 1990: 16). Stuart Mill compared wives to slaves and, similarly, Gilman attacks the idea of the nuclear family: a dominant father, a more or less subservient mother, and an utterly dependent child. The protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” just wants her husband’s company, not a distant man who spends most of his time in his club in town or with his mistress. “My appetite may be better in the evening when you’re here” (“Wallpaper” 1996: 354), she says begging for his affection.

The adults in “The Yellow Wallpaper” –Dr John, Jennie, and the protagonist’s own brother–present the mad woman as a sort of monster. A monstrous lunatic she may be, but, she is actually one who finds the clarity to write the story. As Elaine Showalter notes, “madness is the price women artists have to pay for the exercise of their creativity in a male dominated culture” (1979: 4). When literary women write about madness in the nineteenth century, they disturb the meaning of men’s oppressive and censorious writing and alter both convention and tradition because they take control of their own fictional representations. In addition to the way in which they defeat the shame of self-exposure, this is the only positive view of mental illness in literature. Gilman uses this first person narration to present, as Goodman notes, how wrong the masculine version of reason was (1996: 127). In fact, Gilman’s is the voice of reason in all that madness.

Gilman saw her experiences as relevant to other women. When “The Yellow Wallpaper” was published in *The New England Magazine*, she sent a copy to Weir Mitchell, whose treatment had kept her from

writing during her own breakdown, aggravating her illness. Years later, she learnt that he had changed his treatment of neurasthenia after reading her story. Delighted to hear that wonderful news, she wrote in her autobiography "I have not lived in vain" (*Living* 1990: 121).

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