

2017

Nursery Versus Straightjacket: The Feminist Paradox of “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Ashley N. Brooks
University of North Georgia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/papersandpubs>



Part of the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brooks, Ashley N. (2017) "Nursery Versus Straightjacket: The Feminist Paradox of “The Yellow Wallpaper”," *Papers & Publications: Interdisciplinary Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 6 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/papersandpubs/vol6/iss1/18>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (CURCA) at Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Papers & Publications: Interdisciplinary Journal of Undergraduate Research by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

Nursery Versus Straightjacket: The Feminist Paradox of “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Dr. Chris Bell for telling me to write and then rewrite. Thank you to Dr. Leigh Dillard for telling me to put my work into the world.

Nursery Versus Straightjacket: The Feminist Paradox of “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Ashley N. Brooks
University of North Georgia

That Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” is studied in classrooms worldwide is no surprise. Upon publication, the story was met with an equal amount of critical acclaim and controversy. Gilman wrote the story following a harrowing experience with a doctor prescribed rest cure, a once-common treatment for women suffering from mental illnesses, in Gilman’s (and likely the narrator’s) case, post-partum depression. The rest cure entailed nothing but sleeping and resting. Women who were prescribed the rest cure could not participate in any stimulating activities, such as reading, writing, learning, socializing, or anything else considered too strenuous by their male doctors. Such a treatment is not conducive to mental health and is more of an attempt to oppress rather than to fix. Gilman’s experience is evidence of the harmful nature of the rest cure, and this experience reflects that of many women in the nineteenth century. By writing “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman sought to immortalize the medical mistreatment of the rest cure while also illustrating how and why women are often labeled as hysterical or unstable. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is not only a critique on such harsh and unnecessary medical practices, but also a feminist outcry against a patriarchy that would rather subdue women than address the true nature of their problems. Gilman emphasizes the realistic plight of the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and the dramatic ending of the story leaves much for interpretation about women’s place in a male-oriented world. “The Yellow Wallpaper” reflects the narrator’s ensnarement in a feminist paradox: to remain trapped in her illness while preserving her autonomy, or to become forever confined by domestic life and lose any sense of control over her own identity and fate.

Gilman illustrates the feminist paradox through the use of various symbols, the most obvious and ironic being the yellow wallpaper itself. The yellow wallpaper is symbolic of the narrator’s illness, but it is worth noting that her illness is one brought on by patriarchal constraints. Ann Heilmann argues that the narrator’s obsession with the wallpaper first mirrors her automatic obsession with fulfilling patriarchal obligations, but as the story progresses, the narrator becomes more concerned with tearing the wallpaper down, symbolizing her defiance and rebellion against such oppressive norms: “Gilman was visualizing her emerging feminist opposition to the ‘pointless pattern’ of male thought and cultural production, juxtaposing these with a womancentered politics and perspective, the central female consciousness of her text” (Heilmann

ASHLEY N. BROOKS is an English Major with a concentration in Writing & Publication at University of North Georgia. She currently works at a public library and hopes to pursue a joint Master’s degree in Library Science and English upon graduating from UNG. Ashley is an active member of Sigma Tau Delta on the Gainesville campus of UNG, where she holds the office of President. She presented a version of this paper at the 2017 Sigma Tau Delta convention in Louisville, Kentucky.

6). The narrator's transition from subservience into defiance is reflected by her reaction to the wallpaper, which evolves as her illness progresses. At first, the narrator abhors the wall paper, and describes it as such: "The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smoldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others" (Gilman 257). Ironically, the wallpaper is yellow, an eye-catching color that normally signifies happiness and energy. The narrator does not react positively to the wallpaper, but the pattern grabs her attention and holds her thoughts hostage. As the narrator's illness progresses, her reactions to the wallpaper become passionate, even possessive. "But I am here, and no person touches this wallpaper but me—not alive!" (Gilman 267). This quote illustrates the contradictory relationship the narrator has with her illness. On one hand, her illness, like the patriarchal standards and dominance, holds her prisoner and invades her every waking thought. On the other hand, her illness is the only thing that is truly hers, though it is arguable whether she would be suffering in this way in the first place if her fate was not controlled by the men in her life. For example, her husband and doctors prohibit her from expressing her feelings through writing, and she is also prevented from reading, working, or engaging in any other creative distraction.

Paradoxically, the wallpaper represents the disease (mental illness exacerbated by patriarchal expectations and control) but it also represents the cure (societal liberation through rebellion via insanity). As described by Greg Johnson, the narrator could not have liberated her own autonomy without having first been imprisoned: "Rather than simply labeling the narrator a madwoman at the story's close, we might view her behavior as an expression of long-suppressed rage: a rage which causes a temporary breakdown (like those actually suffered by both Dickinson and Gilman) but which represents a prelude to psychic regeneration and artistic redemption" (Johnson 522). The narrator's agency is taken from her by her husband and male doctors, and she is trapped by their expectations. Because she is left with no other options, she begins to

ruminate on the wallpaper and succumb to her illness: every other means of distraction and expression is taken from her, and she has only her illness and the wallpaper left to fill the void. Rather than submitting to patriarchal suppression, she allows her anger to build until it has reached critical mass, and she uses this anger to triumph over those that try to silence her. Without her illness as a part of her identity, she is but a commonplace woman, eternally confined to humdrum domestic life at the will of her husband and the other male figures, with little hope of rising above her station or existing outside of societal norms. In her illness, she finds something to fixate on that cannot be prohibited or silenced by her husband, doctors, or family members, no matter how they try.

If the wallpaper represents the narrator's entrapment in and obsession with her illness, the garden serves as a symbol of domestic life. The narrator first begins to describe the garden after reproaching herself for dwelling too long on her illness. At first, Gilman describes the garden in a positive light: "There is a delicious garden! I never saw such a garden—large and shady, full of box-bordered paths and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them" (Gilman 256). The garden appears fertile and welcoming, but the narrator's description of it is underwhelming. Her initial reaction to the garden reflects her initial reaction to domestic life; she responds appropriately at first, focusing on the quaint, appealing features of the garden. Lee Shweninger describes how wives and gardens are viewed as similar instruments in a patriarchal society: "The patriarchal colonists set aside both wife (as opposed to woman) and garden (as opposed to nature or wilderness) as sites of purity or manufactured ideality" (Shweninger 27). The narrator at first views the garden as bright and fertile, much like how traditional domestic roles are portrayed by society as a whole.

It can be assumed that the narrator, like many women before her, was initially enthusiastic about her role of wife and mother, until realizing that this role was the only one she would ever be able to fill. Upon realizing domesticity will strip her of her individuality, she begins to view the garden as an ominous space. As the

story progresses, her descriptions of the garden become more foreboding: “I can see the garden, those mysterious deepshaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees” (Gilman 258). The words that Gilman uses to describe the garden imply subtext about the narrator’s attitude toward domesticity. The arbors being “mysterious” and “deep-shaded” implies deception, while the word “riotous” used in conjunction with “old fashioned” to describe the flowers implies an exuberance of outdated ideals regarding femininity, while “gnarly trees” invokes a feeling of danger or difficulty. The narrator’s changing descriptions of the garden reflect her changing attitude toward domestic life. By the end of the story, the narrator hallucinates about women “creeping” through the garden, a manifestation of her anxieties towards the duties of motherhood and marriage; saddled with these impending burdens in addition to her illness, she cannot walk confidently (Gilman 266). Instead, she creeps through the garden as a representation of her struggle with domestic life. The narrator struggles against her illness as well, as represented by her vision of a woman trapped behind the paper. However, the narrator is not as preoccupied by the garden (domesticity) as she is in the wallpaper (her illness), so her reaction to the perceived woman creeping in the garden is not as strong as her reaction to the perceived woman behind the wallpaper.

The comparison between the narrator’s reaction to the garden and her reaction to the wallpaper are further evidence of her entrapment between the two circumstances. The narrator reacts to the wallpaper with disgust, though her contradictory transfixion to it is apparent in her writing. Where at first she writes about domestic subjects (the house, the garden) and provides limited or flat description, writing about the wallpaper causes her writing style to become more florid and ardent, as if she were mirroring the wallpaper pattern with her words: “It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide--plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in

unheard of contradictions” (Gilman 257). The description of the wallpaper is far more poetic and well thought out than that of the estate’s garden: “I never saw such a garden-- large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with grape-covered arbors with seats under them” (Gilman 256). When the two descriptions are compared side by side, it is hard to believe that they were written by the same person. Though initially attracted to the beauty of the garden, the narrator is not as infatuated with it as she is with the wallpaper, as evidenced by the contrast in her writing style when addressing each. The narrator’s attitude toward the garden mirrors her attitude toward domestic life; she describes the garden plainly, politely, and passionlessly. Her descriptions of the garden evoke either no image or else a very generic one. She reacts this way to the garden because, as Shweninger asserts, the garden represents the patriarchal norm. The garden, like women, has been tamed by men and forced to grow in an unnatural, ordered way: “The garden becomes the site of limits, of control, of the artificial, of denial, of the male’s triumph over the wildness of nature” (Shweninger 27).

The narrator is at first attracted to the garden because it is what is expected from her, not because she has genuine interest. Her lack of interest in the garden and in domesticity is reflected in her bored writing style. The garden represents passive domesticity, whereas the garden represents her illness and entrapment in patriarchal systems. Her reaction to the wallpaper is one of shock and horror, but her descriptions are vivid enough to evoke a specific image of the lurid color and pattern. The narrator may hate the wallpaper, but it is the only source of distraction available to her that has not been prohibited by the rest cure. She fixates on the wallpaper in the same way that she fixates on her illness, and it is not long before those two things are the only thing she feels she has ownership of and control over. Though she feels oppressed and surrounded by the wallpaper much in the same way that she is oppressed and surrounded by the male figures in her life, the wallpaper provides her with something to rebel against. In the end it is the wallpaper that frees her from her entrapment

by driving her completely mad. In her madness, she is liberated from the confines of patriarchal domesticity, and she regains the autonomy that she had begun to lose because of marriage and motherhood.

Even her own child cannot inspire the same level of interest as the wallpaper. The narrator mentions her nervousness about the baby in conjunction with her horror of the wallpaper, contradicting herself again shortly thereafter. She muses about how she couldn't fathom any child living in the nursery with the wallpaper, appearing to come to the conclusion that it is better that she herself occupy the room. However, the wording that she uses is misleading: "I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here after all, I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see" (Gilman 262). The wording of this statement implies a double meaning; is the narrator stating that she can stand living in the nursery with the wallpaper better than a baby could stand it, or is she implying that she would rather be confined to the nursery with the wallpaper than be confined to the duty of motherhood? As the narrator talks more about the wallpaper, she mentions the shape of the woman in the subpattern. She says, "I do not like it a bit. I wonder-- I begin to think-- I wish John would take me away from here!" (Gilman 262). This sentence contradicts her earlier statement about being able to tolerate the wallpaper better than a baby. It implies that she cannot, in fact, stand the wallpaper. She "wonders and begins to think," and in doing so she expresses her longing for an escape, not only from the glare of the nursery's nauseating interior design, but from the entire estate, from everything that represents her domestic confinement.

That the narrator is confined to a nursery is yet another clever use of irony by Gilman. Though the narrator expresses a preference for a different bedroom, her request is overruled by her husband, and she is instructed instead to board in the nursery with the wallpaper. The wallpaper is not the only unsettling detail about the nursery. There are also bars over the windows, and various ring and other equipment left over from when it was (presumably) a gymnasium for children. John Bak describes how the narrator is

able to free herself from the prison-like norms of domestic life by succumbing to the very nervous illness brought on by patriarchal oppression. By succumbing to her nervous illness, she breaks from the Victorian norm and regains her autonomy by becoming a madwoman: "The Victorian mind-set her patriarchal society has instilled in her – she has essentially released herself from the external bars and rings that John (or all nineteenth-century men, for that matter) uses to restrain her" (Bak 44). Despite not being able to tend to her child without feeling anxiety, and being prohibited from taking part in the duties of domestic life, the narrator is still physically confined to a nursery. It is this ironic confinement which drives her to the brink of madness, which in turn serves as the catalyst for her own unconventional liberation.

Nadkarni describes the narrator's reaction to the wallpaper in conjunction to her reaction to motherhood, noting the parallels between her ill-feelings toward both: "What makes the wallpaper so monstrous is that it is constantly multiplying and breeding—it has a life of its own. Interestingly, Gilman's characterizations of the wallpaper index something more than a general anxiety about procreation and proliferation" (Nadkarni 5). Nadkarni's observation of the narrator's nervousness about procreation is all the more poignant given that the narrator lives in a nursery for much of her rest cure. Gilman's decision to board her narrator in a nursery represents a perpetual entrapment in domestic life, even in the face of mental illness. The narrator is powerless, trapped between two completely different yet equally undesirable fates, nervous illness or the monotony of domesticity. She does not want to be ill anymore, as evidenced by her abhorrence of the yellow wallpaper. Despite her unhappiness, she feels that she can better deal with her illness than she can with marriage and motherhood, hence why she envisions the creeping woman behind the subpattern. Though she hates the wallpaper and is at first frightened by the woman, she is nonetheless possessive of it, mentioning over and over again how no one should touch it but her (Gilman 264).

Bak asserts that the narrator projects her own yearnings for individuality and autonomy

onto the woman she imagines is trapped behind the wallpaper: “In objectifying herself through this imaginary woman, the narrator can free herself, if only in mind, from the external prison her husband places her in” (44). The narrator is trapped by her illness, yet her illness is the only thing that truly belongs to her and is within her control. She is a mother ironically confined to a nursery by her condition, but should she recover, she would still be confined to a nursery: that of her own child. The narrator is trapped in a paradox, unable to avoid one fate without ultimately surrendering to the other. In the end she chooses to be mad of her own volition rather than be stripped of her autonomy and subdued into a domestic role.

The conclusion of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is open-ended and leaves much for interpretation regarding the narrator’s fate. Going mad lends some agency to the narrator and allows her to control a small aspect of her fate, but only for a moment. Though we do not know what happens to the narrator at the story’s close, it can be assumed that she was institutionalized by her husband and male doctors for failing to get well according to their standards. The narrator exercises temporary agency by choosing her illness over traditional domesticity, but she is not truly free. The very act of being ill confines her to the will of the patriarchy, as male authority figures decide how to cure her, they set the standards for wellness, and they can decide whether or not she is fit to participate in life. Gilman’s use of irony and contradiction in the story serve to further illustrate the narrator’s tenuous plight: her entrapment in the feminist paradox of domesticity versus mental illness. The narrator is prevented by her husband and male doctors from doing anything of substance, and this treatment gradually drives her further into obsession with the yellow wallpaper and into the grip of her illness, the only thing she that she feels she has ownership over. The narrator contradicts herself in the way that she writes about the wallpaper, expressing horror at the color and pattern yet writing about it with a descriptive eloquence not previously seen in the other topics she writes about; contradictorily, this suggests not horror, but passion. Ironically, the narrator

is confined to a nursery as part of her treatment, just as she would have been if she had been well enough to take care of her own child. When the narrator muses about whether she can stand the wallpaper better than a child, the feminist paradox is brought full circle. By the end of the story, the reader is left to wonder whether or not the narrator is successful in overcoming such a confining paradox. The narrator rebels against patriarchal constraints and seems to decide her own fate by succumbing to her illness, but she can never be truly free, because male-dominated tradition ultimately decides her fate, even though she was able to gain a semblance of control by rebelling against the rest cure and choosing illness over domestic subservience.

Works Cited

- Bak, John S. “Escaping the Jaundiced Eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper.’” *Studies in Short Fiction*, no. 1, 1994, p. 39. EBSCOhost, libproxy.ung.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsgcl.15356232&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Heilmann, Ann. “Overwriting Decadence: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Oscar Wilde, and the Feminization of Art in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper.’” *Short Story Criticism*, vol. 62, Gale, 2003. EBSCOhost, libproxy.ung.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsgcl.H1420051948&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Johnson, Greg. “Gilman’s Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper.’” *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 26, no. 4, Fall89, pp. 521-530. EBSCOhost, libproxy.ung.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=fth&AN=7135846&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Nadkarni, Asha. “Reproducing Feminism in Jasmine and ‘The Yellow Wallpaper.’” *Feminist Studies*, no. 1, 2012, p. 218. EBSCOhost, libproxy.ung.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsgcl.293668229&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Schwenger, Lee. “Reading the Garden in Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper.’” *Isle: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1996, pp. 25-44. EBSCOhost,

libproxy.ung.edu/login?url=http://search.
ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh
&AN=1998065833&site=eds-live&scope=site.
Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wallpa-
per." *The Portable American Realism Reader*.
Ed. James Nagel and Tom Quick. New York:
Penguin, 1997. 254-69. Print

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Chris Bell for telling me to write and then rewrite. Thank you to Dr. Leigh Dillard for telling me to put my work into the world.