**"The Yellow Wallpaper" Biographical Criticism**

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," is the disheartening tale of a woman suffering from postpartum depression. Set during the late 1890s, the story shows the mental and emotional results of the typical "rest cure" prescribed during that era and the narrator’s reaction to this course of treatment. It would appear that Gilman was writing about her own anguish as she herself underwent such a treatment with Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell in 1887, just two years after the birth of her daughter Katherine. The rest cure that the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" describes is very close to what Gilman herself experienced; therefore, the story can be read as reflecting the feelings of women like herself who suffered through such treatments. Because of her experience with the rest cure, it can even be said that Gilman based the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" loosely on herself. But I believe that expressing her negative feelings about the popular rest cure is only half of the message that Gilman wanted to send. Within the subtext of this story lies the theme of oppression: the oppression of the rights of women especially inside of marriage. Gilman was using the woman/women behind the wallpaper to express her personal views on this issue.

The two common threads that connect Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the narrator in her story are depression/postpartum depression, and entrapment within their roles as of women. Specifically, Gilman and the narrator are trying to escape the function society has placed on them. First, after fulfilling their expected duties as wife and mother, both Gilman and the narrator become depressed after the birth of their child. It is this depression that leads them to the infamous rest cure so widely prescribed during the late 1800’s. Linda Wagner-Martin, in her essay on "The Yellow Wallpaper" describes Dr. Mitchell’s treatment of the typical female seeking his world famous rest cure. Wagner-Martin states that the rest cure "depended upon seclusion, massage, immobility, and overfeeding; . . . [it] had at its root complete mental inactivity" (982). Carol Parley Kessler, in her essay on Gilman’s life, quotes Dr. Mitchell’s prescription to Gilman as, "never touch pen, brush, or pencil" (Kessler 158). Gilman subjects her narrator to the same prescription. You can tell from the story that the narrator wants to write and that she thinks that being allowed to do so would help her mental and emotional condition. She says, "I think . . . it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me" (Gilman 81).

Kessler further explains that Dr. Mitchell’s treatment only made Gilman’s depression worse and that eventually "she ceased to follow his regimen" (158). The character she creates in "The Yellow Wallpaper" also fantasizes about ending her regimen saying, "I wish I could get well faster" (Gilman 81). Both seem to view the rest cure as an unwanted interruption in their lives. It should be no surprise then that Gilman draws from her own experience and Dr. Mitchell’s treatment. She even finds a way to incorporate him into the story as a kind of threat to the narrator. The narrator in the story is thinking about the reaction of her husband, who is also a doctor, to her slow convalescence, "if I don’t pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall" (Gilman 82). The context of this statement and the overall tone of the story make this an ominous threat. I believe Gilman intended it to be taken in just that light.

Gilman must have nearly gone mad at the prospect of not being able to write or "relieve the press of ideas" that were trapped within her (Gilman 81). Prior to her receiving treatment from Dr. Mitchell, Gilman wrote a verse called "The Answer," which expressed "her anger at both inequality in marriage relation and pain experienced" (Kessler 158). She was not yet the well-known writer she was to become. Dr. Mitchell’s prescription forbidding her to write might have been a death sentence to the expressive, creative side of Gilman. Perhaps a sort of mental and emotional self-preservation set in and instead of following the doctor’s orders, she abandoned treatment altogether. At that time Gilman also made the tough, life-altering decision to leave her husband, Charles Walter Stetson. Ironically Stetson was another budding writer like his wife. It seems that just like the narrator in the story, Gilman too found her freedom and happiness compromised by her marriage.

The second common bond between Gilman and her female narrator is the idea of freedom from oppressive traditional female roles. I believe that society is represented by the wallpaper in the story and escape is Gilman’s central theme. She devoted much of the story and much of her own life to escaping. The woman/women in the story are trying to escape from behind the wallpaper; the narrator is trying to escape the rest cure and possibly the treatments of her husband; and Gilman wants to escape from the gender traditions of a male-dominated society. In Gary Scharhorst’s piece on Gilman in the Reference Guide to Short Fiction, he gives several examples of her using the theme of freedom or escape in her other stories. Scharhorst found that typically "the heroine is freed from dependence upon men, often as the result of death or temporary separation from her husband, often with the aid of another woman who acts as her patron" (210). "The Yellow Wallpaper" is just one of many stories that Gilman wrote that dealt with women trying to attain their freedom from something or someone.

The woman trapped behind the yellow wallpaper is nearly a perfect metaphor for Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Kessler, in her biographical essay on Gilman, makes the point that this one short story seemed to most closely echo the views of Gilman in regards to the oppression of women in her society. Comparing the two, Kessler writes, "this once she was able to join her public and private expressions in a work of devastating impact" (159). Gilman, a very active crusader in the women’s rights movement, tried to peel away the gender bias that plague the women in our culture, just as the narrator in her story tries to pull off the wallpaper in her room to free the trapped women behind it. The patriarchal society of this country was Gilman’s wallpaper. She had to work hard at trying to force through societal changes. Just like the resistant old wallpaper in her story, ridged and yellow with age, Gilman and her counterparts had much difficulty in pushing through the wallpaper of tradition.

Unlike the narrator in the story, who eventually frees from behind the wallpaper all the women with "strangled beads and bulbous eyes" (Gilman 88). Gilman did not live to see her life’s work complete. While some advances were made by the women’s rights movement before her death in 1935, Gilman must have thought the changes were painfully slow. In her story, slowness in the form of all "of those creeping women" trying to escape from the oldness that trapped them, acted as a premonition for changes in women’s rights movement (Gilman 89). For Gilman and her story "The Yellow Wallpaper" life is imitating art.

**In Control**

**Adam Leed**

The story "The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is a story about control. In the late 1800's, women were looked upon as having no effect on society other than bearing children and keeping house. It was difficult for women to express themselves in a world dominated by males. The men held the jobs, the men held the knowledge, the men held the key to the lock known as society . . . or so they thought. The narrator in "The Wallpaper" is under this kind of control from her husband, John. Although most readers believe this story is about a woman who goes insane, it is actually about a woman’s quest for control of her life.

The narrator is being completely controlled by her husband. The narrator's husband has told the her over and over again that she is sick. She sees this as control because she cannot tell him differently. He is a physician so he knows these things. She also has a brother who is a physician, and he says the same thing. In the beginning of the story, she is like a child taking orders from a parent. Whatever these male doctors say must be true. The narrator says, "personally, I disagree with their ideas" (480), and it is clear she does not want to accept their theories but has no other choice. She is controlled by her husband.

Control is exemplified later in the story in the choice of rooms in which she must stay. She has no say whatsoever in this decision. She is forced to stay in a room she is uncomfortable with. This is the bedroom in which John has trapped her; this room is not a room in which she wants to be. The windows are barred and the bed is bolted down. This is a subliminal clue of control. And there is the horrible yellow wallpaper. "I never saw worse paper in my life" (482), she says. She wants to change rooms, to go to one of the more pleasing rooms downstairs. However, she knows that, "John wouldn’t hear of" (481) changing rooms.

John attempts to control even her inner life, her writing. She says that "he hates to have me write a word" (482). He says the writing is not good for people who are sick. He tells her that it will slow down her healing. Writing is the only thing that’s keeping her sane, but she is unable to do it freely. She has to hide her words so John does not find them. This shows that John has mental control as well as physical control.

As the story progresses, the narrator thinks that maybe she could gain some control over things. She begins to gain mental strength from the wallpaper. Her mind begins to churn and she commits the ultimate crime in John’s eyes . . . she thinks. She thinks that maybe John is not entirely correct about everything. However, she knows that she cannot have John know about it. She has to do it in her mind for now. She begins by analyzing the wallpaper. John has told her that she should not let such things bother her. She focuses on it for that simple fact. She feels she knows something that John does not. This is clear when she says, "there are things in that paper that nobody knows but me" (488). The narrator is certain that she now has some knowledge that her "all-knowing" husband does not. Eugenia C. Delamotte says that the husband "uses his exclusively masculine knowledge as a source of power over his wife" (206). She is now beginning to realize that she has a mind of her own and is able to use it.

The narrator begins to think there may be some hope that she can gain some control, but as Delamotte points out "she herself is a mystery: to her husband and to herself" (206). John thinks of her as a mystery that he is unable to solve. So instead of confessing this inability, he hides his wife in the room. He thinks he is solving the mystery but in reality he is giving his wife a chance to solve it on her own. She does so by beginning to take control of her own life and refusing to be a "little goose" any longer.

These feelings of freedom build to a climax when she tears all the yellow wallpaper off the walls. She is sure that John will have something to say about this, but she is not bothered. She wants control of something even if it is the "odious wallpaper." That was just the first step. Her life is now in her own hands. It is no longer in the hands of a male. She has locked the door to the room and grown mentally as a woman. Her final and ultimate feeling of control comes when John finds out what she has done. The narrator distances herself from John and controls him when she says, "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" (482). She no longer worries about what John thinks and is not deterred by his fainting. She is on a mission to get all the wallpaper off the walls, and she will stop at nothing to accomplish this. She has come to a point where she has had enough and takes matters into her own hands.

The husband and the wallpaper are similar subjects. They are virtually identical throughout the entire story. At the beginning, both the husband and the paper dominate the narrator. But in the end John no longer directs her every move. John no longer inhibits her inner thoughts. And the wallpaper no longer oppresses her. As time goes on, she gains confidence and control over both and ultimately dominates them.