



Yellow Feminism

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Drawing from biography and textual evidence, Telle Lanum configures Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a vital harbinger of the twentieth century's second-wave feminist movement, noting Gilman's innovative use of literary form for political ends. This essay was composed for Writing about Literature with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

One wouldn't expect the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," published in 1892, to have a feminist flair, but this story would later come to be known as a pivotal record of woman's rights. In order to properly dissect the layers of feminism in this semi-autobiographical story, you need to know a little background about the author Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Coming from a broken home, Gilman spent her childhood in poverty (*Living* 1-10). Her mother became cold and distant and thus chose the same path for her children. Gilman, unable to form deepened connections, suffered a great deal emotionally. Through her tenacity and perseverance, she eventually found herself at the Rhode Island School of Design where she studied art and became romantically involved with another woman (44-60). Unfortunately, this relationship added to her emotional strife as it was forbidden, and her partner

eventually left to marry a man. Even though this action furthered Gilman's disdain for men, she married a husband of her own and bore him a child. She then suffered from a serious bout of post-partum depression (90). This is where the idea for her story's yellow wallpaper was engendered, the author interweaving her own life with that of the protagonist, the first-person perspective and shifting tenses allowing readers to intimately experience the narrator's mental deterioration.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" was published on the heels of coverture, when a wife belonged to her husband and her body was his to do with whatever he pleased. In fact, women of the era were counseled that conjugal relations were a woman's duty until a sufficient number of children were born — almost an imprisonment, if you may. If any woman displayed any post-partum issues, such as Gillman did herself, she was immediately deemed to have a nervous condition. It is this very nervous condition that is the driving force behind the "rest cure" that sets the scene. A young couple has rented a home for a few months. They recently had a child, and the mother, getting quite emotionally ill after the birth, was deemed "nervous." The husband, being a physician, decides he knows what is best for her: "But John says if I feel so I shall neglect proper self-care; so I take pains to control myself — before him at least — and that makes me very tired." Almost immediately, we see currents of suppression. The husband talks down to her, not allowing her to work, socialize, or even write in her journal. A bedroom is chosen that quite resembles a psychiatry ward of a mental hospital — not the bedroom she so wished to use, mind you, but the bedroom the husband chose for her: a sunny room with a nice sturdy bed nailed to the floor; hooks and straps on the walls, as kind of a gymnasium of some sorts; and bright yellow wallpaper filled with inner demons and a creeping old lady.

As the name insinuates, this rest-cure involves a lot of relaxation. The more time this new mother spends in the room, the more this yellow wallpaper consumes her. As her husband becomes more

distant with his work and more demeaning with his attitude, the narrator's suppressed rage rears its ugly head: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage." Giving in to the internal struggle, the mother goes mad and is assumed to have killed herself after several references to her belts and ropes. In what could be considered an epic fate of foreshadowing, Gillman also committed suicide in 1935.

Brimming with feminist gravitas, it's almost as if "The Yellow Wallpaper" was written in protest of the treatment of woman across decades. It wouldn't be until the 1960s and the 1970s, during the second-wave feminist movement, that this short story found its modern audience. The definition of feminism is the advocacy of woman's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes. Though Gillman's short story is not necessarily standing up for woman's rights, it is selling the show for how women were treated. Although the autobiographical accounts of "The Yellow Wallpaper" are compelling, it is the underlying feminist connotations that really sets the story apart. Much like this is a tale of repression and freedom, the actual yellow wallpaper that enralls the narrator, considered by many a mere feminine frivolity, eventually suffocates and exonerates the mother.

A precedent of the poor treatment of woman can be seen most in the relationship between the narrator and her husband, John. Throughout the entirety of the short story, we see the way John is mishandling his wife. She is not a person, with her own choice or voice in her own treatment, but his "case" or his "wife":

John is a physician, and *perhaps* . . . that is one reason I do not get well faster. You see, he does not believe I am sick! . . .

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 . . . what is one to do?"

Through this mishandling, John goes on to isolate and further himself from his wife. The narrator, the “wife,” feels this emotional abuse to her core, and it drives her madness. She sees the figure behind the wallpaper, stifled and silenced, but doesn’t realize it is herself. For weeks, the two beings intertwine, becoming one. The day before they are set to return home, the narrator has lost herself. She locks herself in her room, ripping and tearing at the wallpaper. John breaks open the door only to faint at the site of his mad wife. In a significant example of redemption, the wife crawls over her husband in her madness. Her madness becomes her freedom.

The feminist movement brought about political, social, medical, economic, and educational perspectives, all of which can be applied to this short story. Here we have a woman, a brand new mom at that, deemed “sick” by only her physician husband. Unallowed to do anything of real joy for herself, she is forbidden to write in her journal or visit with nearby cousins. First-wave feminism began most emphatically in the early 1900s; yet, before even that, Gilman lived in California and actively participated in rallies for equal treatment of woman. Using her own experiences and life challenges, she endures as a brilliant writer way ahead of her time, saying *less repression, more freedom*. A feminist indictment of the late-nineteenth-century patriarchy, “The Yellow Wallpaper” provided feminist tools to interrupt literature in different ways. Gilman makes one grateful for works of art like this paving the way, or even just for enabling discussions about woman’s rights. ►►

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GILMAN, CHARLOTTE PERKINS. *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography*. 1935. U of Wisconsin P, 1990.

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