

## Charlotte Perkins Gilman against Chauvinism depicted in her work "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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### Abstract:

Through hard times, one can be creative. Charlotte Perkins is a writer, a feminist and an activist. Though she has a decent place in society, she has many struggles. In her pregnancy, she has suffered the baby blue as a postpartum depression. Her male doctor has advised her to try the rest cure. The author has written the Yellow Wallpaper as a reaction to the personal experience she had. In her story "the Yellow Wallpaper", Charlotte Perkins has attempted to show how women are depicted in the late 1960s. The present study aims to analyse the Yellow Wallpaper from the feminists points of view, and how the author has shown the discrimination she has been facing. The research tends to highlight how females have tried to survive in a patriarchal society where their voice was not even heard.

**Keywords:** Feminist; charlotte Perkins; depicted; Yellow Wallpaper

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The patriarchal society of Victorian American used to be oppressive and despotic towards women. Only men were able to work and connect to the outside world. It has been difficult for American women, in particular, and other women around the world, in general, to leave their houses, to earn a living or own a property. Males used to be everywhere; they were the writers, the teachers, the lawyers, the

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doctors, the priests, etc. As a reaction toward the male oriented society, Feminist theorists attempt to give the voice to the voiceless and help females expose to the outside world. In the late 1960s, the feminist movement was a backlash against the theoretical assumption toward sexism and **chauvinism**<sup>1</sup>. There have been different means to accomplish their aims and present the female as an independent human being, free from all the oppressive and submissive acts. Feminists back then were asking for equality among females and males. They needed to prove the idea that females are contributors to society not just “**angles in the house**”<sup>2</sup> doing nothing but stay there and wait for a lovely wedded husband.

Feminist literary criticism, which was the direct product of the women’s liberation movement of the 60s, was based on the notion that through literature females need to be represented differently (Petter Barry, 2002). Jane Austin, Alice Walker, Charlotte Gilman and many other writers attempted to break the ice and write about females and the idea of women’s inequality in society. In a short story, Charlotte Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper”. The author was a writer, a women’s right activist, a mother and a wife. After she gave birth to a little girl, she was having a post-partum depression. Her doctor asked her to rest and to stop writing. He said that the reason behind her hysteric condition is not giving birth but writing. Charlotte was a strong woman, and she fought for women’s rights. Within the feminist literary criticism and in relation to Gilman’s story, three interrelated conceptions are used to explore women’s lives; the female, feminine, and the feminists’ views in fighting against misogynists and male oppression through writing.

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<sup>1</sup> The first documented use of the phrase "male chauvinism" is in the 1935 Clifford Odets play *Till the Day I Die*. It refers to the belief that men are superior to women.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "Angel in the House" comes from the title of an immensely popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women

Charlotte Perkins Gilman has explored these points of views in her focus on the female body as opposed to the male, the feminine status as a set of culturally defined characteristics, and how the heroin was displayed in the story as a wife, a mother, but never a woman or a writer. In addition, the political position of both the author and narrator in relation to the male oppression which was presented in the story through the main character's husband, John.

## **2. Theories**

### **2.1. Feminist Theory**

Simone de Beauvoire, a great feminist figure mentioned once: *"One is not born a woman; rather one becomes one"* (Barry, 2002). So, it is not about being a female and having feminine characters, it is about becoming a woman, fighting for the rights and defending the sex. Simone de Beauvoire also wrote that *"the first time we see a woman takes up her pen in defense of her sex was Christine de Pizan who wrote **Epitre au Dieu D'Amour**"* in the Fifteenth Century. These women were not superwomen; they were humans who appreciated all females around the world.

Therefore, if a human being thinks that his or her mother should be respected, or his or her daughter deserves a better education, then he or she is simply a feminist. Rebecca West once mentioned, *"That people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat"*. Feminism attempts to change the attitudes in wide range of areas in the western society, and feminist activists have challenged the law and cultural norms seeking for legal rights that includes the right of owning a property, right of integrity and autonomy, voting, abortion rights, Working rights. They were fighting for the protection of women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape. Thus, the story of "The

Yellow Wallpaper” is a good example to reveal the injustice life women have lived throughout time. It also shows how submissive and obedient they were through the main character that was so obedient to her husband, John.

## 2.2. Rest Cure

In the short story of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the writer sheds light on “The Rest Cure Treatment”. Her main purpose is to stigmatize and show disapproval to Silas Weir Mitchel who introduced this treatment as a therapy that includes doing nothing but resting. Silas Weir Mitchel is a Philadelphia neurologist who introduced the Rest Cure as the perfect cure for women who are having the baby blue or the post-partum depression after giving birth. It was based on force-feeding, massage, bed rest, isolation, and preventing the sick woman from work. In her autobiography, Charlotte Gilman (1935) describes her experience with Mitchel saying:

*“I was put to bed, and kept there. I was fed, bathed, rubbed, and responded with the vigorous body of twenty-six. As far as he could see there was nothing the matter with me, so after a month of this agreeable treatment he sent me home with this prescription:*

*“Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. . . . Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours’ intellectual life a day. And never touch a pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live.”(69)*

Gilman has introduced Mitchel as a medical villain and The Rest Cure as a Gothic torture against women. For her, he was a misogynist who torture women instead of helping them. The author

Gilman was not the only author who suffered from this treatment. It was also imported to Britain by the British gynecologist Dr. William Smoult Playfair in 1881 who used it to treat the author Virginia Woolf (Marland 2001).

Consequently, Gilman exploited the rest cure in *The Yellow Wallpaper* to alert other women of the damaging effects of the treatment. It was never perceived as **The Rest Cure**, it was, however, "The Unrestful Cure"

### **3. Literature Review**

*"Literature is the one place in any society, where within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way"* Salman Rushdi

Each one has their own literature, it only takes courage to spell it out and share it to world. Literature is the voice of our thought and ideas. It enables us to understand society and history. It also helps people express their own understanding to the world. It is indeed the place of beauty and aesthetic experiences. Humans need to breathe, *"and all else is literature"* Paul Verlaine.

Describing one's thought is a challenge. Not anyone can defend his or her own ideas through literature, only great people do. Women in the nineteenth century were marginalized and deprived of their rights. Few of them dare to defend themselves and the image of woman in general. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one of these great people who found out that literature is not only a source of pleasure, but a savior and a rescuer. In these veins she wrote: *"Through it [literature] we know the past, govern the present, and influence the future."* (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1911)

### 3.1. Charlotte Gilman and the Yellow Wallpaper

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an out spoken feminist who fought for women all over her life. She was an effective writer during the Nineteenth Century, and she never thought she would be such an inspiring and a motivating writer to many. Her short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper”, has been tackled by different theorists in literature throughout times. It was analyzed by psychoanalysts, linguists, and Marxist feminists.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Gilman needed to lead the reader into a world of horror and mystery. The story was a Gothic genre where she expressed her thoughts and criticized society. According to Cai qiao (2002), Gilman uses the wallpaper in the protagonist room as a symbol of her terrible circumstances. One may question, why did the author choose the Yellow Wallpaper as a symbol of horror? Maybe she has used it to show the narrator horrifying condition in the room her husband driven her to stay in. According to Gilbert and Gubar (2007) the narrator finds herself in terrible condition and Gilman uses the wallpaper as a symbol of the society.

Furthermore, Lane (1990) has mentioned that Gilman created the woman in the wallpaper so that the narrator will express her anger and the fury she had because of abandoning her child and because of her husband who treated her like a baby. So Gilman wrote the yellow paper because she was mad at Mitchel, her own husband and her daughter who was taken away from her. In a short essay, “Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman confirms that it was because of the Dr. Mitchel. She added that if it was not for a wise friend who helped me to cast the doctor’s advice and go back to work, “*the normal life in every human being*” I would be mad by now. She mentioned later in the essay that she sent him a copy of the Yellow Wallpaper, but he never acknowledged it. The story as Gilman (1998)

wrote, "...was not written to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy and it worked".

### **3.2. First Wave Feminism**

The first wave feminism refers to the men's treatment of women. It was between the period of the Nineteenth and the early Twentieth Century in both the United States and United Kingdom. It was centered on promoting the equal contact and the property rights. However, the end of the Nineteenth Century, feminists focused more on gaining political power to defend women appropriately. The first wave feminism was marked by many feminists such as Voltairine de Cleyre and Margaret Sanger. These figures were fighting for women's sexual, reproductive, and economic rights.

### **3.3. Second Wave Feminism**

The second wave feminism refers to the period of the early 1960s and lasts to the late 1980s. It was a continuing phase to the first wave feminism as Imelda Whelehan(1986) suggested. This period has largely focused on the different issues of equality and has aimed at ending discrimination. Carol Hanisch introduced the slogan "the personal is political" which was synonymous to the second wave. In addition, feminists of the second wave attempted to defend the women's cultural and political inequalities and encouraged women to understand different aspects in their life in relation to the sexist power structures. Also, second wave feminism was well known by gynocriticism that was coined by Showalter in her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977).

This latter involves three main related aspects which are: the examination of female writers and their place in literary history, the consideration of the treatment of female characters in books by both

male and female writers; and the discovery of a canon of literature written by women.

## **4. Analysis of the Story**

### **4.1. The Narrator's Body "Female"**

Gilman's main purpose of writing this story is to condemn the "Rest Cure" that was a popular treatment for nervous illness as mentioned by Elísabet Rakel Sigurðardóttir(2013). In this fictional story, the author embodied herself. She wrote about a young upper middle class woman who was a writer and a wife, after delivering a little boy she suffered from the same psychological state as the author. Her husband was a physician who took care of her. He rented a three month house that is isolated from the town. He got her a nurse to take care of her and the baby. Within the room they were staying, there was this yellow wallpaper. The narrator found it ugly and scary and full of patterns. She started imaging herself stuck in this drawing and wanted to free herself. One night she just ripped the paper into pieces and started creeping in the room, when her husband came to the bedroom, he fainted. His wife did not stop and kept creeping on his body. In the story, the narrator was anxious, and down to the dumps due to the postpartum depression which was resulted from her body hormones changes after giving birth to her little boy.

During pregnancy, the amount of the two female hormones, estrogen and progesterone, increases greatly which triggers this depression. Biologically, after 24 hours of yielding the baby, the amount of these two hormones drops back quickly to their normal state. According to Weir Mitchel, the fast change in hormone levels may lead to depression, just as smaller changes in hormones can affect a woman's mood before she gets her menstrual period (Poirier Suzanne 16). Besides, the female physiological attribute was also



displayed implicitly in the story. Though she was his wife and partner, John did not consider her so, since they were not even sharing bed, as mentioned in the story "...there was only one window and not a room for two beds and no near room for him if he took another".

Also, John loved her and took care of her, but he kept belittling her by calling her: "Little girl", "a blessed little goose", "my little" which denotes his bossiness and control. In addition, Gilman kept the narrator nameless which made one question, why? I thought that the reason for her being nameless is because she has no word and she was submissive in the story. However, the author maintained the main character without a name because she wanted to attract the readers' attention by showing that female writers were struggling to write using their own names. They were writing in disguise. Failing to name her could represent as well the idea that no character in the story was able to find out who she is, as a real person. In real life, Gilman had a baby girl which made me wonder what her reason behind using a baby boy in the story? Maybe she wanted to explain the idea that though the heroin got a baby boy, she was dependent and her voice was never heard. Indeed, this was the case because in her childhood, Gilman had a brother, and her mother preferred him over her. In the story, having a baby boy did not make any difference, and the narrator maintained meek and obedient.

*"The labor of women in the house, certainly, enables men to produce more wealth than they otherwise could; and in the way women are economic factors in society. But so are horses"* Charlotte Gilman.

#### 4.2. The Social and Cultural Features “Feminine”

Queen Victoria in refusing the feminist movement mentioned that if women want to be equal to men, they will lose their feminine traits. Women will no longer be that precious, and elegant ladies. Instead, she insisted that women’s role in society must be restricted to “being a mother” and “a wife leaving work and business to men which reveals a state of discrimination that was essentially institutionalised. Besides, women had no right to work or to claim any right. Having any role in society, means that they lose their feminine qualities. The queen’s idea was not spread only in Britain, in America and other parts of the world as well. Furthermore, women back then were unable to make their own choices. They had to ask men whether a father, a husband, or a brother to take a decision for them. Simone de Beauvoir mentions that “*No one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility*” In the story “The Yellow Wallpaper” the heroine was a typical and an identical woman of the 1860s. She was unable to have the social role women are having in the 20s where women are finding different ways to connect to the outside world. They are everywhere sharing with men many rights such as working as teachers, police officers, lawyers, presidents, company owners, and finding different ways to prove themselves socially and match between their life outside and inside home.

The main character personifies the social struggle against male domination. The poor woman had an oppressive husband who prevented her from getting in contact to the outside world for the sake of helping her cured. Was not he aware of her mental state? Didn’t he know that keeping her away from anything she likes will never cure her, but kills her and drives her crazy? He was not such a caring person as he looks. If a partner is falling down, feeling depressed and anxious, one should be careful in dealing with her; he

must not laugh at her, or belittle her. If a physician of high standing does not believe that his wife is having a nervous depression, how can she get well faster? As she mentioned at the beginning of the story: *"You see, he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do"*. In this concern, Simone de Beauvoir states in the *Second Sex* that *"the representation of the world, like the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from their absolute truth"*.

Additionally, isolating her in that colonial mansion and preventing guests to visit her was not a help and a relief to her mind, but a submissive act that made her psychologically unhealthy. That country house was isolated from the center of the city; *"quite three miles from the village"* as she said. Was the main aim behind that is clean air, or did he have other intentions behind? As a result to John's ways of dealing with her, the narrator started imaging herself being locked behind the bars in that wallpaper she had in her room. Each time, she got a step away from reality, which drove her insane. If John accepted her ideas and let her have some guests, write, or even move out to the down stairs room, she might get well soon. However, each time she asked for that, he refused even to discuss. Our main character suffered from this social life that controls her and made her *"an angle in the house"* where she should only listen and obey what other say without saying her own opinions.

### **4.3. Political Orientation (Feminist)**

Charlotte had political intentions when she wrote the story. Her main purpose in writing *"The Yellow Wallpaper"* is to condemn not only that medical treatment of *"The Rest Cure"*, but also the misogynistic principles and resulting sexual politics that make such a treatment possible. The injustice role she had in society as a mother

and a wife only, and the unequal relationship between her and her husband is only an example that revealed the women's image in society, and the gender inequality. The main character in the story was a young upper middle class lady and a writer. In the time the story was conducted, women had no ability to write or express their thoughts, only few of them wrote using male nicknames because the act of writing has been always a political act.

Virginia Woolf said: "*for most of history, anonymous was a woman*". Each time one attempt to write, the political system or society in general tried to prevent her and criticize her for that. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, an Indian postcolonial Feminist mentioned in "Under Western Eyes" (2003) the discrimination of the third world woman and writers as a hegemonic entity and attempted to critique the political project of western feminism. She wrote: "*Western feminisms have tended to gloss over the differences between Southern women, but that the experience of oppression is incredibly diverse, and contingent on geography, history, and culture.*" Therefore, not only western writers were prevented from writing, women of the third world are still struggling to be a part of the literary canon and become recognized in literature today.

In the author's life, women were unable to become full citizens or to vote. Public voice, media, and even the political arena refused the ideas and attempted to fight back anyone who claims women's rights. Gilman made John the window through which readers can understand the negative image of women in society. John wanted to convince his wife that the reason behind her psychological state is working or writing, as she said: "I take phosphates or phosphites whichever it is-and tonics, and air and exercise, and journeys, and absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again". One can see that John's idea of his wife writing was institutionalized. Hence, the social and the political organization were refusing women as writers.

The idea of “the rest cure” I believe had a political implication. It was created to make women nervous rather than making them relieved and cured. The main character was not suffering from any physical illnesses to be asked to rest her body, she was having a postpartum depression which needed I assume to meet the outside world and do whatever she pleased to get treated. Why did not Silas Weir Mitchel think of curing “the baby blue”<sup>3</sup> through allowing women to interact with others since humans are naturally social? As in the story, when she claimed: “personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work with excitement and change would do me good”. Indeed, there was a hidden reason behind the “The Rest Cure.”

Moreover, physician and psychologist in the late of the 18s introduced theories that proved women as immature creatures and unstable emotionally. As a result, they were looking for any solution that suits the political arena and prevent them from doing anything that include writing, voting, working, or fighting for their rights. The term Gaslighting was used in 1944in the film of Gaslight, coined by Patrick Hamilton. It has been used by mental health professionals to describe manipulative behavior used to confuse people into thinking their reactions are crazy. These theorists created the ideas that the hysteria and madness are resulted from nothing but the interaction of women with the outside world, which made no sense at all. If the heroin was convinced that writing was the reason behind her anxiety, and if anyone including her husband was saying that writing will never help her treated, but made her condition becomes worse, how could not she believe that is true!

In the story, even the housekeeper who was John’s sister believed that it is all because of writing that she was sick, just as she

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<sup>3</sup> “baby blues” are the least severe form of [postpartum depression](#), it is important not to ignore the changes that are happening in your body (Andrea Bates 2016)

explained: “I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which makes me sick. But I can write when she is out, and see her long way from the windows”. Moreover, Gilman indication of the wallpaper was a clever shot. First, the main character started seeing a woman behind the bar in that yellow wallpaper, as if she was seeing herself stuck there. This indicates the political status of women. Then, she started seeing many women, which represented the ideologies of that era. The narrator, as she decided to free herself and the other women locked on the wallpaper, closed the door tightly so no one could notice. The author showed how difficult it was for a feminist to spread different ideologies, and free all women in society from this male oppression and patriarchy through writing. Verginia Woolf stated in her essay Room of One’s Own that “if a woman wants to write novels, she must have money and a room of her own”. However, I say if a woman wants to write, she just need to grape a pencil, or a pen and a copybook and start. I assume that being a writer has nothing to do with being rich; being a writer only takes courage and has nothing to do with belonging to a high social class or owning a sum of money. Therefore, Gilman in this short story had a political purpose more than a moral one. She wanted to show the world that she can write, and none can prevent her from doing so.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

To Sum up, though the main character in the short story got mad, the idea was delivered to society and people started to be aware of the dangerous effect of the treatments. Besides, Gilman succeeded to expose reality in the Nineteenth Century and reveal how hard life was for any woman regardless her status, her family background, or her achievement. She also displayed that the idea of females being biologically different to males were oppressed. Then, she mentioned the social status of women in society and their life roles that were restricted to motherhood and housekeepers. Additionally, she threw

light on the fact that feminists were barely able to say their word and explain their ideologies to the public. She implied that feminists and anyone who fought for women's rights are extremely rejected by either the public voice, or political institutions. Just as the central figure said toward the end, "I have got out at last..., so you cannot put me back". Gilman, too, is out at last, again, as (Ann J. Lan 1999) mentioned and this time here to stay. A very brave woman, Gilman, said a word none dares to say.

## **6. Recommendation**

After I finished this work, I got inspired by the Indian writer Chandra Talpade Mohanty. If only I got the chance to engage in any literary study, I would write about the third world writers who are fighting to make their voices heard. I would involve women in the third world who are struggling to free themselves from male domination. In India, a woman cannot eat until her husband does. In Africa, a woman cannot marry until her father approved. I suggest that feminists need to start writing about "the third world female."

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*Title: Charlotte Perkins Gilman against Chauvinism depicted in her work "The Yellow Wallpaper"*

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