

SYMBOLISM AND SOCIAL CRITICISM OF SHORT STORY THE YELLOW WALLPAPER BY CHARLOTTE PERKNIS

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* illustrates the psychological and social oppression of women in the 19th century. This article examines the story's use of symbolism and social criticism through a feminist literary lens. Diagnosed with "temporary nervous depression," the protagonist is subjected to the rest cure, a treatment reflecting the gendered medicalization of women's mental health (Mitchell, 1887). The yellow wallpaper symbolizes confinement, silencing, and patriarchal domination (Treichler, 1984). It evolves into a metaphor for female resistance against imposed domestic roles (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Showalter, 1985).

Keywords: *Feminism, symbolism, social criticism*

Abstrak

The Yellow Wallpaper karya Charlotte Perkins Gilman menggambarkan penindasan psikologis dan sosial terhadap perempuan pada abad ke-19. Artikel ini menelaah simbolisme dan kritik sosial dalam cerita melalui lensa sastra feminis. Tokoh utama yang didiagnosis "depresi saraf sementara" dipaksa menjalani *rest cure*, sebuah bentuk medikalisasi terhadap kesehatan mental perempuan (Mitchell, 1887). Wallpaper kuning melambangkan keterkungkungan, pembungkaman, dan dominasi patriarkal (Treichler, 1984). Simbol ini berkembang menjadi metafora perlawanan terhadap peran domestik yang dipaksakan pada perempuan (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Showalter, 1985).

Kata Kunci: Feminisme, Simbol, Kritik Sosial

I. INTRODUCTION

The Yellow Wallpaper, a short tale by Charlotte Perkins Gilman that was released in 1892, serves as a thoughtful and moving indictment of the medical and social norms of her time in addition to being a work of fiction. The story, which emerges from the complex background of the Victorian era, which was marked by both intense and oppressive gender ideas and amazing scientific advances, examines the systematic marginalization of women (Showalter, 1985, p. 9). By pathologizing disorders like anxiety and depression under vague terms like "hysteria" or "neurasthenia," which were commonly used to control women who did not conform to patriarchal norms, medical discourse at the time frequently disregarded women's psychological experiences (Ehrenreich & English, 1978, p. 101). These diagnoses legitimized medical practices that reinforced gender subordination by ignoring the social causes of women's distress and instead portraying their suffering as biological shortcomings.

Central to Gilman's critique is the "rest cure," a treatment widely promoted by neurologist Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell (1887), which imposed total physical rest and intellectual inactivity—particularly on upper-middle-class women. Prohibitions against reading, writing, or social engagement under this regimen often exacerbated psychological conditions, effectively rendering women passive, voiceless, and devoid of agency (Mitchell, 1887; Veith, 1965, p. 200). Through the story of a female narrator subjected to this treatment by her husband, who is also a physician, Gilman foregrounds issues of structural gender inequality, the silencing

of women's perspectives deemed irrational or inconsequential, and the pervasive patriarchal authority within both medical and social systems (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 90). The narrator becomes emblematic of a broader class of women whose mental health was interpreted through male-dominated frameworks that denied their subjectivity (Foucault, 1965, p. 199).

Initially misread as a tale of personal psychological decline, *The Yellow Wallpaper* was often stripped of its sociopolitical subtext and viewed merely as a gothic horror narrative (Treichler, 1984, p. 61). However, with the advent of literary feminism and the intellectual shifts brought by second-wave feminism in the late 20th century, the text was re-evaluated as a seminal feminist critique (Treichler, 1984, p. 62). This critical reorientation underscored the story's representation of systemic female oppression within patriarchal societies—oppression embedded in invisible cultural expectations and institutions (Althusser, 1971, p. 165)—as well as women's internal resistance and their efforts to reclaim identity and autonomy (Butler, 1990, p. 3). Gilman herself acknowledged that she wrote the story with the explicit aim of challenging Dr. Mitchell's rest cure and provoking reform, affirming the work's activist intent (Gilman, 1913, p. 195).

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the symbolic elements in *The Yellow Wallpaper* as representations of patriarchal structures, particularly how these symbols illustrate the narrator's experiences of suppression and psychological constraint.
- To identify both the overt and subtle forms of social critique presented by Gilman, especially concerning unethical medical practices and restrictive gender norms that limited women's autonomy in the 19th century.
- To explore the use of personal narrative as a mode of resistance, highlighting the power of women's voices in challenging institutionalized oppression.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates feminist literary theory with structuralist analysis, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of both the narrative's gender politics and its symbolic language. Through a feminist perspective, the analysis examines how patriarchal authority is articulated through characters, environments, and social interactions. Drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's (1979, p. 92) concept of the "madwoman in the attic," the study situates the narrator within a tradition of female literary figures whose perceived madness functions as a masked critique of patriarchal constraints. Gender, in this context, is understood not as a biological given but as a social construction shaped by cultural discourse (Butler, 1990, p. 8). The narrator's confinement and mental deterioration thus symbolize the broader societal repression of women's intellectual, emotional, and physical agency.

From a structuralist-symbolic viewpoint, the yellow wallpaper emerges as a dense signifier, encapsulating the narrator's psychological entrapment and sublimated desire for emancipation (Treichler, 1984, p. 70). The nursery—converted into her room of confinement—functions as a metaphorical space of infantilization, denying the narrator adult autonomy and reinforcing domestic subordination (Foucault, 1978, p. 104). The image of the "woman behind the wallpaper" operates as a powerful metaphor for repressed identity and collective female resistance, culminating in a symbolic act of rebellion that reclaims subjectivity (Kristeva, 1980, p. 280).

By merging feminist and structuralist frameworks, this research offers a comprehensive reading of how Gilman crafts a multi-layered critique through symbolism and narrative structure, exposing the intertwined psychological and sociocultural injustices that silence and marginalize women.

Research Hypotheses

- The yellow wallpaper symbolizes the patriarchal forces that suppress women's self-expression and autonomy, with the narrator's descent into "madness" representing her only form of defiance.
- The nursery signifies the systematic infantilization of women in 19th-century society, effectively denying them the right to intellectual growth and personal agency.
- The "woman behind the wallpaper" is a symbolic embodiment of repressed female identity and the collective yearning for liberation, culminating in an act of symbolic resistance.
- Through a deeply personal and experiential narrative, Gilman transforms *The Yellow Wallpaper* into a vehicle of social criticism, exposing the gender biases of medical practices and oppressive societal norms, and inspiring readers to interrogate and resist such structures.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This study combines feminist literary criticism and discourse analysis with a descriptive qualitative methodology. The original text of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 book *The Yellow Wallpaper* serves as the main source of data. The narrative is examined as a literary work that uses symbolism as a rhetorical and aesthetic device, patriarchal societal systems, and gender ideas.

A review of the story's literature and corroborating feminist literary references form the basis of the non-experimental research design (Showalter, 1985). The main tool is the researcher, who reads the book actively, critically, and reflectively in order to spot symbolic aspects and societal criticism.

Key symbols in the narrative are identified, their meanings are interpreted within sociocultural contexts, and they are connected to feminist theoretical frameworks like criticisms of patriarchy (Beauvoir, 1949), the medicalization of women (Mitchell, 1887), and social control (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979).

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Yellow Wallpaper as a Symbol of Patriarchal Oppression

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the wallpaper itself functions as a powerful symbol of disorder, psychological entrapment, and restricted freedom (Treichler, 1984). Its disturbing color and chaotic pattern provoke unease, mirroring the narrator's own feelings of being stifled and overregulated. Feminist critics see this wallpaper as a metaphor for the ways patriarchal norms limit women's ability to express themselves and move freely (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979).

The narrator's increasing fixation on the wallpaper reflects her subconscious struggle to understand and push back against the forces that confine her. Her close inspection of its design becomes a way of reclaiming her intellect—something her husband and doctors have systematically denied her. This inner resistance aligns with Hélène Cixous's idea of *écriture féminine*, where women express themselves through non-traditional, often emotional and intuitive means. Denied the freedom to write, the narrator instead projects her voice through the symbolic reading of the wallpaper.

What may seem like just a strange pattern is in fact a layered representation of how society controls female identity. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain how repeated social expectations keep women in submissive roles. The narrator's deep discomfort with the wallpaper reflects this greater systemic control.

Roland Barthes's view that symbols are sites of contested meaning also comes into play here. The narrator's intense scrutiny of the wallpaper becomes a symbolic rebellion—a quiet but powerful attempt to challenge the ideological structures that restrict her. Thus, the wallpaper stands not only as a literal barrier but also as a representation of deeper, structural oppression.

2. The Nursery as a Symbol of Women's Infantilization

The room where the narrator is kept was once a nursery—its barred windows and scratched walls suggest past restraint. This space comes to represent the way women are often treated like children in patriarchal systems: seen as incapable of autonomy and subject to male oversight (Beauvoir, 1949). John's paternalistic yet controlling behavior reflects how love under patriarchy can disguise dominance.

Turning a nursery into a room for adult confinement reinforces the idea that women are perceived as immature, irrational beings. The room's physical marks—rings, gouges, bars—become lasting symbols of how generations of women have been restrained. The narrator's placement here is no coincidence; it reflects how society metaphorically "locks up" women in a state of dependency.

Simone de Beauvoir's notion of woman as "the Other" is evident here. The narrator isn't treated as a full person with valid thoughts; instead, she is expected to accept decisions made for her. This infantilization points to the broader structures that silence women and strip them of authority over their own lives.

Luce Irigaray's theory that domestic space reinforces patriarchy fits well with this scene. The nursery—with all its connotations of helplessness—symbolizes how the home can serve as a tool to keep women subordinate. Its features suggest control and passivity, reducing the narrator to someone in need of constant supervision.

Julia Kristeva's idea of *abjection* also offers insight here: the nursery is both a space of repression and one that stirs a desire to break free. It becomes a site of inner conflict where the female self struggles to emerge, but remains crushed under layers of social and psychological control.

3. The Woman Behind the Wallpaper: Dual Identity and Rebellion

One of the most haunting images in the story is the figure of a woman trapped behind the wallpaper. As the narrator's mental state worsens, this woman becomes clearer—and eventually, the narrator identifies with her (Lanser, 1989). This shadowy figure is not just hallucination but represents a buried self, trying to break through the roles society has forced upon her.

The crawling woman becomes a symbolic double—a rebellious part of the narrator who refuses to conform. As the narrator's perception of reality deteriorates, this figure becomes more vivid, standing in for the narrator's inner resistance. Tearing off the wallpaper is both a literal act and a symbolic gesture of defiance.

Gilbert and Gubar's theory of the "madwoman in the attic" provides a compelling lens here: female madness in literature often hides an unspoken protest. The crawling woman reflects a buried narrative of resistance—one the narrator finally embraces, even at the cost of her social acceptance.

Gayatri Spivak's idea of the subaltern—the voiceless outsider—sheds light on this character as well. The trapped woman embodies those silenced by dominant ideologies. Through her, the narrator voices a protest that could not otherwise be heard.

Antonio Gramsci's notion of critical consciousness is also relevant. The narrator's attempt to liberate the woman within the wallpaper is an act of awakening—a revolt against the dominant systems that control female autonomy. It shows that resistance can emerge, even from hidden or suppressed parts of the self.

4. John: The Medical Figure and Husband as Patriarchal Authority

John, the narrator's husband and doctor, embodies two layers of patriarchal authority—familial and institutional. His belief that his wife is simply suffering from a “temporary nervous depression” (Mitchell, 1887) and his insistence on isolation reflect how medicine was historically used to control and pathologize women (Showalter, 1985).

John's treatment of the narrator reveals a deeper societal pattern: male professionals often discredit women's emotional and intellectual insights. His control over every aspect of her life—disguised as care—reinforces the idea of benevolent patriarchy, where a woman's lack of autonomy is seen not as oppression, but as a symptom.

Foucault's theory of power and knowledge illustrates how John's authority isn't just personal—it's systemic. He uses medical discourse to frame his wife's behavior and to maintain social control. This form of domination cloaks itself in reason, making it harder to challenge.

John serves as a symbol of how institutions and domestic life work together to keep women voiceless. Drawing from R.D. Laing, we can see how women's genuine experiences are often reframed as mental illness. John's actions reduce the narrator's distress to a diagnosis, reinforcing structures that invalidate female suffering.

5. Madness as Liberation: Insanity as Protest Against Norms

In a striking twist, it is through madness that the narrator achieves her strongest sense of liberation. By the story's end, she crawls across the room and announces that she has finally “come out” of the wallpaper (Gilman, 1892). Within a critical context, her descent into insanity can be seen not as breakdown, but as a final, desperate act of rebellion against a system that continuously erases women's voices (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979).

Rejecting the roles of obedient wife and passive patient, she enters a new space where she reclaims some measure of control. Her crawling—though read by others as insanity—is a reclaiming of her body and a rejection of social and linguistic norms.

Kristeva's theory of *abjection* helps us understand this transformation: in rejecting what society expects, the narrator begins to articulate a self that had been forcibly repressed. Madness becomes the only language left to express a female experience denied recognition in patriarchal discourse.

Lacan's view that madness disrupts the symbolic order adds further depth: in embodying the woman she once saw behind the wallpaper, the narrator breaks away from externally imposed identities. Her mental collapse, then, becomes a symbolic—and tragic—victory over a world that refused to hear her.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses strong symbolic elements to criticize the patriarchal norms that limit women's freedom, especially in domestic and medical contexts. The story highlights how the main character's mental decline reflects the broader issue of women's silenced voices and lack of autonomy. The analysis shows how literature can become a space for resistance, using symbolism to question existing power structures. This contributes to literary and feminist studies by offering a deeper understanding

of how fiction can reveal social issues and support the development of gender-conscious reading.

Suggestions Future research may consider exploring similar themes in other feminist texts from the same era, using different perspectives such as psychoanalysis or cultural studies. This story may also be applied in educational settings to introduce students to feminist literature and to spark discussions about gender roles, mental health, and the role of narrative in expressing personal and social struggles.

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