

Politics and Architecture of the Gothic House in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*¹

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ABSTRACT

The gothic 'house' with the gothic architecture gives the expression of the bizarre, macabre psychological states with an atmosphere of suspense, uncertainty and horror. This paper discusses the different types and functions of the house as a Gothic elements in a feminist narrative. The paper offers a new insight on cultural perception of the Gothic since the author considers the house a central theme in her narrative with meaning either the building or the family line - this paper's main focus will be on various forms of interaction between the house and the people who live in it. American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* will provide the textual basis for this investigation.

The paper aims to show the socio-cultural peculiarities in the adaptation and transformation of the Gothic house to fit the American frame. The house is an embodiment of the heroine's visibility in this text and is significant to the story's politics in addressing an uncomprehending male- dominated society. Also shows the multiple cultural layers of the Gothic architecture that bring up a recurrent collection of themes of madness, morality, criminality, family bonds and the animal or demon within human psyche.

Keywords: *Gothic; Architecture; Perkins Gilman; fiction; madness.*

INTRODUCTION

Gothic novels are considered an inspiration for female writers to react against the male dominance as male voices are higher in many representations of such literary forms. The setting of the Gothic house is sometimes shared between a husband and a wife with a major plot showing the outcome of criminality and oppression. *The Yellow Wallpaper* published in 1892 by the American writer Perkins Gilman is a novel showing domestic realism caught in the fantasy of the Gothic house with elements of mystery, terror and psychological problems. The house in its Gothic architecture offers the reflections of the bizarre, macabre psychology within an atmosphere of suspense and horror. The socio-cultural factors affect the narrative in showing women oppression within the framework historical of Nineteenth century English society.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman married Charles Stetsman in 1884, and gave birth to her daughter in 1885. After that she suffered from serious postpartum depression. Her battle with postpartum depression and the doctors she dealt with during her illness inspired her to write *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

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The Narrator and the Yellow Wallpaper in a Gothic House

This paper sheds light on the way that dungeons and endless corridors that are considered a hallmark of European Gothic are removed from the American Gothic house described as a colonial mansion throughout this narrative. The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a mentally disturbed woman. She begins the story by telling the reader about her move to a beautiful house for the summer. Her husband, John, is also her doctor, and the move is to help the narrator overcome her mental illness, which she explains as nervous depression after the birth of their baby. John's sister, Jennie, also lives with them and works as their housekeeper.

Though her husband believes she will get better, the narrator is depressed and has an active imagination. She likes to write about her own world with the focus on her baby. She hides her writing from her husband because he disapproves. There is a nurse that cares for the baby since the narrator herself is too nervous to provide care.

The reason why she does not get well is part of the mystery. A medical diagnosis is a verbal formula representing a constellation of physical symptoms and observable behaviors. Once formulated, it dictates a series of therapeutic actions. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the diagnosis of hysteria or depression is believed to be a conventional woman's disease of the nineteenth century. This sets in motion a therapeutic regimen which involves language in several ways. The narrator is forbidden to engage in normal social conversation and her physical isolation is designed to remove her from the possibility of over-stimulating intellectual discussion. She is further encouraged to exercise self-control and avoid expressing negative thoughts and fears about her illness. She is also urged to keep her fancies and superstitions. Above all, she is forbidden to work and to write. Learning to monitor her own speech, she develops an artificial feminine self who reinforces the terms of her husband's expert diagnosis. This self-attempt to speak reasonably and in "a very quiet voice," refrains from crying in his presence, and hides the fact that she is keeping a journal. This can be a self-disguise to truly shape the narrative in a confrontation with language since she does not feel free to speak truthfully "to a living soul" (Gilman, 2004).

The narrator confides her thoughts to a journal, "dead paper", instead. The only safe language is dead language. But even the journal is not altogether safe domain for self-expression.

The architecture of the house inspires the horror of the narrative. The narrator and her husband have a large room that has ugly, yellow wallpaper which the narrator criticizes. She asks her husband if they can change rooms and move downstairs but he rejects her demands. The more she stays in the room, the more the narrator's fascination with the hideous wallpaper grows. After hosting family for July 4th, the narrator expresses feeling even worse and more exhausted. She struggles to do daily activities, and her mental state is deteriorating. John encourages her to rest more. In the time between July 4th and their departure, the narrator is seemingly driven insane by the yellow wallpaper. She sleeps all day and stays up all night to stare at it, believing that it comes alive, and the patterns change and move. Then, she begins to believe that there is a woman in the wallpaper who alters the patterns and is watching her.

A few weeks before their departure, John stays overnight in town and the narrator wants to sleep in the room by herself so she can stare at the wallpaper uninterrupted. She believes that she can see the woman in the wallpaper. John returns and frantically tries to be let in, and the narrator refuses; John is able to enter the room and finds the narrator crawling on the floor. She claims that the woman in the wallpaper has finally exited.

The specific description of the house symbolizes the women's trapped feelings. Windows are not letting the light in but become the barrier that imprisons her and shows the darkness within. She cannot see through these windows. There is the other world and many other possibilities but she cannot embrace them. She says that she cannot even look out of these windows because she can only see more creeping women. The outer world reflects her own psyche. A woman that is oppressed and has to creep because of the society. She believes that women should stay in the shadows and never be exposed to daylight. In such a house there is no gateway. She is prevented by her husband to get to the other side of the house. Consequently the house is no more a secure realm for its inhabitants.

The house is a main symbol of female oppression. It is described as a "colonial mansion, a hereditary estate" and represents the 19th century patriarchal society in which they live. The community that confines the narrator and women in general. She finds something to be creepy about the house and even calls it "haunted" but her husband brushes it off, laughing about it and simply blaming her feelings on a "draught".

The room she stays in represents this even further. The narrator thinks it used to be a nursery due to the window that had been “barred for little children” and the “nailed down” bed produce the uncomfortable feeling of a prison which is underlined by the fact that the narrator doesn’t get to leave the room very often as she is supposed to rest as much as possible in order to get over her depression. The room’s wallpaper immediately catches the narrator’s attention. She announces to have never seen a “worse paper” in her life” and describes it with negative words calling the colour almost revolting.

At first, it seems to be bearable to live in but the longer the narrator stays in the room or the house, the more she wants to leave, and the more it seems to be “haunted” . What only seemed to be her imagination at first turns out to be true due to her growing paranoia and the woman startling behind the wallpaper. However, she has grown to be more and more uncomfortable with the social codes and the gender norms, wanting to break out of it. According to Barbara A. Suss, the room in which the narrator is placed in and the wallpaper in it have eventually influenced the narrator’s mind, adding to her loss of sanity and paranoia and producing a narrative that is complex and subversive. The text becomes both psychologically realistic and impossible. (Suss, ,2003).

The Yellow Wallpaper is not only considered Gilman’s classic feminist text but also a postmodern fictional text that is transformed into different vibrant cultural visual shapes in our 21st Century worldwide cultural perceptions of feminist views. In London William Morris Gallery, the American Nigerian artist Kehinde Wiley opens his art show on February 22nd 2020. The show consists of series of paintings of female portraits in harmony with the self-horror expressions that we find in Gilman’s fictional text. (Huges, 2020) The artist who is famous for his 2018 Obama portrait has captured Gilman’s fictional neurotic woman and produces the hyperreal portraits of women of colour dressed in vibrant streetwear. The artist has succeeded in self – consciously shaping his subjects portraits in backgrounds of variety coloured wallpapers for each paintings. Gilman’s text shows many facts of women oppression in the question of race besides the classic views of white women escaping the prison of patriarchy. It has become the symbolism of all oppressed women crawling under the wallpaper of different cultured yellow prisons.

The above reading of the fictional text is based on the fact that the narrator has no name nor personal traits excepts her depression and willingness to write a diary. She is treated like a child by her husband who pushes her into complete passivity. She is unable to make any descriptions about her life. Gilman is showing the typical husband – wife relationship of her time as the domestic life is managed by masculine rules and the family house becomes a male dominated institution. This oppression is turning the woman into the unnatural woman. Tori Moi observes that women are not allowed to shape their own images of femaleness, and instead must confirm the patriarchal rules imposed on them. Nineteenth century political legislations established the role of wives and mothers within defined borders put by men. The link between feminism and women’s struggle for civil rights. Many nineteenth century American feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Antony were active in the struggle for women rights and the abolition of slavery. (Moi, 2002). Women were kept subservient to men.

The intellectual background on mental illness during the nineteenth century shows the connection between the health of both the body and the mind. The excessive exercise of the intellect or feelings. The blood- vessels of the eye can be bursting and its bloodshot appearance shows a warning for the need of rest. The brain is affected in the same way by excessive use. Under the head of excessive mental action must be placed the indulgence of the imagination in novel reading and castle building. (Golden, 2004). In *The Yellow Wallpaper* , the narrator attempts to write as a psychological stimuli to react against her disturbed mental state . She was denied the right of writing by her own husband who is also her doctor. She is gradually transformed into a creature exists outside the layers of definite realities of the socio political frame of her world. Hence the house is changed from its domestic existence as a safe domain into a mysterious zone of horror. It Gothic architecture emphasizes this new shape as the source of horror. The Gothic style of Victorian house building was distinctive with pointed arches, tall towers, steep roofs, and colorful patterns of tile and brick on the exterior. Inside the house the staircases are made of expensive wood and marble and painted ceilings. (York, 2012). In such context the narrator becomes a gothic heroine wishes to gain domestic privacy and escape her domestic partner who violates her self-image by imposing his male dominance. According to Milbank The female Gothic is a term that impeaches a certain relationship between the heroine and the Gothic house reflecting the Victorian culture of the female Gothic plot. The emphases shifts from the intellectual villains and their houses in the shadow of the law to the romances of mystery and the act of writing itself in the service of the legal process. (Milbank. 1992). Such reference to legal legislations can be implied in the *Yellow Wallpaper* within the social authority given to the husband in

manipulating his wife. But the malignant male aristocratic discipline is overthrown by the female escape. The female suppression is portrayed by placing her within a sexual hierarchy.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper* the husband is away one evening and the wife locks the door, throws the key out of the window. Then she starts peeling the wallpaper. She thinks of committing a suicide but believes it to be “improper and might be misconstrued”. She circles the room and follows the pattern of the wallpaper and finally becomes the woman inside the wallpaper trapped in an endless maze. When the husband comes and breaks open the door, he faints as he looks at his wife crawling. She laughs and creeps over his slumped body that is blocking her path in order to continue circling the room. Such scene is not only an image of madness as the wife suffers from postpartum depression and social disorder but an act of rebelling against prevailing social attitudes imposed on her within the walls of this Gothic house. The transformation of both heroine and the house from the spatial domains into some mysterious supremacy over the Victorian social codes and traditions gives the text variety of interpretations beyond the limitations of the motif of confinement and enclosure of a woman living in a patriarchal society. Since the narrator is crucially engaged in writing and setting the record of her experiences in a journal. The text becomes a feminist document by nineteenth century woman. As Elvira Pulitano observes this document is directly the sexual politics of the male-female and husband - wife relationships. (Shukla, 2004). The struggle over women’s rights to possess her desires as well as her language. Her writing relationship with the wallpaper is a metaphor for women’s discourse as written in the story “thick with life”. This act of writing enables her to possess authority. Her madness becomes “sanity” that enables her to articulate new perceptions of reality.

According to the theory of Helene Cixous, the *écriture féminine*, women must write through their bodies. The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* in the story violates the silence imposed upon her by “writing the body” both by physically circling the room and writing the pages of the story. (Sellers, 2003). The narrator gains triumph over the domestic violence and sexual exploitation. The yellow colour of the wallpaper and its smell is a powerful symbol of repressed sexuality.

The Gothic house itself takes control of the narrator’s consciousness. She is bewitched by its beauty at first as well as being haunted by it. The ironic ending of the tale when the narrator breaks away from her confinement showing several rhetorical gestures alluding to the Gothic tradition is the ultimate realization of women going mad in their home-prisons.

CONCLUSION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman described herself as a woman supporting a woman and she was a close friend of Adeline E. Knapp, a reformer and a journalis in the Pacific Women’s Press Association. This adds to the fact that the Gothic female created in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is an attempt to engage in the politics of gender and to create a paradigm conflict that stimulates the reader to take a stand with or against the narrator. The story lies at the heart of the American Gothic literature and according to Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet it frustrates the identification and critical judgment. (Monnet, 2013). It illustrates the physical and mental deterioration of women during the nineteenth century in America but also showing the ongoing conversation regarding issues of gender and race within the tradition of the American Gothic to condemn the sexual politics that deny women their self- identification.

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