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### Shades of Yellow

In *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the reader sees the transition of a woman of fair health into a woman of insanity. At the beginning of the story, the narrator's husband believes she suffers from a temporary nervous depression. He picks a room for her in their secluded summer estate, asks that she rest constantly, and refuses to allow her to write, as she usually does. When she tries to argue with him concerning all his rules, he insists he knows what is best for her because he is a doctor, and for that reason, she agrees to his wishes. The narrator feels uncomfortable in the estate and eventually becomes obsessed with the yellow wallpaper in the upstairs room she has been confined to. The narrator claims a woman is trapped within the wallpaper, and as her time in the estate comes to a close, she decides to free the woman by peeling away the yellow wallpaper. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a short story that can be interpreted in many different ways. By simply reading this story, most won't see the multiple ways it can be understood. Presenting many critical perspectives of this difficult to understand short story allows the reader to more easily form their own interpretation of the story and to see how many different ideas this story evokes from its readers. The true intentions of Charlotte Perkins Gilman for writing *The Yellow Wallpaper* may never be known for sure. Through analyzing the articles pertaining to this short story, the most common interpretations connect the story with feminism. By way of the interpretations I have examined, this paper will explore the

multiple avenues of *The Yellow Wallpaper* by discussing the different political and social challenges, linked closely with feminism, which the author experienced while writing the story.

In *Monumental feminism and literature's ancestral house: Another look at 'The Yellow Wallpaper'*, Janice Haney-Peritz states, "It is this male line of response that the 1973 edition of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' seeks to disrupt and displace, implicitly by affixing to the text the imprint of the Feminist Press and explicitly by appending to the text and afterword in which Elaine Hedges reads the story as a "feminist document," as "one of the rare pieces of literature we have by nineteenth-century woman which directly confronts the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship" (Haney-Peritz 114). Whether Gilman meant for her short story to become a symbol for feminism or not, that is exactly what it became. Feminism was a significant and influential force in the United States during the 1970s. A version of *The Yellow Wallpaper* was published in 1973, and by this year, feminism was a part of many women's daily lives. Roe versus Wade and Frontiero versus Richardson were two Supreme Court cases surrounding women's rights that occurred within the same year a version of Gilman's story was released by the Feminist Press. It is no coincidence then that Gilman's release of this story was viewed as an act of supporting feminist protests and ideas during that time. Haney-Peritz also says, "Indeed if it can be said that by becoming another woman, the narrator realizes herself in spite of John, then it can also be said that the self she realizes is not "her" self but a self-endangered by John's demands and desires" (Haney-Peritz 120). Gilman's short story was picked apart and interpreted by feminists to display the inferiority that women felt from their male counterparts. Although Gilman never explicitly stated her story was directly or indirectly about feminism, the critics and readers from that time used the story to benefit their cause. Haney-Peritz uses quotes from the story and interpretations from feminists of that time to show

how instances from the story could advocate feminism. While feminists took this story and their one-sided interpretations to the extreme, Gilman's short story would arise at the perfect time to become the martyr the feminist movement needed.

Asha Nadkarni, author of *Reproducing Feminism in Jasmine and 'The Yellow Wallpaper'*, articulates, "While Gilman's tale of a privileged white woman's descent into madness may serve as an allegory for many Anglo-American Second wave feminists, *Jasmine* seemingly offers a happier narrative of feminist development—one that does not end in madness and one that is ostensibly available to all" (Nadkarni 218). Nadkarni's article discusses the two different approaches that *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Jasmine* take towards advocating feminism. In the eyes of critics, *The Yellow Wallpaper* takes on a more aggressive and demanding role as it addresses feminism, but *Jasmine* takes on a more passive and a more upbeat role. By contrasting the two approaches, readers can see how gruesome and intense Gilman's story really is. Nadkarni states, "In her groundbreaking analysis of race in 'The Yellow Wallpaper', Susan Lanser takes issue with precisely this claim: she argues that such universalist readings create a feminist subjectivity for the story's narrator and reader through a violently reductive interpretive act. As a corrective, Lanser "risk[s] overreading" the wallpaper by interpreting it in racial terms. Focusing specifically on the yellow color of the paper and by excavating examples of Gilman's anti-immigrant and anti-Chinese sentiments in her other writings, Lanser links descriptions of the wallpaper to nativist tropes" (Nadkarni 220). Although this article mainly focuses on the contrasts of the two stories, I believe this quote is important because it shows how the happenings of the world around Gilman shaped her writing. Whether or not the color of the wallpaper has something to do with Gilman's beliefs on the immigration of Chinese people into America at this time or not, it is worth noting the time that the Immigration Act of 1970 was

passed in connection with the time Gilman's story was released. While *Jasmine* shows readers a subtler approach to advocating feminism, *The Yellow Wallpaper* was more of an attention getter, and that was the response the feminist movement was looking for. While Gilman's story was more outspoken, sometimes a subtle approach could be considered the best approach. Even with the story's outspoken approach, there are still subtle truths that lie within the story's framework.

In the article *On Not Reading Between The Lines: Models of Reading In 'The Yellow Wallpaper'*, Jeannette King and Pam Morris write, "Increased awareness of sexual inequality made it easier to read the story as an almost scientific case study of breakdown, caused by the repressive prohibition against any unwomanly activity imposed on the protagonist by her physician husband" (King and Morris 24). The article by King and Morris specifically talks about how easy it is for someone, who was made aware of the inequality of men and women, to simply analyze *The Yellow Wallpaper* as being only about the oppression of women. Before reading the story, if the reader did not have a position on feminism, they might interpret the story to simply be a sort of horror story, rather than there being a deeper meaning. The writers of the article also state, "The creeping figure behind the paper trying to break through is the narrator's double, and, as the narrator's anger and hostility towards her husband gradually surface in the text, so she assists the double to break free from the forms that confine her" (King and Morris 25). The narrator expresses her oppression by freeing her double from the wallpaper. This is symbolic of women freeing themselves from the grasp of inequality. The authors go on to say, "Annette Kolodny is more concerned with the history of the sex-coded readings of the story, but she too sees the woman behind the paper as the narrator's true inner self: 'What she is watching, of course, is her own psyche writ large... the underlying if unacknowledged patterns of her real-life experience...'" (King and Morris 25). The narrator has become the symbol of the feminists.

By freeing herself from oppression, or the paper, it displays the mission of feminists. While the story does have a lot of symbolic meaning concerning feminism, the connections of the article made with the narrator and the women behind the paper being the narrator's inner self are undeniable. *The Yellow Wallpaper* has more of a direct connection to Gilman than most readers may realize.

*Gilman's 'Interminable Grotesque': The Narrator of 'The Yellow Wallpaper'* by Beverly A. Hume says, "Rather, I maintain that, as a writer, she fails to recognize of the significance of the comically grotesque texture of her tale. Because of this artistic failure, she assumes the grotesque proportions of the yellow wallpaper, becomes a grotesque figure, and, in so doing, transforms her narrative into a disturbing, startling, and darkly ironic tale about nineteenth-century American womanhood" (Hume 477). *The Yellow Wallpaper* was inspired by its author's similar experience. In Gilman's autobiography, she claimed that she based her short story on her experiences with rest cure therapy. Writing the story was her way of conveying to her doctor that this treatment was wrong and could lead to other problems that could become far worse. Hume states, "Despite her stated didactic intent, there are marked discrepancies between Gilman's autobiographical account of her nervous breakdown and her narrator's in "The Yellow Wallpaper." (Hume 478). Gilman believed there were gender-encoded misconceptions related to her diagnosis, as well as the diagnosis of other women. What Gilman did not count on however, was her simple story to promote a problem that personally affected her would become a gruesome tale. Hume talks about how she does not believe Gilman was aware of how far she takes the intenseness of her story. Gilman writes, "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" (Gilman 684). The narrator decides that she is the woman behind the wallpaper, and she becomes

consumed with the idea that she is now free to do as she chooses without being confined any longer. The narrator really takes on the persona of an insane, mentally ill woman that appears a little too over the top to some readers. The severity of this short story makes Hume wonder if this is simply a story or if this is a narrative of exactly how severe Gilman's illness was at one point. Regardless, Gilman's story, while it can be viewed positively, it is also viewed in much a darker way than simply as an advocate for feminism.

*Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in "The Yellow Wallpaper"* by Carol Margaret Davison states, "Working from the premise that Gilman's tale "adroitly and at times periodically employs Gothic conventions to present an allegory of literary imagination unbinding the social, domestic, and psychological confinements of a nineteenth-century woman writer," Johnson provides a fairly satisfactory general overview of "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a Gothic production" (Davison 47). Davison goes on to talk about the way the circumstances in the story could lead readers to believe its author could possess some dark qualities that surface in her writing. While reading Gilman's story, some interpreters found that her story resembles that of Female Gothic style writing. Davison explains, "Their common oversight has been to fail to consider the suitability and implications of Gilman's choice of what later came to be classified as the Female Gothic Mode, a form that is generally distinguished from the traditional Gothic mode as it centers its lens on a young woman's rite of passage into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially the joint institutions of marriage and motherhood" (Davison 48). This style of writing is identified in *The Yellow Wallpaper* by the way Gilman portrays the narrator. She makes the narrator start out by being slightly sick, but by the end of the story she has transitioned into a grotesque woman. While it may not be the traditional story about a woman's rite of passage, as described in the quote by Davison, the

Gothic aspect of her writing is present in this particular story. This is why the Female Gothic style of writing classifies *The Yellow Wallpaper* so perfectly. I do not believe Gilman intended for her short story to be so grotesque, but I do believe her intentions of catching the attention of the story's readers was a success.

In *Escaping the jaundiced eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'*, John S. Bak writes, Yet what Gilman critics for the most part have (until recently) tended to neglect, and what this interpretation will stress, is that the narrator, despite her doctor's ill-advice and her husband's dehumanizing imprisonment, is successful in freeing herself from her male-imposed shackles, her Panopticon (Bak 40). Bak uses the example of a Panopticon to explain the events of the story. A Panopticon is a circular prison with cells arranged around a central well, from which the prisoners inside could be observed at all times. The primary goal of this type of prison was to generate a symbolic relationship between the observer and the observed. This directly connects with the way the narrator and the woman behind the paper had a relationship. They could always watch each other and neither could escape the view of the other. Bak goes on to say, "By placing her in this room, John, the narrator's husband, resembles the penal officers of the eighteenth-century psychiatric wards of penitentiaries, whose credo Foucault describes: 'project the subtle segmentations of discipline onto the confused space of internment, combine it with the methods of analytical distribution proper to power, [and] individualize the excluded...'" (Bak 42). Being imprisoned is definitely not a good thing, but being imprisoned and constantly watched is something far more sadistic. Having someone constantly watching your every move is a little over the top. The Panopticon is an example of where the observer and observed have no choice but to share a bond. This is what happened with the narrator and the woman she saw behind the paper. It is no coincidence to see

the transition of the narrator take such a drastic turn toward insanity. The confinement by her husband is to blame for the madness that consumes the narrator, and without this prison-like lifestyle, the narrator could have gotten better rather than worse. This critical perspective of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is very similar to my own.

My personal perspective incorporates almost all of these interpretations, but I place most of the blame for the narrator's transition to insanity on John. I interpret *The Yellow Wallpaper* to be a story of a woman driven to insanity by her husband. Even though he might be honestly trying to help her, he is not succeeding. Rather than treating her like an adult, he simply pretends she is a child. He just talks down to her and evaluates her situation as somewhat simplistic and unimportant. I would definitely go as far as to place the blame for everything that happens to the narrator entirely on her husband. The narrator even states, "John is a physician, and *perhaps*—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind—) *perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster" (Gilman 673). The main problem that the narrator faces is no one believes she is actually sick. Since no one believes there is a problem, they are treating the narrator like there is nothing wrong. The narrator writes, "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—a slight tendency—what is one to do? My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing" (Gilman 673). If John had not brought the narrator to the secluded estate, then she would have never been confined to the upstairs room with the yellow wallpaper. I am in no way suggesting she would have gotten better had she not gone to the estate, but I do believe she would not have become insane. The narrator's husband being the dominate figure here makes the narrator subject to his instruction and demands. This is where the aspects of feminism play a role in my interpretation.

The reader might not know what the outcome would have been had the narrator gotten to choose her own room in the house. She might have been able to recover and return to a sane state of mind. The reader would be blind to not consider the fault of the narrator's husband in this story. Although the husband is a doctor, he is the one I believe to be at fault for the worsened condition the narrator and her double found themselves in inside the upstairs room.

*The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a short story that can be examined through many different mediums. It is a story of insanity, confinement, and freedom. While it might not be a conventional short story, it is definitely a controversial one. Freedom from confinement is one thing that drives many people to extremes. I believe this is why this story was advocated so heavily by the feminist community. In the case of Gilman's story, her desperate attempt at freeing herself causes her to lose her sanity. Leading a life similar to that of a prisoner would cause anyone to want to break free of that type of confinement. Especially when that person is innocent, they begin to question why they are forced to live this way. This is true of the life of the narrator after moving into the estate. *The Yellow Wallpaper* raises a question in the mind of the reader. That question is to what extremes will people will go to when you confine them. Living the life of a criminal when you have done nothing to deserve that type of life is something no one should stand for. Being placed in a similar situation, I know that feeling of confinement all too well. There are some things everyone must escape from, and at some point, you must stand up for yourself. The only person that can free you from the confines of your own mind and life, when others put you there, is yourself. You can be responsible for your own life and your own destiny. Sometimes others think they can judge what is best for our lives based on our current situation. You and God are they only people you have to answer to when all is said and done. No one should have the power to dictate the course of your life or your happiness

except you. This is demonstrated by the way the narrator, despite her husband's attempts to do the 'right thing' for her, frees herself from the yellow wallpaper. Eventually everyone must choose their own path, regardless of who agrees or disagrees with the choices they make. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is an example of how you can break free of the mental and physical confines that hold you back and how you can use those experiences to create a new and exciting future.

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