

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*: An Assertion of Gender Equality and Liberation

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"Leaving behind nights of terror and fear I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear I rise"
-Maya Angelou in *Still I Rise*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (July 3, 1860 – August 17, 1935) was a prominent American feminist, sociologist, novelist, writer of short stories, poetry, and nonfiction, and a lecturer for social reform. She was a utopian feminist during a time when her accomplishments were exceptional for women, and she served as a role model for future generations of feminists because of her unorthodox concepts and lifestyle. In 1898 she published *Women and Economics*, a theoretical treatise which argued, among other things, that women are subjugated by men, that motherhood should not preclude a woman from working outside the home, and that housekeeping, cooking, and child care, would be professionalized. The ideal woman," Gilman wrote, "was not only assigned a social role that locked her into her home, but she was also expected to like it, to be cheerful and gay, smiling and good-humored."

Gilman became a spokesperson on topics such as women's perspectives on work, dress reform, and family. In many of her major works, including "The Home" (1903), *Human Work* (1904), and *The Man-Made World* (1911), Gilman also advocated women working outside of the home. This paper captures through a miniscule eye Charlotte Perkins Gilman's assertion of gender equality and liberation of women in her semi-autobiographical short story "The Yellow Wallpaper".

Literature holds a mirror to the society, reflecting, representing and projecting the conventions, customs and culture of mankind. In a broader sense, it questions the existing patriarchal or andocentric ideologies, erasing the existing genealogies paving way to new phenomenal patterns. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a notable work of American Feminist literature

published in *The New England Magazine* in January 1892, that asseverates the socially constructed norms and practices oppressing women, subjugating women to an inferior status. "The Yellow Wallpaper" confronts the readers with issues that a woman is rejected, raising doubts on gender parity and postulates a new framework of societal structure.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman renders the short story in first person narration that oscillates between the past and present in stream-of-consciousness technique interweaving the plot into it and loading it with rhetorical questions and attributions by Jane, the protagonist. To Jane, the secure colonial mansion is the "haunted house" and "there is something queer about it." She completely abhors taking tonics and pills or the mental rest ("Rest cure") prescribed to her as a form of treatment for her 'nervous prostration' after the birth of her child by her physician husband. Indeed she prefers congenial work with excitement to relieve her stress and mental exertion. Gilman funnily puts forth how being cared too much and treated like a little child drains away a person's energy thus, "And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head".

The motherhood in her longs to nurture and nourish the baby. She laments, "Such a dear baby! And I *cannot* be with him." Gilman beautifully presents a woman craving for love, being shut in a room which she does not like. Jane perceives imaginary characters in an Utopian world. Her incommunicable existence with the outer world has negative repercussions ramifying her into non reality. She visualizes "absurd, unblinking eyes", "broken neck", "two bulbous eyes" in the patterns of paper. Her seclusion only worsens her state of mind and she retorts to writing, to engage herself creatively. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* declares, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved." Jane is forced to hide her writing from her husband and sister who deny her the pleasures of expression.

Gilman uses colour symbolism to denote the degrading mental stability of Jane. Writers have used colour to highlight the connectivity between the text, characters and setting. In literature, yellow is considered as a stimulating colour that denotes honour and loyalty. It is also an unstable colour associated with cowardice and mental illness. In Biblical terms, yellow is associated with fire, which in turn has always been interconnected with the Purification process. Yellow is one of the primary colours which come from then Earth itself. It cannot be formed by mixing any of the other colours. The counter part of the colour is mentioned in God's principle in that: In 1 Peter 1:7, "God talks about trials and purging" (The trail of faith will be more precious than Gold and be tried with fire)

Jane feels that, "The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing." The pattern seems to be a fungus to her infecting her in multifarious proportions and the florid arabesque, budding and sprouting in endless convulsions.

Gilman demonstrates how patriarchal domination tends to arrest a woman's creativity and debunk preconceived notions prevent her progress and development. Gender Flexibility is also discussed subtly in "The Yellow Wallpaper". Gender Flexibility is a broad term that encompasses a variety of behavioral and mental strategies. The key is that all these strategies transgress rigidly drawn structural and cultural boundaries between women as caretakers and men as breadwinners.

Mealey notes, "Evolutionary psychologists study statistical differences that correlate with gendered behaviors and see male dominance as hormonally induced." John takes away the autonomy of Jane which proves detrimental to her physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. The liberation that Jane strives for could denote the liberation of her spirit from strict authoritative standards and dictatorship. With nothing to stimulate her, she becomes obsessed by the pattern and colour of the wallpaper. "It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw – not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things. But there is something else about that paper – the smell! ... The only thing I can think of that it is like is the color of the paper! A yellow smell." She imagines a strange woman being held captive behind the dull, horrid patterns of the wallpaper. In the end, she imagines there are women creeping around behind the patterns of the wallpaper and comes to believe she is one of them. She locks herself in the room, now the only place she feels safe, refusing to leave when the summer rental is up. "For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow. But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way."

Gilman used her writing to explore the role of women in America at the time. She explored issues such as the lack of a life outside the home and the oppressive forces of the patriarchal society. Through her work, Gilman paved the way for writers such as Alice Walker and Sylvia Plath. The wallpaper is a symbol suggestive of the enticing suppressive elements that lock the women within the four walls of their homes, thereby pushing them into a stifling atmosphere bereft of freedom and cordiality. Jane, the narrator in the story tries to read the yellow wallpaper on the wall and conceive the meaning. She miserably fails, for it is "uncertain" and "lame." To the narrator, her caring yet misunderstanding husband's long notes of continuous preaches and Jennie's inexplicable looks only add to her failing mental coordination. "Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be", she adds to find relief to her tormented soul. Virginia Valian advocates, "We see girls and women as nurturing, communal and expressive. In brief, men act, women feel and express their feelings."

The narrator thinks, "And though I always see her, she *may* be able to creep faster than I can turn! I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind." Her husband treats her like a little child, calling her "darling", "blessed little goose" and "little girl." He does not provide her the liberty of decision making. She is forced to stay in a room which she hates- not a comfortable bedroom; instead, it's a room that appears to

have once been a nursery. Its "windows are barred for little children," "a gate on the stairs" and "a nailed-bed" showing again that she is being treated as a child, and also like a prisoner. He even isolates her from the familial bonding that she really needs and tends to instruct her which seem to be the couch of his concern.

Gilman portrays the pitiful state of female gender's incarceration by male patriarchy. According to Treichler's article *Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in The Yellow Wallpaper*, John's diagnosis and treatment of the narrator serve to control her speech. Treichler says, "Because she does not feel free to speak truthfully 'to a living soul' she confides her thoughts to a journal- 'dead paper'- instead." Instead of speaking freely to her husband John, that she believes her condition is more serious than temporary nervous depression, she confides these personal thoughts to her private journal. "He is very careful and loving," she writes in her journal, "and hardly lets me stir without special direction." The narrator's pleas to end her solitary confinement falls into the deaf ears of two men who take control of her-one presumably her husband and the other, her brother. They nip the bud of the female discourse.

In her vulnerable attempt to free herself from the room, she cries bitterly, which again is misunderstood by her husband who dismisses her representations as "fanciful". She is silenced and directed to be "rational". The creeping woman-troubling, ugly, also peppered with distorted heads with bulging eyes and strangled is indicative of women caught up in the intangible mires of the repressive society. Gilman writes that "nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so."

The narrator emerges as an artist victoriously at the end, unfettered and unshackled by the norms of the world, defining her true "self" and "her very being of existence". Her relief of writing opens the door of liberty. Gilman sketches the triumphant moment in a defiant tone, "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" The narrator creeping over the fainted body of her husband is symbolic of Gilman's voice for the female gender. Gilman argues that women's obligation to remain in the domestic sphere robbed them of the expression of their full powers of creativity and intelligence, while simultaneously robbing society of women whose abilities suited them for professional and public life. An essential part of her analysis was that the traditional power structure of the family made *no one* happy—not the woman who was made into an unpaid servant, not the husband who was made into a master, and not the children who were subject to both. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a clarion call by Gilman to voice out for women to fight against the obstacles that prevented them from existing beyond the sphere of their home - effectively hindering any kind of intellectual or creative growth.

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