Salem Leavitt

Professor Perez

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The Art of Insanity: An Analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Does an artist in captivity simply stop creating? Or do they find another surface to work on? In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper,* the narrator never stops creating; she just changes her medium.

The Yellow Wallpaper was written in 1892 and is widely considered a Gothic, feminist classic by modern audiences. In the story, the main character and narrator is prescribed the Victorian "rest-cure" by her physician husband for her hysteria. This is a parallel to Gilman's own experience being prescribed the "rest-cure" by Dr. Weir Mitchell, designed to prevent women from mental strain or exertion (Crowder 2). Gilman herself nearly went insane applying this "cure" and later wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a protest against the medical subjugation of women, but also the patriarchally driven neglect of women's issues as a whole. While the narrator's journal evidences her physical and mental downfall, the rebellion of it also embodies a certain freedom to express the thoughts and human emotions that the patriarchy condemned. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman repurposes madness as an act of artistic expression, with the narrator turning her mental decline into a creative process and the wallpaper into her canvas. Ultimately, her insanity is not the loss of identity, but a final, desperate expression of it.

Gilman opens the story by establishing the narrator's condition as fully mental. Her "illness" has nothing to do with physical ailment, but an overactive imagination, and thus the

cure targets her mind as well. Ironically, the rest-cure is the very thing that *causes* her mental decline, because the narrator's inability to write is akin to an inability to fully live. The narrator remarks that "John says the very worst thing I can do is think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad", showing that her "condition" itself is not the focus, so much as her active thinking about it, or just thinking in general. In the eyes of her husband and brother, her "illness" is autonomy, and in the narrator's eyes, it is her lack of autonomy.

She also expresses that her secret writings still cause her distress, saying, "I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal - having to be so sly about it…" (Gilman). She acknowledges previously that "congenial work, with excitement and change" would do her some good, but the fact that she must do it secretly and "in spite of them" frames simple creative expression as something forbidden or unsafe (Gilman). The hidden nature of her writing represents the men around her exerting authority over her mind and body. Just as her writings are secret, she feels her true identity as a writer/artist is secret as well and shamed by her husband. Through this, Gilman asserts that the narrator's mental deterioration is *not* caused by pathology, but directly by the restriction of her voice and right to expression. The later, real illness is then shown as a consequence of the cure for something that never really needed to be cured in the first place, rather than a cure for her real postpartum depression, allowing the narrator's stifled creativity and untreated depression to be expressed and reflected elsewhere, in the wallpaper itself.

The narrator's need to write is persistent because it is a part of who she is, and the journal becomes the one thing she can control. Her husband's authority over her represents the patriarchal control of women in Victorian society, and the narrator's journal represents women's rebellion against that control. Although she cannot fully express herself without being shamed

and crippled by her husband, she can still write herself into authentic existence in her journal, which is only hers. However, the journal inevitably became a risk for her safety, and afraid that her husband would discover it, she became enamoured and haunted by the wallpaper, which I think also represents emotional safety in a way, because even though it was the manifestation of the narrator's insanity, the experience was uniquely hers, and no one else could see or critique it.

As her conscious written voice deteriorated, and her consciousness moved onto the yellow wallpaper, her thoughts manifested as visages and patterns in the wallpaper because words could not accommodate her artistic expression as she descended into obsession. Initially, the narrator interprets the "art" in the wallpaper rather than creating it. She describes the wallpaper as an artist would dissect a piece, saying, "It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide" (Gilman). This shortly transitions to the narrator hallucinating a woman struggling inside the wallpaper, remarking "The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out", representing her own feelings of being trapped (Gilman).

Eventually, the narrator's obsession with the woman in the wallpaper consumes her, and she violently tears it off the wall, recounting "I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper" (Gilman). While this is the physical destruction of the wallpaper, it also marks the re-creation of the narrator as the woman her mind has dreamt up in the wallpaper. All of her suppressed thoughts, creations, and desires were projected onto the wallpaper because she was unable to express them herself. The canvas offers her a space for self expression that nothing and no one else would. The combination of the

narrator and the woman in the wallpaper signifies a shift from passive sickness to active authorship in the mental creation of a new being.

The end of the story supports this transition, with the narrator spitting at her husband, “I've got out at last…in spite of you and Jane”; assuming Jane is the narrator's name, the story further implies that the narrator has almost written herself into another self that was able to escape where she could not. In the final sentence of the story, the narrator steps over her husband's fainted body, symbolizing her taking back control over her own (new) self. Her insanity then becomes a final act of defiance rather than submission or failure. Her destruction of the wallpaper represents her rebellion against the rules imposed on her by her husband and society, implying that madness was the only accessible medium for female expression in an oppressive, chauvinistic society. Gilman’s writing style also supports this; it is fragmented, repetitive, and the imagery gets more visceral as the story progresses, representing both artistic experimentation and mental illness.

In her later commentary on the piece, “Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*”, Charlotte Perkins Gilman explained that “it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy”. However, in the story, the narrator can only achieve freedom *through* insanity, which highlights a fairly tragic paradox of women's creative freedom in the oppressive culture of Victorian-era America. The final scene of the narrator “creeping” over her husband's body is bittersweet; she has escaped her domestic role, but at the cost of her sanity. Ultimately, Gilman’s story remains relevant and powerful because it shows how the denial of women’s creativity and literal bodily autonomy can lead to dangerous and self-destructive forms of rebellion. The narrator’s madness may have been her undoing, but it was also her masterpiece.

Works Cited