



Psychopolitics and the Papered Self: Female Suffering in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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Abstract— *In a room wallpapered with madness, a woman crawls in circles, not just across the floor, but through the thick residue of a culture that has pathologized her very being. What begins as quiet discomfort with the décor becomes a descent into psychological collapse—a collapse orchestrated not by an inner weakness, but by the tightening noose of patriarchal medical care. The Yellow Wallpaper is not merely a gothic tale of nervous breakdown—it is a mirror turned toward the psychiatric practices and domestic ideologies of the 19th century, reflecting the cost of silencing women in the name of science and love. This paper explores the intersection of psychopolitics, melancholia, and female suffering in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work, drawing on theoretical insights from Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, and Gilman's autobiographical experiences. By contextualizing the protagonist's descent into madness within 19th-century medical discourse and sociocultural expectations of femininity, this study interrogates how gendered notions of mental illness were both pathologized and politicized. Through this multidisciplinary lens, the paper argues that *The Yellow Wallpaper* not only critiques medical misogyny but also performs a proto-feminist poetics of rebellion against the silencing of women's mental distress.*



Keywords— *Madness, medical misogyny, psychopolitics, female suffering, feminist literary criticism.*

"There are things in that paper which nobody knows but me, or ever will."

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "*The Yellow Wallpaper*"

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly attention to *The Yellow Wallpaper* has spanned feminist, psychoanalytic, and historical approaches. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's influential *The Madwoman in the Attic* positioned literary madness as a subversive response to the silencing of female voices in patriarchal literature. Elaine Showalter's historical work on hysteria and the rest cure further contextualized the story within nineteenth-century psychiatry. More recent feminist theorists have drawn on Kristeva's work to explore female melancholia as a structural condition tied to repression and loss of identity.

Michel Foucault's historiography, less often directly applied to literary texts, has become increasingly relevant in examining how madness is socially constructed and

institutionally policed. Scholars such as Shoshana Felman and Dianne Hunter have noted the usefulness of combining Foucauldian analysis with literary narratives that depict madness because of social power dynamics. This paper builds on these works by synthesizing Foucault's theory of madness and Kristeva's melancholia in a close reading of Gilman's text.

II. INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) endures as a seminal feminist text that uncovers the fraught nexus of mental illness, gender, and domestic ideology. "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" has since become a case study of the psychical consequences of the masculine

refusal to listen to a woman's words." (Thrallkill, 526) Written after Gilman's own traumatic experience with the "rest cure" prescribed by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the story allegorizes a woman's psychological unravelling under the guise of medical and marital care. Long read as a critique of Victorian domesticity and patriarchal medicine, the narrative invites a deeper examination of the structures that pathologize and politicize female suffering.

Examining *The Yellow Wallpaper* through the lenses of Julia Kristeva's melancholia and Michel Foucault's psychopolitics, this paper situates its analysis within Gilman's biographical context. Kristeva's conception of melancholia as a psychic disorder rooted in a loss that cannot be acknowledged or assimilated illuminates the narrator's fragmentation and repression of selfhood. Foucault's insights into the power dynamics of psychiatric discourse help unravel the husband-physician's disciplinary role, casting the narrator's madness not as deviance but as resistance. Finally, Gilman's autobiographical writings, especially her reflections on the failures of the rest cure, offer a first-person lens through which the story can be read as both testimony and critique.

Reclaiming Gilman's haunting short story as a psychopolitical text, the paper reads the protagonist's "madness" not as an aberration but as a response to systemic repression. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of melancholia, it explores how female suffering is internalized and rendered unspeakable within symbolic language. Michel Foucault's critique of institutional power offers a framework for analysing the "rest cure" as a disciplinary technology that rewrites female subjectivity under the guise of care. Finally, Gilman's biography—specifically her firsthand experience with psychiatric treatment—grounds the narrative in a historical reality that is as disturbing as the fiction it produced.

In fusing biography, theory, and narrative, this paper contends that *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a work of strategic resistance: a story that breaks down as its narrator does, exposing the structures that demand women suffer in silence. Madness, in this case, is not failure—it is revolt.

By integrating these voices, this study positions *The Yellow Wallpaper* not merely as a tale of personal madness, but as a potent political intervention—one that reveals how gender, medicine, and language converge to produce and silence the suffering woman. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing feminist and literary conversations about the aesthetics and politics of mental health in literature.

Adopting an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, this paper integrates literary analysis with critical theory to examine *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Michel Foucault's

Madness and Civilization provides the historical and philosophical foundation for understanding how madness is constructed and regulated by institutional forces, particularly within the medical establishment. Foucault's work reveals how modern societies have framed mental illness not solely as a clinical issue but as a political and social construct, often enforced through spatial confinement as a form of discipline. Complementing this structural critique, Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun* offers a psychoanalytic perspective on melancholia as a response to unmourned and unrecognized loss, particularly within the context of female subjectivity. Through close textual analysis, the paper explores how the story's narrative form, imagery, and character dynamics reflect these broader theoretical concerns. While Foucault exposes the mechanisms of institutional control, Kristeva's insights illuminate the internal psychic toll of patriarchal repression. In *Black Sun*, she theorizes melancholia as a psychic rupture resulting from a loss that cannot be symbolized or socially mourned—an experience that, for women, often manifests as a fragmented self. Anchoring this analysis in the historical context of nineteenth-century psychiatry, the paper also engages with the rest cure prescribed by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, whom Gilman explicitly critiques in both her fiction and autobiographical writings. Ultimately, the study situates *The Yellow Wallpaper* within evolving discourses on gender, mental illness, and domesticity.

Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* reconfigures madness not as an intrinsic pathology but as a construct produced through historical processes of exclusion and institutionalization. Foucault asserts that, by the nineteenth century, madness was sequestered, categorized, and treated under a "medical gaze" that sought to normalize and control deviant behaviour (Foucault). Particularly, women's bodies became sites upon which social anxieties about domesticity, sexuality, and autonomy were inscribed.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator's descent into madness is not a natural deterioration but a consequence of the so-called "rest cure" imposed by her husband, John, a physician. This cure, which enforces passivity, confinement, and the denial of creative expression, mirrors what Foucault terms the "great confinement"—a mechanism to silence those who disrupt the social order. The narrator's mental collapse thus emerges not from internal pathology but from the external, systemic oppression that demands her submission and erasure.

"The physical pain is incontestably real, that it seems to confer its quality of 'incontestable reality' on that power that has brought it into being" (Thrallkill, 525)

Julia Kristeva, in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, offers a psychoanalytic lens to understand melancholia as a profound, pre-linguistic grief, often tied to a loss that cannot be fully mourned or articulated. For women, Kristeva argues, melancholia often results from the internalization of patriarchal prohibitions that foreclose avenues for self-expression and autonomy.

In this context, gendered hermeneutics becomes essential to the paper's approach, offering a critical method for understanding how patriarchal systems of interpretation shape the meaning of madness, identity, and expression. The narrator is not simply misdiagnosed—she is misread and denied interpretive agency by both medical institutions and societal norms. Her melancholia can be seen as stemming from a loss of self that the dominant patriarchal culture refuses to recognize. Her confinement strips her of meaningful language and social agency, leaving her to identify with the inanimate—the grotesque wallpaper pattern that increasingly mirrors her fragmented psyche. In peeling away the wallpaper, the narrator performs an act of symbolic mourning and self-liberation, albeit through madness. “For as I will explain, Gilman’s historical moment is marked by the incursion of the literary into the medical, within the nascent discourse of psychotherapeutics.” (Thraikill, 527)

The “woman behind the wallpaper” becomes a metaphor for the buried, melancholic self. As Kristeva notes, melancholia is “a language that is not a language,” and the narrator’s increasing obsession with the wallpaper constitutes a symbolic, though fragmented, form of expression (Kristeva, p. 43)

Her identification with the trapped woman culminates in a moment of transgressive liberation when she declares: “I’ve got out at last... And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (Gilman, 1892). In this moment, madness becomes an assertion of subjectivity, albeit through destruction. Kristeva would interpret this as the melancholic subject reclaiming her lost identity through the collapse of the symbolic order that had erased her.

The creeping figure in the wallpaper becomes an emblem of all women trapped by domestic ideology. The act of tearing down the wallpaper is thus revolutionary, symbolizing the rejection of imposed roles. The narrator’s creeping around the room, her identification with the “woman behind the wallpaper,” becomes a transgressive act that blurs the boundaries between sanity and insanity, private and public spheres. As feminist scholar Sandra Gilbert notes, the story “dramatizes the ways in which patriarchal definitions of female sanity serve to imprison women in infantilized roles.” (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 735–739)

Gilman’s text locates madness within the seemingly benign space of the home, revealing how the domestic sphere, idealized as a site of feminine virtue, also served as a carceral institution. In line with Foucault’s analysis, the home becomes a microcosm of the asylum, where surveillance, control, and normalization are enacted under the guise of care.

John’s paternalistic control over his wife exemplifies the medicalization of female behaviour that pathologized emotional expression, intellectual ambition, and creative desires as signs of hysteria or nervous disorders. The narrator’s persistent journaling in *The Yellow Wallpaper* functions as both an act of resistance and a melancholic effort to preserve a sense of self within a repressive, medicalized domestic environment. Although her husband forbids intellectual activity, claiming it exacerbates her “nervous condition,” the narrator continues to write in secret. This act of disobedience is central not only to her narrative agency but to understanding how mental illness is gendered and controlled through language, or more precisely, through the denial of a woman’s access to meaningful expression.

In Michel Foucault’s analysis of madness in *Madness and Civilization*, the mad subject is denied the right to speak, as the modern medical system replaces the voice of the afflicted with the voice of the expert. (Foucault) Under the “medical gaze,” the body becomes a site of observation, discipline, and silence, particularly when the subject is female. This gaze is present in *The Yellow Wallpaper* in the figure of John, the narrator’s husband and physician, who insists that she avoid all “stimulating” activity, including writing, reading, and thinking. He tells her, “You are gaining flesh and colour, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you.” (Gilman, 1997) His assessment is not based on what the narrator feels, but on what he observes and prescribes. She, in turn, writes secretly: “I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!” (Ibid., 9.)

This covert journaling can thus be read as an act of Foucauldian resistance—an effort to reclaim subjectivity in a system designed to render her voiceless. It is a transgressive assertion of agency, in direct opposition to the institutionalized role imposed on her. The diary becomes the only space in which the narrator can record her inner reality, which the rest of the world seeks to erase.

Furthermore, Kristeva’s notion of melancholia as an “unspeakable grief” elucidates why the narrator’s attempts at self-articulation through writing are repeatedly thwarted. John’s prescriptions further police language already insufficient for expressing her condition. In this context, her breakdown can be read as a refusal of linguistic and social

frameworks that refuse to accommodate female differences. While the journal serves as an act of defiance, it also reveals the narrator's increasing entrapment in what Julia Kristeva would call melancholia—a form of mourning for a loss that cannot be consciously articulated or socially recognized. For Kristeva, melancholia is distinguished from normative mourning by its structure: the subject cannot locate or name what has been lost and therefore cannot process it through language. The loss is psychic and pre-symbolic, disintegrating the speaking subject.

In this light, the narrator's writing is an attempt to resist the descent into inarticulable despair. Yet her entries are fragmented, erratic, and increasingly irrational, reflecting the psychological disintegration Kristeva describes. Early in the story, her language is relatively coherent, but as the narrative progresses, the syntax becomes disrupted, and the entries become shorter and more obsessive, mirroring the fracturing of her identity. She writes, "There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day." (Gilman, 1997)

This statement reflects a shift: her writing becomes not a mirror of reality, but a projection of her internal breakdown. The journal records a melancholic merging with the other—the "woman behind the wallpaper"—a Kristevan figure of the abject, the unassimilated, and the excluded. The narrator's inability to mourn the loss of her freedom, creativity, and autonomy leads her to embody that very loss in her writing, which becomes a form of speech from the margins of subjectivity.

Gilman's story does not simply depict a descent into madness—it stages madness as a critique of the social structures that define and enforce it. The narrator's madness is at once the symptom of her repression and the vehicle of her resistance. Her descent is not into irrationality, but into a different rationality—one that exposes the absurdity of the norms around her.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is far more than a tale of personal psychological decline—it is a searing indictment of the sociomedical systems that defined, confined, and silenced women in the name of care. Through the lenses of Michel Foucault's psychopolitics and Julia Kristeva's theory of melancholia, the story emerges as a multifaceted exploration of how madness is produced not simply as a medical condition but as a response to systemic repression. Foucault's analysis reveals the narrator's domestic space as a microcosm of the asylum—her husband as both caregiver and jailor—while Kristeva's melancholia illuminates the internal devastation wrought by a loss of identity, voice, and meaning.

In this context, the narrator's madness is not pathology but protest. Her descent is a radical act of disobedience—a breakdown that doubles as a breakthrough, a rebellion against the symbolic and material conditions that render her voiceless. Her obsessive fixation on the wallpaper, her clandestine writing, and her eventual identification with the "woman behind the wallpaper" all mark a refusal to be contained by the interpretive frameworks of medicine, marriage, and domestic ideology.

Gilman's narrative strategy mirrors this rebellion: as the narrator's mind fragments, so too does the structure of the text, disrupting coherence and resisting the authority of rationalist discourse. This textual instability becomes its mode of resistance, suggesting that the act of writing, even in disarray, is a form of reclaiming subjectivity. The story thus becomes both a critique and an enactment of the struggle for female autonomy.

Ultimately, *The Yellow Wallpaper* stages madness not as personal failure but as political revolt—a revolt against a world that refuses to listen to women unless they are silent. By uniting critical theory with historical and biographical analysis, this paper affirms Gilman's story as an early feminist intervention, one that exposes how deeply the personal is entwined with the political, and how madness can serve not only as a symptom of oppression but also as a language of resistance.

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