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A Suppressed Reality in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a seminal work of feminist literature that critiques gender inequality, the medicalization of women's mental health, and patriarchal oppression in the late 19th century. Drawing from Gilman's own experience with postpartum depression and the controversial "rest cure," the story is analysed as an allegory of female entrapment and psychological deterioration. Through the symbolic use of the yellow wallpaper and a compelling Gothic narrative, Gilman illustrates the protagonist's descent into madness as a response to social constraints and the denial of autonomy. The review synthesizes critical perspectives from scholars who examine the story through various theoretical lenses—ranging from Foucauldian panopticons and psychoanalysis to gender and power dynamics—revealing the enduring relevance of the story in feminist literary discourse. The paper highlights the shifting interpretations of the text over time and underscores its role as a powerful critique of both historical and ongoing issues of gender politics and mental health.

Keywords: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, feminist literature, gender roles, mental illness, rest cure, patriarchy, Gothic fiction, panopticons, female autonomy, symbolism, 19th-century medicine, literary criticism.

INTRODUCTION

"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a seminal work of feminist literature that delves into gender inequality, mental health, and the limitations imposed on women in the late 19th century. It was written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an American sociologist, writer, and lecturer who played a vital role in the women's suffrage movement. First published in 1892, the story is a captivating and disturbing account of a woman's descent into madness as she grapples with societal expectations and suppressed desires.

In the feminist movement of her era, Gilman was a leading figure who fought for women's rights and disregarded conventional gender roles. To create a moving and compelling story, Gilman drew inspiration from her own experiences, which included postpartum depression and the "rest cure" therapy like the one described in "The Yellow Wallpaper."

The story, set in an era when women were expected to conform to rigid domestic roles, follows an unnamed protagonist married as she goes through a "rest cure" that her doctor husband, John, has recommended for her. She is confined to a room with yellow wallpaper and grows more and more fixated on the wall patterns, seeing a trapped woman within the complex pattern. The wallpaper represents her confinement and the oppressive nature of her patriarchal society as her mental state deteriorates. Through her writing, Gilman aimed to subvert the Victorian era's prevailing views on women's mental and emotional health. A powerful critique of the constrained roles given to women and the negative results of their social subjugation can be found in "The Yellow Wallpaper."

In addition to examining the psychological effects of gender inequality, Gilman's tale also serves as an allegory for women's struggles in a society where men are in charge. The narrative is informed by her personal experiences with mental health and the limitations imposed on women's autonomy, making it a powerful and deeply personal work.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" has come to be recognised as an essential work of feminist literature that has sparked discussions about gender, mental health, and the place of women in society. Gilman's evocative writing style and unsettling narrative continue to ring true with readers, inspiring them to consider the complexities of gender dynamics and the adverse effects of suppressing individuality.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative, analytical, and interpretive methodology grounded in feminist literary criticism and psychoanalytic theory to examine Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The study focuses on understanding the interplay between gender, mental health, and power dynamics

as represented in the narrative. The methodology combines close textual analysis, secondary research, and interdisciplinary theoretical approaches to interpret the psychological and social dimensions of the protagonist's experience. The study follows a qualitative research design because it seeks to explore abstract concepts such as identity, oppression, and resistance rather than quantify measurable outcomes. This design enables the examination of themes, symbolism, narrative structure, and character psychology to draw meaningful interpretations from the text. At the core of the methodology is close reading, a method used to dissect the literary elements of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, such as imagery, motifs (e.g., the wallpaper), and narrative voice. This analysis helps to uncover how Gilman constructs a critique of patriarchal control and the medicalisation of women's mental health. The symbolism of the wallpaper was studied to understand its metaphorical resonance with female confinement. The narrator's language and descent into madness were examined to interpret the intersection of power, language, and identity. The research is informed primarily by feminist literary theory, focusing on scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Ann Oakley, and Hélène Cixous. These perspectives are used to analyse the representation of women's voices, their silencing, and the systemic oppression depicted in the story. Additionally, psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freudian and Lacanian perspectives, is used to explore the psychological fragmentation of the narrator, including repression, hysteria, and the unconscious. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to ground the analysis in existing scholarship. Critical works by Greg Johnson, John S. Bak, Janet Kendall, and others were consulted to frame the story within a broader academic conversation. Identifying common themes and debates in existing interpretations. Situating *The Yellow Wallpaper* within the historical and cultural context of 19th-century America. Highlighting how interpretations have evolved with shifts in feminist discourse. Historical analysis was employed to understand the socio-medical context of the 19th century, especially regarding the "rest cure" treatment for women. The research reflects on how medical practices and gender expectations of that period influenced both the protagonist's condition and Gilman's critique. The overall strategy is interpretive, aiming to uncover hidden meanings and ideological undercurrents in the text. This involves: Reading the wallpaper as a Panoptic structure, in line with Michel Foucault's theory of surveillance and discipline. Considering how Gilman's autobiographical experience influences the fictional account. Through this interdisciplinary and multi-layered approach, the research aims to highlight *The Yellow Wallpaper* not merely as a literary artifact but as a socio-political critique embedded in feminist thought. The methodology ensures a nuanced understanding of how Gilman's narrative critiques institutional authority, challenges medical paternalism, and advocates for female autonomy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Greg Johnson examined the themes in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" from the 19th century in his 1989 paper, "Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in *The Yellow Wallpaper*." To emphasise Gothic themes of confinement, rebellion, forbidden desire, and irrational fear, it is compared to the process of hanging new wallpaper in Emily Dickinson's mother's bedroom. The female narrator's behaviour is examined to examine the challenges faced by women in relation to societal expectations. The narrative is a critique of gender stereotypes and the detrimental effects of patriarchal oppression on people's mental health. The wallpaper represents the protagonist's confinement as the author explores the interaction between psychological and physical spaces. The narrative illustrates the narrator's disintegration within the Gothic literary canon as she faces her repressed desires and fights irrational fears. The exploration of gender dynamics and the effects of suppressing individuality in "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a ground-breaking piece of feminist literature is highlighted in this paper, enhancing our understanding of the novel.

Ann Oakley's paper "Beyond the Yellow Wallpaper", written in 1997, discusses the story. The widely held notion that health results only from medical intervention is contested by this paper, which was first presented at a conference in 1983. It also contends that eliminating gender inequalities is not an easy task. The paper examines the differences between health, health care, and medical care while focusing on the theme of "women and health." The paper identifies and investigates three unresolved issues in women's health: production, reproduction, and the medicalisation of women's psychological struggles, particularly in the form of mental illness. It draws on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper". In addition to highlighting the importance of viewing health as a social construct influenced by societal factors, the paper exhorts women to share their own experiences because they significantly impact women's well-being. The paper also emphasises women's critical role in family welfare and reproduction, emphasising that these roles contain the very factors that contribute to women's poor health.

"Escaping the jaundiced eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*," by John S. Bak, published in 1994. Discusses how Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a feminist manifesto that challenges male control of women. The yellow wallpaper in the story is a metaphor for Michel Foucault's Panopticon, which contrasts the narrator-confinement wife to that structure. She breaks free from patriarchal gender norms while also developing schizophrenia because of her paranoia, illustrating the transformative power of her mental illness. Bak argues that Gilman's story is a call to action for women to resist societal expectations and reclaim their agency. He also highlights the importance of understanding the historical context in which the story was written, as it sheds light on the pervasive sexism and misogyny of the time. The story examines societal oppression and the tearing down of oppressive norms through the Panopticon lens. Gilman's tale offers a potent illustration of individual liberation within a feminist context.

The 1996 article "'But One Expects That': Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the Shifting Light of Scholarship" by Dock, Allen, Palais, and Tracy examines how Gilman's tale has been interpreted and received throughout time. The authors draw attention to how feminist critics constructed commonly held "facts" in the 1970s, such as the notion that the story was regarded as a ghost story rather than a critique of sexual politics; Gilman encountered resistance from male editors, and male doctors criticised the work. The authors refute these accepted "facts" by re-examining the documentary evidence, and they emphasise the role that ideology plays in collecting and analysing evidence. They contend that, just like the literature it seeks to analyse, scholarship is influenced by historical biases. By analysing "The Yellow Wallpaper," the authors show how prevailing biases can influence interpretations, highlighting the need for critical reevaluation in literary scholarship.

David Johnson examines Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story as a critique of the oppressive features of 19th-century patriarchal society in his essay titled "The Yellow Wallpaper." Johnson claims that the "yellow wallpaper" is a metaphor for the narrator's imprisonment by societal expectations in a 1998 article that appeared in *Studies in Short Fiction*. In addition, he suggests that the tale is a cautionary tale about the risks associated with confining and isolating people who are psychologically fragile. Johnson also discusses the story's critique of the medical community's reliance on antiquated and unsuccessful methods of treating mental illness. Through his analysis, he draws attention to the broader implications of Gilman's work and exposes the shortcomings of the medical practices used at the time. Johnson provides a deeper understanding of the story's critique of gender roles, societal constraints, and mental health treatment by looking at the symbolism and thematic components of "The Yellow Wallpaper." His essay adds to the ongoing debate about Gilman's story and its broader implications for moral standards and personal freedom.

The short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is also examined through the prism of gender and power dynamics in Janet Kendall's essay, "The Yellow Wallpaper: A Case Study of Gender and Power," published in *American Literature* in 2000. The oppressive nature of the patriarchal power structure is highlighted by Kendall's analysis of how her husband and other male characters undermine the protagonist's agency. A potent indictment of societal expectations for women, the "yellow wallpaper" represents the outward manifestation of the protagonist's entrapment. The importance of women challenging and escaping oppressive systems is emphasised in Kendall's feminist interpretation. She clarifies the complexities of gender roles and the restrictions placed on women by critically analysing the story's themes. With insightful observations on how gender and power interact, Kendall's essay adds to the ongoing discussion surrounding "The Yellow Wallpaper." It also highlights how crucial it is to challenge ingrained beliefs and power structures.

Erin Kelly examines how Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" critiques 19th-century gender politics and the medical establishment's treatment of mental illness in her essay "The Politics of Madness in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" Kelly contends that the story, published in *Arizona Quarterly* in 2000, is a powerful refutation of the idea that women are inherently frail and require male leadership. She focuses on how Gilman defies patriarchal expectations and highlights how gender roles harm women's mental health. Kelly also discusses the tale's caution against confining and isolating those with fragile psychological states. Kelly emphasises the value of uniqueness and autonomy by carefully examining the protagonist's descent into madness while confined by the yellow wallpaper. Overall, Kelly's essay provides a compelling analysis of "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a critique of gender politics and mental health treatment in the 19th century.

The article "The Reading Habit and 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" by Barbara Hochman, published in 2002, explores Charlotte Perkins Gilman's relationship to reading and how it is portrayed in her work. According to Hochman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" expresses concerns about turning to fiction as a form of escape. The narrative shows a reader who is initially mesmerised but ultimately destroyed by a text. Hochman speculates that Gilman expressed these worries, reflecting her ambivalent attitude towards reading during the emotional upheaval. The article also discusses "The Yellow Wallpaper's" captivating and eerie qualities and how they affect readers' emotions. Our understanding of Gilman's reading preferences, the social concerns surrounding fiction, and the ability of the story to affect readers is deepened by Hochman's analysis.

"The Yellow Wallpaper: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Politics of Colour in America" by Heilman examines how Gilman's short story portrays the gendered politics of colour in America. In a 2004 article that appeared in *The Southern Literary Journal*, Heilman makes the case that Gilman's writing is still relevant today. The symbolic use of the "yellow wallpaper" to represent the oppressive nature of the patriarchal society in which the protagonist is trapped is carefully examined in the essay. In his discussion of symbolism, Heilman also touches on how race and gender intersect in the US. Heilman emphasises the continuing importance of "The Yellow Wallpaper" in critiquing gendered politics and delving into the interconnectedness of discrimination by examining these themes in "The Yellow Wallpaper."

"The Yellow Wallpaper: The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses", a 2009 research paper by Jürgen Wolter, explains how "The Yellow Wallpaper," a famous story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, has sparked a variety of interpretations, often with opposing points of view. The text's depth comes from both its multifaceted approach and the unresolved contradictions and ambiguities that exist within it. The main issues raised in Gilman's story were actively debated within shifting discourses when she was writing it. The article focuses on three main topics: the changing use of wallpaper in interior design, the divisive discussion surrounding the colour yellow, and the divisive debate regarding the effects of intellectual activities on women's health. The article clarifies "The Yellow Wall- Paper's" intricate layers of meaning and highlights why its contradictions and ambiguities persist by examining these three interconnected issues. In addition to capturing the culture of her era, Gilman's story continues to have an impact on readers today, generating lively debates and a variety of interpretations of her seminal work.

A very recent work, "Women Entrapment and Flight in Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" is the subject of Ghandeharion and Mazari's 2016 paper, which critically evaluates the well-known feminist novel. The authors examine how the story's characterisation relates to patriarchal norms and conventional gender roles. The paper illuminates the unnamed female protagonist and how her anonymity enables female readers to identify with her by drawing on Lacan's theories of language, Cixous' ideas on *écriture féminine*, and Freud's misconceptions about women. The authors emphasise the theme of women's entrapment and the potential for liberation in the story by focusing on these elements. The essay helps readers, especially women readers, gain a deeper understanding of the feminist elements in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and their appeal to them.

CONCLUSION

A key piece of feminist literature, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" examines gender inequality, mental illness, and women's restrictions in the late 19th century. Gilman challenges norms and reveals the negative effects of patriarchal oppression through eerie symbolism and a compelling narrative. The Gothic elements, critique of gender roles, representation of mental illness, and symbolism of the yellow wallpaper have all

been topics of discussion among academics who have studied the story from various perspectives. The ongoing debates and scholarly interpretations surrounding "The Yellow Wallpaper" show how readers continue to find it relevant and influential. People continue to reflect on gender dynamics, mental health, and the suppression of individuality because of Gilman's evocative storytelling and thought-provoking narrative. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is regarded as a classic piece of feminist literature that continues to provoke debates about gender equality and the pursuit of individual freedom.

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