



Unveiling the Truth: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a Poignant Representation of Mental Health Disability

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ABSTRACT

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper (1892) is a pioneering literary work that exposes the flawed treatment of women's mental health during the late 19th century. In an era when women's emotional and psychological issues were often diagnosed as "hysteria," many were subjected to restrictive and counterproductive treatments such as the "rest cure." This paper analyzes The Yellow Wallpaper as a powerful representation of mental health disability, focusing on the protagonist's psychological decline, the symbolic role of the yellow wallpaper, and the impact of patriarchal authority on her mental state. The study also draws parallels between the protagonist's experiences and Gilman's own life, revealing the author's intent to challenge medical and social norms. By combining literary analysis with historical and feminist perspectives, this paper underscores the lasting relevance of Gilman's work in contemporary conversations about mental health, gender oppression, and the importance of compassionate, individualized care.

Keywords: Mental health disability, feminism, patriarchy, hysteria, rest cure, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Yellow Wallpaper, symbolism, women's oppression, literary analysis

Introduction

During the late 19th century, the field of mental health was still in its early stages of development, and treatments for psychological disorders, especially among women, were deeply influenced by gender bias. Women who suffered from conditions such as postpartum depression, anxiety, or chronic fatigue were often misdiagnosed with "hysteria"-a vague and sexist label used to describe a wide range of emotional symptoms. The medical community, dominated by male physicians, believed that women were emotionally and intellectually

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inferior to men. As a result, treatments emphasized passivity, domesticity, and physical rest, rather than addressing the complex mental health needs of the patients.

One of the most controversial medical interventions of that time was the “rest cure,” promoted by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell. This treatment required patients, usually women, to remain isolated in bed, avoid any physical activity, and abstain from creative or intellectual work. While intended to calm the mind, the rest cure often had the opposite effect, leading to further emotional and psychological decline.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* was written in response to these medical practices and the broader social structures that oppressed women. While the story is framed as a piece of gothic fiction, it functions on multiple levels-as a psychological case study, a feminist protest, and a critique of medical negligence. Through the unnamed protagonist’s descent into psychosis, Gilman illustrates the dangers of silencing women and denying them control over their bodies and minds.

This paper explores *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a literary portrayal of mental health disability. It examines how the protagonist’s condition is misunderstood and mistreated, how the symbolic yellow wallpaper mirrors her psychological entrapment, and how patriarchal authority figures, particularly her husband, contribute to her mental breakdown. By connecting these themes to Gilman’s personal experience with the rest cure, the paper also reflects on the broader implications of the story for mental health advocacy today.

Objective

The central purpose of this study is to analyze “*The Yellow Wallpaper*” as a critical commentary on 19th-century mental health practices, especially the rest cure. It seeks to understand the protagonist’s experience as a depiction of mental health disability that is exacerbated by social and medical oppression. The paper will also explore the symbolism of the yellow wallpaper, the role of patriarchal control in the protagonist’s decline, and the influence of Gilman’s personal experience on the narrative. Finally, the paper highlights the ongoing importance of Gilman’s story in academic discourse on mental illness, gender inequality, and the need for humane and individualized mental health care.



Methodology

This study employs textual analysis to examine *The Yellow Wallpaper* within its historical, feminist, and psychological contexts. The primary method is close reading, with attention to the language, imagery, and narrative structure of the story. Secondary sources, including feminist criticism, historical texts on mental health treatment, and scholarly interpretations of Gilman's work, are used to support the analysis. These sources provide insights into the cultural attitudes of the time, the reception of Gilman's story, and its continued relevance in modern discussions about gender and mental health. The paper also draws from Gilman's autobiographical writings to better understand the connections between her life and the fictional experiences of her protagonist.

Analysis:

The Author's Personal Experience and Its Influence on the Story

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's personal experience with mental illness and the rest cure directly inspired *The Yellow Wallpaper*. After the birth of her daughter, Charlotte Perkins Gilman experienced postpartum depression. She sought help from Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, who diagnosed her with neurasthenia and prescribed his well-known rest cure. Gilman was confined to bed, forbidden to write, and instructed to lead a quiet, domestic life. Rather than improving her condition, this treatment led to a deepening sense of despair and helplessness.

In her autobiography, Gilman wrote that she nearly lost her sanity under this treatment and only began to recover when she defied the doctor's orders and resumed writing. This act of rebellion not only helped her regain her mental balance but also became a turning point in her life as a writer and feminist thinker. *The Yellow Wallpaper* was written partly as a form of protest and partly as a warning to other women. Gilman even sent a copy of the story to Dr. Mitchell, hoping he would reconsider his methods.

In this sense, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is more than just fiction-it is a semi-autobiographical narrative that reflects Gilman's own suffering and resistance. By turning her personal trauma



into a literary work, Gilman gave voice to the countless women who were silenced by a medical system that refused to take their mental health seriously.

The Protagonist's Mental Health Disability and Its Misdiagnosis

The protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is never named, which emphasizes her lack of identity and autonomy. She is a young mother suffering from symptoms that suggest postpartum depression, including fatigue, anxiety, and emotional instability. However, her husband John, who is also her physician, dismisses her condition as a temporary “nervous disorder.” He insists that she follow the rest cure, confining her to a room in a rented house and forbidding her from writing, working, or engaging in any stimulating activities.

*“John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition and I confess it always makes me feel bad.”*²

Despite her protests and growing discomfort, John refuses to believe that she is truly ill. He adopts a patronizing tone, calling her “little girl” and treating her concerns as irrational. This dynamic reflects the broader societal tendency to infantilize women and deny them authority over their own bodies and minds.

The protagonist's descent into psychosis is not caused by her original condition, but by the treatment she receives. Her isolation, lack of intellectual stimulation, and inability to express herself through writing all contribute to her mental breakdown. As her condition worsens, she becomes obsessed with the yellow wallpaper in her room, seeing patterns and figures that no one else can perceive. Eventually, she loses touch with reality entirely, crawling around the room in a state of delirium.

Through this portrayal, Gilman critiques the way mental health disabilities were misunderstood and mistreated. The protagonist's breakdown is a direct result of being silenced and controlled, rather than a natural progression of her illness.

^{2,3}Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper”, *The New England Magazine* 5, no.1 (1892): 648



“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 hysterical tendency-what is one to do?”³

This quote reveals that the seriousness of the narrator’s illness is overlooked by her family or by doctors. Since John is both her husband and a respected doctor, everyone trusts his opinion and ignores what the narrator says about what she is experiencing. The term “slight hysterical tendency” illustrates a common belief in the nineteenth century that women were governed by emotions and that their mental health problems were not serious. Through this, Gilman criticizes a medical system that gives more importance to male authority than to the patient’s own experiences and feelings.

The narrator’s question, “what is one to do?” shows her helplessness and lack of control over her own treatment and life. She feels unable to speak for herself or make decisions about her health.

The Yellow Wallpaper as a Symbol of Oppression and Mental Deterioration

One of the most striking elements of the story is the yellow wallpaper itself, which functions as a complex symbol of the protagonist’s psychological state. At first, she finds the wallpaper unpleasant-its color is “repellent” and its pattern “confusing.” Over time, however, her feelings about the wallpaper shift. She imagines a woman trapped behind the pattern, struggling against the bars as though seeking escape.

“The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.”⁴

“There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.”⁵

This imagery represents the protagonist’s own sense of entrapment. Just as the woman in the wallpaper is imprisoned by the pattern, the protagonist is imprisoned by the restrictions

^{4,5}Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper”, The New England Magazine 5, no.1 (1892): 649



imposed on her by her husband and society. Her growing obsession with the wallpaper reflects her attempt to make sense of her confinement and reclaim some sense of agency.

The chaotic, disordered pattern of the wallpaper also mirrors the fragmentation of her mind. As she stares at it day after day, isolated from meaningful interaction or activity, her grip on reality begins to slip. She projects her own suffering onto the wallpaper, eventually believing that she is the woman inside it and must set herself free.

By tearing down the wallpaper at the end of the story, the protagonist symbolically attempts to liberate herself. However, her triumph is hollow, as it comes at the cost of her sanity. The final image-of her creeping around the room while John faints-is both haunting and ironic. It reveals the devastating consequences of denying a person the freedom to express themselves and make decisions about their own health.

Mental Health Stigma and the Role of Patriarchy

The protagonist's story highlights how deeply rooted gender roles and patriarchal values contributed to the neglect of women's mental health. John represents the authoritative male figure that combines the roles of husband, doctor, and caretaker. He has complete control over his wife's treatment and dismisses her thoughts and feelings as unimportant. His actions, though possibly well-meaning, are patronizing and harmful.

*"But John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself-before him, at least, and that makes me very tired."*⁶

John, the husband of the narrator, advises her to control her emotions even though she feels it difficult. Gilman uses this dynamic to critique the broader societal structures that prevent women from advocating for themselves.

*"There comes John, and I must put this away,-he hates to have me write a word."*⁷

⁶ Gilman, "The Yellow wallpaper," 648

⁷ Gilman, "The Yellow wallpaper," 649



The above statement reveals that John does not want his wife to take part in activities that involve thinking and creativity. Writing is the narrator's way of expressing her thoughts and feelings and maintaining some independence. However, John does not allow her to write because society expects women to be quiet, obedient, and dependent on men. By stopping her from writing, he prevents her from expressing herself freely and sharing her true feelings.

Gilman uses the relationship between John and his wife to criticize the patriarchal society of the nineteenth century. During that period, women had very limited rights and freedom. They were expected to obey their husbands and depend on men for important decisions. Men controlled major institutions such as medicine, law, education, and family life. As a result, women's opinions and feelings were often ignored or considered unimportant.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper", as both her husband and physician, John makes all the decisions for his wife. He fails to listen to her concerns or take her feelings seriously. Whenever she tries to express her thoughts, he dismisses them and insists that he knows what is best for her. This reflects the common attitude of society at that time, where men were seen as more rational and intelligent, while women were considered weak and emotional.

Because women had little power or independence, many of them were unable to speak openly about their problems, especially mental health issues. Their emotions were often misunderstood or ignored. Gilman shows how this lack of freedom and self-expression can damage a woman's mental well-being. Through the narrator's suffering, she argues that women should have a voice, freedom, and control over their own lives and health. By portraying a woman who is driven to madness by such treatment, Gilman exposes the dangers of silencing and disempowering those who are mentally ill. She suggests that mental illness is not merely an individual challenge but also a social concern, shaped by the relationships and systems that surround the individual.

The story also challenges the idea that madness is purely a medical condition. Instead, it can be a response to trauma, neglect, and oppression. In this way, "The Yellow Wallpaper" aligns with modern disability studies, which emphasize the social understanding of disability-



examining disability through the lens of both personal impairments and the obstacles imposed by Society.

Disability Studies Perspective

From a disability studies perspective, the narrator's suffering is caused not only by her mental illness but also by the way she is treated by the people around her. Disability studies suggest that a person's difficulties can become worse because of social barriers and lack of support.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the narrator is kept alone, deprived of freedom, and prevented from expressing her thoughts and feelings. She is not allowed to work, write, or take part in decisions about her own treatment. These restrictions make her condition worse and lead to her mental breakdown.

Through the narrator’s experience, Gilman shows that society can play an important role in increasing a person’s suffering. The narrator's decline is not caused only by her illness but also by a system that ignores her needs, feelings, and opinions. This idea is similar to the social model of disability, which emphasizes that social attitudes and barriers can contribute to a person’s difficulties.

Conclusion

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a timeless and powerful exploration of mental health disability and gender oppression. Through the story of a woman whose condition is misunderstood, mistreated, and ultimately worsened by those around her, Gilman exposes the failures of a medical system that prioritized control over compassion. The symbolic use of the yellow wallpaper, combined with the protagonist’s psychological decline, creates a vivid and unsettling portrait of what happens when a person is denied agency and expression.

Drawing from her own experiences, Gilman transforms personal suffering into a work of social critique and artistic innovation. *The Yellow Wallpaper* continues to resonate with readers today, offering insights into the challenges faced by those with mental health



conditions and the importance of empathetic, individualized care. It also reminds us of the ongoing need to challenge gender-based discrimination in medicine and society.

As we reflect on this story in the context of modern mental health advocacy and feminist thought, it becomes clear that Gilman's message is as relevant now as it was over a century ago. By listening to the voices of those who suffer, respecting their experiences, and promoting autonomy and dignity in care, we can honor the legacy of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and work toward a more just and humane approach to mental health. The story also teaches us that mental illness should never be ignored, misunderstood, or treated without considering the individual's needs and feelings. Gilman emphasizes the importance of communication, support, and freedom in the healing process. Through the narrator's tragic experience, readers are reminded that every person deserves to be heard, respected, and involved in decisions about their own health. Gilman calls for a society that values equality, respect, and human dignity. Thus, *The Yellow Wallpaper* continues to serve as a powerful reminder of the need for both mental health awareness and gender justice. As such, *The Yellow Wallpaper* remains an important literary work that continues to raise awareness about mental health, women's rights, and the need for compassionate care in society.

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