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Space and Domesticity in "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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Woman must put herself into the text
- as into the world and into history.

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This article deals with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) in the context of the interplay, at the end of the nineteenth century, between gender and family roles on the one hand, and questions of space and domesticity on the other. Gilman understood quite well that confinement to household work did not prepare women to join modern society and that spatial arrangements between the sexes are socially created. She believed that when such arrangements provide access to valued knowledge for men while reducing that possibility for women, the organization of space becomes a crucial factor in perpetuating status differences. I therefore also aim to provide in this article an understanding of gender inequalities from the viewpoint of the architectural spatial contexts within which they occur, as reflected in Gilman. Thus, the general theoretical framework also takes into account Gilman's own views on architectural reforms and her call for a new role for women in a market-oriented society, as she expressed them in her numerous studies in sociology and social history. As in the case of other feminist women writers who voiced similar concerns, I would argue that the narrative borders between fiction and social criticism are not as well-defined in Gilman as one would have thought. Gilman found various ways to express her ideas, and fiction was just one of them. She always felt that everything she wrote was "for a purpose" (qtd. in Meyering 66) and that her real interest was in ideas.

In 1892, the *New England Magazine* published Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," a fascinating study of a woman going insane. However, Gilman had had great difficulty getting the work published, and when it finally appeared, it was either criticised for its morbidity or praised for the wrong reason. The attention the story has received since has focused on its atmosphere of mystery, being regarded as a Poesque horror story. This is mainly due to the fact that William Dean Howells introduced it in his own collection, *Great Modern American Stories* (1920), as "terrible and too wholly dire," and "too terribly good to be printed" (qtd. in Lane xvii). Its chilling qualities were also praised by the horror writer H. P. Lovecraft, who defined it as one of the great "spectral tales" in American literature (qtd. in Lane xvii). Perhaps one reason for the mixed reactions at the time is that nineteenth-century readers had learned to read stories about the type of mental breakdown so common in Poe's tales, but nothing had prepared them to understand a tale of mental collapse in a middle-class mother and wife. On the other hand, it might also be that the story was unpopular exactly because it struck too deeply and effectively at traditional ways of seeing woman's place in the world.

It was about fifty years after Howells's collection first appeared, in the early 1970s, that the story was revalued from a feminist perspective, as a devastating portrait of a woman struggling to free herself from a conventional, personality-destroying marriage based on constricting sex roles. In 1973 the tale was reprinted by the Feminist Press and in the afterword, Elaine Hedges read it as a "feminist document," as "one of the rare pieces of literature we have by a nineteenth-century woman which directly confronts the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship" (37), in a domestic space, I would add.

One must concede that "The Yellow Wallpaper" possesses many elements of the Gothic horror story. For a start, the setting, a "colonial mansion" that is a "hereditary estate," is immediately perceived by the narrator-protagonist's fervid imagination as a "haunted house." In the opening lines, she declares that "there is something queer about it" (Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" 3). In her view this would explain why it has been let so cheaply after having been empty for so long. There is also a kind of self-reflexive hint at the Gothic literary tradition when the narrator-protagonist comments that "[the house] makes me think of English places that you read about" (Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" 4). The immediate reference that comes to the reader's mind is, of course, Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817); surely the narrator-protagonist is familiar with that novel. Most probably she is an avid reader of Gothic stories and now is on the verge of "living through" one of those stories herself.

As in many Gothic stories, the place will soon become a site of seclusion for the narrator-protagonist who is about to spend three months there, in the hope that this will prove beneficial to her mental health. On the contrary, by the end of her stay, the narrator-protagonist, who never names herself, will slip completely into

madness. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is the very self-conscious diary of these three months.

In the first section of her journal the reader clearly perceives the narrator-protagonist’s anger and frustration at being kept in complete isolation and without work by her husband-physician John. The reader knows that this is due to the fact that she suffers from a “temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency” (Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” 4) following the birth of her child. As she clearly puts it, she does not agree with this cure of complete rest and inactivity:

> I sometimes fancy that in my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. So I will let it alone and talk about the house. (Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” 4)

From that point on, the house, and the wallpaper in particular, become a device through which she expresses her innermost feelings, the torments of her emotional life. The room where she spends all her time is the nursery, ironic if one thinks that most of her mental problems derive from her recent maternity. However, the nursery seems to be the appropriate place in so far as she lives exactly the life of a child, kept in one place at the mercy of two adults, her husband/father figure John and her sister-in-law Jennie, described as the “perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper” (Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” 8). It is in this room that the narrator-protagonist’s obsession with the yellow wallpaper begins and it is here that it will end: in madness.

At first the narrator-protagonist merely finds the wallpaper repulsive from an aesthetic point of view:

> I never saw a worst paper in my life. One of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough constantly to irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions. (Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” 5)

This is more than simply another version of Poe’s “arabesque.” By describing the wallpaper, the narrator-protagonist is clearly describing the way she views herself: ugly, suicidal, sinful, caught in the absurd contradictions inherent in her role as a wife. The sin she has committed refers perhaps to the fact that due to her illness she

cannot be with her child, thus neglecting her duties as a mother. Interestingly, during her lifetime, Gilman herself was accused of being an "unnatural mother" when she sent her daughter Katherine to live with her ex-husband and his new wife. As I point out later on, this is not the only autobiographical element in this short story.

With the passing of time the narrator-protagonist begins to withdraw into the world she sees in the wallpaper. Oblivious to all else, she becomes indistinguishable from the paper and the woman she imagines creeping behind it. Undoubtedly, the topos of the double or the *doppelgänger* is another feature typical of the Gothic tradition. In this case, however, the narrator-protagonist's association with the wallpaper involves a traversal of conventional boundaries in which she simultaneously creeps along the walls of her room on both sides of the wallpaper and outside the house. In her hallucinations, she even imagines that there are "a great many women behind" (a whole "collectivity" of trapped women?) (Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" 15) what she calls the wallpaper's sub-pattern. By the end of the story she manages to free the woman behind the barred pattern (and thus herself) by scrapping what is left of the paper. This is a collaborative effort; the woman behind gives a helping hand: "I pulled and she shook. I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper" (Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" 17).

The destruction of the wallpaper coincides with the end of the narrative and with the destruction of the narrator-protagonist's wifely identity. According to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the narrator-protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" truly "escape[s] from her textual/architectural confinement" (91). However, one should not be led to believe that this is a completely optimistic conclusion. The narrator-protagonist in fact does not decide to leave the room, to "jump out of the window" (Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" 18) into the open; she remains in the room, still creeping and with a rope around her waist. In other words, she has destroyed only the façade, the visible bars which hinder her movements, but not the most inner ones, the ones inherent in her own self, which stem from a sociocultural self-conditioning. The woman of the story remains trapped in the room because she is psychologically crippled. The invisible bars, as she admits, are "too strong even to try" to destroy them:

> Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is *improper* and might be misconstrued . . . I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard! It is pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please! (Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" 18; emphasis mine)

Gilman struggled to do the *proper* thing, torn between accepting and rejecting domesticity, throughout her life; that is to say in a period, the second half of the

nineteenth-century, which saw a torrent of works on the proper role of women or what was known as the "women's sphere." "True Womanhood," a concept very much debated at that time, included four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and, last but not least, domesticity. Domesticity was particularly praised since it constituted the pillar of society; women who refused the simple equation of family and social duties were labelled as "semi-women" or "mental hermaphrodites" (Welter 21, 40). Such an obsession with woman's domestic sphere dates back as early as 1835 when Alexis de Tocqueville noted how separated the male and female "spheres" were in America. He also observed that young American girls are only apparently more independent than their European counterparts. In fact, they give up that independence as soon as they get married, a step considered necessary as "security for the order and prosperity of the household" (212-213). It should be noted, however, that, by the time Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper," in 1892, such sharp distinction into two separate spheres was breaking down, mainly due to social change. Still, women like Gilman had to face the dilemma of how to be a wife and and a mother and pursue a career at the same time, in her case as a writer and a social reformer. This was achieved at a cost, as Carol R. Berkin observes in an article aptly entitled "Private Woman, Public Woman: The Contradictions of Charlotte Perkins Gilman." Berkin asserts that 'too many of her [Gilman's] own psychic struggles were over defining *self*, its boundaries never stable, the distinction between self-fulfilment and selfishness never clear" (167).

Mysterious nervous illnesses seriously affecting their intellectual achievements were very common among women in the period under consideration. As Jean Strouse observes:

> Taken all together these illnesses . . . can be seen as a collective response to the changing shape of late nineteenth-century American life, in particular to the changing social positions and functions of women. Industrialisation had altered the nature of housework . . . leaving some women with leisure time to use their minds and others with a heightened commitment to motherhood as a perfectable science and the apotheosis of femininity; the Civil War proved that women could do men's jobs if necessary . . . Some women addressed themselves to these changes directly, trying to encourage or thwart them. Others turned inward, making their private lives the battleground for what Woolf called their "own contrary instincts." (xv)

Gilman had of course her "own contrary instincts" to deal with throughout her life, as is confirmed by her autobiography and literary production. "The Yellow Wallpaper," in particular, seems to be the narrative re-enactment of her own mental breakdown, due to what only in recent years has been recognized as "post-natal depression." At the time, her "nervous prostration" was cured by Silas Weir Mitchell, an eminent physician (and popular novelist) who treated women (Edith Wharton and Jane Addams among them) for neurasthenia. Dr Mitchell disapproved of non-domestic activity by women and the philosophy behind his advice on women's health is included in his *Wear and Tear, or Hints for the Overworked* (1871), which deals with the deleterious effects of commerce on men, and with the problems of society women exhausted from too much play. "The kind of [nervous prostration] I had was evidently beyond him," Gilman ironically observes in her autobiography (*The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 95). After undergoing a regime of constant bed rest and severely restricted activity, Mitchell's women patients were to return to tranquil lives as wives and mothers. This regime had two goals. First, the patient was "surfeited with it and welcomed a firm order to do the things she once felt she could not do," that is, to return with unquestioning acceptance to the busy life of housekeeper, wife and mother. Second, she was introduced to the "moral medication" of the physician, so that she would come to trust and depend on him for moral guidance (qtd. in Lane x). Intellectual activity was considered responsible for most of women's health problems; the reason behind it being that it caused "an afflux towards the brain of the blood which ought to flow towards the genital apparatus." Moreover, the same woman's physiology could not support intellectual labours adequately, since, it was argued, in the female cranium "the space destined to be filled with the brain is smaller" (qtd. in Welter 62, 58). Another physician, Dr Meigs, summed up this point even more emphatically: to him woman "has a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love" (qtd. in Welter 28).

There is an obvious resemblance between Dr Mitchell in particular and John, the narrator's husband/physician in "The Yellow Wallpaper." However, I wish to focus on the deeper social implications of Mitchell's cure in the context of Gilman's thought on the role of women and the architectural/social reforms she so passionately advocated. In this way, I hope to elucidate the reasons why, in my opinion, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is both a great work of imagination and social criticism.

Elaine Showalter links the phenomenon of female insanity to a policy of social control in the Victorian period. Her argument could be applied to the American context as well:

> In a society that not only perceived women as childlike, irrational, and sexually unstable but also rendered them legally powerless and economically marginal, it is not surprising that they should have formed the greater part of the residual categories of deviance from which doctors drew a lucrative practice. . . . Moreover, the medical belief that the instability of the female nervous and reproductive system made women more vulnerable to derangement than men had extensive consequences for social policy. It was used as a reason to keep women out of the professions . . . and to keep them under male control in the family and the state. Thus medical and political policies were mutually reinforcing. (qtd. in Meyering 56)

In addition to Showalter's argument, I would suggest that medical and political policies were also strictly interrelated to economic policies. The interdependence of domesticity with the market emerges with greater specificity in nineteenth-century feminist critiques of the rest cure, of which "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a fictional example. This short story can be regarded as a parody and a protest against domestic confinement, and the tradition of selfhood established by the domestic ideology according to which women signified the stability of the private sphere. The rest cure countered the marketplace with a fortified domesticity, which, in turn, fortified the marketplace. In other words, the cure for immobility reiterated and recommended conventional domesticity (Brown). As Gillian Brown points out, "In restricting women to bed, the rest cure in a sense demobilises the domestic in order to recharge it for reproductive service to the market" (175). In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the uncertainty of the protagonist's place and her identification with both the woman she imagines creeping behind the paper and the woman she imagines "creeping along . . . in the open country" (16) seem to suggest that domestic borders are not, after all, such a good defence from the outside world. Brown finds that

> The nervousness manifest in moving walls and in the dislocation of self replicates the conditions of commerce from which those walls ideally barricade the individual. . . . Gilman's subversion of domesticity launches a utopian transformation of the market, elaborated in the socialist-feminist collective households and redesigns of domesticity she advocated in her subsequent writings. (176)

How truly "socialist" Gilman's ideas were is a matter of contention; the intellectual framework of her insight was that of the evolutionary and progressive social

analysts of her era, among which Fabian socialist activists featured prominently. Gilman believed in a sort of social Darwinism in the sense that, to her mind, the shifting patterns of social organization could be understood, predicted, and even manipulated, if the evolutionary laws Charles Darwin had discovered were properly applied to human society. She contended that free women could help to speed up evolution. As she put it in *The Home: Its Work and Influence*(1903):

> It is not that women are really smaller-minded, weaker-minded, more timid and vacillating; but that whosoever, man or woman, lives always in a small, dark place, is always guarded, protected, directed and restrained, will become inevitably narrowed and weakened by it. The woman is narrowed by the home and the man is narrowed by the woman. (277)

In the same work Gilman also condemned the existing home as an archaic holdover from pre-industrial times and called for the complete mechanization and collectivization of all its functions. She wanted to preserve the home, and she did not go far enough to suggest that women and men share domestic work; rather she argued for paid women domestic workers; in other words, she advocated for one class of women to work for another. So much for her socialist views! Nor did she design a mode of voluntary co-operation among women (such as the "co-operative housekeeping" that Melusina Fay Peirce, early feminist and founder of the co-operative housekeeping association, had advocated in 1870). Rather, she regarded corporate forms of domestic organization as both efficient and profitable. She wished to make housework a legitimate human business, something which should be done by experts instead of by amateurs: a particular social industry instead of a general feminine function. Gilman certainly belongs to that tradition of American feminism which sees any hope of emancipation for women outside the confinement of the home, as opposed to that other strand, exemplified by the educator Catherine Beecher, one of the early promoters of higher education for women, who argued for women's specific domestic identity.

Social historian Daniel S. Smith, discussing what he called "domestic feminism" in a controversial article published in 1979, argues that "the dichotomy between women trapped or suppressed within marriage and women seeking to gain freedom through social participation does not accurately represent the history of American women in the nineteenth century" (239). Probably such a comment would cause less stir now than it did in a time of radical feminism like the 1970s, since it is no doubt arduous to fit the lives of nineteenth-century American women into two sharply distinguished categories. I would argue that Gilman's case, in a way, exemplifies the impossibility of such a task, as she had to deal with the conflicts of

the public/private spheres throughout her life and her resolution of the dilemma was contradictory: retaining some of the typical feminine prerogatives (motherhood), while reassessing the function and the same architecture of the domestic space.

In *Women and Economics* (1898) Gilman stated that women were holding back human evolution because of their confinement to household work and motherhood. Consequently, domestic work and childcare should be removed from the home, allowing women to undertake both motherhood and paid employment, which would make it possible for them to be economically independent of men. The spatial setting for feminist motherhood was the feminist apartment hotel, with private suites connected to central kitchens, dining rooms and day-care centres. Such views stemmed from her firm belief that changing the structure of the spaces in which men and women lived and worked would certainly cause changes in behaviour, altering the very relationship between the sexes. House planning at the time reflected precisely the common cultural understanding of such relationship: a home divided into distinct kinds of spaces, into zones for women and for men, adults and children, and at whose centre was the kitchen. Gilman was actively trying to think through some sort of structural changes, presumably believing that a changed social environment would effect a change in consciousness. Unfortunately, her ideas in terms of architectural reforms were never put into practice. Her disciple Henrietta Rodman attempted to build the feminist apartment, the radical architect Max G. Heidelberg was hired (there were no wallpaper in the rooms of the building he designed!), but at the end it all came to nothing (Hayden 198).

Perhaps the best realisations of Gilman's ideas are in her fiction, in realistic novels such as *What Diantha Did* (1912) or in utopian ones such as *Herland* (1915), often published serially on her journal *The Forerunner*.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is commonly regarded as the best of her literary works, the kind of short story that I believe Virginia Woolf would perhaps have appreciated—so distinctively feminine/female/feminist it is in its language and vision, a story in which the narrator does finally find a space for herself. Yet, as Linda Wagner-Martin observes:

> Gilman presents the perils of unsympathetic isolation. The protagonist has all too much of a room of her own . . . she is isolated within it, and made to think that any artistic or intellectual activity is worthless. Rather than nurturing her efforts, the room suffocates them. (61)

Imagination is a powerful instrument. It leads the narrator-protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" to believe that she has found her new self in the woman creeping behind the pattern. However, what Gilman seems to suggest is that this is not enough, that women can only free themselves if the material conditions of their

life are radically changed and a dialectical movement between private and public spaces is finally installed. Just like Gilman herself, most of her fictional heroines struggle to overstep the prescribed boundaries of their lives and become active participants in their society, and in so doing they put themselves into the text as well as into the world. This is not an easy process, the risks of being trapped in one room are enormous: frustration, madness, suicide, a "creeping" existence that certainly is not worth living for. According to Gilman life is growth and the greatest sin of all is to hamper that growth, because in doing so one would destroy any glimpse of hope in the future, any glimpse of hope in change.

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