

Unreliable Narrator Trapped in her Narrative: Absence of Meaning in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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ÖZET

Yazar, olduğundan farklı olmak amacıyla yazar.

– Michel Foucault

Herhangi biri olan beni tanımyorsun. Şimdi ne olacak peki?

– Leigh Gilmore, *Otobiyoğrafinin Sınırları*

Bu makale, Gilman'ın "Sarı Duvar Kağıdı" adlı eserinde anlatının belirsizliğini ve güvenilezliğini gösteren unsurları irdelenmektedir. Kısa hikaye çoğunlukla dilin ürünü olan bir edebiyat kurgusu ve yazarın bir kimlik tanımlaması olarak görülür. Güvenilmezlik ise, dilbilim sistemlerinin dışına çıkıldığında oluşan bir kavramdır. Kelimeler durağan yapılar olmadığı için, aslında kendi içinde bir güvenilmezliği de barındırmaktadır. Anlatıcının kullandığı kelimeler üzerinden kendi kimlik tanımlaması bu sebeple tartışmalı hale gelmektedir. "Sarı Duvar Kağıdı" adlı eserin yazarı da, kendi kimliğini bulmak adına yola çıktığı eserinde sonunda çıkmaza girer. Sonsuz dilbilimsel zincirleme içinde bir betimleyiciden diğerine hareket ederek, aslında yazar kendine "metaforik" bir dünya yaratmakta ve kendi deyimleriyle bir "rahatlama" sağlamaktadır. Yazarın 19 yy. erkek-egemen toplumun baskısına maruz kalmış olması, kendini "tavan arasına atılmış deli kadın" olarak tanımlamasına yol açmıştır. Öykünün iyi işlenmiş bakış açısı da, yazarın bilinç ötesi kurguladığı mecaz dil kullanımını daha etkili hale getirmektedir. Sonuçta bu makale; kurgu ve kimlik arasındaki ilişkinin aslında olmayan bir ilişki olduğunu irdelemektedir.

ANAHTAR KELİMELER anlatıcının güvenilmezliği, anlatı, farklılaşma, kimlik, "Sarı Duvar Kağıdı"

ABSTRACT

One writes in order to become other than what one is.

– Michel Foucault

You don't know me, anonymity insists. Now what?

– Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*

The present article tries to examine the elements of unreliability and uncertainty in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," as a narrative. Short story is seen as any other literary work, a 'construct', a product of language. Unreliability is a result of differentiation within a linguistic system. Thus, words never achieve stability, and the question is "can the narrator of the words be a reliable one?" The narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" struggles to find a true 'self' by making a narrative in which she seems stuck in the end. Moving from one signifier to another, through a linguistic chain which is potentially infinite the narrator creates a 'metaphorical' world of language which she calls a "relief." Oppressed in the, 19th century masculine world, she gives an account of herself by narrating her story in which she turns to be a 'mad woman in the attic'. The story's perfect point of view is also considered effective since it takes the reader to the narrator's figurative language which seems unconscious. The paper, thus, aims to study the 'narrative' and the 'self' construction which both seem to fail in the work.

KEYWORDS unreliable narrator, narrative, difference, self, "The Yellow Wallpaper"

INTRODUCTION

“Life is a verb,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote at the dawn of the twentieth century.¹ Gilman calls life a verb, and she chooses a continuous tense for her kind of ‘verb’ when she calls her autobiography, published after her death in 1935, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, which implies the unexpectedness and activeness of life; an active gerund rather than static. For Gilman the verb of life without ‘ing’ is nothing. She valued work and being involved in the hustle and bustle of life even when she suffered from sickness. If her reputation today rests largely on “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), it is mostly because it is a piece of her life story. At the time when the story was published first in the *New England Magazine* about 1891, Gilman writes in her article that, “a Boston physician made protest in *The Transcript*. Such a story ought not to be written, he said; it was enough to drive anyone mad to read it.”² Gilman writing the articles tells us the story of the story. She tells us about the many years she suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia—and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble she went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. She asserts, “This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still-good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to live as domestic a life as far as possible.”³ Gilman here puts emphasis on what the physician said: to “have but two hours’ intellectual life a day” and “never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again” as long as I lived. This was in 1887.”⁴

Gilman’s and many other women’s breakdowns were just the turning point of a masterpiece by Gilman named “The Yellow Wallpaper.” This was the story of many women stuck in the conventional life after marriage, watching their active pre-marriage life fading away. Charlotte herself as a young woman was largely self-educated and independent. When in 1882 she met Walter Stetson, a young painter who pursued her with tenacity, she found it so tough to forget the freedom she had and take the conventional path of married life. Before marrying she was reading literature, philosophy, and feminist journals, learning French and German, writing stories and

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1. Lynne Sharon Schwartz, Introduction to *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, in Perkins Gilman (New York: Batman Classic Book, 1982), p.xxv.
 2. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper” *The Forerunner*, October Issue, (1913), p.1.
 3. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper,” p.1.
 4. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper,” p.1.

poetry. Immediately afterward, lassitude, fretfulness, and fits of weeping overtook her, and upon the birth of her daughter, Katharine, in 1885, sank into a severe depression, hardly able to read or to do domestic work, not to mention care for a child.⁵

"The Yellow Wallpaper" as a story of many women's stories gained both bad and good reviews. No doubt that the reader does not enjoy reading the story of a woman creeping to madness. In 1920 William Dean Howells included the story in his *Great Modern American Stories* as a horror story.⁶ It does not matter what Gilman's intention was in creating such a story, the point is that "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a real masterpiece due to its fabulous narrative techniques and familiar, yet anonymous narrator. As she herself puts it, "It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked."⁷

NARRATIVE, NARRATOR AND THE NARRATEE

"The Yellow Wallpaper," as a short story is made up of indecisive narrative and an unpredictable narrator which leaves us as readers in amazement and wonder in the end. The narrator, suffering from post-partum depression is taken to a "A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate," or as the narrator prefers to call it, "a haunted house."⁸ John, her husband who is a physician of so-called high standing is sure that there is nothing the matter with her but temporary nervous depression. She tells us that it is absolutely forbidden to work until she is well again. But she keeps writing any way calling it a "relief."⁹

From the first line of the story we are a part of the narrator's narrative. To us the narrator is the main character who introduces others, interprets events, analyses situations and of course most importantly narrates her role in the narrative. She is constructing her narrative in which she is unconsciously a protagonist. Her narrative similar to the room she is kept in, seems more like a prison in which she and her readers are trapped. Studying the story as a constructed narrative space, Beth Snyder-Rheingold asks the reader who thinks of the story as a house and asserts that "structurally, it is nearly all interior, rarely departing from the scene of the bedroom but nevertheless emphasizing the

5. Lynne Sharon Schwartz, Introduction to *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, in Perkins Gilman (New York: Batman Classic Book, 1982), p.xiii.

6. Lynne Sharon Schwartz, Introduction to *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, in Perkins Gilman (New York: Batman Classic Book, 1982), p.xxiv.

7. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper," p.1.

8. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings* (New York: Bantam Classic Book, 1982), p.1.

9. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.3.

interior/exterior dichotomy.”¹⁰ In such position the narrator is simultaneously a ‘self’ and an ‘other’. She narrates her story to her self as an ‘other’. We as readers are confused and stuck in her created irony. This weird position of the narrator affects the readers’ views of other characters in the story; one sees John and Jennie through the eyes of the narrator whose reliability is ambiguous. Though there is no way out, the narrator weaves the narrative and the readers find themselves in it as well.

UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

To question the reliability of the narrator we as readers must know who the ‘unreliable narrator’ is in narrative fiction. A reliable narrator is a person whose rendering of the story and commentary on it, the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth. An unreliable narrator, on the other hand, is one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it, the reader has reasons to suspect.¹¹ Although trusting the narrator is not easy, there are signs of ‘unreliability’ spotted in all texts. Hawkes believes the main sources of unreliability are the narrator’s limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme.¹²

In case of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the protagonist is a character without even a name. She is just a tenant whose rent is paid by her ‘respectable’ husband, ‘John’. Her knowledge of the other characters and the events is limited to the room she is kept in. Her limited view is as large as the windows in the room, a framed point of view of the outside. There are lines emphasizing this limited range of view. The first ‘Window’ written by the narrator is shut by her husband. Talking to him about the spookiness of the house, she writes, “He said what I felt was a *draught*, and shut the window.”¹³ This is what her knowledge is about what she knows or is able to know is poisoned in her room chosen by her husband.

Through the story the word ‘window’ is repeated six times in three pages. The mostnoticeable one is when she describes the room and the window. She writes, “It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.” Here Gilman uses

10. Beth Snyder-Rheingold, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “*The Yellow Wallpaper*”: *A Poetics of the Inside*, retrieved from: <http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/snyder.htm>.

11. Terence Hawkes, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1983), p.100.

12. Terence Hawkes, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, p.100.

13. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.3.

the combination, "barred windows" intelligently and intentionally. In *Women and Economics*, Gilman shouts for less restrictive world not only for women but for all humanity. She writes, "The freedom of expression has been more restricted in women than the freedom of impression, if that be possible. Something of the world she lived in, she has seen from her barred windows."¹⁴ In the story Gilman's narrator is alienated behind the barred windows. This window can also parallel the narrative.

UNCERTAINTY

Analyzing the element of uncertainty in Gilman's story, Armitt asserts that the narrator lacks a name in addition to being in a "position that marginalizes her from the patrilinear code. Inevitably, though not able to behave appropriately, she is, herself, appropriated in the sense of being named 'mad'."¹⁵ Suffering from a denied identity what is literally left from her is just her uncertain and unreliable narration; an endlessly shifting series of 'I's. This uncertainty in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is somehow contagious, for the reader cannot decide whether the narrator is reliable or unreliable, and if unreliable to what extent. Hawkes believes it happens in some texts, and these narratives are called "ambiguous." These texts make such a decision impossible, putting the reader in a position of constant oscillation between mutually exclusive alternatives.¹⁶

The interesting point is that in some scenes while writing, the narrator does not trust what she calls 'people'. Are we the people she does not trust or are they the characters in the story. She writes, "I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much."¹⁷ Armitt believes, "if it simply refers to the presence of the direct addressee(the reader) then it is a simple suspense mechanism used to withhold information that we desire to have." But then there is she who talks to us 'privately'. "I thinks that woman gets out in the daytime! And I'll tell you why—privately—I've seen her!" Contrasting and ambiguous, the more she creeps into insanity the more unreliable her narrative will be.

There is a "you" in the narrator's narrative: "you see he does not believe I am sick!,"¹⁸ or somewhere else she says, "you see I have something more to expect, to look

14. Michelle Mock Murton, *Behind the "barred windows": The Imprisonment of Women's Bodies and Minds in Nineteenth-Century America* WILLA, IV (1995), pp.22-26.

15. Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (New York: Arnold, 1996), p.135-136.

16. Terence Hawkes, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, p.103.

17. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.16-17.

18. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.2-4.

forward to, to watch.”¹⁹ This you is always there, as an “other” to which she can describe her “self.” But there are scenes in which we see she stops writing in the presence of an “other.” While writing she says, “There comes John, and I must put this away, —he hates to have me write a word.” The other character is John’s sister whose presence makes her stop writing since she does not trust her at all. She is able to write, “when she is out, and sees her a long way off from these windows.”²⁰

She actually has difficulties in communication with others through speaking. We, as readers barely see her talking except in a couple of scenes in which she tries to overcome her silence and talk to John or Jennie, though she seems to be misunderstood in all of them. She trusts the “dead paper” rather than talking to someone. She is supposed to stop writing, for it does her good but she says, “Personally I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good”²¹ and we know by work she means writing.

WRITING VERSUS SPEAKING

The narrator feels relieved while writing. She actually pours her ‘self’ out by writing words down, repeating them, and of course, fancying through writing them. The question is that is writing really a ‘relief’. In *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, Norris analyzes what ‘writing’ means to Derrida. He believes writing for Derrida is, “the free play or element of decidability within every system of communication.”²² Derrida finds writing, the endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and places it for ever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge. In this sense the speaker of the language is always moving away of grasping his own language.

Writing versus speaking is one of the binary oppositions which jumps at us right when we start reading the story. Deconstructing the Saussureian way of thinking which valued ‘voice’ and ‘speaking’, Derrida argues that writing is in fact the ‘precondition’ of language and must be conceived as prior to speech.²³ Tracing the definition of the term

19. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.14.

20. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.7.

21. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.2.

22. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.28-29.

23. Raman Selden, *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: an Introduction* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p.89-93.

'deconstruction' Derrida reverses Plato's terms, seeing writing as the basis of speech, and "speech as unable to conceptually subsist on its own, but falling back into a kind of pervasive textuality or arch-writing, as we only know speech because it is comprised by language and subject to models of linguistic representation." At this point Derrida gets to destabilize the given, to advance what he calls 'difference,' a special kind of difference that ensures that meaning is never quite totally 'there.'²⁴

Another way of putting what was just said is that meaning is not immediately present in a sign. Speaking of the absence of meaning Terry Eagleton believes, "since the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is not, its meaning is always in some sense absent from it too." Meaning then is 'scattered' or 'dispersed' along the whole chain of signifiers.²⁵ As Derrida puts it we can never escape the differential nature of language, or to extricate ourselves from the 'aporias' of discourse, the undecidable flow and counterflow of all signification.²⁶

As we read the story of the desperate narrator we literally are not able to nail down the meaning, it is never fully present in any one sign alone. This is sharply noticeable in the narrator's contradictory commentaries on different characters or events. There is an uncertainty about everything including her own writing through which she tries to free herself. This uncertainty can be put to our literary advantage.²⁷ The protagonist oscillates in her opinion, at times asserting that, "He is very careful and loving,"²⁸ while others she admits that, "I'm getting a little afraid of John." In case of writing she suffers from a repressed desire which makes her feel not confident enough to write. But she keeps writing. We read three one sentence-paragraphs, "I don't know why I should write this," "I don't want to," "I don't feel abl."²⁹ She goes on, "And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!" Her choice of word is absolutely interesting. She chooses, 'say' rather than 'write' while ironically she is writing.

Thus we face the most important binary opposition which is writing and speech, bringing to the mind other oppositions like wholeness versus the fragmentation, or internal against external. The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" has a noticeable desire to write rather than speaking. The question is whether this desire is fulfilled. Noelle Vahanian in *The Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* gives a full definition of the word desire. Vahanian

24. Victor E. Taylor, Charles E. Winquist, *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.85.

25. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p.128.

26. Raman Selden, *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature*, p.89.

27. Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, p.134.

28. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.3-13.

29. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.9.

draws our attention to the point that 'desire' is a word before it is a thing. We are what we desire. "Desire is the possibility of satisfaction in language, through language." Vahanian asserts, "Desire is the vital force of creativity, because desire imagines its objects." Desire rethinks itself on finite terms; and rethinks itself again, and celebrates its necessary arbitrary constructiveness. The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" desires many things, but mostly desires to free herself and she does this through language. She is the subject, under construction, who desires without end because as Vahanian believes, "desire is a word, and language is a sublimated terrain of nature." What matters is to know that, "desire is to think, to speak, to write, to read: in sum, it is to live in a world that knows no other world."³⁰

Lacan's impression of desire is also a potentially endless movement from one signifier to another. He believes desire originates from a lack which strives continually to fill. The narrator's lack is fulfilled through stepping into the waves of language. She enters language and becomes a prey to desire.³¹ As the narrator desires to write, we desire to read. Our reading the text is as if she is deceiving us by telling us stories to trap us in the endless game of meaninglessness. There is no ultimate level, and we all know that. We notice repetitions through the story as if the narrator tries to prove something to us and to herself. By saying it over and over again she makes something out of nothing. Her narrative, unfinished and unlocatable takes us with itself.

As she moves on and writes she steps into the deep sea of signifiers which makes her lose the truth-no signified at all. From a deconstructive point of view language has no ability to represent thought in this way; all discourse is subject to the play of 'difference'. In Derrida's language the word includes the meanings 'to differ', 'to disperse', and to 'defer'. Signifiers (spoken or written words) can never have settled signified; language then cannot capture 'presence'. Language is a system of differences and not a collection of units of meaning. Signifiers 'disperse' meaning and 'defer' presence.³²

Something of this deferral presence is suggested in the story. There is that repetition again. No-thing is being represented through her narrative. She deconstructs herself and her writing as well. Contradictions in her language and noticeable emphasis on some words lead us to the point that she is making us believe in her truth by repeating something which is really no-thing.

The 'I' repetition in addition to words like "personally I," "I believe," "I feel," "I try," "I suppose" are followed right away by John's opposing ideas which are like a

30. Victor E. Taylor, Charles E. Winquist, *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, p.94.

31. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p.167.

32. Raman Selden, *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature*, p.92.

hammer repressing her thoughts. Her description of the paper is also something she clings to in order to fulfill her desire and express her hate and disgust.

These all show the undistinguishable line between certainty and uncertainty in her narrative. Although here and there through the story she keeps telling. "No one but myself," "no body knows but me," she is the first one who is deceived by her own story. Meaning is just an illusion of hers, she fancies and it gets closer to reality. Selden asserts that, "there is a sense that Non being and Being are one, that the thought, though non-existent, has the force of a 'thing'. This 'thing' is really nothing. That there is something determined only by the repetition." What is certain is this thought that, "Once might be a dream, but twice makes it a 'thing'."³³

MAD WOMAN IN THE ATTIC

There is one point in the story where we feel she is getting worse. We watch her crawling to madness in her solitary 'yellow' room. She even loses her 'self' and feels she is just like the boring room, damp and cold. While others keep telling that she is getting better she believes, "Better in body perhaps—."³⁴ The problem is that she cannot talk. Whenever she begins to express herself she is pressed back by her husband's so-called wise look which makes her feel foolish. Once she thought, "it was a good time to talk" so she told him that she was not gaining there, and she wished he would take her away. What she hears in return is a bunch of 'I's which makes her stop speaking. She writes, "I began, and stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word." The moment after her pointless effort to talk to John, she gazes at the paper and this is when she begins her journey toward becoming a 'mad woman in the attic'.

What she sees in the paper seems to be her double who is poisoned under the repetitive pattern. The pattern of the paper repeats itself endlessly, and as she puts it, "I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion."³⁵ She needs to find a conclusion, if there is any. Then she says, "I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else I ever heard of. It is repeated, of course, by the breadths, but not otherwise." The pattern parallels her

33. Raman Selden, *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature*, p.93.

34. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.11-14.

35. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.8-9.

words, repetitive and endless with no conclusion in the end. She keeps writing duplicitously to rewrite her 'self' anew. Through this she also creates a creepy double for her 'self': The woman in the paper. The woman in the story constantly writes of herself as being involved in a narrative of events whereas there are no events but those created by her. She as a narrator with no story tries to narrate and renarrate herself; through narrating this nothing she suffers from a creeping uncanniness. Reading Jefferies's *Snowed Up*, Julian Wolfreys believes this recognition of this double practice is crucial to understanding the nature of diary-writing in general, where one is both author and character, one who is produced by one's own narrations but who also serves the narration directly.³⁶

What was said above is what the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is being stuck in, her own narrative. Throughout the story we are offered some ironic commentaries on the situation which also makes this point sharper. The feeling of being repressed by others is what gets sharper in the writer-narrator's uncertainty. Her lack of confidence in writing reflects what she desires and all these originate from her image of the 'other'. She is someone who speaks for her 'self' and later for her double the woman in the paper.

Choosing an unreliable narrator Gilman gives her narrator the freedom of changing moods and feelings. This unreliability suggests the narrator's creativity and leads her and us to a world of fantasy. Under the gaze of her husband and his sister she tries to narrate her silenced voice and invisible position, what is called a "narrative of death." She then turns to a mad woman prisoned in the attic away from the active life outside, giving birth to her meaningless narrative and her double in the paper. Here the reader is faced to various oppositions, coming up one after another, such as: escape/confinement, active/passive, and fragmentation/wholeness.

In contrast to the unified masculine self of the time, nineteenth century patriarchy forced women into a fragmentary existence which required them to function simultaneously as wives, mothers, daughters, but never autonomously as the singular self. Gilbert and Gubar assert, "through the violence of the double, the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts, while at the same time it is through the double's violence that this anxious author articulates for herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be contained."³⁷

36. Julian Wolfreys, William Baker, *Literary Theories: A Case Study in Critical Performance* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1996), p.184.

37. Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic*, p.85.

The anger is destructiveness. It is boiling water getting to its boiling point. She narrates, "Hurrah! This is the last day, but it is enough." She deceives the others through which she deconstructed her 'self'. Now she does not desire their presence anymore. When Jennie wants to be with her she tells her she should rest alone. "That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit!" she says while thinking about the woman in the wallpaper. She is nothing without her though she calls it "that awful pattern." It laughs at her as John does, but she made her decision while saying, "I would finish it to-day!"³⁸ She wants to finish it though she struggles to help that "poor thing." There is an ambiguous line when she writes, "I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper."³⁹ The unidentified subjects, "I" and "she" change places and in the end they become 'we.' The narrator unites with the woman in the paper as if they are one. But she, or they peel themselves and we as readers are left with a narrator full of selves and yet selfless and a narrative full of repetitions but with deferred meaning. Despite all these the narrator desperately keeps telling her story to escape the nightmare she is trapped in.

There is this deferral meaning and repetitions in the story. Since this narrative at this point of the narrator's life is what is left from her being, she is moving through this meaninglessness and getting closer to committing suicide. Rejecting the choice posed in Sartre's *La Nusee* between living and recounting, MacIntyre acknowledges that there are some people who fail to perceive their own lives as a meaningful narrative. MacIntyre asserts: "When someone complains—as those who commit suicide—that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and perhaps characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any points any movement towards a climax or a *telos*."⁴⁰

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator's life turns to an intolerable sequence of events. Her narrative, as being read by the reader, is full of, "he said," "she said" since she is bound to be silent and listen. The only way out of this prison, called 'other', is writing to express her self. She writes, "It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so."⁴¹ From John the reader repeatedly reads, "I'm a doctor," "I know," while from the narrator the most repeated sentence is

38. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.17.

39. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.17.

40. Collin Davis, *After Poststructuralism: Reading Stories and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.135.

41. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.11.

“no body but myself.” Telling the story and narrating it to us, is essential to her. Without the story she gets even more selfless. She, as a subject is unable to perceive and construct her ‘self’ and most importantly the meaning of her own narrative, and such a situation seems absolutely unbearable.

Developing Freud’s views on language, Kristeva puts considerable emphasis on the central role of storytelling in psychoanalysis in her *sense et non-sense de la revolte*. Kristeva believes through free association the inaccessible and unknown unconscious could be brought into language which is on the borders of consciousness and unconsciousness, and enables communication between them.⁴² Based on what Kristeva claimed and clinging to Lacan’s description of the unconscious as ‘structured like a language’, psychoanalysis turns to a narrative - the patient who can also be the narrator, narrates her story to overcome the trauma. But the problem is not only the unreliable narrator, but an unreliable path to step out of the trauma. For Kristeva language fails to be a sure ground for truth. Kristeva believes not only can words allow internal things to become conscious, but also and conversely, they can be the source of errors and engender hallucinations; they are not as sure as they seem to be for moving between perception and Consciousness, and vice versa; from that point, language ceases to be a sure ground for leading to truth.⁴³

As the narrator of the story fails to prove her ‘self’ in and through language, she starts having hallucinations. These weird thoughts get sharper when the narrator’s effort to connect to the other fails. She even does not tell them the truth which proves her unreliability as a narrator. The irony is interesting though since the reader knows what she is doing. She writes, “I don’t tell them I’m awake—O no!” She then confesses that she is getting a little afraid of her husband. “He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look.”⁴⁴ Of course she makes a guess that “perhaps it is the paper!” The paper is some occupation to her to get away from the boredom of the attic she is kept in. She uses the paper as a turning point in her meaningless life story. She thinks, “Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was.”

42. Collin Davis, *After Poststructuralism: Reading stories and Theory*, p.138.

43. Collin Davis, *After Poststructuralism: Reading stories and Theory*, p.139.

44. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, pp.13-14.

OUT OF CAGE AT LAST

The three last pages are considerable for their choice of word. Gilman seems to choose each word intentionally and intelligibly. There are more "I"s while the narrator pushes herself more to free the woman in the paper, and literally to free her 'self'. She peels off all the paper and believes, "the pattern just enjoys it."⁴⁵ Binary oppositions such as, dead/alive, inside/outside are noticeable while the narrator is deciding to finish her story. She says, "I am here, and no person touches this paper but me,—not alive!" She now feels safe to stay inside in spite of her desire to go outside. She even does not like to look out of the windows because, "there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast." The interesting point is that except the last scene in which her husband comes and tries to open the door to rescue her, throughout the last section, she is alone and she narrates in an absence of an 'other'. She says, "I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to." She made her choice.

The last scene is the climax of the story and of course the moment of release for the narrator. Now she is in the very room in which she hated to stay. The paper with the pattern which "lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes" that stares at us upside down, is torn apart by her hands and the women trapped inside are creeping out. Yet the question is whether or not she is free. This is still the most doubtful point of all. Is there a closure to this narrative of hers, is what we as readers wait. The meaning is left to be just an illusion to her and to us as well. How artistically Gilman lets the narrative open by the word "every time." The narrator, so content to be united with the woman in the wallpaper, and to be able to "be out in this great room and creep around" as she pleases, is still trapped in the room and of course in her story. The irony gets sharper since now she does not even try to go out. The room as her narrative is where she moves round and round to please herself. It is a fake feeling of freedom that she seems to be happy with.

She thinks, "I've got out at last."⁴⁶ She talks to John in a low voice that is unheard by John but heard by the reader. Even in the last scene John is unable to hear her. Though she believes she already has what she wanted in spite of John and Jane's presence. She murmurs, "And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" And finally she creeps over him.

45. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, pp.18-19.

46. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings*, p.20.

All in all whether she kills her 'self' literally or in reality, is not a question we desire to find the answer to. However, what we certainly know is what Eagleton asserts. He writes, "It is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails that my meaning is always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself."⁴⁷ In the end, we are more embarrassed than the narrative. We as readers feel more desperate than the whole system of language. In front of us, the proud *aporia* offers more contradiction.

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47. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p.130.