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A Room Not Of Her Own: Confinement of the Female Body and Mind in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a feminist text that exposes the pervasive impact of patriarchal confinement on a woman's body and mind. The unnamed narrator's physical confinement in the nursery room on the pretext of a 'rest cure' symbolises the broader confinement that women experience within the four walls of their home in a patriarchal society, especially in the 19th century. This paper uses a feminist lens to argue how the unnamed narrator is denied agency, particularly spatial freedom, and how, ironically, her descent to madness becomes a form of liberation from the confinement that she undergoes under her husband's autonomy. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is one of the most compelling literary works that talks about the confinement of women in a male-dominated society. Published in 1892, this short story offers a view into a chilling account of a woman's mental breakdown while confined in a room by her husband in the name of rest and medical treatment. This story reflects Gilman's own experience with postpartum depression and her rejection of the 'rest cure' commonly prescribed to women in the 19th century. Building on feminist ideas, especially Gilbert and Gubar's concept of the "madwoman in the attic," this paper shows how the narrator's slow descent into madness is not only a personal tragedy but also a form of silent protest. The wallpaper becomes a living symbol of how women are trapped within domestic and cultural boundaries, yet it also reflects their longing to break free. In the end, Gilman's story is read as both a critique of the patriarchal structures that silence women and a gesture of hope, suggesting that women's voices and creativity can lead toward freedom and self-expression.

Keywords: Confinement, female body, mind, patriarchal society, autonomy, rest cure.

Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an American writer, feminist, and social reformer whose works critique the gender inequalities of late 19th-century America. *The Yellow Wallpaper*, published in 1892, is a short story that reflects the socio-cultural context of a time when women were confined to domestic roles, deprived of intellectual freedom, and compelled to undergo medical practices like the 'rest cure' that intensified patriarchal authority. Gilman herself underwent the 'rest cure' by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell after childbirth, which inspired *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Citing her own experiences, she critiques the oppressive system through the theme of confinement, which is both physical and psychological, making *The Yellow Wallpaper* one of the earliest feminist texts to challenge the control and confinement of women's bodies and minds.

In the late 19th century, women in America were expected to uphold the ideals of the cult of domesticity, which was considered to have a prevalent value system among the upper and middle classes during the 19th century in America. The definition of 'true women' was one that had four fundamental virtues, which were piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. The notion was that women were assumed to be the center of the family, and she was considered the light of the home. Within this, women did not have much legal, social, or intellectual agency, and they were mostly identified by the role that they played at home, as someone's wife and mother.

In the 19th century, like any other establishment, the medical institutes were dominated by men, and they created treatments and methods that would further discourage women's independence and activity through medical treatments and experiments. Dr S Weir Mitchell was one of those male doctors who initiated treatments to cure women's illness which would ultimately drive a sane woman into a 'hysterical state' which they are diagnosed

with, this treatment of his was known as the infamous 'rest cure' which prescribed complete passivity, confinement, isolation and also prohibition of any creative or intellectual work for women diagnosed with 'hysteria' or nervous disorder as they called it.

Charlotte Gilman Perkins also underwent the 'rest cure' treatment after suffering from postpartum depression, an experience which she recalls as one that brought her close to complete mental breakdown. Drawing from her personal experience, she sheds light through her fictional character in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, where the unnamed narrator undergoes coerced rest and isolation by her husband, a physician. The short story critiques both marital as well as medical autonomy - an apparatus of patriarchal control.

Virginia Woolf, in her essay *A Room of Her Own*, published in 1929, argues that women need a space of their own to write and think freely, with which Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* echoes with early feminist thought. Through her writing, Gilman explores this argument by portraying her protagonist, who lacks both literal and metaphorical space, whose silence later drives her insane. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is an early feminist text that exposes the threats of the denial of intellectual and physical autonomy to women.

The description of the narrator's physical environment evokes imprisonment rather than comfort. The room chosen by her husband for her recovery is a nursery room with 'barred windows', 'nailed down bed', and 'rings and things in the wall' (Gilman, 1892). The description of the room gives a vivid image of what an asylum might look like, and these details suggest restraint and surveillance instead of a place for an ill person to rejuvenate and recover from her poor health. The 'colonial mansion' which John has secured for the summer, according to the narrator, looks like a haunted house. The home, ideally a place of comfort and safety, becomes a space of confinement. Instead of receiving care,

she endures confinement and restrictions that prevent her from engaging in any congenial work, and remains isolated in the 'nursery room'. Though society traditionally idealizes the domestic sphere as nurturing and protective for women, this narrative portrays it as restricting and controlling, turning the home into a mechanism of confinement. John's dual role, as a husband and a physician reinforces this sense of confinement. With complete authority over her, he dictates her movements, prescribes her medicines, rest, and activities, and denies her any autonomy over her own body, insisting that he knows what is best for her.

As the narrator writes, '*He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction*' (Gilman 1892), his complete authority leaves her physically immobilized, confined not only by the barred room but also by the medical authority embodied in her husband. The room with the yellow wallpaper and John's dominance explains how confinement of the female body was naturalized under the guise of care.

Medical practices like the 'rest cure' by Dr S Meir Mitchell demanded passivity and isolation, restricting women from any physical activity or intellectual work on the guise that it could deteriorate their health and reproductive capacity. The narrator's barred room becomes a significant symbol of the restrictions placed on women's bodies in her time, critiquing how patriarchal society coerced women to be passive patients rather than individuals with autonomy.

Beyond her physical restrictions, the narrator faces limitations on her intellectual freedom, reflecting the nineteenth-century constraints on women's creativity and autonomy. The narrator finds an escape from her physical confinement by expressing her thoughts and emotions by writing; however, her doctor husband forbids her from doing this as well. '*There comes John, and I must put this away; he hates to have me write a word*' (Gilman 1892).

This reflects the societal tendency to undermine women's intellectual contributions and to stigmatize imagination as a symptom of 'hysteria'. John's insistence that '*the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition*' (Gilman 1892) reveals how male authority figures dismissed women's capacity for introspection, prescribing inaction instead of giving her agency. By restricting her from even writing her own experience and thoughts, John mirrors a wider social order that denied women education, professional life, and even the authority to articulate their own illnesses.

This confinement of the mind conforms with the prevailing nineteenth-century view that women's minds, like their bodies, required regulation and control. Medical practices such as the infamous 'rest cure' diagnosed thought itself as a threat to women, while the cultural ideal of the 'angel in the house' demanded complete obedience and silence. In her critique, Gilman addresses these oppressive norms through the narrator's descent into madness, which becomes both a symbol of her confinement and an act of resistance against the prevailing norms. When the narrator associates herself with the woman behind the wallpaper, her mental breakdown dramatizes the penalty of denying women intellectual freedom. In this sense, the story foreshadows Virginia Woolf's later argument in *A Room of One's Own*, that women need independence and space for creative freedom while illustrating how the lack of such agency led to the mental imprisonment of women of the nineteenth century.

Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* illustrates how patriarchal 19th-century society confines women's bodies and minds in mutually reinforcing ways through the narrator's experience. The narrator's enforced physical confinement, the repression of her creativity, and her escalating fixation on the wallpaper reveal how domestic and medical authority operated to control and restrict women. The figure of the woman trapped behind the wallpaper serves as a powerful symbol of this

confinement. As the narrator descends into madness, it highlights the mental consequences of her confinement while also representing a form of defiance. Connecting these events to broader feminist concerns, Gilman anticipates later arguments, such as Virginia Woolf's call in *A Room of One's Own* for women's intellectual and creative freedom. Ultimately, the story reflects the necessity of bodily autonomy and mental independence as fundamental to women's liberation, making it a landmark text in early feminist literature.

The yellow wallpaper in Gilman's story functions as a significant symbol of the narrator's confinement and struggle for self-autonomy. Her obsession with the yellow wallpaper is evident in the early part of the story as she writes, 'It is dull enough to confuse the eye, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study' (Gilman, 1892), indicating that the wallpaper's 'sprawling flamboyant patterns' (Gilman, 1892) mirror the disorder inflicted on her mind by enforced inactivity. As her obsession with the wallpaper deepens, she begins to see a trapped woman within the pattern: 'The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out' (Gilman 1892). The woman trapped within the wallpaper becomes a reflection of the narrator's own entrapment in the room, emphasizing the psychological cost of confinement and the desperation for freedom. At the end of the story, the narrator identifies herself with the trapped woman, 'I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern' (Gilman 1892). The final act of her peeling off the yellow wallpaper represents both a desperate action of rebellion against the norms that had confined her and also the complete collapse of her mental state. The wallpaper is an interwoven symbol of physical and psychological confinement, focusing on how restricted domestic and social roles constrain women's freedom in the 19th century.

Applying a feminist theoretical lens reveals how the narrator's confinement in *The Yellow Wallpaper* functions as a critique of

patriarchal authority in nineteenth-century domestic life. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman In The Attic*, published in 1979, argue that the figure of the 'madwoman' in literature often represents women's resistance to the oppression that they face, with mental instability functioning both as a consequence of and a reaction to social restrictions. The narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* descends into madness, and her identification with the woman behind the wallpaper exemplifies this concept, emphasizing how coerced restrictions and passivity produce psychological resistance. Similarly, Elaine Showalter (1985) emphasizes the medical practices of the nineteenth century, where practices like the 'rest cure' curtailed women's creativity and autonomy. By applying these frameworks, the wallpaper serves as a symbol of patriarchal control and confinement of the female body and mind, while the narrator's obsession with the wallpaper represents both oppression and rebellion. These feminist perspectives shed light on how Gilman critiques confinement, showing that women's physical restriction and denial of intellectual freedom directly intertwine with their psychological experiences of oppression.

The text anticipates later theoretical assertions on the necessity of autonomy, intellectual freedom, and creative expression for women, while also exposing the profound consequences of their systematic denial. In doing so, Gilman's work not only reflects the cultural and medical practices of her own era but also continues to resonate as a compelling reminder of the enduring struggle for women's intellectual and bodily autonomy. *The Yellow Wallpaper* uncovers the inseparable link between physical and psychological confinement, conveying how patriarchal authority functions simultaneously over the female body and mind. By dramatizing the narrator's enforced passivity, loss of autonomy, and descent into madness, the narrative functions as a critique of a nineteenth-century system that stigmatized women's agency and confined them within

domestic and intellectual boundaries. Viewed through a feminist framework, the text foreshadows later theoretical arguments on the need for autonomy, intellectual freedom, and creative expression for women, while uncovering the significant consequences of their organized exclusion. In doing so, Gilman's work not only mirrors the cultural and medical practices of her own period but also continues to resonate as a powerful reminder of the perpetual struggle for women's intellectual and bodily autonomy.

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