



#3.2
2013
ISSN 2161-0010

Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature

Malin, Natlie. "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Disillusionment with Social Norms." *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature* 3.2 (Spring 2013): 62-71. PDF.

Natalie Malin

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Disillusionment with Social Norms

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is not just a compelling short story about the main character's slip into deeper depression. More significantly, the 12-page text boldly examines other socially unacceptable themes often ignored and thus left unexplored *especially* according to 19th century ideological conventions. These themes are mainly the narrator's thwarted desires for a creative outlet that she, like other women, found they were forced to relinquish once they married. As will be argued in this paper, it is thought that Gilman's main character uses the only agency she has available to cope with her feelings of domestic entrapment and the taboos associated with sharing her thoughts of being unfulfilled with her role as a wife and mother.

When "The Yellow Wall-Paper's" frustrated mother/narrator finally gives up on trying to get her husband John to listen to her pleas for intellectual stimulation, she not only slips into deeper psychosis but, as I suggest via employing critical discourse analysis, allows her odd

behavior to be a form of revolt regarding societal expectations on motherhood. Indeed, van Dijk writes of such "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis" when he notes that typically, like the narrator/mother's discourse with her husband, critical discourse analysis focuses on "...explicit sociological stance of discourse analysis, and a focus on dominance relations by elite groups and institutions as they are being enacted, legitimized or otherwise reproduced by text and talk" (283). Furthermore, the behavior patterns of both the husband and wife in this short story exemplify such sociological ideology power constructs; "powerlessness and inarticulateness are often associated" (Johnstone 135).

Though Gilman was later found to be autobiographically descriptive in her depictions of despair related to her own post-partum depression, various publications both before and after Gilman's shocking 1892 "The Yellow Wall-Paper" also explore the gritty secret underside of motherhood and marital disillusionments. This suggests that the unsightly phenomenon of disenfranchisement with domesticity was not reserved only for those who found a way to use alter egos in storytelling (Braun; Glubka; Kamel). Like other female authors, Gilman was aware of the potential backlash for admitting her negative perception of motherhood. She therefore, arguably, slips herself into the main character of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and by doing so, safely purges some of her own despair by penning such a depressed character forced to assume a role. Significantly, Johnstone notes that there are no categorization themes, i.e., men versus women, that are natural (150).

Gilman's main character in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" continuously disagrees with her husband's disapproval of her desire to write because he mistakenly attributes her beloved creative outlet to increasing her frailty from giving birth to their child. In his "Critical Discourse Analysis and the Discourse of Condescension," Thomas Huckin explores related discourse

analysis and explains that this type of conversation signifies how “people are manipulated... and thereby subjected to abuses of power” (158). Though the cure for a diagnosis of hysteria, both Gilman's and the narrator/mother's diagnosis, was thought to be complete rest (Hedges), Gilman's narrator/mother nonetheless feels writing is something she desperately needs to do (see also Braun) and so sneaks journal entries in when able: “There comes John, and I must put this away, — he hates to have me write a word” (609) . In fact, according to *Decorum, a Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society*, published in 1879, a woman during this time period could not even volunteer for charity or work in the schools without first consulting her husband (Ruth and Snyder 200) . The narrator/mother's journal entry is an excellent and typical example according to Huckin, who writes that critical discourse analysis takes into account interpersonal aspects such as “politeness, identity and ethos” (156) . The fact that Gilman's oppressed narrator/mother does not want to disobey her husband's request (i.e., not journaling) and therefore hides what she is doing behind his back, would be considered the polite thing to do during that time period. Johnstone discusses such action to be related not so much to acquiescing to expected behaviors, but to being aware that one needs to act a certain way so as to not cause social ripples.

A rhetorically analytical reading allows readers to also witness the narrator/mother's initial praise of her husband's relieving his wife of all her worries slowly turn from that of compliance to camouflaged contempt near the end of the story. This female character's anger at not being able to do what she wants finds ways of expressing itself initially in unchallenging descriptions sans resentment from her forced patriarchal submissiveness: “I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more” (Gilman 609), suggesting her acceptance, at this point, with her limited

agency. Ruth and Synder's etiquette manual listed how a wife must never "...speak an unrefined word; let you're your conduct be such as an honorable man may look for in his wife, and the mother of his children" (204-5) . As Huckin writes, such submissive behavior signifies and "serves the interests of the powerful over those of the less privileged" (159). Perhaps use of such agreeable language and outlook allows Gilman's narrator/mother to better cope with the frustration and disquiet she feels are associated with domestic virtues of the time, such as assumed marital bliss and compliance . Women were supposed to be thrilled when they reached the "goal" of marriage and motherhood, and if they weren't, something was terribly wrong with them . An example of such accepted rules can be seen in Ruth and Snyder handbook which lists "Avoiding All Causes for Complaint" (201) and repeatedly stresses a wife's duty to "be content" (203) . Especially during the time period that "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was written, there was "an assumed difference between [men and women's] status and worth" (Huckin 167), thus, Gilman's narrator/mother had no voice worthy of being heard.

Herndl describes hysteria to be understood as "a woman's response to a system in which she is expected to remain silent, a system in which her subjectivity is continually denied" (53). However, though protagonist knows she is to keep quiet, she still cannot help herself from repeatedly trying to get her husband to listen to her. Indeed, the story opens with the narrator/mother voicing her opinion about her feeling that the colonial mansion they are staying at feels queer. Yet her husband immediately dismisses his wife's disposable opinion, setting the theme of the story: "John laughs at me of course, but one expects that in marriage" (608). Note how the narrator does not pursue her qualm with her husband, framing her expected behavior at the onset of the narrative. Indeed, Ruth and Snyder's *Decorum, a Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society* notes "Avoid All Bickerings" as a subsection about a

wife's behavior listing: "There is something expressibly endearing in small concessions, in gracefully giving up a favorite opinion or in yielding to the will of another; and equally painful is the reverse" (204). Surely, a literate person such as Gilman would have read, or at least known about, such manuals on accepted deportment.

In most of the 12 sections of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" the narrator/mother tries to convince her husband that rest is not what she needs, which he continually ignores, or doesn't even "hear." Treichler (1984) concurs that such women's invisibility could in fact be related to patriarchal order's "failure to perceive [the woman] at all" (62), which could heighten the narrator/mother's impatience with her being denied access to her creative outlets. Other feminist authors, both before Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and after, have chosen to voice their rebellion against such unwanted and uncomfortable predetermined gender roles by writing overtly autobiographically. However, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is one of the earliest and most popular of these, and is considered to be Gilman's most famous publication, which is often cited in feminist studies ("Charlotte").

In "Out of the Stream: An Essay on Unconventional Motherhood" author Shirley Glubka shares many of the painful details associated with her acceptance that she "did not like the role of mother" (225) and thus decided to give her child up for adoption, mostly as a way of saving her sanity. Though this article was written nearly 100 years after "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Glubka still defines herself as feeling like a social outcast for not being able to ascribe to the preset ideals of satisfaction associated with maternity. Glubka confessingly writes of how she constantly felt burdened by motherhood and how she secretly resented the time and energy her son sapped from her. She disliked how he forced her to put aside her own reading and writing, admitting finally, that she was "in fact, bored" (227), something that Gilman did not confess in "The Yellow Wall-

Paper" per se, but close readings probably cause readers to assume as much. Remember, according to Ruth and Snyder's 1879 handbook on acceptable behavior, wives and mothers were to be content.

Glubka's realization that motherhood caused her to become a "highly responsible, joyless, rather rigid person" (230) reflects Gilman's narrator/mother's shared insight when Gilman's main character refers to John's sister, who takes care of her baby, as one who "hopes for no better profession" (611). Glubka was initially ashamed and surprised at her resentment once she reached the supposed pinnacle of motherhood, and so became angry, much like the narrator/mother becomes as "The Yellow Wall-Paper" progresses. After instigating her four-year-old son to be adopted by his beloved preschool teacher, Glubka found relief and a returning of power in control over her life. Relatedly, Gilman's main character in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is also relieved by the fact that someone else is caring for her baby: "There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wallpaper" (613). However, she blames the baby's need to be cared for by someone else on the ugly wallpaper as a way of not openly divulging her unconventional thoughts about motherhood.

"The Yellow Wall-Paper's" theme of suffering in silence from prescribed roles and expectations are further examined in Bennett's related "'The Descent of the Angel': Interrogating Domestic Ideology in American Women's Poetry, 1858-1890." Bennett explores narrators who abandon "all hope of romance and travel" (592) and openly confesses to crying over the tribulations and oppression associated with motherhood. Gilman's narrator/mother also notes her crying spells: "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time" (612). But this is where I deduce that her sadness is often associated with frustration, and frustration sometimes turns into action. Such

behavior might allude to “politics as the art of concealment” (Huckin 167), where a conniving narrator/mother essentially plans her coup de grace in order to be heard.

Bennett goes on to list other authors, such as Elizabeth Drew Stoddard, Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who, like Gilman, personally found previously acclaimed domesticity to be “a source of self-alienation, conflict and despair” (594) . Bennett illuminates a lesser known reason such early authors as Stoddard adopted male pen names; not so as to be more likely to get published, but to also have the freedom to discuss such taboo subjects — such as the perception of imprisonment she associated with motherhood — thereby allowing these female authors protection from societal retaliation for discussing such unconventional thoughts. It seems obvious that Stoddard's doing so is similar to Gilman's reasons for employing a fictitious narrator in “The Yellow Wall-Paper.”

Bennett notes how protests against the confines of motherhood were reflected in “the woman's inability to have a life of her own, to act on her own passions and desires, [and how this] leaves her an empty shell” (600) . Indeed, many mothers' “desires for personal growth, freedom and excitement” (601) were squelched, leading to their misery. Writing and other creative outlets were not only therapeutic for these artistically inclined women; writing was considered by them to be a necessity often ignored or disallowed, causing further inner turmoil for them . Note how Gilman's narrator/mother writes “I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to. I don't feel able... But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way — it is such a relief!” (613). This hidden, yet necessary form of self-expression, evidenced in Sections 1-4 and 9-12 in “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” must have added to the narrator/mother's psychic toll. Not only is she forced to sneak in writing about her unhappiness and resentment related to the demands of motherhood and marriage; she also becomes less submissive and more angry with

her husband, which can be read as a sign of her growing agency setting the stage for her final revolt . Additionally, when John forces his wife to lie down more and more often, the narrator/mother writes that she does not, in fact, sleep, but fakes it and “that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them that I'm awake — O no!” (615). Rhetorical analysis of Gilman's use of such a strong word — deceit — can be thought to clue the reader in that the narrator/mother is beginning to find an agency that will finally allow her to be heard . By employing Huckin's third stage of critical discourse analysis, we now see Gilman's narrator/mother dispute the assumed difference between herself and her husband (167).

Interestingly, Wesley's examination of creative female characters who are labeled “dangerous” simply because they have artistic aspirations outside of motherhood explores female characters who “dare to live creatively” or create lives “independent of societal expectations” (92) so as to not sacrifice themselves and give in to the either/or dichotomy of marriage versus career . Like Gilman's narrator/mother, one of Wesley's characters “falls into a dark period when she does not write and appears to lose herself as well” (94), reflecting Gilman's narrator/mother's struggles with the similar plight when she stops journaling and appears to finally succumb to madness at the end of “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” However, I argue that because we see her go from writing powerless connoted journal entries such as “The fact is I'm a little afraid of John” (615) to “I turned it [John's compliment that she is getting better] off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was because of the wall-paper — he would make fun of me” (616), her hopelessness and fear is turning into empowerment. The narrator/mother's agency continues to grow, unlike Kamel's 1985 depiction of stifled female author's feelings of powerlessness (65).

I suggest that Gilman's narrator/mother goes from being fearful and compliant to angry and vengeful. Rhetorical analysis shows the continuously more aggressive descriptions she uses: "I thought of seriously burning the house..." (615), "if those heads [in the wallpaper] were covered or taken off... (617), "I wish he [John] would take another room!", "he [John] asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretends to be very loving and kind. As if I couldn't see through him! (617), and most notably, "...no person touches this paper but me—*not alive!*", and "...I got so angry I bit off a little piece at one corner..." (618) . Importantly, the final clue that Gilman's frustrated and ignored narrator/mother decides to use her psychosis to get her controlling husband's attention is evidenced when she narrates "I am getting angry enough to do something desperate" and later admits to *wanting* to "astonish him" (618) . Here, she calmly encourages — and allows — John to show negative emotions (pounding and crying at the door) and condescendingly ignores him as he has ignored her, as a socially acceptable way of teaching her husband a lesson she could not otherwise teach.

Furthermore, it is of utmost significance that readers notice that the narrator/mother looks over her shoulder at her "aghast" husband *while continuing to creep* along the baseboards of her prison bedroom, as well as continues to creep *over him after he faints* from witnessing her bizarre behavior (619). It appears that this action shows Gilman's narrator/mother using her agency to finally achieve a chance at being heard by being seen, even if , according to critical discourse analysis, she is not the "superior" one in the relationship, but "ordinary" (Huckin 170). Such unexpected changes in behavior "can cause trouble in interaction" (Johnstone 143), but perhaps Gilman's narrator/mother's could no longer ascribe to pretending to be content and thus, no longer cared what her husband John, or anyone else, thought about her anymore.

Works Cited

- Bennett, Paula. "The Descent of the Angel": Interrogating Domestic Ideology in American Women's Poetry, 1858-1890." *American Literary History*. Vol. 7, No. 4 (Winter, 1995), pp. 591-610. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 July 2012.
- Braun, Gretchen. "Paragon" and "Mad Wife": Emily Jolly's Fiction of Agency. *Pacific Coast Philology*. Vol. 43 (2008), pp. 36-54. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 July 2012.
- "Charlotte Perkins Gilman." <http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/gilman1.html>
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wall-Paper." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Vol. 2, 4th Ed. (2002), pp. 608-19. Print.
- Glubka, Shirley. "Out of the Stream: An Essay on Unconventional Motherhood." *Feminist Studies*. Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer, 1983), pp. 223-34. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 July 2012.
- Herndl, Diane Price. "The Writing Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anna O., and "Hysterical" Writing." *NWSA Journal*. Vol. 1, No. 1 (1988), pp. 52-74. *Ebscohost*. Web. 25 March 2013.
- Huckin, Thomas. "Critical Discourse Analysis and the Discourse of Condescension." *Discourse Studies in Composition*. Eds. Barton, Ellen and Stygall, Gail. Cresshill: Hampton Press, 2002. pp. 155-76. Print.
- Johnstone, Barbara. "Participants in Discourse: Relationships, Roles, Identities." *Discourse Analysis*. 2nd ed. Blackwell Publishing, 2008, pp. 128-61. Print.
- Kamel, Rose. "Literary Foremothers and Writers' Silences: Tillie Olsen's Autobiographical Fiction." *MELUS*. Vol. 12, No. 3, Ethnic Women Writers IV (Autumn, 1985), pp. 55-72. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 July 2012.
- Ruth, John. A. and Snyder, C.S. *Decorum, a Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society*. (1879), Texas Woman's University Vault. MFILM 10 reel 407, no. 2945.
- Treichler, Paula A. "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in "The Yellow Wallpaper." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*. Vol. 3, No. 1/2 (Spring-Autumn, 1984), pp. 61-77. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 March 2013.
- Van Dijk, Teun A. "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis." *Discourse and Society*. Vol. 4, No. 2 (1993), pp. 249-83. SAGE. 20 March 2013.
- Wesley, Debbie. "A New Way of Looking at an Old story: Lee Smith's Portrait of Female Creativity." *The Southern Literary Journal*. Vol. 30, No. 1 (Fall, 1997), pp. 88-101. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 July 2012.