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Unravelling the Mind: Psychological Turmoil and Identity Fragmentation in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper

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Abstract: *The present paper embodies the connection of self and identity to the psyche of an individual, especially women, in a world that is harsh upon her demeanour, represses her, and fractures her identity under systemic control. The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman calls for attention to the mental upheaval shown through the unnamed woman character, her assertion of herself, and her urge to establish her presence in spite of various subjections. Through the symbol of the yellow wallpaper, Gilman scrutinizes the metaphor in order to map the narrator's internal struggle and mental breakdown as a reaction to enforced passivity, isolation, and the denial of intellectual and creative agency. With the repressed identity depicted through imagined women trapped within the pattern of the wallpaper, the narrator evokes a sense of conscious interpretation of an eroded self. In a way to analyse the story using the lenses of feminist and psychoanalytic theory, Gilman critiques the gender dynamics of power and the medicalization of women's experiences, emphasizing that madness is not just a pathological condition but a fragile, distorted, often desperate assertion of selfhood.*
Keywords: *Psyche, Women, Identity, Internal struggle, Isolation, Feminist and psychoanalytic theory, Gender dynamics*

The genre of a literary piece does not determine its profundity. Such is the case with the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, published in 1892, which stands out as a powerful narrative that confronts complex psychological and societal issues with striking vigour. Though a seminal work of American literature, it possesses all the prowess of being a feminist critique of the treatment of women's mental health in the late nineteenth century. Gilman's narrative serves as both a personal and political document, exposing how patriarchal institutions—especially medicine and marriage—functioned as mechanisms of female oppression. Beyond its historical and gendered implications, the story also explores a more universal struggle with societal conventions and the search for personal identity.

What unfolds is a story about an unnamed female narrator residing in a secluded country estate who is confined to a room under a prescribed treatment by her physician husband, John. The unnamed protagonist and her irrational condition represent a poignant depiction of her mental aberration and identity fragmentation, which Gilman astutely points out while indicating the patriarchal domination and medical liberty as a means to assert and establish social order, limiting the existence of women by silencing their voices. The narrator's weakened physical state reflects a diminished mental existence, illustrating that her psychological decline and eroded sense of self are not merely personal afflictions but symptoms of broader societal forces

that deny women's agency, expression, and autonomy. "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" (Gilman 816).

The narrative illustrates the suffering of the protagonist as she undergoes a treatment known as the "rest cure," which was developed by Dr Silas Weir Mitchell and was prevalent during the Victorian period. It involves complete rest, both physical and mental. The method of the rest cure isolates individuals from any kind of stimulation, including writing, reading, or socializing. There is a prohibition on any engagement that allows individuals, especially women, to be intellectually aware and socially conscious. It is guided by a strictly controlled lifestyle that often includes overfeeding to restore physical strength. Thus, resembling the symptoms of postpartum depression or another form of mental illness, the narrator is subjected to this so-called treatment of the rest cure, as she has been diagnosed with what her physician husband calls "a temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" after child birth. Eventually confined to the yellow wallpaper of the upstairs room, she identifies with its cage-like patterns that prevent her from working, writing, secret journaling, or seeing her child. She loses herself while diminishing her ability to express through her actions and expressions and ultimately becomes voiceless.

In her foundational work, *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman points out, "The first principle of psychological trauma is the loss of voice" (Herman 1). Thus, instead of providing any therapeutic effect, it exacerbates her psychological deterioration, resulting in more hallucinations and deeper instability. In this piece, the unnamed female narrator undergoes the same condition, where the treatment compels her to isolate herself from her being, abandoning all the activities that keep her sane and vibrant. There is a denial of creative expression, social connection, and intellectual engagement, leading her to become numb and mute. The so-called treatment of the rest cure drives her deeper into insanity and irrationality. The entire narrative revolves around mistreatment and misunderstanding, where the rest cure turns out to be a form of maltreatment disguised as therapy.

Though reflecting on the psychological disintegration of a woman who experiences incessant mental suppression and trauma in a controlled environment, the entire narrative is teeming with metaphorical interpretation and symbolism of her inner and outer being. The metaphor on which the whole story revolves and depends is the yellow wallpaper, revealing the fact and making it more meaningful by emphasizing that it is more than a symbolic representation of confinement. The yellow wallpaper is thus an external picture of the internal turmoil within the narrator, who is on the verge of collapse and whose psyche fails to exist in a rational world.

At first, the wallpaper seems unpleasant and murky: ripped, soiled, and unclean, with a formless pattern that attracts the narrator. With no one to talk to and nothing to think about or work for, the only thing that remains with her to keep her engaged is that unrecognized and clumsy structure of the wallpaper. She even sees a ghostly pattern behind that which is visible only in the light. She says, "It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight" (821). Eventually, the narrator hallucinates and observes the same entity as herself in the yellow wallpaper. She finds a woman trapped behind the wallpaper, shackled in the wires that confine her from within. The woman behind the wallpaper is but a reflection of her own subconscious being, reminding her of her mental imprisonment. Thus, Gilman's deceptive outburst exemplifies a narrative that uses subtle metaphors and symbolism to expose a major social evil—one that has been eroding the social order while remaining largely invisible to the broader system.

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In the words of Sandra Gilbert, a prominent feminist theorist, the domestic space in Gothic fiction often functions as a psychological prison that entraps women both literally and symbolically as "the room becomes a prison, the wallpaper a symbol of her silenced condition" (Gilbert and Gubar 89). There is a masterful use of spatial symbolism to solidify the decline in the narrator's cognitive approach. Entrapped in a cramped space with barred windows, torn wallpaper, and a nailed-down bed, the narrator finds herself suffocating as the entire scenario resonates with the atmosphere of a mental institution: "I lie here on this great immovable bed – it is nailed down, I believe – and follow that pattern about by the hour" (820). That limited space mirrors the blockage in her thought process as she thinks about what she feels—imprisoned, distorted, and erratic. The lack of physical mobility heightens her cognitive stagnation. The claustrophobic environment of the room is thus an extension of the narrator's inner world. The more her sanity slips, the more violently she interacts with the space—crawling on the perimeter with her claws and scraping the walls in a desperate attempt to assert her psychological collapse through her physical performance.

The pervasive energy of the story lies not merely in its characters or Gothic setting but in the very manner the narrative unfolds. Distorted, disarranged, and damaged, with a vivid sense of stream of consciousness, revealing that among the many tools Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses to portray psychological instability, her narrative technique is the most significant as it surpasses all others. The narrator's depiction of the self using the 'first person' gathered through secret journal entries creates a direct connection to her mind and soul. From her notions in the senses to her subconscious descent into madness, the narrator herself provides evidence of each and every incident happening to her. Even unreliability adds not only to her distorted character but also to the fragmented and obsessive description of the tale. The inner and outer worlds both become unrecognizable and inseparable for her, intensifying her mental breakdown.

What keeps her somewhat sane is her very personal act of expressing herself through writing. It serves not only as an outlet but also as a form of resistance. Her articulation is her defiance, her very own space where she can express her fear, show her rebellion, and confront her confusion. Her method of articulation works in both cases: to sustain her sense of self and to reveal her unravelling psychological state. The narrator's confinement as well as her liberation both coincide in her manner of writing—disjointed and personal, it is an act of immense empowerment.

While approaching the climax, *The Yellow Wallpaper* invites two opposing interpretations. The narrator's tearing down the wallpaper and declaring her escape can be viewed as a moment of feminist resistance, where she denies all domination and refuses to conform to patriarchal roles—the roles she has not chosen for herself but that have been chosen for her. She loses her grip on reality, which restricts her to these four walls, binding her to the bare minimum needed to render her less of a woman and more of a human. The snatching away of all the existential prerequisites can turn even a mentally and physically able individual into an insane beast; Gilman frames it as a fact that it is all logical and worth interpreting for establishing agency.

Through the lens of psychological fragmentation, which leads the character to the brink of collapse, the very point represents her final dissociation from reality. In order to identify herself with the woman in the wallpaper, she entirely dissociates from her former identity. Thus, the act of tearing down the wallpaper doesn't indicate a path toward recovery but rather the culmination of a profound psychological breakdown and disintegration. Within the confinement, the only thing that remains before her benign self is the yellow wallpaper, and it is easy to become associated with the unusual and illogical pattern that reminds her of the inner turmoil ready to surface at any moment. She hallucinates or draws a picture of her own

subconscious self behind the wallpaper, who wants to escape the unseen bars that lock her up and restrict her agency. So, in a way, *The Yellow Wallpaper* amalgamates the feminist assertion of the self with the psychological disintegration of identity.

The author Gilman takes creative liberty in crafting a literary piece that documents a medical ordeal which nearly destroyed her psyche. What led Gilman to pen her own story was the harrowing experience of undergoing a treatment that forbade a creative mind from creating—where medicine became a tool for silencing women. Victorian medicine and treatment techniques were particularly peculiar regarding women's psychological health. Mental problems in women were often believed to originate in their reproductive organs. According to this misguided notion, intellectual stimulation could damage a woman's reproductive system. It was believed that a depressed new mother could be cured not by participating in normal daily activities but by isolating herself in a room, doing absolutely nothing—not even thinking—essentially reduced to the state of a helpless child.

According to Elaine Showalter, the isolation is not therapeutic but is a form of "enforced infantilism", where the narrator is treated like a child rather than a person with agency and insight (Showalter 138). This approach emphasized the theory that women were inherently more fragile and emotionally unstable than men. As a result, treatments varied significantly depending on gender. Dr S. Weir Mitchell, the brain behind the "rest cure" for women, prescribed inactivity and complete confinement for women, while advocating for full-fledged outdoor activity and stimulation for men. The proposed goal in both cases was to rebuild the nerves and replenish depleted nervous energy. However, these methods essentially side-lined the intellectual and creative needs that are vital to human well-being.

They reflect nothing more than the conventional Victorian setup, where women are under strict patriarchal control—both mentally and physically, depicting the Victorian gender roles, where a touchstone method is applied to women, suggesting that the ideal is for them to be submissive and domestic. They are cult followers of true womanhood, where women are expected to be passive, obedient wives and mothers confined to the private sphere (Welter 152).

Gilman criticizes medical practices that dismiss a patient's thoughts and treat her as merely passive. She highlights something deeply personal and painful: the way women are often ignored and not taken seriously regarding their own well-being. The story reveals that John, the narrator's husband and her doctor, cares for her in both roles, but that care largely gives him control over her. Good intentions and concerns ultimately fail to gain appreciation because they become toxic and oppressive.

Gilman's 1913 essay *Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper* stands as testimony to the fact that she analyses the in-depth repercussions of a psychological bondage disguised as treatment. As no man is an island, she is no woman without referencing her own experiences of pain and suffering. Gilman vents her deeply felt silences during the course of her treatment by criticizing the mistreatment through her indelible fiction. She adumbrates, "I wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*, with its embellishments and additions, to carry out the ideal (I had) of a story that would save people from being driven crazy" (Gilman, *Why I Wrote* 826).

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