

GILMAN'S "INTERMINABLE GROTESQUE": THE NARRATOR OF "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"

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Although critics of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" have noted the dark incongruities between the narrator's world and that of her husband, none have dealt with its humorous implications to an understanding of the narrative (Lane, *Gilman* 5). More typically, critics of this "rediscovered" realistic narrative (Schopp-Schilling) interpret the narrative as one that offers the detailed and chilling account of a woman's entrapment, defeat, and movement toward madness—one caused by patriarchy, that is, by obtusely sexist men such as the narrator's husband John or nineteenth-century psychiatrists like S. Weir Mitchell.¹ In a more recent Lacanian revision of this feminist critique, Jeanette King and Pam Morris argue that the narrator displays psychological shortcomings, "misreads the yellow wallpaper, her other self, and in this way seeks to limit the play of its signifiers" (32), an error, they maintain, that readers of the text should not make. In this essay, I further their argument that the narrator misreads the yellow wallpaper, but not because of her psychological aberrations. Rather, I maintain that, as a writer, she fails to recognize the significance of the comically grotesque texture of her tale. Because of this artistic failure, she assumes the grotesque proportions of the yellow wallpaper, becomes a grotesque figure, and, in so doing, transforms her narrative into a disturbing, startling, and darkly ironic tale about nineteenth-century American womanhood.

Having suffered a continuous, repeated devaluation, Gilman's narrator details a struggle both with and against herself, one that results not only in her madness, but also in an elevated comprehension of that madness. Like the narrator of Gilman's satiric "When I Was A Witch," the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" grows consistently more aggressive toward those ills that oppress her: not only men like John and S. Weir Mitchell, but women like her sister-in-law Jennie ("a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper who hopes for no better profession" [8]) and any other woman who has not "realized Womanhood" (Gilman, "Witch" 31)—including, horribly, herself. Unlike the narrator of "When I Was A Witch" and some of Gilman's other satirical narrators, however, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" does not defeat these dark social forces; instead, she becomes absorbed by them, though her author, Gilman, does not.

In her autobiography, Gilman claimed to have based "The Yellow Wallpaper" on her experiences with S. Weir Mitchell's "rest cure" treatment, observing that the "real purpose" of the story was "to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways" (121). Despite her stated didactic intent, there are marked discrepancies between Gilman's autobiographical account of her nervous breakdown and her narrator's in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Although Gilman describes her husband as one more victimized than victimizing (96-97), the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" directly implicates her husband John, along with Jennie, S. Weir Mitchell, and others suffering from gender-encoded misconceptions, in her movement toward madness. Whether Gilman understood the complexity of this narrator's madness remains uncertain. However, between her penchant for didactic satire and her personal anguish, Gilman did create, quite consciously, a narrator who not only challenges gender stereotyping, but does so in grotesquely comedic terms.

John is mechanistic, rigid, predictable, and sexist; he "combines," as Rachel DuPlessis notes, "the professional authority of the physician with the legal and emotional authority of the husband" (92), eventually to become a caricature of both. "John is practical in the extreme," Gilman's narrator candidly observes. "He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (3). Accordingly, when the narrator suggests to her ever-practical husband that she senses there is something wrong with the house, that there is something "queer" about the house, he "laughs at me, of course" (3, 6). Neither does he take her anxiety about the wallpaper seriously, and when she frantically expresses a desire to move downstairs, he persists in his laughter, calling her a "blessed little goose, and [saying] he would go down cellar [sic], if I wished, and have it whitewashed into the bargain" (8). He also does not permit her to have companions, and when she inquires about visiting with "Cousin Henry and Julia," he boorishly quips that he "would as soon put fireworks in my pillowcase as to let me have those stimulating people about now" (7).

As the narrator's understanding of the meaning of the yellow wallpaper intensifies, so does her irritation with John, who remains doggedly true to his limited perspective. When John is finally made aware of the severity of his wife's "disorder," he reacts by "fainting," altering his conventional role as a soothing, masculine figure to that of a stereotypically weak nineteenth-century female. To intensify the irony of his transformation, Gilman has her narrator aggressively express her annoyance that John has fainted since she now has to run "right over him." He is now in the way of her "creeping," an activity she

earlier attributed to the woman in the wallpaper, an activity that seems not only subversive, but also undefined, repetitive, and comical—or, to use Henri Bergson's words, like "something mechanical encrusted onto the living" (108).

At the same time, Gilman grants her narrator an artistic sensibility, one that evidently begins to resurface the moment that John locks her away to effect her "cure." At the beginning, she briefly contemplates using the gothic genre to explain her dilemma, a genre in which not only ghostly presences live in ancient, decaying mansions, but conventional madwomen flourish as well. "It is very seldom," states the narrator with her first utterance,

that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls in the summer. A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate! (3)

Unlike the hapless heroines of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, of Poe's "A Predicament," or of other parodic gothic fiction, this narrator is not confused by gothic conventions, but alludes to them to suggest that they do not explain her situation. The "place has been empty for years," she declares, and this "spoils my ghost theory" (4).

Knowing as she begins that her tale is not conventionally gothic, the narrator next challenges her readers to unravel the bizarre relations between John and her illness, and between her illness and the "disturbing" pattern of the yellow wallpaper, "one of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (5), a pattern that she initially rejects, but eventually details in a manner that defiantly commits many more such sins. "There is," the narrator observes,

something dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough 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. (5)

Similar observations were made by early reviewers of "The Yellow Wallpaper" (Kolodny 51); and the narrator's sentences, which sprawl from section to section—resistant, breathless, digressive—offer conflicting comment, as other critics have noted, upon her own suicidal plunges (Haney-Peritz 113-14).

The narrator does, however, finally define the nature of her narrative. After her initial uneasiness, she begins to perceive new figures in the wallpaper and to "grow fond" of her room, "perhaps because of the wallpaper" (9). The paper becomes comic to her; more, it becomes grotesque. There is, she states, a "recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down" (7). This figure has a certain "impertinence and everlastingness" that follow "you everywhere with absurd unblinking eyes" (7). Later, tracing the pattern becomes "as good as gymnastics, I assure you" (9), as the narrator not only presents her interests as a game, but details her amused impressions. Its patterns, she says, are a "kind of 'debased Romanesque' with delirium tremens that go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity" (9). Then, the narrator not only clarifies the design of the wallpaper, but of her fiction: "I can almost fancy radiation after all—the interminable grotesque seems to form around a common center and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction" (10).

Gilman's narrator uses this "interminable grotesque" to further her contrast between the rigidly mannered and socially acceptable behavior of her husband (and, less emphatically, of Jennie) and her increasing dissatisfaction with such behavior. Her description of the grotesque comes at the end of the third section of her six narrative segments, offering the reader a structural pattern that, like the narrator's wallpaper, is given coherence by a "common center," even as it "rushes off in headlong plunges of equal distraction" (about John, herself, Jennie's spying, the woman in the wallpaper, and so forth). By self-consciously defining her narrative as a rebellious work that is unified by a central grotesque image, the narrator not only reveals her unconscious awareness of her fictive design, but also leads her readers toward an understanding both of the terror and dark amusement she feels as she confronts herself—a prisoner inside the yellow wallpaper, an unsavory social text created and sustained not only by men like John, but by women like Jennie, and, most horribly, herself. Instead of being freed by this aesthetic and potentially liberating confrontation, however, she is defeated, destroyed, and driven to madness—enabling her author, Gilman, not only to transform her into a grotesque figure, but to make a pointed, darkly satiric, comment against those conventional gender patterns that have imprisoned her.

The confessional tale frequently appears in grotesque literature (Burwick 10-11) with the narrator often appearing as a distorting mirror of his or her experience (O'Connor 78), but Gilman's narrator is unusual in that she attempts, finally, to integrate the symbolic significance of the yellow wallpaper. She attempts to read, or interpret,

it in a manner befitting an aspiring authoress. In so doing, she attempts to do what is virtually impossible: "to apprehend," as Geoffrey Harpham phrases it, "the grotesque directly." "Whereas most ideas are coherent at the core and fuzzy around the edges, the grotesque is the reverse: it is relatively easy to recognize the grotesque 'in' a work of art," but difficult to pin it down, define, or interpret its significance (Harpham xvi). Ignoring Gilman's narrator's clear fascination with so defining the grotesque, Kolodny compares this narrator's situation to that of the narrator of Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum," arguing that while "both stories . . . involve a sane mind entrapped in an insanity-inducing situation . . .," the narrator of Poe's tale is finally "released both to sanity and freedom" by the French Revolution, whereas the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not, since "no equivalent revolution for women had taken place" (51). The problem with this comparison is that Poe's narrator is not, like the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," an artist, nor is he attempting to do more than survive his nightmarish sense that some grotesque horror may (or may not) be present; he does not want to apprehend, integrate, or even see this horror, but merely to survive it. Gilman's narrator, to her destruction, wants more.

Gilman's narrator does show the reader, as King and Morris argue, "how *not* to read [her] text" (32)—not because, as they argue in their analysis, the wallpaper represents to the narrator her "repressed other" (30) or "suppressed self" (31), but rather because she attempts, as an author, to bring the grotesque to life, to consciousness itself. Her inability to do so does not reflect merely her regressive psychological state but rather her failure to recognize the complex nature of the problem. In his analysis of the grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser makes the commonplace observation that writers use the grotesque in an "attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world," and that in spite "of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation" for "where the artistic creation has succeeded, a faint smile seems to pass rapidly across the scene or picture" (188).² It would seem to be this "secret liberation" that Gilman's bemused, and at times, amused narrator initially seeks, and perhaps even temporarily feels—but she is not able to sustain it. Instead, Gilman's narrator attempts to clarify definitively the meaning of the grotesque, merges into it, and, in effect, becomes it—as the woman in the wallpaper.

Because of her representation and implicit perspective on the grotesque in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman does not seem to be primarily concerned with patriarchy, as many recent critics have

argued. Like Jennie, the complying housekeeper, and the narrator herself, patriarchy is, in the context of "The Yellow Wallpaper," only an aspect of the "interminable grotesque" that permeates the narrative; and it is, like the grotesque, represented as an inexplicable, unreadable force. That is, it is meant to be felt, to have an impact, but not to be explained or comprehended rationally.

Commenting upon *why* she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman observed, "it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" (20). Through her narrator, Gilman does suggest why women have been defeated by cultural or psychological circumstances; that is, either failing to see or becoming unduly preoccupied with the grotesque nature of such circumstances, they move toward an increasingly distorted understanding of themselves. In the case of Gilman's narrator, the specific circumstance is that of the impact of gender stereotypes and medical ignorance upon a normal but relatively intelligent nineteenth-century woman, a married and literate woman with a penchant for the pen. Both the structure and the narrator's felt dilemma in "The Yellow Wallpaper" suggest that Gilman felt that the brutality of such a circumstance could be best represented through a darkly humorous treatment of a domestic situation, one in which a husband's rigid and mechanistic sense of propriety is juxtaposed against his wife's increasingly distorted relation to the hideous yellow wallpaper in her room. As Gilman's narrator moves toward insanity and a strangely grotesque status, however, Gilman's narrative enables her readers to see that status in a startling social perspective. For when Gilman's narrator asks her final question, "Now why should that man have fainted?," it reveals not only her transformation into a grotesque figure, a madwoman, but also, in the context of Gilman's conscious use of the "interminable grotesque," the darkly ironic nature of such a transformation.

NOTES

¹In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, for example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar assert that the narrator is a representative nineteenth-century female author and that her progress is "not unlike the progress of nineteenth-century literary women out of the texts defined by patriarchal poetics in the open spaces of their own authority" (91), while Jeanette King and Pam Morris maintain in their recent article that the narrator misreads the wallpaper because she does so from a learned, patriarchal perspective. Other critics have noted Gilman's dual focus on men and women in the narrative. For example, in "A Map for Misreading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," Annette

Kolodny argues that the narrative offers an "exploration of the gender-inflicted interpretive strategies [that are] responsible" for the "mutual misreadings between men and women" (54); similarly, in "Too Terribly Good To Be Printed," Conrad Schumaker asserts that the narrative offers "an effective indictment of the nineteenth-century view of the sexes and the materialism that underlies that view" (598). Other writers who offer representative perspectives on Gilman's explicit critique of patriarchy include Hedges, MacPike, and Haney-Peritz.

²This is not to suggest that critics, past or modern, have settled upon a generally accepted view of the grotesque. As Geoffrey Harpham summarizes in his study, there have been notable conflicting critical perceptions of the significance of the grotesque, and two major critics of the grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin, "manage to contradict each other utterly on the most basic premises" (xvii). All agree, however, that the grotesque combines the elements of humor and horror—though to what end remains theoretically problematic.

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