

Reading the Garden in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Out one window, the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" tells the reader, "I can see the garden, those mysterious deep-shaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees" (15). She describes the garden as delicious and suggests that it offers her an ideal of freedom and movement, an escape from the troubling wallpaper that decorates as it encloses the prisonlike room at the top of the "ancestral halls." Despite this promise of escape, however, in noting the "hedges and walls and gates that lock" (4), Gilman's narrator seems to perceive—at least subconsciously—the irony that, like the attic room, the garden, too, is a place of confinement.

What, then, are the mysteries of those arbors? What promises does that garden hold? What are its ambiguities? What is its history? And how is that garden—bounded by hedges, walls, and locked gates—different from the prison room at the top of the house? In other words, questions about the garden suggest that, like interrogation of the wallpaper, interrogation of the garden can enhance our understanding of the story, especially in light of important recent criticism. Just as a "feminist analysis moves beyond such localized causes [postpartum depression, motherhood, marital depression] to implicate the economic and social conditions which, under patriarchy make women domestic slaves" (Treichler 64), a garden-based reading insists that environmental conditions and attitudes toward nature and gardens tend also to imprison the woman. As a

feminist reading reveals the sexual politics involved in a woman's madness, a garden-based reading reveals the politics of patriarchal subjugation of both woman and wilderness and makes manifest the interrelationships between the control of nature in a garden and the control of a woman as wife or medical patient. Such a politics evokes ecofeminist philosophy.

Several critics of "The Yellow Wallpaper" refer to the American woman's place in nature, but none consider the significance of the garden and its role, nor does any reading place the story in an ecofeminist context.¹ Ecofeminism (ecological feminism) attempts to replace patriarchal hegemonies with different patterns of belief and authority—patterns without oppression, exploitation, and domination. In ecofeminist philosophy a primary tenet is that the same patriarchal worldview motivating the oppression of women and minorities motivates human oppression of nonhuman nature as well.² As a philosophy, ecofeminism announces the inextricable connection between the domination of nature and the domination of women, minorities, children, cultures, and nonhuman nature. It demands that we add nonhuman nature to Kate Millett's now-classic list of groups on which power structures are based—race, class, caste, and sex (24). Because, like minorities, women, and people of lower classes or castes, nonhuman life forms have little or no legal standing or representation; they are continuously, mercilessly, and thoughtlessly oppressed, exploited, displaced, or exterminated. An ecofeminist heuristic thus empowers readers to see the interrelationships between several apparently different types of oppression that are imposed by the same patriarchal mentality. The patriarch, whether embodied in physician or gardener, imposes his will on the subject. (One might also argue, of course, that the gardeners, and even the physicians, to some extent, are also oppressed, exploited, subjugated. Certainly, at least, they participate as socialized products of their patriarchal culture.)

Such an analysis of and approach to the relationships between attempts to control women and to control nature seems especially appropriate in the context of "The Yellow Wallpaper" in that Gilman, too, describes the intricate, complex, ambiguous, and often indeterminate interrelationships not only between man and woman, husband and wife, physician and patient, but also between human and environment, both natural and artificial, that is, both the wilderness and the cultivated garden. In the very act of writing, the narrator

subverts the norm,³ but the text itself is subversive in its ecofeminist inclusion of the narrator's relationship (or would-be relationship) with nature. In the context of Gilman's story, the garden typifies one particular way of validating power over nature, much as a male doctor's prescribed rest cure constitutes a way of maintaining power over a patient, wife, or woman.

Since 1973 and the Feminist Press edition of "The Yellow Wallpaper," before anyone had "made the connection between the insanity and the sex, or sexual role, of the victim" (Hedges 41), such groundbreaking feminist approaches as Hedges's, Kolodny's, Ammons's, Kennard's, Treichler's, Fetterly's, and Lanser's have enhanced our understanding of and increased our appreciation for the story.⁴ According to Kolodny, for example, Gilman's narrator experiences "her self as a text which can neither get read nor recorded." Unlike the narrator of the male-penned "The Pit and the Pendulum," for whom there is a salvation—"Given the rules of the social context in which Gilman's narrative is embedded"—nothing can save "Gilman's protagonist from falling into her own internal 'abyss'" (Kolodny, "A Map" 51).

This internal abyss results in part from the narrator's desperate reaction to the institutions of marriage and medicine that John, the husband, represents, institutions that destroy her sanity. John identifies the woman as a wife/patient and all that being a wife/patient entails, including being submissive, childlike, and subservient (see Ammons). He (or the patriarchy he represents) thus denies her an autonomous existence as he tries to reshape her. Similarly, the dominant culture repeatedly and continually perverts nature as it attempts to replace or re-create it within a garden, much as early Americans attempted to reshape the land they colonized to fit their idea of a biblical garden. As Leo Marx argues, for example, these early Americans attempted to create a new garden of Eden, to make "America the site of a new beginning" (3). The patriarchal colonists set aside both wife (as opposed to woman) and garden (as opposed to nature or wilderness) as sites of purity or manufactured ideality. Kolodny suggests that "America's oldest and most cherished fantasy" includes "the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction" (*Lay* 4). The garden becomes the site of limits, of control, of the artificial, of denial, of the male's triumph over the wildness of nature. Just as

the narrator in Gilman's story "develops an artificial feminine self" (Treichler 61), the garden becomes the site of artificial nature.

Reading a passage from Simon Pugh's *Garden-nature-language* (a study of an eighteenth-century garden, Rousham, in Oxfordshire) in the context of Gilman's short story makes manifest the similarity between patriarchal attitudes toward women and gardens.⁵ If we read "wife" for garden and "woman" for nature, the following passage illustrates the similarities: "The garden, like any sign, is one site of the moral and cultural order, but its significance is heightened by its muteness, by its position masquerading as a 'state of nature.' There are two primary narrative structures which frame the garden's meaning. The first begins with the infant as a beast and ends with the beast civilized and domesticated, tamed by frustration and controlled by regulatory structures" (128). Compare the physician's structures regulating the narrator's life in Gilman's story; the nineteenth-century medical world masquerades its rest cure as effective when the underlying purpose is the taming of the beast, the control of the woman, the creation of a submissive wife.

The narrator's initial turning to the garden with some expectation of discovering freedom, good health, or sanity seems to belie the notion of the garden as a place of confinement and of patriarchal control. After all, the narrator describes a garden in the late nineteenth century in the United States, not an eighteenth-century English garden. Indeed, in contriving the garden as a possible place for her narrator's succor, Gilman anticipates the English gardener Gertrude Jekyll, who beginning in the mid-1890s would maintain that a garden's purpose was "to give delight and to give refreshment of mind, to soothe, to refine, and to lift up the heart" (Jekyll 24). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify the narrator's hope for "health and freedom" as a mirage that the madwoman sees when she looks toward the open country (91). Conrad Shumaker notes that the "thought of the windows leads to a description of the open country and suggests the freedom that the narrator lacks in her barred room." Indeed, "the view outside the window suggests a kind of freedom" (596, 597). In a more abstract sense, Gillian Brown argues that "the real curative property of domesticity . . . would seem to be its elimination of barriers to the outside" (138). An ecofeminist could agree with Brown insofar as "outside" signifies neither the garden nor the marketplace. "Outside" must point toward the wilderness.

But that freedom is only mirage. Jekyll's written account of the feminist garden, for example, does not yet exist in 1892, when Gilman's story is published. The narrator's is a garden of gates, locks, hedges. The garden Gilman describes and the conventional landscape garden—which came into being during the eighteenth and survived well into the nineteenth century—cry out for comparison.

Though over a century old by the 1890s, European landscape gardening, which corrects the rigidity of the earlier classical garden, had yet to be imbued with the feminine principles of Gertrude Jekyll, Ellen Biddle Shipman, Beatrix Jones Farrand, or even Celia Thaxter, each of whom first began publishing or designing only in the 1890s. Until that time, women were systematically excluded from landscape design. Although she had been cultivating her gardens for several years in England, Jekyll did not publish her first book, *Wood and Garden*, until 1899. Ellen Biddle Shipman began training female landscape architects in the mid-nineties when major university schools of architecture were still closed to them. But even these well-trained women were seldom offered public commissions even into the twentieth century, a bias that forced even the best female landscape architects to rely on private commissions to make their living and reputations. Beatrix Jones Farrand did not open her landscape office in New York until 1895, and she employed the very women who remained unemployed by male-owned companies. According to Eleanor Perényi, "not until the twentieth century did any woman play a recognizable part in any garden design" (265).

Similarly, it was only after the publication of "The Yellow Wallpaper" that the American Celia Loughton Thaxter entered the male-dominated world of gardening writing with *An Island Garden* (1894). And even then she describes a small, conventional flower garden on a remote island; hers is not a part of the dominant garden ideology of the turn of the century.

Until the twentieth century, for the most part, the same patriarchy that dominated women and children dominated landscape architecture and garden design. These patriarchal gardens were rife with gates, hedges, and walls. Writing in 1901, for example, Alice Morse Earle maintains that "every garden must have boundaries, definite and high" (399); she asserts this need for walls even though the landscape gardeners advocated hiding the boundary walls. Writing as early as 1784, Horace Walpole, for example, describes the

"destruction of wall for boundaries," but these walls are replaced with fosses, a border less visible but just as effectively confining (Rohde 197). Nan Fairbrother, garden historian of the 1950s, relates that even at the height of romantic landscape architecture (as opposed to the formal gardens of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries) gardens had distinct and functional boundaries. "The boundary must never be seen, but sunk in a ditch, so that more impressionable visitors may imagine the whole countryside belongs to the mansion" (229). The park walls surround even the most "elaborately contrived wilderness" (222). Even Olmsted's progressive 1858 greensward plan for Central Park in New York City called for a seven-foot exterior wall (Olmsted 159).

Perényi urges that one purpose of such walls historically has been to imprison women: "one of the principal functions of the Oriental garden from Turkey to China was the incarceration of women." Even though she enters a half-hearted disclaimer about hers being perhaps too feminist a reading, Perényi does argue that Western garden plans "suggest a similar if less drastic impulse on the part of men" (262).

Whether or not fin-de-siècle culture perceived these gardens as literal prisons, gardens remain, by their very nature, contained, artificially manufactured, walled areas. Indeed, a garden's very existence depends on the boundaries that separate it from the surrounding urban or wilderness areas.

Although probably a landscape garden from perhaps as early as the eighteenth century, the garden that Gilman's narrator describes does have characteristics of the classical garden, especially the "box-bordered paths" and its "long grape-covered arbors with seats" (11). The "beautiful shaded lane" (assuming it is a straight lane) and certainly the greenhouses suggest a classical approach to garden design. On the other hand, the fact that this garden is overgrown and that the narrator suggests the possibility of a "lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf" suggest a later, more romantic, design (15). Regardless of its original design, however, the narrator's garden retains borders, lanes, hedges, and gates that lock as dominant parts of its image.

Despite the initial hope for freedom in the nature outside her window, then, the narrator's hope of discovering health or freedom in the garden seems misplaced. Just as gardens do not signify the natural but, rather, the artificial, so too, insofar as wildness repre-

sents freedom, do gardens imply confinement. The narrator's hope for escape from oppression because of the garden's wildness is ironic in that, as the physician controls the patient, the gardener (or gardener's employer) carefully controls the garden and encloses it with walls or fosses, makes nature submissive, tames wildness. Simon Pugh writes that gardens result from a process of the "demystification of nature": "The less visible corollary of this process is the domination of people[,] for the control of nature was always and still is a metaphor for the control of people" (6, 7). The garden, whether neoclassical or romantic, is not nature after all but "a machine to see with" (6). As Pugh suggests, the "garden does not focus on the country side, but looks away from it toward the city and the town" (25). And an age-old American (romantic) tradition identifies the city and town as sites of society, structure, and control.

If gardens represent the demystification of nature, so Weir's (and the narrator's husband's) medical logic—which sees a rest cure as salubrious—necessitates the demystification of people, especially, in this context, women. The town, the scientific community, and the garden owe their being to one mentality, a mentality that derives from a worldview that flourishes under and depends on patriarchal control. As Pugh writes, "the garden is a representation of nature that masquerades as a mimesis of what it represses but which is really a total reconstruction of what is repressed" (127).

In Gilman's story, John, the doctor, hopes to re-create the woman in the shape of a submissive (appropriately Victorian) wife. Similarly, the gardener (or aristocracy that demands elaborate and extensive gardens that "seem" to be nature) re-creates nature (under control) in the garden; the gardener re-creates, that is, after the "demons have been exorcised in the interest of a better understanding and a rational use of the world and of people" (Pugh 7). To assume that a garden re-creates nature, however, is as absurd as to believe that John's wife will "get well" as a result of the rest cure he prescribes. Like a wife—according to John's socialization—a "garden exists principally as . . . an image of containment and enclosure, of contentment and preternatural simplicity rises up in the wake of this articulation" (Pugh 130). John denies the complexities of his wife's mind and needs, reduces the complexities to control, just as one reduces biological diversity, for example, to achieve control in a garden that is characteristically spotted with imported, non-native species and in which, in the extreme, plants are cut or de-

signed in grotesque shapes or patterns. Even those landscaped gardens—which, according to Fairbrother, “mark the beginning of the romantic revolution” (211)—are characterized by “nature improved, a landscape made more beautiful by art” (208). They are simply “elaborately constructed wildernesses” (222). Even the most contemporary gardens, by the very concept of garden, are simplifications. Ian McHarg maintains that “they exclude much, not least time and change. . . . Indeed they have more in common with aquaria and terraria than with nature” (35, 37). As Pugh points out, the “garden dissembles. Within its spaces, all is not what it seems, although what it is seems innocent enough to the casual eye. Its functionality depends entirely on this seeming innocence, this dissemblance” (127). Similarly, of course, Gilman’s narrator quickly learns that she must dissemble, must pretend to be happy, healthy, recovering: she hides her writing and creeps only behind locked doors, for example.

Inside she creeps behind locked doors, and outside she remains in the garden. Judith Fryer, in another context, writes that “women have stood, in our [American] culture, for some space that is static and tranquil, and men have had the whole territory to explore” (9). In her reading of Gilman’s story, Jean Kennard refers to a woman’s place in nature but not in the garden: “Traditionally women have been identified with nature, a convention which has effectively precluded . . . the possibility of female protagonists interacting with nature in the way male protagonists have. This applies to the wilderness rather than to such tamed natural environments as gardens” (82). Kennard implies that woman can find a place in a garden, as opposed to the wilderness, even though that garden place is only a manufactured, artificial representation of nature. There exists a certain irony in woman’s not having a place in the wilderness in that, historically, woman has been essentialized *as* nature. Carolyn Merchant points out, for example, that “women and nature have an age-old association—an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history” (xv). Merchant also notes that the basic patriarchal attitude that both woman and nature (earth) are “passive receptors” becomes a “sanction for exploitation” (16). Despite the dangers of such essentializing, the same patriarchal mentality that oppresses them sees *nature* and *woman* in many ways as synonymous or interchangeable. For the patriarchy, the wildness of nature has its counterpart in the madness of woman. Both must be tamed, controlled, kept in check. Ursula K. Le Guin offers the

hypothesis that “dominant-identified men and women both” have an ancient fear of nature (both wildness and wilderness): “The misogyny that shapes every aspect of our civilization is the institutionalized form of male fear and hatred of what they have denied, and therefore cannot know, cannot share: that wild country, the being of women” (47).⁶ Hence the gardens and rest cures.

Despite woman’s ironic, historical lack of place in nature, the narrator in Gilman’s story does indeed initially see the garden as a place for succor. Somehow, without explanation and despite the locks and gates, nature seems to hold for her the promise of redemption. Perhaps the promise results from, as Pugh suggests, the fact that every garden recalls Eden and the inherent paradox; perhaps this promise reverberates through the domestic prisoner’s psyche. The garden, after all, is both pristine and the locale of the fall. As such, it calls to both the innocent and the guilty, the hopeful and the despairing: “As a lost state that is recreated through representation, the garden is the sight of desire” (Pugh 2).

If we read the narrator’s creeping as analogous to (or even a metaphor for) masturbation (as does Veeder), it would seem significant that only outside, away from confinement, can one creep with impunity (i.e., without being discovered) in the daytime. The garden, this site of desire, then, holds the promise of self-fulfillment or liberation—but even that is restricted and fraught with danger. As the narrator tells the reader, “I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines” (30–31). Denied freedom from observation alongside the roads, the narrator sends the creeping woman (herself?) farther afield, as it were, until, suggesting the final unattainability of freedom, she essentially loses physical identity: “I watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind” (31). As mutable and transient as a cloud is, the narrator can come only as close as its even more ephemeral shadow.

Just as clouds and their shadows offer only the distant, unattainable mirage of freedom, the untamed, uncontrolled nature the garden is supposed to represent or replicate has never been a place for a woman, not in American literature, at any rate.⁷ Although nature has long been characterized as female—“a calm, kindly female, giving of her bounty,” as Merchant writes (17)—it has not necessarily provided a place or space for a woman. Think, for example, of

Mary Rowlandson's howling wilderness—from her point of view—full of potentially mortal dangers, including her Indian captors, and Sarah Kemble Knight's, for whom every tree trunk and limb is an armed enemy because she lacks "Masculine courage." Or the danger of panthers and fire for Elizabeth Temple in Cooper's *The Pioneers* (1823). Or even the mere outdoors for James's Daisy in "Daisy Miller" (1879), where at night the coliseum itself proves fatal for the truly feminine Daisy.⁸

Le Guin describes a difference between the wilderness men and women know. According to her, "men's wilderness is real, it is where men can go hunting and exploring and having all-male adventures, away from the village, the shared center, and it is accessible to and structured by languages. . . . When [men] go off hunting bears, they come back with bear stories, and these are listened to by all, they become the history or the mythology of that culture. So the men's wilderness becomes 'nature,' considered as the property of 'Man.'" For women, argues Le Guin, it is different: "the experience of women as women, their experience unshared with men, that experience is the wilderness or the wildness that is utterly other—that is in fact, to Man, unnatural. That is what civilization has left out, what culture excludes, what the Dominants call animal, bestial, primitive, undeveloped, unauthentic" (47).

In this sense of the appropriation of space, then, women are without an identifiable place in nature, a fact that marks a lacuna that corresponds to the absence of place outside the home in nineteenth-century patriarchal society. When Jacques Derrida, for example, addresses the issue of a place for women, he is reluctant to describe "woman's place" because such a description—he maintains—recalls the home or kitchen: "Why must there be a place for woman? And why only one, a single, completely essential place?" (442). With this contention he is willing to say that "there is no place for woman." Derrida, then, admits that it "is without a doubt risky to say that there is no [one?] place for woman, but this idea is not anti-feminist, far from it; true, it is not feminist either" (443). Derrida favors a displacement of bodies and places; rather than a "place to inhabit," he prefers a "multiplicity of places" (446).

The problem with Derrida's contention, however, is that it runs the risk of writing women out of place altogether. As Carolyn Heilbrun points out in another context, by maintaining that there is no one place for a woman, one denies a woman any place; there is no

place at all. In the suburban house, for example, there is “a room for everyone but the wife/mother, who, it was assumed, had the whole house. . . . [thus] there is no space for a woman in the suburban dream house” (Heilbrun 113).

For space to be a woman’s, such arguments as Derrida’s imply, that space has to be defined by men: cultivated and controlled. Riotous flowers and gnarly trees suggest uncultivated, undefined, uncontrolled nature; thus when the narrator in Gilman’s story looks out the window, she sees nature or the wildness as a symbol of freedom, as a place to escape male dominance and control. Here Gilman echoes Henry Thoreau’s romantic (transcendental) notion that “in wildness is the preservation of the world” (613).⁹

In freedom (or in nature’s wildness), too, the narrator hopes, is the preservation of her sanity. The wildness must exist beyond the walls and gates; similarly, to maintain her sanity, she must get behind the wallpaper, beyond the confines of the room, away from the restrictions of a Victorian marriage, and free of the patriarchal medical practice. But the narrator does not recognize these needs at first. Initially, she would agree with the historical tradition that posits the notion that “Nature tamed and subdued, could be transformed into a garden to provide both material and spiritual food to enhance the comfort and soothe the anxieties of men [and women?] distraught by the demands of the urban world” (Merchant 8–9), or, in Gilman’s context, the anxieties of the domestic world of the wife, patient, mother.

The narrator’s initial desire for the wild roses, gnarly trees, bushes, and deeply shaded arbors is juxtaposed with the reality of an English garden. As the narrator writes, the garden makes her “think of English places that you read about.” Like the narrator, in fact, the garden is controlled, cut, shaped. We forget when we see the garden, as Gilman and her narrator evidently forgot, the “nameless thousands who laboured to make the great gardens of England” (Pugh 1).¹⁰ Yet insofar as Gilman’s narrator does identify the numerous “separate little houses for the gardeners and people” (11), the garden does become the site of exploitation and domination of laborers and gardeners, just as the Victorian household is the site of patriarchal control of wives and mothers.

Even though she seems to have no conscious awareness of the exploitation of the laborers, ironically, the narrator’s “insanity” does enable her to recognize the confining aspect of the garden and to

see the creeping woman/women outside the window as well as behind the wallpaper. As she emerges, makes her "escape" from the wallpaper, into insanity, that so-called insanity empowers her to realize the shortcomings of the garden as a substitute for nature. The narrator's romantic attraction to shadowy groves is interpolated with her at least subliminal awareness of the control over nature represented by the garden. Specifically, the narrator's attraction to the nature "outside" her bedroom window parallels her obedience toward and acceptance of her husband-physician's diagnosis and treatment. She becomes a victim of what Kate Millett calls "internal colonization" (24). As Patricia Mills defines it, self-domination is "domination reproduced in self-consciousness" (xvi). On the one hand, Gilman's narrator feels a romantic attraction to the shadowy groves and shaded roads (much as she has internalized the romantic convention in her wish for a haunted house), but on the other hand, she seems to imply her awareness of the control over nature that such a garden constitutes.

The narrator has internalized, at least to some extent, her problem as John identifies it: John says that "I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself—before him, at least, and that makes me very tired" (11). In precisely this context, the narrator juxtaposes the wildness of nature with her apparent lack of self-control, writing, "I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window" (12). The roses all over the window, whether or not they are wild roses, suggest a lack of control, and the narrator envies the power, the energy, the health such wildness suggests. At the same time, however, she has imbibed her culture's abhorrence and fear of unconfined, unharnessed nature. Indeed, she abhors the wallpaper in part because it reminds her of a fungus, growths that suggest an unpleasant, parasitic, even poisonous aspect of the wilderness: "If you can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions—why, that is something like it" (25). Her antipathy toward nature parallels her occasional feelings of guilt for not appreciating how good John is to her. In this regard, too, in other words, she is internally colonized. Both men and women accept the dominant view that unharnessed nature is dangerous or unwelcome, somehow a threat. And the dominant nineteenth-century culture accepts the view that women owe their spouses obedience.

Describing the design of the wallpaper, at another point, the narrator again refers to nature: after submitting that the patterns in the wallpaper follow no laws or principles she knows, she describes the “sprawling outline run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase” (20). Unlike in a garden, in other words, there seems to be no structure, no governing principle, no control. She suggests that her terror of the wallpaper and the confinement it represents—as well as the implication of her vulnerability to the machinations of the patriarchy—are similar to that confinement’s exact opposite—the total freedom of the sea—that is, apparently unharnessed, uncontrolled, omnipotent, omnipresent nature. Indeed, what she does not know terrifies her. That she is unable to identify or classify frightens her. Like the multiplicity and apparent chaos in the wildness of nature, the wallpaper, in Treichler’s words, “never becomes attractive. It remains indeterminate, complex, unresolved, disturbing” (73). Moreover, much as her physician has done, her education and artistic background have failed her in that they have not prepared her to “read” the wallpaper. “I know a little of the principle of design,” she claims, “and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of” (20). It is clear here that her education has failed her in that it has not given her the opportunity to learn to analyze or “read” texts as demanding as the one inscribed in the wallpaper. In “The Queen’s Garden” (1865), John Ruskin offers a view of women’s education (still typical at the turn of the century) that might account for this failing in the narrator’s education: “A man ought to know any language or science he learns, thoroughly, while a woman ought to know the same language, or science, only so far as may enable her to sympathize in her husband’s pleasures” (64–65). Correspondingly, the garden, especially the flower garden, provides “nature” enough for the woman, whereas the man demands (and deserves?) the whole wilderness itself to explore, exploit, subdue.

The same mentality that would deprive a woman of the right to know a language or learn to interpret the wildness would deprive her of other freedoms and of autonomy in general. And what site would be more appropriate as a symbol for this deprivation than a garden, controlled, manicured, spaded? Thus, neither Gilman’s nor her narrator’s culture was prepared to read untamed nature; it remained a howling wilderness full of savages and evils. As Susan

Griffin argues, in the Western mind there exists a firm conviction of the connection between women, wilderness, and evil: "That women under the power of the devil meet with him secretly, in the woods (in the wilderness)" (9).

The narrator repeatedly finds herself facing the paradox of the garden. As long as she does not distinguish between garden and nature, the garden holds for her some promise of freedom, even salvation. Yet this promise is broken by the very definition of garden and by the very wildness of nature. In her final effort to get the paper off the wall and free herself, she locks herself in the room. She has "locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path" (34). Later she must describe the key's whereabouts calmly to John: "The key is by the front steps, under a plantain leaf" (36).

Curiously, the *Masterpiece Theatre* film version of the story significantly changes this scene. The filmmakers evidently preferred to have John use impassioned, brute force to kick the door down to rescue his "darling and comfort" (21), his little girl. The difference between the written text of the story and this film version is significant in that the filmmakers accept the manifest but superficial differences between John and his wife. John's power, control, force, and strength (and panic) contrast with the narrator's weakness. Yet his force (like his reason and medical skill) is all for naught as concerns rescuing his wife from insanity. Indeed, her insanity melds with her weakness and apparent obedience (and actual calmness). The film emphasizes the power and, in so doing, misses an important subtlety of the written text.¹¹

The written text's subtlety begins with the narrator's calmness in the face of John's panic (*panic*, or fear of Pan, a god of nature) and extends to the key (a heavily symbolic object to begin with). The key empowers the narrator; she controls it at first; then even after she flings it, she possesses the knowledge of its whereabouts. Thus, she gains and retains a form of power. She is calm; John is panicked. She knows; John stands in ignorance. Her control over John includes his having to retrieve the key from the garden plant. As such it suggests a reversal. The narrator has become the authority; she holds the power; she even gains (if ironically) a certain autonomy.

The narrator's fulfillment, as it were, corresponds to the "place" of the key. Her knowledge that the key rests under the plantain leaf

gives her a freedom neither the physician nor the garden could provide her. Plantain—from *planta*, perhaps meaning sole of the foot—has the same root as place and open space. Thus the *key* under the *plantain* leaf is linguistically linked with the narrator's freedom, both in the key's metaphorical sense of answer or providing explanation (something John certainly lacks) and in its literal meaning of instrument that permits entrance. In that the key is "under the plantain leaf," it necessarily associates control (of entrance) with the garden, confinement with the open spaces outside the room, and even sanity with wildness beyond the garden wall. The plant holds the key. When one creates a garden, Pugh argues, "Nature becomes a tool in a complex struggle for economic and political power" (3). In this regard, the narrator gains that political power, at least momentarily, by placing the key (even if accidentally) beneath the leaf. Ironically, of course, the narrator gains this power only at the moment she crosses the threshold from sanity to madness. Her finally succumbing to her insanity parallels nature's loss of wildness, of vitality within a garden. The plantain leaf represents nature, but in a controlled and artificial environment; it lacks wildness and thus has no enduring power.

One of the tragedies of the story, from an ecofeminist point of view, is that eventually the narrator relinquishes all hope of nature's offering succor. Even though she at first retains a belief of regeneration outside, as she becomes more "insane," she decides that she does not like to "look out of the windows even." And finally, "I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to" (35). The narrator's final refusal to go outside, or even to look outside, can be seen to mark the end of hope, the beginning of despair. Perhaps she realizes at this point that there is no escape but creeping "smoothly on the floor." And as she reaches this conclusion, John is "crying for an axe," apt tool for destroying both doors and forests.

The apparent ambivalence toward nature in Gilman's story suggests a similar ambivalence toward other types of oppression. As Susan Lanser has so evocatively argued, Gilman may well have had a fear of other oppressed groups as suggested by the color yellow—even as she argued vehemently in the story and other writings for liberating women—middle-class, heterosexual, Euro-American, white women—from patriarchal oppression. Some of that fear she apparently attempts to work out in the story. Similarly, she voices

a cultural ambivalence toward nature and deprecates the wildness much as she deprecates the narrator's freedom by allowing her to find it only in madness.

For Gilman, as for the rest of her generation and culture (and ours, too, for that matter), the wilderness embodied or signified wildness, danger, madness. When the narrator goes mad, she goes wild. To be sane is to be tame. Even in Gilman's utopian *Herland* (1915), we remember, one of the country's attractions and something the women are praised for is their control over nature. The women control the (formerly wild) land much as they control their passions and reproductive nature. They live in "a land in a state of perfect cultivation, where even the forests looked as if they were cared for; a land that looked like an enormous park, only it was even more evidently an enormous garden" (11).

Through a feminist analysis of "The Yellow Wallpaper," Treichler concludes that one of Gilman's triumphs "is to have sharpened and articulated the nature of women's condition" (74). Correspondingly, a garden-based reading argues that another of Gilman's triumphs is to have articulated, even if inadvertently, the condition of women and nature and pointed out some of the connections between the controlling and sculpting woman into wife and of nature into garden.

NOTES

1. Though "ecofeminism" is over twenty years old (d'Eaubonne coined the term in 1973), few have applied the philosophy to literature. See Patrick D. Murphy, "Ground, Pivot, Motion: Ecofeminist Theory, Dialogics, and Literary Practice"; Lee Schweninger, "Ecofeminism, Nuclearism, and O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age*"; idem, "A Skin of Lakeweed: An Ecofeminist Approach to *Erdrich and Silko*"; idem, "Toward an Ecofeminism."

2. Carolyn Merchant writes, for example, that juxtaposing "the goals of the two movements [feminism and ecology] can suggest new values and social structures, based not on the domination of women and nature as resources but on the full expression of both male and female talent and on the maintenance of environmental integrity" (vx). Ynestra King defines ecofeminism as "a critical social movement, representing the convergence of two of the most important contemporary movements, feminism and ecology" (702). She maintains that for ecofeminists "leftist projects of human liberation and the liberation of nature are inextricably connected, as

are the ecological and social crises" (730). In "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism," Karen J. Warren strongly asserts that "any feminist theory and any environmental ethic which fails to take seriously the interconnected dominations of women and nature is simply inadequate" (125). Indeed, ecofeminism "radically alters our very notion of what constitutes political change" (Diamond and Orenstein xii).

3. On writing as woman-empowering and subversive, see Fetterly; Treichler.

4. Many of these approaches are collected in a new casebook, *The Captive Imagination*, edited by Catherine Golden.

5. Although Gilman wrote in the late nineteenth century, the garden she describes is not unlike the landscape gardens of eighteenth-century England in their conception and execution. Certainly the British provided the model for New World gardens at least until the end of the nineteenth century. (See, for example, Eleanor Perényi.) Differences between individual gardens notwithstanding, all gardens share the fact of being sites of nature under control, of artificial wilderness.

6. In these terms, ecofeminism begins questioning and even undermining the accepted patterns of belief. It challenges patriarchal norms as it identifies the correlations between the exploitation of people and the natural environment. As Merchant and others have pointed out, the world is an organism; recognition that all of its parts are inextricably interrelated is necessary: "all parts are dependent on one another and mutually affect each other and the whole. . . . Ecology, as a philosophy of nature, has roots in organicism—the idea that the cosmos is an organic entity, growing and developing from within, in an integrated unity of structure and function" (Merchant 99–100). In *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly also affirms that "everything is connected" (11). The implication is that a system of sexual or hegemonic/medical or exploitation-of-nature domination should not exist because any such power-structured system denies the integration and interdependence of all parts, seen as separate only because that interdependence is ignored. In that it hypothesizes the sources of dominance and subordination, ecofeminism may thus constitute a much-needed philosophical framework for examining fiction.

7. See Kennard (82), who argues that in American literature female novelists do not create characters who find themselves in nature; the wilderness is simply not a space for an American woman. See also Fryer (9).

8. In *The Land before Her*, Annette Kolodny argues that women were somehow able to make the frontier terrain their own. Though I agree with Kolodny, her sources were not those mainstream American works that would have been available to Gilman nor would they have been part of the literary convention in the 1890s.

9. Thoreau espouses typically masculine ideas in fleeing to the woods

in his effort to deny society and social responsibility, but the notion of wildness remains important in the context of wildness and freedom. For a discussion of ecofeminism and the contemporary men's movement, see Andrew Ross.

10. In the context of an ecofeminist reading, noting oppression and exploitation of the underclass dovetails nicely with Lanser's reading in "'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the Politics of Color in America." Lanser argues that Gilman suffers an aversion to yellow that suggests an implicit ethnocentrism, even racism, despite her progressive feminism.

11. Interestingly, the *Masterpiece Theatre* film version does include a wilderness scene. As the narrator crawls through the scraps of paper and over her fainted husband, the room becomes a forest; she crawls through a wildness, past tree trunks; the ripped paper becomes fallen leaves. Though apparently completely insane, she has broken through all confines and is indeed in the wilds outside the room, outside the garden. The film reinforces the patriarchal convention of nature as wild and dangerous. The suggestion is that the wilderness, nature (woman?), and insanity are somehow linked. The lack of control in the narrator's mind parallels the wildness of uncontrolled nature.

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