

Crazed Nature: Ecology in THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER

In her 1916 essay “The ‘Nervous Breakdown’ of Women,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses an ecological conceit to explain how the modern working classes of her age are stressed by their “acromegalous” (i.e., fearfully large and disproportionate) urban surroundings. The nature of our jobs, she argues,

should carry a sense of purpose so that we feel our work is “necessary and right.” But moral, decent labor is not the complete recipe for a psychologically sound modern person:

Even if the physico-psychic balance is perfect, there remains another necessity for peace of mind; that is the adjustment between the individual and the environment. The result of such perfect adjustment is shown in any animal species, and to a less degree in human beings of certain classes living under fixed conditions for many generations, such as an agricultural peasantry in China, or any long-descended hereditary aristocracy. The contented aristocrat, though quite at peace within himself, if suddenly transferred to a new economic environment, however healthy, would show nerve strain in the effort at adjustment. (69)

Though Gilman cites the “economic” environmental catastrophe of a favored individual losing fortune, the more interesting basis for her idea lies in evolutionary ecology: the “perfect adjustment” that is “shown in any animal species” and that helps animals maintain their niches in biotic communities. All species survive by adapting to a particular, and unique, life strategy. The living conditions forced on humans of the twentieth century are alien to our evolutionary history and strain our nervous systems, which, Gilman writes, are long adapted to “comparative silence” and “sunlight and fresh wind on every side” (69). The revolutionary work of nineteenth-century life scientists was to outline, debate, and formalize the aesthetics of evolution, which accepts the exquisite adaptations of creatures to their natural conditions as a starting point. Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace put forth the principle of natural selection as a mechanism of evolutionary change (i.e., that the fittest animals are those who survive the selection pressures of competition within and among species and leave viable offspring). But earlier natural philosophers like Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck had anticipated the science we now call evolutionary ecology by theorizing that physiology evolves according to function within particular *environments*, and that most biological organisms are adapted to a specific ecosystem. (Under this theory, for example, the giraffe has a long neck because its food hangs high off the ground.)

This ecological perspective enables a fresh look at Gilman’s most famous short story, “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” a tale truly infatuated with the adjustment between an individual and her physical surroundings. The story rewards many readings, especially into the clumsy prescriptions of early psychiatric treatment, the medicalization of female bodies, the many-layered nature of consciousness and self-identity, and the prose methods of psychological realism. Critics have discussed Gilman’s development of the ecological utopia in her novel *Herland*,¹ but this story, with its omnipresent, fungal, smeary yellow world that is so redolent to readers, and much darker than any utopia, has not been tapped by ecocritics.

Gilman's narrator, who is unnamed in the story, is a new mother and the wife of a doctor who has diagnosed her with a "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" (3), for which he prescribes the rest-cure. The narrator is required to forgo intellectual and social stimulation, to eat and sleep indulgently, and to remain almost entirely in the strange upstairs room of a rented colonial mansion. As a result, this woman is forced by the rest-cure to adapt to her surroundings; like the aristocrat above, she shows considerable "nerve strain in the effort at adjustment." The result of this strain is anger: "I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes . . . I think it is due to this nervous condition" (4); aversion: "I am sitting by the window now, up in this atrocious nursery"; and, most importantly, diversion (through a diary, which she keeps in violation of her husband's orders): "there is nothing to hinder my writing as much as I please" (5). Interestingly, her imposed dwelling space is quite like the ideal, preindustrial setting that was the picture of human health Gilman imagined in 1916, as it has four views for the wind to freshen and a picturesque landscape. Yet this story is inevitably an inward-turning one, and the nature outside fades behind the narrator's growing interest in the anatomy of the room itself:

It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls. (5)

These "things" are sinister vestiges of ancestry in the natural history of this supposed nursery: barred windows and rings mounted on the wall are more evocative of imprisonment and even torture than they are of children's recreation. Other signs of duress that emerge—the gnawed bedstead, the wallpaper that is stripped at arm's length around the bed, the "smooch" of a shoulder rubbed "round and round and round" at the base of the wall—are all evidence of the behavior of the room's earlier inhabitants and provide evidence of previous habitat adaption for the narrator to study. The feature that is most immediately provocative, and initially aversive, is the room's wallpaper, which appears to grow in fetid ribbons. First the narrator sees only curves in the pattern, but then she finds they "commit suicide" by their motion, and soon she fills the curves with human features—"two bulbous eyes" (6) that have a "vicious influence" (7). Thus far she is resisting her surroundings, pitting herself against its energies and apart from the system of the room.

She begins to heal, at least in the eyes of those who observe her and look for nervousness, when she lets her resistance melt into admiring analysis and begins the process of adaptation to the yellow environment. Her torpid brain is an irritated organ, but once she engages in the "gymnastics" of following the paper's pattern her neuroses calm into studious activity. Her diary entries mark her

increasing fascination with a heavily patterned wallpaper as she turns her excess energy toward understanding its bizarre forms and speculating on the history of the room itself. Borrowing a scientific method, she uses reason, principles, and laws to trace the absurdities of form surrounding her. Natural imagery provides ready comparison points, and the observations she records in her diary read like a perverse natural history of the room. She identifies “a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase” in the paper (9), “a florid arabesque” (12), “a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convulsions” (12), and, finally, “strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths [that] just shriek with derision” (18). These irritatingly ornate forms perhaps owe more to the imagination of their beholder than to anything inherent in the paper’s nature; it seems that the subject who sees subversive versions of mushrooms, as well as sick and strangled life forms, reveals her own sick and strangled psyche by her articulations. But amid sickness is a new kind of health, and her imagination grows receptive to the world around her. Stimulated by her environment and nurturing a sense of purpose by teasing out the secrets of the wallpaper, she declares, “Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was” (14).

She also begins to interpolate herself into this jaundiced ecosystem by envisioning a vague human form—which she eventually determines is a woman whom she must liberate—behind the lattice of the wallpaper’s pattern. This woman, who shakes the slats of the lattice by moonlight, is a conceit that allows the narrator to reinvigorate her atrophied body and explore her room by night. It is possible, the reader discovers, that this physical activity, creeping around the walls with a shoulder “smooch” on the paper, may have been practiced by the room’s earlier inhabitants (15). The narrator guesses on her first day of occupancy that the room was a nursery, but her sinister evidence suggests that it was an asylum for adults: “the windows are barred,” “there are rings and things in the walls,” “it is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach” (5); two weeks later, she observes that “the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it has been through the wars” (8). Though the narrator’s state might cause the reader to wonder whether this is merely damage that the narrator herself has inflicted on the room, the narrator does not begin transforming the room herself until after July 4, presumably many weeks into her stay (8). Furthermore, during the time when she makes these observations, she is still very much her husband’s passive patient, which makes it unlikely that she would have caused the damage she initially observes and, though her illness, simply attributed it to a previous occupant. Because this is the case, the stripping of the paper, gouging of the floor and furniture, and perhaps even the

rubbing of the base of the wall become, then, not the act of a single woman but the instinctual behavior induced by the room on any number of previous inhabitants. One by one, the narrator picks up these habits and continues the work of those mysterious predecessors when she begins stripping the paper herself. She begins to take on the characteristics of a creature protecting her territory: she acquires a kind of camouflage by rubbing the yellow residue on her clothing and grows suspicious of rivals like her husband and his sister—to the point that she locks out everyone else from her niche entirely: “No person touches this paper but me,—not alive!” (17). Her mind gives birth to myriad companions in the form of creeping women like herself, allowing for a synergetic intraspecies community in which her acts towards emancipation become valiant and necessary work. She hopes they are compatriots from the motherland on the walls: “I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?” (18). She ultimately discovers her adjusted selfhood in the yellow world, for it is these other women like her who provide a frame of reference for her existence: they bring ontological balance to this new territory by giving it context, meaning, and purpose.

As the story ends, the real natural world outside the room becomes the strange, misfitting one in which she feels like an alien. She finds that “outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow” (18). But she is fully comfortable creeping openly in her yellow world. In her adopted habitat, like a snake in the grass, she “can creep smoothly on the floor, and [her] shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so [she] cannot lose [her] way” (18). Having found her way in this corrupted ecosystem, her loss of sanity is no longer in question. Her husband, formerly a force of masculine reason and authority, is in the yellow world just a landform “across [her] path by the wall,” and she overcomes him physically again, and again, and again, and well after the final exclamation of the story.

Though *triumph* and *liberation* are fraught terms when discussing the narrator’s final fate, and readers are more likely to see her madness as a tragedy of early mental health care, the positive reading gains ground with this interpretation of ecological adaptation. Shirking the male-centered world outside, which places women in wifely and motherly loci, the narrator divests the ill-fitting role prescribed to her in favor of the quasi freedom of a self-made environment. The utopia of her yellow world is sensual, intriguing, and mysterious; her natural talents as a highly imaginative person prosper in that context. Gilman’s case study exhibits the adaptability of human brains to physical conditions, and it leaves us wondering whether woman’s freedom was lost with the Garden, as the story goes, or whether it creeps behind the bars of socialization within each of our minds.

—HEIDI SCOTT, *University of Maryland, College Park*
Copyright © 2009 Heldref Publications

KEYWORDS

dark ecology, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, evolutionary psychology, Charlotte Perkins Gilman

NOTE

1. See recent articles by Jana Knittel and Susan Stratton.

WORKS CITED

- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The 'Nervous Breakdown' of Women." *The Pedagogical Wallpaper*. Ed. J. A. Weinstock. New York: Lang, 2003. 67–75. Print.
- . "The Yellow Wall-Paper." *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. 3–19. Print.
- Knittel, Jana. "Environmental History and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'Herland.'" *International Review of Science Fiction* 35.96 (Spring 2006): 49–67. Print.
- Stratton, Susan. "Intersubjectivity and Difference in Feminist Ecotopias." *FEMSPEC* 3.1 (2001): 33–43. Print.

Copyright of Explicator is the property of Heldref Publications and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.