

天主教輔仁大學英國語文學系學士班畢業成果
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, FU JEN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
GRADUATION PROJECT 2018

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**Nineteenth Century Women's Oppression and Madness as
Revealed Through the Female Character in the Short Story,
The Yellow Wallpaper, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman**

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Female Character in the Short Story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, by Charlotte Perkins
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Final Draft

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CCIII – Section D

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21 July 2017

Abstract

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman identifies herself with the narrator by using a first-person narrative account to describe a woman's harrowing descent into madness and her feminist struggles against patriarchal society. The following textual analysis is based on scholarly articles to analyze women's social status and oppression in the nineteenth century as revealed in Gilman's short story. A close examination of the relationship between the dominant husband and his wife, who is the obedient narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, reveals gender inequalities in a patriarchal society. The female narrator's oppressive suffering causes her to become psychologically ill while living under the restrictions of American patriarchal culture. When the narrator suffers from oppression by her dominant husband, resulting in her mental illness, she becomes interested in the patterns of the wallpaper. The act of tearing off the wallpaper symbolizes the narrator's rebellion against patriarchy and her desire for liberation and to discover her true self.

Outline

I. Introduction

- A. The feminization of madness is a theme in art, painting, and literature in the nineteenth century.
- B. Women's social status and gender inequalities are revealed in the short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*.
- C. The narrator's husband's prohibition of writing and his uncompromising speech cause the narrator to suffer from madness.
- D. Charlotte Perkins Gilman is oppressed by the mass media and her society, like the narrator in the short story who is dominated by patriarchy.
- E. Thesis Statement

The female narrator's social status in *The Yellow Wallpaper* reflects Charlotte Perkins Gilman's oppressive relationship with the journalistic community of her time, and also reveals some of the prevailing causes behind women's insanity living under American patriarchal culture.

II. Literature Review- Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Yellow Newspaper.

- A. The Yellow Newspaper
 - 1. Definition
 - 2. Impact
- B. Gilman's relationship with the journalistic community
- C. Revelations of Gilman's anxiety and her work through *The Yellow*

Wallpaper

III. Literature Review- Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House:

Another Look at *'The Yellow Wallpaper.'*

- A. The narrator refers to the room which John chooses for her as a “colonial mansion” and a hereditary estate, which is like a “haunted house.”
- B. The narrator becomes interested in the wallpaper when the narrator’s husband does not care about her inner voice.
- C. The narrator should free the shadow-woman from the paper-pattern to help her to release her tensions.

IV. Literature Review- Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *'The Yellow Wallpaper:'* A

Symptomatic Reading.

- A. The narrator’s obedient behavior suggests her inferior social status.
- B. The change of the narrator’s speech (simple to complex)
- C. Women’s insanity helps them find their freedom and true selves.

V. Literature Review- *Wild Unrest: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Making of*

“The Yellow Wall-paper.”

- A. Male supremacy in marriage
- B. The symbolic significance of the narrator tearing the wallpaper
- C. The narrator becomes an active figure rather than a passive figure who is dominated by her husband.

VI. Literature Review- First Persons Plural in Contemporary Feminist Fiction.

- A. The reasons of using the first-person point of view in the short story
- B. “An ‘I’-centered narrative that we might call the ‘room of one’s own’ plot links a series of writings that became feminist mileposts” (Morris 13).
- C. The use of first-person pronoun suggests a critical change for the female narrator.

VII. Literature Review- A New Women’s Journey into Insanity: Descent and Return in *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

- A. The narrator’s insanity is a punishment for being a woman.
- B. The action of tearing the wallpaper is like a triumph over patriarchy.
- C. The increase of the narrator’s self-awareness

VIII. Methodology-Textual Analysis

- A. The research paper is based on primary text, *The Yellow Wallpaper*
- B. The textual analysis is based on scholarly articles and edited books
- C. The purposes of using these sources in the research paper project

IX. Textual Analysis

- A. Charlotte Perkins Gilman identifies herself with the narrator by using a first-person narrative account to describe a woman’s madness.
- B. The narrator’s imagination about the wallpaper makes her feel uncomfortable since she is restricted to the bed and not permitted to read and write.
- C. The narrator destroys both the wallpaper and her own identity by

discovering that the woman behind the barred patterns was her true self.

- D. Women's insanity is a form of rebellion against male supremacy and a way for women to heal their mental illnesses.

X. Conclusion

- A. The narrator's suffering reveals parallels with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's plight in the publishing industry as a female writer.
- B. Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses the first-person point of view to show women's courage and how women were betrayed by male hegemony.
- C. The narrator becomes an active force to seek her liberation when she is aware of her passively submissive role toward her husband.
- D. Patriarchal society, culture, and male oppression make women ill.

XI. Words cited

Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, is based on her life experiences. Gilman depicts the narrator's social status as a woman in nineteenth century American society as one of subordination, oppression, and helplessness. The narrator's husband's prohibition of her writing and his uncompromising behaviors lead his wife into self-disintegration and madness. The narrator reveals "he said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get" (Gilman 479). Therefore, the narrator's husband chooses the top of the room as her nursery. Since the narrator's husband requires the narrator to stay upstairs, he does not want the neighbors to know about his mad wife. The physician-husband keeps blaming his wife for her illness and reminds her that they move to the ancestral hall because of her illness. He confines his wife upstairs so that she becomes interested in the pattern of the wallpaper. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, as an author-feminist, struggles against social oppression and male dominance. Accordingly, this research paper examines the female narrator's social status in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, discussing Charlotte Perkins Gilman's oppressive relationship with the journalistic community of her time, as well as the causes behind women's insanity under American patriarchal culture.

This research paper is divided into the following sections: the Literature Review, the Methodology, the Textual Analysis, and the Conclusion. The Literature Review section presents summaries of the important claims and arguments from the secondary

sources consulted by the author. The summaries allow readers to have a better understanding of the background information of the topic. The Methodology section includes arguments derived from scholarly articles and edited books to analyze the topic. The Textual Analysis section discusses the primary source based on scholarly articles, journals, and edited books consulted for the project. Lastly, the conclusion restates the thesis statement, and includes a summary of the main claims of this research paper.

Literature Review

The article “Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Yellow Newspaper,” by Sari Edelstein (2007) points out that nineteenth century American yellow journalism, or the yellow newspaper, is a type of sensational journalism which does not focus on well-researched news, but instead utilizes eye-catching headlines to sell more newspapers. Yellow journalism has a great impact on the media industry of the United States in the nineteenth century when Gilman writes the story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Edelstein claims that Gilman divides the publishing industry into “dead” and “living” works of literature. If some literary works are regarded as “dead,” not marketable, others are regarded to be “living,” more popular. According to Edelstein, the reason why Gilman’s feminist work is considered as “dead” by other major journalists is because it lacks both an audience and a venue. Yellow journalism is alive in the nineteenth century which limits Gilman’s marketability and her ability to publish. Gilman considers the existence of the yellow newspaper as a corruption of print

culture, so she stands in opposition to create a form of female writing.

According to Edelstein, *The Yellow Wallpaper* describes the relationship between the narrator and her husband. Gilman, a female writer in the nineteenth century, is oppressed by the mass media and her society, like the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* who is dominated by patriarchal society. Edelstein argues that *The Yellow Wallpaper* reveals Gilman's anxiety towards the culture of power of yellow journalism which threatens her position as a female author. She shows her fear in the story. In addition, the word "paper" is used as a pun in the story, which invokes a linkage between the wallpaper and the popular press.

According to Edelstein, "As we continue to understand Gilman as a feminist, we must also consider her as a professional writer whose works can be read as an extended meditation of female authority and the fate of socially-conscious writing in the turn-of-the century print marketplace" (88). Gilman's writing does not only expose the social status of women but reveals how the publishing industry works, and what discrimination she suffers from in the nineteenth century as an American woman.

The article answers my question about both the narrator's writing and the wallpaper. The article argues that the narrator's relationship to the wall in *The Yellow Wallpaper* reflects Gilman's relationship to the journalistic community. Gilman defines her work against yellow journalism. As a journalist and fiction writer, she seeks to expose patriarchal ideology and stands in opposition to create a female

reading community. In addition, the word, “paper,” stands for different forms of published materials for Gilman, while the word “paper” can also stand for the wallpaper for the narrator. The article supports what I have learned about analyzing a literary text that when one reads an article or a poem, one should learn about the author’s or poet’s background first. After reading the story, it is interesting for me to draw connections between the author’s constricted life and the narrator’s life in the story. That the narrator’s husband forbids her to read and to write reflects that male dominance over the female narrator, and also reveals a parallel with Gilman’s plight in the public sphere as a periodical author.

In the article “Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another Look at ‘*The Yellow Wallpaper*’,” Janice Haney-Peritz (1986) argues that *The Yellow Wallpaper* is regarded as a feminist story, but it emphasizes the narrator’s husband’s desire and demands rather than paying attention to the narrator’s inner voice. Therefore, the narrator should free the shadow-woman from the paper-pattern, which also helps her find a way to release her tensions. According to Haney-Peritz, the narrator finds her true self by tearing off the wallpaper. *The Yellow Wallpaper* suggests that women can only find their true selves through the use of their imaginations until society changes radically. In addition, Janice Haney-Peritz avers that *The Yellow Wallpaper* does not only reflect women’s social status in nineteenth century America but also reveals how women then suffered from patriarchal domination.

The narrator refers to the room which John chooses for her as a “colonial

mansion” and a “hereditary estate,” which is like a “haunted house” (Gilman 478). To John, the narrator’s haunted house is nothing; however, to the narrator, the haunted house and the wallpaper make her feel uncomfortable. Patriarchal cultures and societies make women ill. According to Janice Haney-Peritz, “By identifying with this other woman, the writer effects her liberation from disease into health and thereby finds that she has entered a new space, the open space of her own authority” (120). The space does not only fulfill the narrator’s physical needs, but also makes the narrator aware that the woman behind the wallpaper holds her true identity. Moreover, the narrator’s handwriting on the wallpaper later helps her escape from her confinement, which leads her to find her liberation and her true self.

The article discusses the symbolic value of the wallpaper in the story. The narrator has to free the woman behind the yellow wallpaper since she has discovered her true identity within the wallpaper. This idea connects with the arguments in one of the articles, by Rula Quawas’ (2006) article entitled “A New Woman’s Journey into Insanity: Descent and Return in *The Yellow Wallpaper*.” In the article, Quawas also points out that the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* tries to help the woman get rid of the wallpaper, which suggests that she frees the woman and herself as well.

Furthermore, the story is based on Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s personal experiences.

The narrator’s relationship to the wall in *The Yellow Wallpaper* reflects Gilman’s relationship to the journalistic community of her day. The narrator is dominated by patriarchy, while Gilman suffers from the mass media. Moreover, the text does not

just focus on the female character's identity. Instead, the story illustrates more specifically the narrator's husband's desires and demands. *The Yellow Wallpaper* does not only describe the relationship between the narrator and her husband, but also examines gender inequalities in nineteenth century American society.

In the article, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's '*The Yellow Wallpaper*': A Symptomatic Reading," Lisa Kasmer (1990) mentions that the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* does not only recount John's patriarchal perspectives, but also reveals that the narrator's social status is inferior to that of her husband. According to Kasmer, the narrator pretends to be recovered from her illness as her husband wishes, and she cannot show any symptoms of madness in front of her husband. Instead, the narrator does what her husband expects her to do, because her husband's language is the law which the narrator should obey. In addition, when the narrator becomes interested in the wallpaper, it is a turning point in the story. According to Kasmer, before the narrator pays attention to the wallpaper, she forms sentences in a short and simple way. Her statements are all based on her husband's languages. In contrast, when she becomes interested in the wallpaper, her sentences become complex and more complicated, which suggests that her inner voice and emotions have changed. Kasmer mentions that avoiding repetition of patriarchal language is important for the narrator to obtain liberation, to find her identity, and to find a way to release her tensions.

For Kasmer, the narrator's husband's language is the first principle. This principle is based on the logic of binary oppositions, the hierarchical system of

patriarchy. Kasmer claims that “The hierarchical system within his language created by a male-dominated society and sounding principle of man necessarily excludes woman and makes other rigid distinctions between what is acceptable and what is not” (4). Therefore, the narrator is trapped within her husband’s discourse, which echoes the woman who is trapped behind the yellow wallpaper. Both of them are not capable of expressing their perspectives and emotions freely.

The article discusses whether or not the narrator’s madness is just a form of mental disability. Kasmer reveals that the narrator’s hysteria is her inability to control her emotions and desires. In addition, the text does not only explain the reason for using the wallpaper in the story, but also elaborates on the connotation and denotation of the “yellow” wallpaper. The article argues that the narrator’s madness is not just a mental disability, which supports the same claims in Rula Quawas’ (2006) article entitled “A New Woman’s Journey into Insanity: Descent and Return in *The Yellow Wallpaper*.” Both of the articles regard women’s insanity as a form of rebellion, which helps women find their true selves. Kasmer claims that madness is a higher form of sanity since madness is a way to heal mental illness. Compared to the other sources, Kasmer argues that the narrator does not triumph at the end of the story because she loses the ability to communicate and to escape being dominated. This idea contradicts what I have learned in Rula Quawas’ “A New Women’s Journey into Insanity: Descent and Return in *The Yellow Wallpaper*,” since Quawas claims that the act of tearing the wallpaper suggests triumph over patriarchal society.

In the chapter, *Silas Weir Mitchell*, from the book, *“To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,”* Ann J. Lane reveals that Charlotte Perkins Gilman suffers from depression which is exacerbated by her marriage and motherhood. She consults with the neurologist, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell and receives the Rest Cure. At the beginning of treatment, the patients are restricted to bed and forbidden to read, write, sew, converse or feed themselves. The process is like an infantilization which is presumed to make the patients contented and tractable. Therefore, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, is a study of a young mother’s descent into madness, which is caused by the dominant husband-doctor who follows S. Mitchell’s Rest Cure. Gilman portrays a Rest Cure similar to Mitchell’s. Mitchell is cast as someone who is more dangerous than the narrator’s husband and considered as the force leading her to her destruction. .

According to Lane, Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses her own experiences to create the short story. In the interview with Mitchell, Gilman confesses that she suffers from exhaustion of the nerves. Neurasthenia is commonly associated with the pressures of nineteenth century American society. Accordingly, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is regarded as one of her genuinely literary pieces, and the most clearly and consciously autobiography. In addition, the short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, is an intensely personal examination of Gilman’s private nightmare. Her writing is a chance for her to introspect as she did in the story. According to Lane, “When Charlotte said that she wrote the piece to save people from being driven crazy, perhaps one of the people she

saved was herself,” for in this story she seems to have let herself go, allowed her unconscious to help her creative art, and in so doing may have helped to purge the demons that terrified her (127). The narrator in the story is a submissive figure, but John stands for the power of father, husband, and doctor combined which suggests gender inequality in the story. Therefore, the languages and the imagery Gilman uses in the story allowing her to express her buried fears of her suffering under nineteenth century American patriarchal society and under those who pretend to love and protect her.

The chapter, *Silas Weir Mitchell*, from the book, *“To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,”* explains who Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell is in the story and answers one of my research questions about the narrator’s madness. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, “John says if I don’t pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don’t want to go there at all” (Gilman 482). This is the only reference to the name, Weir Mitchell. When Gilman suffers from postpartum depression, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell takes the “Rest Cure” as a treatment to her overcome her depression. Similarly, John also embodies Mitchell’s treatment to his wife. Gilman identifies herself and uses her experiences to compose the short story, which supports what I learned from Edelstein’s (2007) article entitled “Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Yellow Newspaper.” Both Edelstein and Lane regard *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as having been composed according to Gilman’s personal life. In addition, Lane’s (1997) book *“To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman” supports what I learn in Conrad Shumaker’s (1985) article entitled “Too Terribly Good to Be Painted: Charlotte Gilman’s ‘*The Yellow Wallpaper*’.” Both of the author claims that since the narrator is confined in the room, she starts to study the patterns of the wallpaper and expresses her emotions which she is forbidden to show in front of her husband at the beginning of the story. Compared to the other sources, in the chapter, *Silas Weir Mitchell*, the author tells the readers that not only the dominant husband causes Gilman to become mad, but also the neurologist, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell who forces her to take the treatment and treats her like a child.

In the book, “*Wild Unrest: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Making of ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’*,” Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (2010) argues that Charlotte Perkins Gilman creates an inner tale which is written as a diary entry from the first-person point of view. Gilman makes the narrator’s husband into an authoritative figure. As a doctor-husband, he is dominant in patriarchal society, which suggests that the narrator’s social status is inferior to that of her husband’s.

John keeps belittling the narrator’s request of moving downstairs, which suggests a male supremacy in their marriage. However, when John refuses the narrator’s request, the narrator starts to enjoy the view from the upstairs window and becomes interested in the pattern of the wallpaper. According to Horowitz, “She tells of her own creeping in the nursery bedroom, locking its door in the daytime, causing the readers to see her growing identification with the wall-paper woman” (185). The

narrator sees the pattern move and she believes that there is a woman behind the wallpaper. Horowitz avers that once she tears down the wallpaper, she can release her pressure and find her real identity, which is like the woman who gets rid of the wallpaper and wins her freedom.

The chapter, *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, from the book, *Wild Unrest: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Making of "The Yellow Wall-Paper,"* answers my questions about the social status of the female character in nineteenth century American society and the symbolic meaning of the narrator tearing the wallpaper in the short story. The narrator's madness is not only a mental disability, but also a form of rebellion against American patriarchal culture. Moreover, the significance of tearing the wallpaper connects with the ideas in one of the other sources, by Rula Quawas (2006) "A New Woman's Journey into Insanity: Descant and Return in *The Yellow Wallpaper*." In this article, Quawas also argues that the narrator in the story tries to help the woman get rid of the wallpaper, which suggests she frees the woman and herself as well. The article supports what I have learned about focusing on changes in the narrator's speech. At the beginning of the story, the narrator is passive and submissive to imitate or to obey her husband's words, but later she becomes an active figure and her speech becomes direct and clear.

The article, "First Persons Plural in Contemporary Feminist Fiction," by Adalaid Morris (1992) discusses the use of the first-person point of view in the short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Morris mentions that the pronoun "I" suggests a high feminist norm.

According to the author, women's liberation novels, autobiographies, and some poems are composed by using first-person pronouns. A first-person pronoun enacts a crucial shift from the pronoun "she" into "I" of women's literature in the nineteenth century. According to Morris, "An "I"-centered narrative that we might call the "room of one's own" plot links a series of writings that became feminist mileposts" (13). The first-person pronoun suggests a critical change for the female narrator in the short story. By using the first-person pronoun, female characters in women's fiction are capable of expressing their ideas and emotions.

For Morris, the purpose of using the pronoun, I, in feminist literature is to promote the consolidation of a female character. According to Morris, Gilman writes *The Yellow Wallpaper* by using the first-person point of view, to suggest affirmative behaviors, liberation, and equal rights for the narrator. The narration starts with the oppression of a woman who longs for her rights, to be able to write, and to paint. However, she can only stay in a haunted house. The narrator's husband focuses on expressing his desire and demands rather than on paying attention to the narrator's identity. The pronoun, "I," in feminist fiction does not only refer to a woman's courage, but also shows how women rebelled against their current situations in patriarchal societies. According to Morris, "after reading novels by feminist writers, such as Woolf, Gilman, Olsen, Rich, and Brown, women's lives profoundly changed: " women begin to subvert the domestic ideology of traditional women who is once an inferior figure, and becomes an active figure in nineteenth century American

patriarchal society (14).

The article answers my question about female identity in the story. “I-centered” narration becomes a popular writing style for feminist literature in the nineteenth century, which shows why Gilman begins *The Yellow Wallpaper* using the first-person pronoun. Instead of using the pronoun “we” or “she”, the story reveals the significance of self-discovery. The article echoes what I have learned before. Most short stories are composed by using the third-person point of view. The first-person point of view is used in the bildungsroman or in some special cases, such as in *Jane Eyre*. The use of the first-person pronoun is related to the author’s constricted life and culture at that period of time. The pronoun, “I,” suggests a woman’s courage and determination to fight for her own liberation.

In the article, “A New Women’s Journey into Insanity: Descent and Return in *The Yellow Wallpaper*,” Rula Quawas (2006) argues that “Feminine insanity is like the violation, which interprets women’s madness as the reflection of female’s oppression in the family” (47). Quawas also claims that the narrator’s insanity is nothing more than a label, which indicates that imposed gender norms are a type of punishment for being a woman. Furthermore, Gilman creates a female character who suffers from schizophrenia in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The author interprets the narrator’s insanity as a form of rebellion. According to Quawas, the narrator longs to pursue independence and liberation. Nevertheless, the narrator suffers from the confinement of being judged in a male-dominated world. When the narrator destroys

the wallpaper, this act of tearing the wallpaper suggests triumph over her patriarchal society. The narrator's sense of awareness and conscience grow as her use of the pronoun "I" increases toward the end of the narration. This suggests that the narrator becomes aware of fighting against a male-dominated society, her domestic condition, and her physical confinement. Unlike most Victorian women, the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is conscious about her submissiveness towards her husband and denies to be dominated.

The author argues that the setting in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a domestic designation of the female's only sphere. Charlotte Perkins Gilman reveals the phenomenon that women are dominated in patriarchal societies by being compelled to uphold a domestic ideology. The narrator in the story tries to help the woman get rid of the wallpaper to free the shadow-woman from the paper-pattern, which also helps her find a way to release her tensions. Gilman does not follow the prevailing literary traditions to create subservient female characters in her works. Instead, the female character in Gilman's short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, is able to seek her liberation and true identity.

The article answers my question about the social status of the female character in the short story. The female character in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is mad. However, women's madness is always an interesting theme in literary works to explore. In addition, the article contradicts what I have learned. Unlike in other nineteenth century short stories and novels, Gilman regards the narrator's insanity as a form of

rebellion against patriarchal society. The idea of insanity in Rula Quawas (2006) “A New Women’s Journey into Insanity: Descent and Return in *The Yellow Wallpaper*,” is different from what I have learned from Emily Dickinson’s *Much Madness is Divinest Sense*. Emily Dickinson regards madness as the divinest sense, while Rula Quawas identifies madness in *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a punishment for being a woman.

In the article, “Too Terribly Good to Be Painted: Charlotte Gilman’s ‘*The Yellow Wallpaper*,’” Conrad Shumaker (1985) argues that “When her ability to express her artistic impulses is limited by her husband’s prescription of complete rest, she begins to find in its tangled pattern the emotions and experiences she is forbidden to record” (590). During the period of time that the narrator stays in the confined room, the narrator is forbidden from engaging in any activities which she enjoys. When she is alone, she starts tracing the patterns of the wallpaper because later she will find that the shadow-woman within the paper is her true self. Once she is able to tear off the wallpaper, she destroys not only the visible wallpaper but also her own identity. The narrator becomes the woman behind the barred patterns of wallpaper.

Through the characters of the rational doctor and the imaginative wife, the narrator’s just wants to deal with the physical causes of her his wife’s illness rather than paying attention to the narrator’s inner voice. For John, mental illness is the “inevitable result of using one’s imagination, the creation of an attractive ‘fancy’ which the mind then fails to distinguish from reality” (Shumaker 592). Gilman’s

depiction of the narrator's decline into madness is praised for the accuracy with which it captures the symptoms of mental breakdown. When the narrator takes the treatment of the rest-cure, she needs to pretend to sleep and have an appetite because that is what John assumes is supposed to happen as a result of the treatment. She cannot stand opposed against the authority, her husband.

At the end of the story, the narrator is still unable to express her feelings directly, instead she creeps around the room. The act of creeping around the room symbolically suggests her triumph and her humiliation symbolically. Nevertheless, her husband faints. John fails because of his own "dogmatic faith" (Shumaker 592). He cannot believe that his wife's imagination can become a force which leads her into madness.

The article discusses the symbolic significance of tearing off the wallpaper. Shumaker argues that the act of ripping off the wallpaper suggests that the narrator destroys the wallpaper and herself at the same time. She finds her true self behind the patterns of the wallpaper. The idea supports what I have learned in Rula Quawas' article, "A New Women's Journey into Insanity: Descent and Return in *The Yellow Wallpaper*," and Janice Haney-Peritz's article "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another Look at '*The Yellow Wallpaper*'," since both of Haney-Peritz and Quawas also claims that the narrator sees a woman's confinement within the paper, and that is her true self. Moreover, in the article, Shumaker explains that the act of creeping around the room symbolizes the triumph of the narrator who takes over the rights of her husband. This idea interests me because in other articles,

the authors, like Rula Quawas and Lisa Kasmer, they just discuss whether or not the act of tearing off the wallpaper is a victory to the narrator. They do not mention the symbolic significance of the act of creeping around the room at the end of the story.

The paper aims to address the following research questions:

1. In what respects does Charlotte Perkins Gilman identify herself with the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*?
2. What is the symbolic significance of the narrator tearing the wallpaper in *The Yellow Wallpaper*?
3. Why does Charlotte Perkins Gilman compose the short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, by using the first-person point of view?
4. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, is the narrator's madness just a mental disability or a form of rebellion against American patriarchal culture?

Methodology

This research project is based on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The textual analysis is based on scholarly articles to analyze the short story and to enlarge one's understandings of women's social status in nineteenth century America. Women in nineteenth century America often suffered from patriarchal oppression and mental illness which Gilman examines in her short story. *The Yellow Wallpaper* explores the phenomenon of women's suffering and their rebellion against patriarchal society with the final action of the tearing off the wallpaper.

The first article, Sari Edelstein's (2007) "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the

Yellow Newspaper,” discusses whether or not Charlotte Perkins Gilman identifies herself with the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The author writes the short story on purpose because the female narrator’s inferior social status in *The Yellow Wallpaper* reflects her relationship to the mass media in nineteenth century America. The second article, Janice Haney-Peritz’s (1986) “Monumental Feminism and Literature’s Ancestral House: Another Look at ‘*The Yellow Wallpaper*,’” explores how patriarchal cultures and societies truly make women ill. In Lisa Kasmer’s (1990) article, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘*The Yellow Wallpaper*’: A Symptomatic Reading,” Kasmer mentions that the narrator’s social status is inferior to that of her husband and argues that both the narrator and Charlotte Perkins Gilman are not capable of expressing their perspectives and emotions in their society. In the chapter, Silas Weir Mitchell, from the book, “*To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*,” Ann J. Lane (1997) explains who Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell is in the story and how he influences Gilman in reality and the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Moreover, in Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz’s (2010) article “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” *Wild Unrest: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Making of ‘The Yellow Wall-paper,’* Horowitz discusses the relationship between male dominance and female subordination in the short story. Horowitz elaborates on the change of the female narrator, from a passive figure to an active force. In the article, Adalaide Morris’ (1992) article “First Persons Plural in Contemporary Feminist Fiction,” explores why Charlotte Perkins Gilman composes the short story, *The Yellow*

Wallpaper, by using the first-person point of view. The first-person pronoun indicates the high feminist norm in the short story and the pronoun, “I,” suggests a woman who longs for her rights and her liberation. The seventh article, Rula Quawas’ (2006) “A New Women’s Journey into Insanity: Descent and Return in *The Yellow Wallpaper*,” explores the reasons and purposes behind the narrator’s madness. Finally, the eighth article, Conrad Shumaker’s (1985) “Too Terribly Good to Be Painted: Charlotte Gilman’s ‘*The Yellow Wallpaper*,’” discusses that the act of the protagonist’s creeping around the room suggests a triumph for the narrator who is controlled by her husband and also explores the reasons why her husband who faints at the end of the story.

The purpose of using these sources is to identify and to understand the main reason for women’s oppression in nineteenth century America. The female narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* reflects Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s relationship to the journalistic community and reveals that American women are oppressed by American patriarchy, which often causes American women to become mad.

Textual Analysis

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1892 short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator’s suffering reveals parallels with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s plight in the publishing industry as a female writer. According to Morris, “An ‘I’- centered narrative that we might call the ‘room of one’s plot links a series of writings that became feminist mileposts” (13). Gilman identifies herself and uses first-person point of view to compose the short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The pronoun, “I” suggests

a “high feminist norm” and conveys the message of affirmative behaviors, liberation, and equal right to the female narrator. (Morris 11). When Charlotte Perkins Gilman composes the short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, she tries to subvert the domestic ideology of traditional women.

According to Edelstein, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is “no more ‘literature’” than her any literary works, the short story is written ‘with a purpose’” (86). However, Gilman’s talent is oppressed while the mass media, yellow journalism, is dominant in the publishing industry. The word, “paper,” stands for different forms of published materials for Charlotte Perkins Gilman, while “paper” stands for the wallpaper to the narrator (Edelstein 81). *The Yellow Wallpaper* reveals Gilman’s anxiety toward the power and culture of yellow journalism, and is also recognized as a feminist indictment in nineteenth century American patriarchal society.

At the beginning of the story, Charlotte Perkins Gilman depicts a woman who spends the summer with her physician- husband, John, and her sister-in-law, Jennie. They settle down in the “ancestral hall” in what the female narrator calls a “haunted house” (Gilman 478). During the period of time that the narrator stays in the “haunted house,” the narrator does not only reveal how she interacts with John in the marriage, but also describes the patterns of the wallpaper which make the narrator obsessed. The wallpaper covers the room upstairs that her husband had assigned to her. As the narrator observes, “I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls” (Gilman 479). According to Lane, the narrator

is treated like a child since she is restricted to the bed and not permitted to read, write, and sew by herself (117). The process is like an infantilization which is presumed to make patients suffering from mental illness contented and tractable.

In the converted nursery, the bed is nailed down and there are bars on the window, which confines the narrator so that she cannot escape from it. According to Shumaker, “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” (Shumaker 596). When the narrator pays attention to the actual bars of the window, she finds many shadow-women creeping from the same window. The narrator’s imagination about the wallpaper makes her feel uncomfortable and later her feeling toward the tangled patterns of the wallpaper leads to a discussion of her mental illness.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman does not give a name to the female character, but instead she gives a name to the narrator’s husband, John. This indicates that women’s social status is not important in nineteenth century American society. As Quawas avers about the narrator in the short story, “If one cannot communicate, cannot feel, has no name or identity, has been so thoroughly divided, one has been, in the sense of Laing in *The Divided Self*, engulfed, “drowned,” ceased to exist as a self” (48). The narrator does not die or lose her identity, instead she seeks for finding true herself. Therefore, the narrator at the end of the story tears off the wallpaper in search of the entrapped woman behind the tangled patterns of the paper.

When John plans a schedule for the narrator on an hourly basis for each day, the

narrator comments, “he is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.” and she continues to say “he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more” (Gilman 479). John believes that all his wife need is to get enough rest. According to Quawas, the narrator’s husband’s dominance illustrates “the paradoxical double bind of nineteenth-century behavioral expectations of women” (45). Women are expected to live their lives according to men’s wishes. Similarly, John does not let the narrator do what she really wants. The narrator is forbidden to exercise or to do her work, which is that of writing, because John makes his wife better by asking her to take rest as much as possible. The narrator’s husband’s prohibition of writing and his ignorance and incomprehension of his wife’s needs leads the narrator on a journey to self-disintegration and madness. “Both characters are doomed to act out their respective parts of ‘loving’ husband and obedient wife right to the inevitably disastrous end” (Shumaker 595). Moreover, Lane argues that the narrator’s language to her ‘loving’ husband is similar to what Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses to describe Walter, her own husband (126). This also suggests that Gilman composes the short story based on her personal life experiences.

Before the narrator’s attention becomes focused on the patterns of the wallpaper, she is imprisoned and treated like a child. As she looks at the wallpaper, she says “I used to lie awake as a child” and thinks of her childhood memory, her ability “to get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy- store” (Gilman 481). However, her husband just keeps

reminding her “not to give way to fancy in the least” (Gilman 481). John refuses to “consider anything but physical details” (Shumaker 594). John is full of rationality to analyze his wife’s symptoms based on his knowledge and expertise as a doctor. If his wife’s symptoms are nervousness and the loss of appetite or energy, she should follow his prescription and stop doing imagination toward the patterns of the wallpaper.

Gilman, as a female writer, makes the narrator’s husband into an authoritative figure. Compared to the imaginative narrator, John is a rational doctor-husband in patriarchal society, which suggests that the narrator’s social status is inferior to that of her husband. The narrator in the short story keeps asking her husband “And what can one do,” “What is one to do,” and “But what is one to do?” (Gilman 479). These questions suggest that the female narrator is helpless and unable to deal with her problems by herself. She relies on her husband’s words, orders and obeys them spontaneously. According to Shumaker, the narrator’s view of her husband is colored by the belief that he really loves her and always takes good care of her (594). John’s dominance indicates that patriarchal cultures and societies make women ill.

When the narrator says “But John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself- before him, at least, and that makes me feel tired” (Gilman 479), she knows that she must control herself and recover as soon as possible. Even though John tells the narrator that it is unnecessary to be self-controlled, the narrator realizes that she needs to pretend to be healed according to John’s expectations. The narrator is not allowed to show any symptoms of madness

in front of him. Instead, the narrator does what her husband wishes her to do because John's language is the "law," and inarguable for the narrator to submit. As Kasmer argues, "The law on which John's language is founded, and to which the narrator has submitted, is the phallus or the patriarch, a first principle" (4).

The female narrator's descent into insanity can be revealed through the change in the narrator's speech. According to Kasmer, "Before the narrator becomes interested in the wallpaper, her narrative is over-laden with sentences which are short and simple" (8). For example, she says "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him," and then she continues to say, "Of course it is only the nervousness" (Gilman 480). In contrast, when she becomes interested in the patterns of the wallpaper, her sentences become complex and more complicated, which suggests that her inner voice and emotions are different than before. For instance, she says "The outside pattern is a florid arabesque, reminding one of a fungus. If you can imagine a toadstool on joints, an interminable of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolution- why that is something like it. That is sometimes" (Gilman 485). Kasmer mentions that avoiding repetition of patriarchal language is important for the narrator to obtain liberation, to find her identity, and to find a way to release her tensions (10). The narrator begins to surpass her husband's language and to establish her own.

The narrator anticipates her husband to repaper the wallpaper since she feels uncomfortable with the patterns of the wallpaper. John says that he will deal with the

“heavy bedstead,” the “barred windows, the “gate at the head of the stairs” one after the other once the wallpaper had been repapered (Gilman 480). He thinks that if he promises his wife to repaper the wallpaper of the room, she will not be satisfied and will ask him to change more furniture for her. He cannot spoil his wife. The husband is reluctant about changing the wallpaper and instead, replies to his wife that doing so would be dangerous, for “nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies” (Gilman 480). John does not want to bother himself with meaningless acts like changing the wallpaper for the three-month rental house. According to Shumaker, for John, mental illness is the “inevitable result of using one’s imagination,” “fancy” is the feather which leads human beings to be unable to distinguish from reality (592). John focuses on expressing his desires and demands rather than on paying attention to the narrator’s wishes and identity.

Gilman identifies herself with the narrator and uses her psychological experiences to compose the short story. Her depiction of the narrator’s decline into madness is praised for “the accuracy with which it captures the symptoms of mental breakdown and for its use of symbolism” (Shumaker 595). In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, when the female narrator suffers from mental illness, her husband and brother suggest to her to take Rest Cure. However, in the interview with Mitchell, Dr. Silas Mitchell also asks Gilman to get enough rest while she claims that she suffers from “neurasthenia, or exhaustion of the nerves,” which is associated with the pressures of nineteenth century American society (Lane 115).

The “rest-cure,” is a solution to cure hysteria and nervousness conditions in 1877 (Lane 116). Gilman discusses this treatment in her autobiography, and says that the “rest-cure” is designed for “the business man exhausted from too much work” (Shumaker 591). Both Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the narrator in the short story take rest-cure while they are suffering depression. When the narrator is undergoing the rest-cure, she states that “John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious” (Gilman 480). Therefore, in the short story, Gilman shows that John prescribes the rest-cure as a treatment for his wife, which is similar to Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell’s Rest Cure for Gilman herself. According to Lane, Dr. Weir Mitchell prescribes this cure to Gilman when she suffers from depression. Both of the methods from John and Dr. Weir Mitchell are trying to imprison the mad female character (126). John only wants to deal with the physical causes of the narrator’s illness, while Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell’s orders are to confine Gilman and make her lose freedom and her true self. Thus, the narrator remarks, “John says if I don’t pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don’t want to go there at all” (Gilman 482). This indicates that not only John but also Weir Mitchell is considered as one of the causes which lead the narrator into insanity.

The narrator starts to pay attention to the barred patterns of the wallpaper. As the narrator remarks, “there are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or even will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day” (Gilman 483). According to Janice Haney-Peritz, “By identifying with this other woman, the writer

affects her liberation from disease into health and thereby finds that she has entered a new space, the open space of her own authority” (120). For John, the space in the upstairs is the nursery room for his wife to undergo the rest-cure treatment until she is healed, whereas, for the narrator, the room makes her struggle with her illness and her true identity. It is a turning point that the narrator recognizes that there is a woman behind the wallpaper and that it is her true self.

As the narrator is gradually accustomed to the color of the wallpaper, she decides to free the shadow-woman to obtain independence and liberation. “I don’t want to go outside. I won’t, even if Jennie asks me to. For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow” (Gilman 489). The act of tearing off the wallpaper has different symbolic meanings. According to Quawas, ripping off the wallpaper suggests the triumph over patriarchal society to the narrator (49). The narrator’s sense of awareness grows as her use of the pronoun, “I,” toward the end of the narration. She uses a first-person point of view to enact the crucial feminist shift from she who is object to “I” who experiences myself as a subject. As Morris asserts, whether bildungsroman, Künstler roman, coming-out story, or personal essays, “each of these writings charts the gradual emergence of a unitary subjectivity the protagonist recognizes as her ‘true’ self” (13).

Quawas states what the narrator feels about her terrifying experience is what Dante felt when he exited from hell (49). It is a sense of resurrection, of rebirth toward liberation and independence. Women’s insanity is a form of rebellion against

male supremacy and a way for women to heal their mental illnesses as well. Similarly, Shumaker also suggests that the act of creeping around the room is symbolically “her triumph and her humiliation” over her husband (598). However, for Kasmer, she argues that the narrator does not win a victory because she is unable to verbalize her problems to her husband, express her unwillingness to be restricted in reading, writing, and escaping from the confinement which is judged by a male-dominated world (9).

After the narrator tears off the wallpaper, she releases her tensions, attains her liberation and finds her true self within the patterns of the wallpaper. According to Horowitz, “She tells of her own creeping in the nursery bedroom, locking its door in the daytime, causing the readers to see her growing identification with the wall-paper woman” (185). The narrator’s madness is not only a mental disability, but also a revolt against American patriarch culture. As the narrator remarks, “now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across me path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time” (Gilman 489). The narrator’s husband at the end of the story is not as powerful as the narrator. The unnamed narrator takes over the rights of John, which suggests a change in the female narrator, from a passive figure to an active figure. John fails because of his “dogmatic faith” in “materialism” and “empiricism” (Shumaker 592). He could not believe that her imagination could become a force which leads his wife into madness.

The narrator finally creeps around the room and her shoulder “fits in that long smooth the wall,” so she can find her way (Gilman 489). She destroys both the

wallpaper and her own identity by discovering that the woman behind the barred pattern was her true self. According to Janice Haney-Peritz, the author argues that women can only find their true selves through imagination until society changes radically (124). She also avers that the narrator's suffering reveals that women's social standings are not valued respectfully within patriarchal society. *The Yellow Wallpaper* suggests that women's mental diseases, hysterias, and anxieties are "psychological enactments of the insubstantial and insignificant roles" in a male-dominated Victorian society (Quawas 41). Gilman, as the narrator, is oppressed by males, such as her husband, her brother, and Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell in nineteenth century American society.

As the author of the short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman is one of the writers whose artistic and political ambitions do not correspond to the public demands. The narrator's suffering reveals parallels with Gilman's plight in the publishing industry as a female writer. The oppressive use of power by a male is an instance of patriarchy which makes women ill. The narrator's discomfort in the ancestral hall suggests her desires for her own space and freedom. According to Haney-Peritz, "The women's decent and madness are creditable ways for a woman to find her true self and free herself" (122).

Conclusion

The female narrator's social status in *The Yellow Wallpaper* reflects Charlotte Perkins Gilman's oppressive relationship with the journalistic community of her time,

and also reveals the causes behind women's insanity under American patriarchal culture. *The Yellow wallpaper* is an inner tale, "written as diary entries in the first person by a woman in distress," through which Charlotte Perkins Gilman identifies with the narrator who is oppressed by male-dominated world (Lefkowitz Horowitz 176). As Lefkowitz Horowitz observes about the narrator, "She is in a conventional nineteenth-century marriage under the dominion of her husband, who has total command of the kingdom of their house" (177). The narrator's suffering reveals a parallel with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's plight in the publishing industry as a female writer and exposes that patriarchal society makes women ill. She destroys the wallpaper only to discover that the woman behind the barred pattern is her true self. The unnamed narrator in the end of the short story subverts the domestic ideology of traditional women who is once a passive and inferior figure, and becomes an active figure in nineteenth century American patriarchal society.

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