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## The Helpless Angel in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes Charlotte Parkinson Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* from a feminist perspective. It reveals the reasons behind the existence of this literary text in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For this purpose, the paper presents Gilman's life as the background of the study, and then, it tries to find a link between her life as a woman and the life style of narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. In this way, the paper theorizes the arguments with reference to both Gilman's life, and the sequences of events in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. During the lifetime of Gilman, majority of women suffered from being subject to men and male dominance which confined them into homes. Thereby, they were forbidden from their rights to work or to get knowledge or even to speak their minds. So, being affected by the miserable condition of women around her, Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* in order to defend women in her society. Thus, the paper tries to demonstrate that Gilman uses her text as a tool to encourage and normalize women's resistance to the patriarchal rules in their society that confined, oppressed, and dehumanized women. Gilman uses her protagonist in the text as a role model for women in her society who were oppressed, and left helpless. Throughout the text, Gilman tries to walk in the shoes of those women who never got a chance to be what they are and got broken at the end. Thus, the paper exposes the dystopian life style of the narrator so as to reach into a conclusion that the narrator's story is not more than Gilman's story which is presented to stand for women's story in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The phrase "Helpless Angel" in this paper, thus, is symbolically presented so as to symbolize the helpless women in Gilman's time. The phrase is driven from one of the main patriarchal terms of the age which was *The Angel in the House*.

**Keywords:** *Gilman, Helpless Angel, the Yellow Wallpaper, Feminist Perspective, Dystopian life style*

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### 1. Introduction

As a writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman is well known for her fiction *The Yellow Wallpaper* which is an output of her tragic experience in life as a woman. In her childhood, her parents got separated after she was born, and this caused economic problems for her, as later, she described her childhood as "painful and lonely" (Gilman, 2001, p.1656). Gilman married Charles Stetson who was an artist, and hoped to spend a better life with him, but unfortunately, instead of having a good married life, she faced another type of life similar to the miseries of her childhood. The pains continued as she gave birth to her daughter Katharine; and thereby, she entered the difficulty of life that manifested itself in being mother and wife. Day after day, her marital tension increased till her husband believed that she was in mental depression, and thereby, a prescription was written for

her by a specialist in woman's nervous disorder, Dr. Mitchell. He proposed for her a rest cure that manifests itself in being in bed without any intellectual activities for several weeks (Rit, 2010).

Gilman went by the rules of her treatment. But it only made her more depressed, and increased her tension till she reached a state of madness. Moreover, depending on the prescription written for her by Dr. Mitchell, her husband isolated her in a room with no human contact. She was not allowed even to touch a pen. As a result, Gilman refused to be treated that way, and she translated her suffrage into words, and started to write this story to encourage women to gain their independence and resist what the male society puts them under (Rit, 2010).

Gilman's experience as a mother and a wife was her biggest inspiration that made her be more aware of women's condition

around her. In the time of her rest cure, she dramatized her experience in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. She showed and exposed how women of her society should call for their rights, and put a light on the limitations in front of them. In this way, Gilman uses literature to raise awareness in her society and help those who have the same problems like her. Therefore, literature became the "only available effective tool of resistance for Gilman that allowed her to focus on her society in an imaginatively distance setting, and provide fresh perspectives" (Booker, 1994, p.4).

In the late nineteenth century, in which Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*, women were confined at home by the restricting rules of English society which treated them as "second-class citizen" (Crewe, 1995, p. 57). At the time, the only appropriate job for woman was being a mother and a wife, which were the last stage of their developments in the society. They were not given their individual needs and rights, simply because the society was a male-dominated one. Women were kept at home and those who had jobs were less worthy and not considered as the preferred type of women. So, as a result, women were unable to break the rules of their society, and they were obliged to accept their duties as wives and mothers. Barrett (2013) stated that "due to the male-dominated organization of society, women frequently did not have legal rights; thereby, they were expected to obey the male decisions by raising families and perform the duties of diligent wives and mothers" (p. 4).

## 2. The Angel of the House

In the Nineteenth Century, the most known and popular term for describing Victorian women was "The angel in the house" which was used by Victorian poet Coventry Patmore (1823-1896). This term became popular as the Victorian society used it to define and identify women's roles and duties in the society. According to this term, women were given the name of angels, and this name was allegorically used to identify women's duties which were serving like angels, and sacrificing themselves for their families. And the word "house" was also used to limit the available place for women's activity which was their houses (Kuhl, 2018, p.171). This way, women were only titled as mothers and housewives, and they were not allowed to participate in any activities or have any other duties outside their home. They were supposed to stay innocent, utterly helpless, and calm. Their

only source of connection to the outside world was through their husbands because they were ruling everything, while women were obliged to follow them without question. Though women were educated, they were not taught any skills that they may get use of outside of their home. So, basically their lives were revolving around marriage, children, and taking care of the family's health.

The narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is one of these women, or one of these helpless angels who were kept at home and prevented from having any kind of creativity that embraces their talents. As her husband knows that she is different, and she may make some changes in her society through her writing, he will try everything to find a way to make her an angel in the house. He uses language to convince her that she is made for the domestic life, and any type of writing is going to be bad for her condition.

## 3. Hysteria in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator is prescribed a rest-cure for her nervous exhaustion. The disease was called neurasthenia in the eighteenth century and it was one of the nervous diseases. Women were mostly victims of this disease because of their sensitive minds and delicate bodies. These nervous diseases were associated with a big number of symptoms, such as "visible swelling of the stomach, headaches, fainting, palpitations of the heart, long fainting, wind in the stomach and intestines, frequent sighing, giddiness, watching, convulsive crying, convulsive laughing, despair, and melancholy" (Wayne, 2008, p.8). In the nineteenth century, the term changed into hysteria, and among its many symptoms child birth was one. The narrator claims that she gave birth into a baby before the rest cure, and this gives some hints about her problem that her husband takes advantage of.

Moreover, the effect of the yellow wallpaper on the narrator shows that she might has neurasthenia because of her depression, and her conclusion for the wallpaper is her constant melancholy. Whether the narrator has one of these diseases or not, she is obliged to have the rest cure and her only way to escape that fact was through writing, or else what can she possibly do? Even if she is alright, her isolation, the house and her husband are reasons to get her depressed. Perhaps she is not ill at all, but her sexist society and the power of male order makes her go through



the cure in order not to be creative, and be a proper wife for her husband. On the other hand, maybe the narrator is really suffering from hysteria, and the cure makes her worse. At the end, this hysteria led her into a kind of madness or abnormal imaginations about the wallpaper.

#### **4. The Helpless Narrator**

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, one can see a journey of struggle inside the narrator's mind for three months. This woman is an unnamed narrator who supposedly suffers from a nervous condition, and now the doctor prescribed her a rest cure in a mansion far away from people in order to get better. Since the beginning, one can realize that she is secretly writing what is in her mind on a paper, and this appears in her speech as she says: "I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind" (Gilman, 2001, p.2). From this quotation, it becomes clear that the narrator personally disagrees to go through this rest cure, and she realizes that this cure will make her worse, that is why she tries to do anything to keep her sanity.

When she gets into the house, her description of it indicates nothing more than a prison that is called a house. This appears in her speech as she says: "The most beautiful place! It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think about English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people" (Gilman, 2001, p.6). The house is big, isolated, and far away from people. So, it is basically her husband who brought her to lose contact with other humans. Sadan stated that, "separation is a more complex kind of lack of knowledge. It expresses itself in lack of information about others who share the same fate, with whom it's possible to create an alliance in order to resist power" (1997, p.47).

The narrator asks her husband to change the room, but he refuses and asserts his control over her. Elaine Hedge, concerning these limitations, states that "Without such choices, women would be emotionally and intellectually violated" (Hedges, 1992, p.120). In this case, the narrator is not allowed to make the smallest choice; just like a child, she is told that she doesn't know what's best for her, and this affects her belief in herself and feels less like a person. John takes the big airy room which is used to be a nursery room that had rings and things in the wall, and the windows are barred. The narrator's attraction for the wallpaper starts right away, as she

says, "I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (Gilman, 2001, p.10)

She takes a look out of the window and starts seeing the garden from her own fascinating perspective: "Out of the window I can see the garden, those mysterious deep shaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees" (Gilman, 2001, p.16). She calls the garden as amazing as if it's a wonderful place to escape from her bitter reality and be free with her imagination. However, even the garden has gates and walls, and it's imprisoning her. Schweninger (1996) comments on the condition of the garden by stating that, "What promises does that garden hold? What are its ambiguities? And how is that garden—bounded by hedges, walls, and locked gates—different from the prison room at the top of the house?" (p.26). In this case, the garden symbolizes a world full of possibilities, and it is parallel to the wallpaper; both of them represent the imprisoned narrator and her isolated world. However, the gates and walls represent the narrator's society in the way they circle around her to give her the feeling of being kept at home. Schweninger (1996) comments on this idea by stating that;

"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. Therefore, the garden becomes the site of limits, of control, of the artificial, of denial, of the male's triumph over the wildness of nature" (p.27).

In this trapped condition, the narrator's thoughts get interrupted from time to time because John (her husband) must not see her writing. John believes that the place is good for her, and he refuses to change the wallpaper because he thinks it will give him more control over her. So, he tries to calm her down by using his sweet deceiving language. He sets a daily schedule for her in order to make her know what to do and what to eat, and then, he tries to prevent her from any activity that refreshes her mind. In this way, John wants her to be his own puppet, and through the patriarchal rest cure, he ensures that the narrator thinks he is doing everything to help her get better.

Later on, the narrator becomes confused, she does not understand her husband, and this appears clearly in her speech as she says, "John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of

superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (Gilman, 2001, p.3). It seems that John does not understand the narrator or he does not want to understand her, and her wide imaginations and thoughts are refused by him. He laughs at her whenever she feels uncomfortable about something. The narrator complains about the wallpaper that had a vicious influence on her, it changes her mood while looking at it, but John does not take her concerns seriously.

The whole furniture of the room is torn and old, especially the yellow wallpaper that disturbs the narrator. Here, the color represents the corrupt society of the time which she lives in; that is why she does not want to deal with it. John's sister (Jennie), who is the housekeeper, watches her from time to time. She is a young woman who represents exactly what a woman has to be in the society (the angel in the house). She is more like John, and the opposite of the narrator. Therefore, John is trying and wishing for his wife to be more like his sister, under his control. As a result, the narrator keeps her writing tools away from Jennie too because she is not the one who understands her, but rather, she is more like a spy.

The narrator's condition is not getting any better though she had rest cure for a week. Till now she cannot do anything or act normally, and this appears in her speech as she says: "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time. Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone" (Gilman, 2001, p.25). John tells the narrator that if she does not get better fast, he shall send her to Weir Mitchell in fall, which is far worse than being with John. The narrator believes that the physicians of her society have the same patriarchal qualities of John; they will never give her a proper treatment for her ill health. So, she has learned not to let her emotions out, and she prefers to be alone most of the time. In this way, there would be less pressures on her.

The narrator used to hate the wallpaper, but now she is getting into it, and she keeps looking at it most of the time, line by line, all the patterns with details. It moves her imagination, as she says, "I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps BECAUSE of the wall-paper" (Gilman, 2001, p.26). Watching the wallpaper interests the narrator, and at the same time exhausts her, but these things are all done without John's knowing.

John usually uses his courageous and sweet words in order to convince her that

whatever he says is best for her. His language is one of his tricky tools that makes her feel guilty as if he's so good, and she is the one who does not worth it. In this way, John chooses her food for her, and makes a sleeping schedule for her. Whenever she asks for something out of the plan, he refuses it, especially if she asks for meeting with other people.

The narrator claims that the only thing that makes her happy is her baby. But at the same time, she believes that being here is better than being with her baby, perhaps because her condition got worse after she gave birth to her baby. So, according to her, maternity is another element that enables her husband to confine her at home for a long period of time. Therefore, she does not want to be with her baby although the baby is her source of happiness. What we have here is the misuse of power in the male dominated society. Men are redefining the natural role of women according to their preferences so as to have absolute control over them. In the text, these ideas are presented symbolically through the wallpaper and the narrator's condition during the rest cure.

The narrator keeps on watching the wallpaper with detail day and night. Her conclusion about the shapes she sees in the paper is that there is a shape which is like a woman creeping behind the paper. Maybe more than just a shape. This appears in her speech as she says, "Of course I never mention it to them anymore--- I am too wise, - -but I keep watch of it all the same. There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will" (Gilman, 2001, p.33). The narrator begins to see the reflection on her own situation in the paper as if there is a woman like her who is stuck behind a barred window, and the whole paper is not letting her to go out. In this case, the yellow wallpaper symbolizes her husband and the patriarchal society of her time. Thus, the women in the wallpaper are not more than the reflection of the narrator's own imagination that appears to the reader to portrait a clear picture of women's condition indirectly.

Later on, the narrator seems to go out of her way to express the symbolic relationship between herself and the woman in the wallpaper. She feels so realistic about her conclusion for the paper that she tries to feel it, but this time John notices. She always believed that John loves her so much, and she is the one to be blamed for being such a burden on him, but one of the nights, she realizes that it might be just an act by John. What is going on is not out of John's love for



her, but it is out of his love to his control over her.

In this way, the narrator tries to test her husband whether her opinion about him is right or not. She starts to open her heart to John, and tells him how much she's gone worse since she got there, but before she even finishes, John interrupts her speech, and tries to convince her that there is no reason to leave here, and she is actually getting better and better. This way, the narrator realizes that it is better to survive on her own, and keep everything hidden from John. Now, she is completely aware that the sweet language of John is a tool to make her do anything he wants.

As days pass, she looks into the wallpaper more and she feels some changes in the pattern of the wallpaper. Later, she smells a smell that comes out of the paper. Now, she sees her own world in the paper as if she is living inside it. The pattern and the smell go away in the morning and come back in the evening. This suggests that at night the power of the male-dominated society (John) is absent; that is why she can see everything, but in the morning as John comes back, she cannot do anything because she is under his control. This way, the narrator learns to hide her daily activity, and tries to resist John's language with her silence. She no longer does what he orders, and never goes by his schedule, but rather, she tries to fight back because she has an aim now, which is discovering more about the wallpaper.

In this way, the narrator specifies most of her time for the wallpaper, especially at night; therefore, at daytime she sleeps, and at night she watches over the woman creeping behind the paper, as she says, "I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. There is a week more and I think that will be enough" (Gilman, 2001, p.45). Besides the patterns and the shape of the wallpaper, she realizes that even the color and the smell are unique. She claims that she sits for hours trying to find out what it smells like. At first, she used to hate it so much, but now she is getting used to it. It is like the wallpaper which is the place and the world she has been put in. The narrator finally shows a perfect image of her society through the wallpaper:

"I really have discovered something at last.... The front patterns DOES move and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast and her crawling shakes it all over." (Gilman, 2001, pp.49-50.)

Through this speech, the narrator wants to say that many women are like her

suffering from the restriction of the male dominated societies. They are stuck inside their homes just like those women behind the wallpaper. She feels that the woman who shakes the paper is trying to get out, and she crawls around the paper trying to find somewhere to get rid of it. This situation is similar to the situation of women in her time, especially herself; many creative women are prevented from working or speaking their minds. No matter how much they try to find ways, there will always be barriers that dehumanize them and turn them into child producing machines.

John gradually notices that his way of controlling the narrator is starting to fail. He realizes that she is strangely quiet, not saying everything like before, and she is not sleeping at night. He asks Jennie many questions, and Jennie also asks the narrator many questions in sweet words, but it does not work anymore because now she starts to resist, as appears in her speech, "He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind. As if I couldn't see through him!" (Gilman, 2001, pp.54-55). This way, the narrator became smarter, and gained the power of her mind to resist John. Instead of John deceiving and tricking her, she starts to deceive him by pretending that she is like the one he wants; but in fact the wallpaper gives her strange strength as if she is trying to solve the problem within the wallpaper which is her own problem as well. So, she spends nights trying to figure something out for the woman in order to help her escape, and finally she decides to tear the paper apart and set her free.

On the last day, when John is away, dramatically the narrator tries to help the get out, but she fails; the sunlight comes and the shape of the woman goes away. She does not give up, she wants to do more, and she is not ready to go home without setting this woman free. Her last attempt succeeds while John is away. She locked the door and threw the key into the garden. When John came back and asked her to open the door, she told him that he can find the key in the garden, as she writes: "John dear! Said I in the gentlest voice, the key is down by the front: steps, under a plantain leaf! / Then he said -very quietly indeed/ I can't, said I, The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf" (Gilman, 2001, pp. 63-64). Through her speech, it becomes clear that the narrator uses the locked door as a form of resistance against her patriarchal society. She throws the key into the garden in order to say that John has corrupted the nature against women's role in the society, and therefore, to save her, John has to go and

find the key in the garden. This way, she gives herself one last chance with John, and thinks that this key could solve the problem if John listens to her. Finally, the narrator becomes more disappointed when she sees John carrying an axe to break the door, as it appears in her speech, "now he is carrying an axe. It would be a shame to breakdown that beautiful door" (Gilman,2001, p.53). It seems that John is not ready to listen to her; that is why he follows his male solution to deal with the locked door. Thus, John breaks the door, and enters the room. When the narrator sees John in this harsh way, she goes mad because she loses hope for survival. Schweninger (1996) says that:

The narrator's madness comes as a result of "the anxieties of the domestic world of the wife, patient, and mother. 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, and narrator's madness can be seen to mark the end of hope" (p.35).

Mills (2005) as quoted from Foucault, commented on the phenomenon of madness among women in the nineteenth century by stating that:

"Madness is constructed by society and its institutions. Mental illness should rather be seen as the result of social contradictions in which humans are historically alienated, Foucault describes the way that the institutionalization of those considered to be insane developed from the practice in the twelfth century of confining those who were suffering from the highly infectious disease leprosy" (p.89).

Mills (2005) also states that "those women who have rebelled against the social conventions and restrictions on women's behavior have sometimes been labeled as mentally ill" (p.103). In this text, the narrator became one of those women that have been considered as mentally ill, but behind this madness, a form of resistance appears. When the narrator loses her sanity, she no longer follows the patriarchal rules of her society. So, the narrator's madness "can be considered as a form of sanity for her because now she is not obliged to accept what John says. In this way, the madness empowers her as appears in her creeping in daylight and with the existence of John" (Suess, 2003, p.90). When John sees his wife in this condition, he faints. He faints because he knows that he has lost his control over the narrator; no one can bring her back to him. So, he becomes disappointed, and faints. When the narrator sees John fainted, she asks, "Now why should that man have fainted? But

he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" (Gilman,2001, p.65). Through this speech, it becomes clear that the narrator could overcome the patriarchal rules of her society, and her creeping around the fainted John indicates her triumph over John. Finally, the helpless angel finds the site of power in her madness, and frees the woman in the wallpaper through tearing it up. In this way, she frees herself as well.

### 5. Sum Up

This paper studied *The Yellow Wallpaper* from a feminist perspective. It decoded the given symbols in the text so as to reveal the hidden messages behind the lines. The arguments within the paper were analyzed with reference to the life of the author, the sequences of events, and the *Angel in the House*. The paper showed that Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* so as to defend women around her. She reflected her life experience as a mother and wife in her protagonist so as to draw readers' attention to unspoken issues concerning the miserable life women. In this way, *The Yellow Wallpaper* can be considered as one of the masterpieces that introduces the postmodern readers to the condition of women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is an allegorical text that uses symbols to portrait a clear picture of women's miserable life at that time. Through her work, Gilman wants to say that the patriarchal societies do everything in order to maintain their control over women, and sometimes these societies produce patriarchal literary works in order to encourage women to stay at home. *The Angel in the House* can be one of these works that belong that appeared in the society to fix those patriarchal beliefs in the minds of women. This literary work identifies the preferred position for women in the society which is their houses, and the word "angel" was used to give a reference to their holly duties. In this way, women were deceived by their patriarchal societies. However, in the text, Gilman presents this angel as a helpless angel who's confined, dehumanized, and deprived from her rights. Her husband notices some rebellious qualities in her that is why he tries his best to keep her under control. The problem with the narrator is that she is not ready to be a traditional woman of her society, so she starts to write in order to spread awareness among women around her. Her awareness appears in the shape of a story that is called *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Thus, this paper theorized Gilman's intention behind *The*



*Yellow Wallpaper* through analyzing the lines, characters, and the sequences of events within her text.

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