

Women Entrapment and Flight in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Azra Ghandeharion
Milad Mazari
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad
ghandeharion@um.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to yield a critical reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), which is one of the pioneering feminist works of American literature. Attempts have been made at finding affinities between the specific characterization of the story and the stereotypical male and female figures as defined by patriarchy and in terms of traditional gender roles. The paper tries to draw on Lacan's conceptions of language, Cixous' ideas about *écriture féminine*, and Freud's misconception about women's conditions. Drawing critical attention to this information, the paper focuses on the main unnamed female character and the fact that her anonymity helps the readers, specifically female readers, to identify themselves with her.

Keywords: The Yellow Wallpaper, patriarchal society, gender roles, confinement and escape, imagination, feminism

1. Introduction

This paper aims at finding the feminist elements in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892); first, by suggesting how this story can be taken as a feminist work of fiction, and then by trying to identify these feminist elements with

ideas discussed by the second-wave feminists, as referred to in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1974), ideas suggesting and criticizing the concept that women, as they are perceived by the patriarchal society, are nothing but the products of such a society, i.e., they are constructed in this fashion by men.

We then attempt to shed light on the issue of traditional gender roles as an inseparable part of any patriarchal society, in particular the American society during the nineteenth century, the same society in which our narrator and her husband are living. An analogy is drawn between the logical, analytical and rational role conferred upon men, the narrator's husband and other men mentioned in the story, as opposed to the subjective, irrational and illogical role bestowed on women, embedded in the characterization of the female narrator, and the fact that these roles are assigned by the patriarchy of the aforementioned society. We go on to probe men's emphasis on the material and the visible, specifically the physical symptoms of the narrator's condition, as opposed to women's stress on the imaginative and the inexplicable, particularly the narrator's feelings and her condition as was exacerbated by the wrong and institutionalized diagnosis of her husband. It is noteworthy to say that her world of imagination is inexplicable only in terms of male dominated language and premises. These sexist gender roles and their inhibiting nature repressing women –the narrator is confined in a room resembling a prison– are represented by the pattern of the wallpaper in which there is a front pattern, implying the bars of a prison constructed by the society in which women are confined, and a sub-pattern resembling the body of a woman trying to escape, which embodies all the women restricted by the rules and regulations of a patriarchy.

Furthermore, this paper explores the idea of feminine writing or *écriture féminine* as has been put forward by Cixous, discussed in Bray (2004) and Jacobus & Barreca (1999), as a way to liberate women from the yokes of the patriarchal mindset usually internalized by patriarchal women. Accordingly, the female narrator of the story secretly keeps a journal which proposes two ideas: first, the genre preference of women and their discursive type of writing, discursive in the eyes of male dominated language; secondly, it is the secrecy with which she is keeping that journal that suggests that women are not supposed to carry out intellectual undertakings such as painting and writing, if they desire to be seen as the perfect mother, wife and/or housewife in such patriarchal societies.

In terms of language, Jacques Lacan's ideas of the *imaginary* and the *symbolic orders* (Homer, 2005), have been used to cast light on the binary opposition present in the story between the narrator's husband's rule-oriented universe in which word and emotion are separate and the narrator's imaginary universe in which she roams free and tries to flee from the "Law of the Father", as embodied in the diagnosis of his physician husband (Tyson, 2006: 94).

Moreover, we investigate the ways in which Gilman has worked out interwoven relationships and affinities between this story and her own autobiography, in which she explains about herself having the same condition, in terms of discussing the

stereotypical diagnosis of serious women ailments, psychological or physical, simply as hysteria, as was suggested by Freud and many other physicians to be a routine female trouble at the time.

Finally, the paper attempts to indicate if the female narrator of this story was successful in liberating herself or the final scene in the story was just a temporary phase in the process of her entrapment, physically, socially and emotionally.

2. Review of the literature

The focus of attention has been put on feminism; that is, Betty Friedan's ideas as have been posited in *The Feminine Mystique* (1977), Helene Cixous' concepts about *écriture féminine* (Jacobus & Barreca, 1999; Bray, 2004), Foucault's notion of Panopticon (Mills, 2003), Kristeva's conception about the future generations of feminism (McAfee, 2004), Freud's idea about hysteria (Thurschwell, 2000), Lacan's notions on language as elaborated in Homer (2005), Showalter's beliefs about female writers (1977), and finally Beauvoir's opinions in her *The second sex* (1953).

Feminist approaches toward literature are taken from Tyson (2006) and Guerin (2011). The idea of imprisonment and surveillance has been probed as mentioned by Bak (1994). The reason why this story can be regarded as a feminist piece of literature was explored in Shumaker (1985). The concept of *écriture féminine* was taken into consideration while examining Haney-Peritz (1986). Rena Korb's ideas discussing female entrapment and flight (Korb, 1997), Greg Johnson's arguments on the narrator's final breakdown as an outcome of ages of repressed anger (Johnson, 1989), and Linda Wagner-Martin's sight on women's conflicting roles in patriarchal societies (Wagner-Martin, 1989) have also been considered in this paper. The issues of discourse differences between men and women have been analyzed by concentrating on Treichler (1984). Lanser (1989) has also been instrumental in the analysis at issue. In addition, the much debated concept of the cult of true womanhood in the nineteenth century was focused upon in Quawas (2006). The issue that the story has biographical elements was stated by Hamilton (2015). Oyeboode (2011) has talked about the rest cure which was prescribed to women who suffered from the same nervous breakdown as both the narrator and the author of the story and that this was an ill judgment for such cases. Finally, Battisti and Fiorato (2012) have concentrated on the question of women's identity and how it remains under the shadow of their male counterparts in patriarchal societies.

3. Discussion

3.1. A feminist story

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is a feminist story in that it shows women's confinement by

the use of the yellow wallpaper which in turn becomes a symbol of surveillance; the female narrator of the story is in a prison cell, the nursery room which has solid signs of imprisonment, such as barred windows, and is being under scrutiny by his physician husband to see if she shows the proper behaviour expected of her. This story has been viewed by many critics as a feminist declaration of liberty. The paranoia of being under an incessant watch makes the narrator go mad; however, this seeming madness liberates her from patriarchal concepts of appropriate feminine behavior. Gilman herself noted in her autobiography that her aim when writing this Gothic story was to warn her own physician, Dr. S. Weir Mitchel, in fact against his wrong diagnosis of women's conditions (Bak, 1994: 6).

As was indirectly mentioned above and as has been stated by second-wave feminists, women are not essentially born as weak, irrational and subjective. According to de Beauvoir, a woman's sole anatomy does not suffice to determine her as male or female; rather, these entities are formed by the conscious awareness of individuals through the roles they play at the very heart of the society in which they live (Beauvoir, 1953: 63).

The role that society plays in this respect is quite evident during the post Second World War years, in the fifties. As Friedan proposes, the feminine mystique suggests that the most elevated value and the sole commitment that a woman can bear is that her femininity be fulfilled. This mystique argues that the origin of women's plight is that they envied men and tried to follow their paths; rather, they should have accepted the true essence of their nature, that is, cultivating maternal love, male superiority, and sexual passivity. The new visage that the mystique provides women with is in fact the old one; according to this visage a woman's occupation is that of a housewife (Friedan, 1977: 37-38).

It is notable that this work of fiction is autobiographical. Charlotte Perkins Gilman put herself in care of a prominent nerve specialist, Dr. S. Weir Mitchel, because of her complaint of depression. Her doctor diagnosed her with "postpartum depression" as a result of her daughter's birth. During that period of time, the world of medicine had not yet differentiated between the ailments of the body and the afflictions of the mind; thus, psychological conditions such as depression were diagnosed and treated by neurologists like Dr. Mitchell. Her doctor's prescription for her situation was as follows: "Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. Lie down an hour after every meal. Have but two hours intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live" (Gilman, 1935: 96). As a result, his treatment included isolation of the patient from family and everyday surroundings and she was forced to go through total rest in the bed. Moreover, she was warned by her doctor against undertaking any intellectual attempts such as writing or painting. In this story, Gilman indicates the terror of such kind of treatment and how being isolated from everyday life can drive someone, all women, to total madness (Korb, 1997: 284).

It is notable to know that if they had let her openly keep a personal diary and write about her innermost feelings on her ailment, it would have had decreased the amount of

unbearable pressure which was on her. Also, writing is a process of self-assertion and helps individuals to find their status in the society and in turn acknowledge their unique identity, something that women were searching for during the time that the story was written.

However, the story is not only about the enhancement of just one aspect of women's life; on the contrary, it speaks of various issues pertinent to the sufferings of nineteenth-century women, in particular their being limited by restricting conventional gender roles. Since Gilman herself suffered from a form of nervous breakdown as a result of a rest treatment, which was quite identical to what was prescribed for the narrator, she stated that she had written the story to help people not to become insane. As a consequence, one can claim that this story is about women's entrapment and flight (Korb, 1997: 284).

Additionally, Gilman has said that she did not regard this work of fiction as a piece of literature and that she wrote everything for a specific purpose; here, the purpose has been to show the perils of a specific medical treatment (Shumaker, 1985: 589). The narrator proposes that the diagnosis *per se*, is the one reason why her condition does not improve, since it underestimates her own belief that her state is in fact very serious and material (Treichler, 1984: 61). As is obvious, the female narrator is physically trapped in a nursery room, more reminiscent of a prison cell, and also she is mentally and emotionally restrained by her husband's tyrannical diagnosis of and prescription for her condition. Moreover, critics have regarded the relationship between John, the narrator's husband, and the narrator herself as embodying the imbalanced power structure present in the society at the time between men and women: the suppression and impotency of women in nineteenth century America (Gilman, 84-85).

Elaine Hedges views the story as a "feminist document," as "one of the rare pieces of literature we have by a nineteenth-century woman which directly confronts the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship" (Haney-Peritz, 1986: 114). Inevitably, a feminist-oriented reading of the story focuses on the socioeconomic factors that force the narrator, and by contrast all women of the same era, to insanity (Treichler, 1984: 64).

When her symptoms of the illness tended to exacerbate, Gilman herself found out that the conventional domestic role had had a partial role in the emergence of her sickness. Thus, she abandoned her husband and along with her baby moved to California, where she became a full-time writer and also a feminist activist. After living in California for three years, she put her pen to paper and wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). After the publication of the book, she sent a copy to her physician to show him the detrimental aftermath of his wrong diagnosis and treatment. Her use of Dr. Mitchel's real name in the narration diverts the reader's attention to the outside world (Treichler, 1984: 8).

3.2. Feminine Imagination vs. Masculine Factuality

Drawing an analogy between men and women's role in the nineteenth century, one must, first, focus on how men and women view the outside universe differently. Women have been said to view the universe through an imaginative and fanciful lens, while men look at the world in terms of reality and factuality; one could say they have a materialistic viewpoint toward everything. In the story as well, one can follow a pattern of binary oppositions as found in the characterization of both main and secondary characters. The husband is a physician who only concentrates on what can be seen and touched, the tangible; nevertheless, his wife is supposedly a writer who uses her creative power in order to flee from the harsh realities imposed upon her by her husband and society, being forced to stay in room and not being allowed to write, which is her one and only getaway (Shumaker, 1985: 589-590). So, one may wonder what happens to one's imaginative powers when they are seen as feminine and frail by a society that only prizes the actual and the practical? Gilman herself had experienced the same pattern of imposition during her earlier life when she used her imagination to escape the bitterness of life, but one of her mother's friends warned her against such illusive imagination as perilous. Consequently, Charlotte, who was just a fine, obedient New England girl, closed all the doors shut to her world of dreams and imagination in order to remain the lady on the pedestal, as was suggested by the 19th century "Cult of True Womanhood" (Guerin et al., 2011: 255).

The female narrator of the story is struggling with the same problem, that is, from the very first words of the story she shows her gift of imagination by imagining that the house they have rented is in fact a haunted house; in addition, by looking at the wallpaper she is taken far back into her childhood when she could entertain herself just by looking at the walls and the furniture of her childhood house. At the same time, she is repeatedly reminded by her husband that she had better not succumb to her fanciful imagination at all (Shumaker, 1985: 590). There are two vivid examples in the text itself which show the aforementioned pattern: firstly, when she asks her husband to change the wallpaper since she does not like its ugly pattern, he answers: "nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies" (Gilman & Dock, 1998: 31). By doing so, he makes her feel as if the fact that she does not like the wallpaper for its ugliness were just a whimsical feminine impulse that must be curbed. The second instance occurs when she sees the curious pattern in the wallpaper and requests that she be taken to another room, but her husband, a rational, practical man, sticks to the tangible and the visible and refuses to do so by saying: "You are gaining flesh and colour, your appetite is better, I feel really better about you," (36) here he fails to pay attention to his wife's emotional needs.

In this tale, two separate universes exist which are worlds apart, that is, that of the female narrator and that of her husband and sister-in-law. In order to elucidate on this matter, it must be said that the narrator gradually crawls and creeps into the mystical world of her imagination, a mythical world which helps her liberate herself from all the

fetters of the materialistic universe of male domination. On the other hand, there is the daylight universe of masculinity, that of rules and regulations which exists only in terms of whatever can be observed and focuses on empiricism rather than subjectivity; a world which belittles and condemns women's dependence on fancy as frenzy (Johnson, 1989: 524-525).

Thus, because of all these contrastive contradictions which flow from the very beginning all the way down to the end of the story, the thoroughly masculine husband, representative of the patriarchal society of the time, incessantly tries to repress his wife's fanciful imagination and calls it perilous; furthermore, his institutional diagnosis sees her creative power as the sole source of her deteriorating condition, a diagnosis which is based on the medical profession's surefire experimentations of that time that took men's experience as a universal standard and applicable to both genders.

As an inevitable result, the narrator unconsciously struggles to create a balance between her incipient need for immersion into the world of fancy and her husband's disparaging comments on the matter (Johnson, 1989: 524-525). This internal conflict of choosing between the daylight world of masculinity and the night-time universe of fascination is evident in the following excerpt:

I will take a nap, I guess. I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to. I don't feel able. And I know John would think it absurd. But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way – It is such a relief! But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief. (34-35)

When, for the first time, she looks at the wallpaper in the mesmerizing gleam of the moonlight she starts to recognize the front and sub-pattern and just submerges herself step by step in her gaping world of night-time imagination. So she goes on to say: "There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will" (35). Then she describes that in the moonlight she sees that the pattern in the wallpaper "creeps" in and out of the windows and that she "hated" to wake John up, maybe because it will be shallow and illusive to him.

3.3. Traditional Gender Roles

Traditional gender roles are based on biological essentialism, that is, biology decides the essence of the individual in terms of femininity and masculinity; in other words, it posits that a woman is biologically born a woman and is not constructed a woman in the society. This issue is of utmost importance since it is an alibi used by patriarchy to say that women are the weaker sex. Hence, ideological discrimination hides behind a seemingly biological fact (Bray, 2004: 28-29).

All the articles, publications, and editorials by specialists were suggesting that women have to try to find gratification as mothers and housewives. They were taught that a genuinely feminine lady does not aspire to have a career, better education, rights

in the political sphere, and so forth. In the fifties many girls quit college since they assumed that higher education could hamper their marriage. Girls did not want to study physics, as it was thought to be unfeminine. All an American girl ever desired was to be married, to give birth to four children and reside in a pleasant home in the suburb. After the Second World War, the glamour of feminine satisfaction turned out to be the heart of the culture in America (Friedan, 1977: 11-14).

By presenting a room every inch of which projects the image of a prison, windows with metal bars and a vicious looking bed that is fixed to the floor, the image of crawling women all around the room and the house and the presence of overbearing men, her husband and all other male characters, the story heralds the issue of sexist gender roles and foreshadows further feminist literature to emerge later on (Shumaker, 1985: 589).

It was in 1962 that the problem of the trapped housewife in America came to be a commonplace issue. Nevertheless, many people, including men and women, did not believe that it was a real problem (Friedan, 1977: 21). So, it might be wise to say that Gilman, many years prior to the emergence of the matter, had predicted the plight of women and analyzed this issue to the smallest detail in her elaborate narrative.

By definition, when a woman has internalized the standards and conventions of patriarchy she is called a patriarchal woman. Moreover, a patriarchy is a society in which the dominant culture bestows privileges onto male members of the society by advocating traditional gender roles. Traditional gender roles project women as irrational, powerless, unassertive, and passionate, while representing men as logical, powerful, defensive, and strong-minded (Tyson, 2006: 85).

Earlier in this paper the problem of the trapped housewife in America was mentioned. As Friedan proposes, the real fetters that trap her in the role of the submissive suburban housewife are the ones that she harbors in her mind and attitude. These chains are not readily identified and thus cannot be broken with ease. As a result, she refers to this issue as the “the problem that has no name”; this plight of American housewives rings a sentence in their mind: “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home”, yet, they could not pinpoint what it really was (Friedan, 1977: 26-27).

As a clear example, Freud did not seem to be concerned with the situation of women, instead, he formulated his ideas based on the situation of men and used male psychological patterns as the standard (Beauvoir, 1953: 66). The story very appropriately posits that the American society of the time was replete with such men, that is, Dr. Mitchel, John, who is Dr. Mitchel’s exact double in the narrative, and also there is the narrator’s brother.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper* the female narrator is apparently misinterpreting her environment and one way or another, here and there, she succumbs to her husband’s domineering ideas, those of traditional gender roles. For example, when she tries to convince her husband, John, to change the gruesome wallpaper, not only does he reject to give in to her request, but also he declares his strong power over his wife when he

implies that after changing the wallpaper, he might have to change the "heavy bedstead" and then the "barred windows" and finally all the other things just because he has a whimsical wife who always nags just like a pampered child.

Here, obviously, he is founding his dominion in the matter and suggesting the fact that she must be under her supremacy. The problem is that, being a patriarchal woman, she fails to see the delicate pattern of sovereignty in this context and instead of asserting her objection she relies on him as a figure of authority (Korb, 1997: 286). Yet, in another part of the story, she thinks that writing might relieve her psychological affliction, but she is reminded of what John has said, what institutionalized authority has put forth, that writing is forbidden for her, since it makes her tired, and then she decides not to do so.

Just as a normal member of a patriarchal society which champions traditional gender roles, John, who is a representative of such a society, believes only in the physical and practical aspects of life and renders the narrator's reactions against his mentality as unreasonable, which is again totally understandable for the male dominated society in terms of her condition as a woman.

The story condemns the sexist viewpoint of the nineteenth-century society toward women and censures the materialism upon which the cornerstones of this society are founded (Shumaker, 1985: 598). Thus, the narrator is inevitably entrapped by having unconsciously accepted that John is the epitome of logic and reason, and that she is acting erroneously, according to the standards of the same society that John and his lookalikes stand for.

The tragic truth that Gilman has pointed a finger to is that not only the narrator but also all the other women have somehow internalized and shared the patriarchal values as a normal and natural part of their lives. For instance, as has been mentioned before, John has banned his wife from committing to any writing, as she herself says: "There comes John, and I must put this away, he hates to have me write a word" (31). She also implies that her husband believes that because she has strong "imaginative power" she has to use her "good sense" and control her inclination to make illusive stories.

So, as is obvious in the above mentioned excerpts, she somehow believes in what her husband puts forth, but the problem arises when the narrator describes her sister-in-law as a woman who is "so good with the baby" (31) and also as an individual who can be seen as a "perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper and hopes for no better profession" (33). So far, her sister-in-law is solely a unique housewife, but the narrator does not stop here and continues to say that even her sister-in-law shares one destructive idea with all the male characters in the story, that is, writing is the sole cause of the narrator's sickness (Korb, 1997: 286), which shows that both of these women have accepted their doomed fate of being the ruled-over, the subordinates who are at the mercy of their imagination. Moreover, her sister-in-law is perfectly satisfied with being a mere housekeeper, which is exactly what a patriarchal society aims to achieve, i.e., to keep women busy with the household chores and to make them stay away from the social life, the social sphere which is already replete with men.

Another aspect of the story which suggests and indirectly condemns the concept of gender roles is the times when the female narrator is treated like a little child and the perfect role described for her is that of father's favorite little girl (Wagner-Martin, 1989: 51-52). The new cheerful housewife female heroes, as appearing in the fifties publications and magazines, are curiously younger than the lively girls who had careers during the forties and the thirties. They appear to become even younger any time they emerge in the books and magazines and they have an almost childish dependence on their male counterparts. They have no insight about the future (Friedan, 1977: 38-39). This tendency in the media of the fifties may be referred to as the infantilization of women. That is to say, they are little girls and their only goal is to give birth to a future generation of more babies, and this is supposed to be the only way to become a female hero according to the standards of the fifties.

A further side effect of the process of infantilization is identity crisis. Friedan claims that the culture prevalent during the Victorian time did not allow women to satisfy or acknowledge their primary sexual desires; similarly the American culture during the fifties does not allow women to satisfy or acknowledge their primary desires to mature and gratify their latent powers as equal human beings (Friedan, 1977: 69).

She has to be an infant-like character whose job is to remain in a room, formerly a nursery, and just stare at the walls and the ceiling. In this line: "Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose" (32), it is shown how her husband calls her his "little goose", a dumb animal, and treats her as if she were a defenseless creature who is at the mercy of patriarchal premises.

Overall, the ideal woman would be the one who plays the role of the submissive girl who is not a trouble maker, one who stays in the room and tries her best to curb what he does best, i.e., using her imaginative power.

The word "diagnosis" has also been cleverly used to represent the voice of male dominated scientific world of medicine that tries to describe women's serious psychological conditions just in physical terms. This specific word projects institutional authority and privileges the logical, the practicable and the empirical. It is the same voice which renders the narrator's idea that the house is haunted as superficial and superstitious and tries its best not see women's conditions as serious (Treichler, 1984: 65). This diagnosis has been legalized by being incorporated in the institutional frameworks of matrimony and the medical profession.

3.4. Feminine Writing as a Liberating Power

In *A Literature of their own* (1977), Showalter posits that for women to work essentially meant to toil for the sake of others. Thus, any type of work which indicated self-development would be in stark opposition with the feminine value of the time, which suggested suppression and submissiveness. It is clear that writing, a self-centered career, was considered a threat, since it called for the enhancement of the individual's ego instead of its rebuttal (Showalter, 1977: 22). So, it is quite pardonable why her husband and her sister-in-law are so positive on the fact that she is better off without putting her pen on paper; furthermore, she is in a state of censorship in terms of her own writing, that is, she does not want others to find out that she is keeping a diary.

Thus, it was for a reason that Gilman forced the major character of her story to continue writing against all oppositions. She wanted her character's feminine imagination to crawl beneath her skin and to muster all its strength so that in the final scene it could leap up against the suppression and revolt. Gilman helped her nameless character to put forth her concealed identity that has been kept a secret for many oppressive years of a truly patriarchal marriage.

As stated in the conceptions of Cixous, if women are not inclined to become just like patriarchal men, they must not think in their mode of language. Cixous asks women to survey their suppressed identities and employ a system of writing that does away with the standards of phallogocentric discourse. Since the patriarchal discourse has forced women to ignore their bodies, Cixous considers the conventional mode of writing to have close affinities with an objective discourse that expresses ideas concerning women's bodies but would protest against it speaking on its own behalf. Therefore, Cixous summons all women to jot down the feminine body. This form of writing, that is, *écriture féminine*, is closely related to the mother's ancient voice prior to being disrupted by the symbolic order's emergence (Jacobus & Barreca, 1999; 59).

As has been posited by Lacan, within the "Imaginary order" the infant does not differentiate itself from its mother because it has not yet acquired language, which is to be taught by its father, and which is called the "Symbolic Order". The Imaginary stage is the essential origin of language which later on is domesticated by the Laws of the Father (Guerin et al., 2011: 261). As stated by Lacan, the symbolic order is Phallogocentric and is ruled by the paternal body of laws (Homer, 2005: 57). What violates the close relationship between mother and child when the infant sets foot in the realm of the symbolic order is termed by Jacques Lacan as the "Name-of-the-Father"; in addition, any individual's superego is formed through identification with the father (Homer, 2005: 51). Consequently, women do need a language of their own in order to express themselves in feminine terms and to get in line with their primordial bond with their ancestral mother.

In line with the feminine writing, the narrator's brand of writing is to a certain extent discursive and usually jumps from one issue to something different. It is based on contradictions and internal conflicts; once, she talks about the fact that writing makes

her tired, and next she wishes that she were in a good condition that she could write, as though writing could do her good. Also, there are some great gaps in her writing which has been labeled, by the narrator herself, as “unheard of contradictions” (31); i.e., the very moments when she tries to oppose her husband, but she lacks the specific language which is required to enable her liberating powers. So, matters are left unsaid (Haney-Peritz, 1986: 117). Therefore, as mentioned earlier, she is following the guidelines of feminine writing, that is, her writing is freely associative and does not follow a linear type of reasoning, as is advised by male sort of writing. It opposes patriarchal method of writing which celebrates laws of logic and dismisses emotionality (Tyson, 2006: 101).

The wallpaper itself can be seen as the embodiment of feminine discourse, what seems, at first glance, “repellent”, “revolting”, and ‘...committing every artistic sin’ (31); but, when one delves deep into its fascinating world, just as the narrator rips it off the wall, the hidden corners and patterns, which patriarchy tends to overlook, oppress, or fails to recognize all together, are unveiled. Furthermore, her association with the wallpaper is equivalent to a line of work which women has been deprived of, i.e., women’s writing (Treichler, 1984: 62).

3.5. The Wallpaper

In her essay on *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Treichler has said: “In these (feminist) readings, the yellow wallpaper represents (1) the narrator’s own mind, (2) the narrator’s unconscious, (3) the “pattern” of social and economic dependence which reduces women to domestic slavery.” In addition, she goes on to say: “The woman in the wallpaper represents (1) the narrator herself, gone mad, (2) the narrator’s unconscious, (3) all women” (Treichler, 1984: 64). One can state that the wallpaper is the central and the most important element in the story, and therefore it deserves further interpretation.

Initially the female narrator is not comfortable with the wallpaper, but no sooner than she recognizes the two sets of patterns in the wallpaper, the front one projecting the idea of prison bars and the sub-pattern representing the shape of a woman who is “stooping down and creeping about” (31), and shaking the bars and trying to get out of that prison cell, she identifies herself with the figure and all the initial repulsive feelings are forever gone. Her seeing the sub-pattern in the wallpaper suggests her own gradually emerging selfhood (Johnson, 1989: 523). The figure in the sub-pattern is a perpetual reflection of the narrator: “She is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through the pattern- it strangles so.” However, when the story comes to an end, the unnamed narrator, representing all women of her time, finally finds a way out, that is to say by starting to creep around the room she, in essence, has become the woman behind the bars trying to get out. Thus, she is trying to escape all the places of entrapment. Ironically, her tyrannical husband who used to exert patriarchal force upon her, is now a lifeless object on the ground in her way: “so that she had to creep over him” (Korb, 1997: 287).

In the above paragraph, among the excerpts taken from the story, keywords stand out such as “stooping down” and “strangle”. One of the definitions of stooping down is: “to lower your moral values so as to do something disgraceful”. The brilliant use of this word conveys the idea that, by now, women have realized that their traditional role as the submissive housewife/mother is by definition reprehensible, so they have to find a way out of this situation, even if it means madness as happened to the narrator of the story. The other fabulous choice of word is that of “strangle”. This word also proposes the ideas of gender roles and how women are stifled behind bars set upon them by the male dominated society. All of the above ideas and concepts are skilfully embedded in the central element of the story, the wallpaper.

Yet, the wallpaper has a ghostly quality which adds up to the narrator's description of it, a description which confirms her saying that the house is haunted by creeping women and also all the interpretations which perceived the room to be a prison, a place where the individual is under interminable surveillance. The repeated use of the word “eyes” in the following selections is testimony to the above-mentioned remarks:

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.

... Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where the two breadths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other. (32)

Moreover, the idea of eyes all around the room is reminiscent of the concept of “male gaze” in which the patriarchal power is obvious. This idea communicates that the male members of the patriarchal society look and the female members of such a society are looked at. The ones who are looking take over and are in control, while the ones who are being looked at are solely objects, as if in a window, to be watched, hence their position of powerlessness within their society (Tyson, 2006: 102).

This concept of male gaze is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's Panopticon. According to his perception, the structure of factories, prisons and schools are built in a specific way so that it makes possible maximal visibility; as a result, the person within that structure internalizes a new form of discipline. This new form forces the subject to assume that he is under a constant watch, while he may not. It follows that the individual, unconsciously, is playing the role of the oppressor and the role of the prisoner simultaneously (Mills, 2003: 45-46).

3.6. Routine Female Trouble

Nowadays, postpartum depression, the same illness from which Gilman herself and the narrator of her story suffered, major depression and other similar psychological complaints reported by women are to be addressed and treated as major health problems

which are curable if the patients receive help from both realms of medicine and psychology. But psychologists such as Freud, and his other contemporaries, had disregarded these complaints as routine “female trouble” and labeled them as hysterical tendencies (Guerin et al., 2011: 261).

It has been accepted recently, from a historical viewpoint, that hysteria was an ailment which could not be separated from the social status of the nineteenth century middle-class women at that time. Hysteria functioned in a twofold manner, that is, it drew the attention toward them that women were not supposed to ask for and at the same time it doubled her dependency upon the male-oriented medical profession that saw her in a way as if she were a malingerer (Thurschwell, 2000: 17-18).

Consequently, a typical nineteenth-century middle-class housewife would be seen as a desperate attention-seeker who acts just as irrationally and sentimentally as a spoiled infant to be the center of attention, and her serious case of nervous breakdown would be viewed as trivial.

Thus, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the narrator of her story were diagnosed accordingly, since they both lived in the nineteenth-century, and they both were prescribed to have complete rest; furthermore, according to their treatment, they were not to receive intellectual stimulation and were not allowed to touch pen, meaning that they were deprived from what they did best, i.e., writing. As a consequence, when Gilman herself finally recovered from her sick bed, she did put her pen on paper and wrote this autobiographical story to show the gradual psychological journey of women from sanity to madness as a result of this inappropriate diagnosis of the time (Bak, 1994: 1).

3.7. A Final Twist

Yet, there is a twist in the story. One might ask why the unnamed female character did not leave the house or her husband at the final scene. To answer such a question it would be wise to refer to the fact that this story paved the way for the consequent feminist movements; thus, the name of Julia Kristeva might occur to the reader. According to Kristeva, the future generations of feminism will try to find various pathways to make women’s manifold yearnings come to a unified understanding; that is, to reconcile their familial and reproductive desire and their longing for the world of career and productive social life (McAfee, 2004: 100). Consequently, the female character in the story tries not to live, instead she is circling around the room so as to find a way to keep both her familial life and her future social life.

Furthermore, Kristeva argues that the third generation feminists should not try to condemn patriarchy and/or men as the sole culprits for the oppression of women, instead the members of both sexes are guilty in an equal manner. Hence, they are equally responsible for establishing a new way of viewing the relevant issues and work out new solutions (McAfee, 2004: 102).

4. Conclusion

According to all the issues which were mentioned earlier in this paper, the unnamed female narrator of the story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), tries, first, to attain her state of selfhood, that is, find herself and her place in patriarchy, and then to defy all the rules and regulations, norms and standards, and values of this male-dominated society and finally to find a way out. Her being an anonymous character casts light on the fact that the story is not just about one specific woman in a particular setting; rather, it relates and accounts the story about female sufferings which have taken place and still can occur in any part of the world.

This story has paved the way for later feminist literature and the continuation of the feminist movement by drawing the story to an end in an almost optimistic way. As is obvious from the last scene of the story, the female narrator has changed her position from staying dormant in her bed to the position of crawling and creeping all around the room, even now she is able to surpass her biggest obstacle, that is, her tyrannical patriarchal husband. It can be implied that feminism has now moved on from its infancy and has begun a long, yet promising way.

The female narrator of the story has now the strength and determination to go for seeming madness and insanity over living a sad life of muffled acceptance. She is for the very first time in her entire life, free from all the shackles and chains of patriarchal society and has liberated from whatever masculine concept that this society has previously inculcated in her mind.

Insanity in this final scene, can thus be seen in both positive and negative lights. It can be rendered as positive if one views this final deed of the female narrator as a liberating act of selfhood and assertiveness. By the same token, de Beauvoir argues that a society that is systematized by men edicts that the female subjects are inferior; thus, she can destroy that inferiority through doing away with the superiority of men. She can do that by dominating, negating, and contradicting him through denying the very values and truths that he champions (Beauvoir, 1953: 674).

Cixous, similar to de Beauvoir, asks women to welcome their liberty and to say no to the idealization of reliance on men. She adds that there is a fortitude in being on one's own, not having a man to look after her. Instead of seeing herself as castrated by not having a man, woman should embrace the fact that she has to nurture herself and bring forth their own freedom (Bray, 2004: 57).

On the other hand, it is a negative ending, since it indicates that whoever attempts to defy the order which has been set by the patriarchy will arrive at final madness; yet, as mentioned earlier, this madness is prized over silenced sanity.

Nonetheless, Cixous postulates that the individual has to undergo the process of alienation in order to gain the truths of her entity (Bray, 2004: 58-59).

To conclude, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) is more of a feminist political declaration of independence for women than a work of fiction; Moreover, it tries to save women from the gradual process toward madness and helps

them escape the suffering from the cruel oppression of patriarchy which strangle whomever who does not abide by its tyrannical doctrine. It has successfully condemned the wrong notions about women and has shown a way out of the baffling labyrinth of domineering masculinity.

References

- Bak, John S. (1994): "Escaping the jaundiced eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"". *Studies in Short Fiction*, 21: 39.
- Battisti, Chiara & Sidia Fiorato (2012): "Women's Legal Identity in the Context of Gothic Effacement: Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria or The Wrongs of Woman* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*". *Pólemos*, 6(2): 183-205.
- Beauvoir, Simone de (1953): *The second sex*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Bray, Abigail (2004): *Hélène Cixous: Writing and sexual difference*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Friedan, Betty (1977): *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins (1935): *The living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An autobiography*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins (2006) [1898]: *Women and economics*. New York: Cosimo.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins & Julie Bates Dock (1998): *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The yellow wall-paper" and the history of its publication and reception: A critical edition and documentary casebook*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Hamilton, Carole L. (2015): "The Collegial Classroom: Teaching Threshold Concepts through Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'". *CEA Critic*, 77(2): 211-222.
- Haney-Peritz, Janice (1986): "Monumental feminism and literature's ancestral house: Another look at 'The Yellow Wallpaper'". *Women's Studies*, 12(2): 113-128.
- Homer, Sean (2005): *Jacques Lacan*. London: Routledge.
- Jacobus, Lee A. & Regina Barreca (1999): *Hélène Cixous: Critical impressions*. Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach.
- Johnson, Greg (1989): "Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'". *Studies in Short Fiction*, 26(4): 521-530.
- Lanser, Susan S. (1989): "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper', and the Politics of Color in America". *Feminist Studies*, 15(3): 415-441.
- McAfee, Noëlle (2004): *Julia Kristeva*. New York: Routledge.
- Mills, Sara (2003): *Michel Foucault*. London: Routledge.
- Oyebode, Femi (2011): "'Why I wrote The Yellow Wallpaper?', by Charlotte Perkins Gilman". *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 17(4): 265-265.
- Quawas, Rula (2006): "A New Woman's Journey into Insanity: Descent and Return in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'". *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association*, 105: 35-53.
- Korb, Rena (1997): "An Overview of 'The Yellow Wallpaper'". *Short Stories for Students*. Detroit: Gale.
- Showalter, Elaine (1977): *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Shumaker, Conrad (1985): "'Too Terribly Good to Be Printed': Charlotte Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'". *American Literature*, 57(4): 588-599.
- Thurschwell, Pamela (2000): *Sigmund Freud*. London: Routledge.
- Treichler, Paula A. (1984): "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'". *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 3(1/2): 61-77.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda (1989): "Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper': A Centenary". In Sheryl L. Meyering, ed, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Woman and Her Work*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 51-64.