



Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Feminist Restructuring of Realism in “The Yellow Wall-paper”

Jasmine Matthey
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Throughout the time of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's life, from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, realism was the leading literary trend. Realism, as a popular mode of representation in literature at the time, was supposed to focus on ordinary people living their ordinary lives filled with ordinary events. This rise of literary tendency was meant to reflect the myriad of changes that America was undergoing at the turn of the century. Civil War, emancipation, and the rise of industrialization further divided and splintered class from class, race from race, and person from person. Realism developed as a way to portray the true and diverse lives of Americans in hopes of bridging the yawning gap dividing the nation.

However, up to this point, realism had been primarily focused on an Anglo-European patriarchal perspective and presentation of reality, which alienated the realities lived by a majority of people who didn't fit into this white androcentric mold. Literary greats like William Dean Howells, Frank Norris, Mark Twain, and more all had one thing in common: they were white men writing from their privileged experiences and perspectives about what they believed the social, political, and economic environments of America looked like. That is until writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman entered the writing scene and actively worked to dismantle the biased and skewed representation (or lack thereof) in literary realism. In her work, Gilman shatters the perpetuated standards of realism during the Gilded Age and redefines realism according to the Progressive Era's amplification of social activism and reform. Predominant of which being her piece "The Yellow Wall-paper," where Charlotte Perkins Gilman purposefully breaks away from the perpetuated androcentric portrayal of literary realism to expose the too-often overlooked and discredited reality of women.

According to the short biography included in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature 1865 to the Present*, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman lived much of her life on the margins of a society whose economic assumptions about and social definitions of women she vigorously repudiated" (509). As a result, Gilman worked to reveal that patriarchal systems like aggression and competition bled into the domination of women, society, the arts, and beyond. She made it a point to emphasize the need for literature that would "represent the lives of women in their full complexity and nuance" (Levine 593). It was her prerogative to "present her own case for a [new] kind of literary realism" (Levine 593).

In an excerpt from “Masculine Literature,” Gilman sums up her view of the exalted patriarchal representation of realism. She writes, “As it is, our great sea of fiction is steeped and dyed and flavored all one way. A young man faces life...” (594). That’s the limited view of American reality that realism had been portraying up until this point. Gilman continues, “Fiction, under our androcentric culture, has not given any true picture of woman’s life, very little of human life, and a disproportionate section of man’s life” (594). With such a narrow depiction of American life, it became inescapable that readers and greater society would begin to internalize patriarchal hegemony. Gilman warns, “What we have been fed upon so long we are well used to, what we are used to we like, what we like we think is good and proper” (594).

Gilman, a New Woman of her time, resisted this systemic androcentric imputation by radicalizing realism in her own writing. In “The Yellow Wall-paper,” Gilman shifts the focus away from a man’s point of view and instead depicts the harsh reality that marginalized American women had to contend with. Through forced social degeneration, we witness the protagonist descend into madness, a debilitating madness that’s certainly more severe than whatever “nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency” (“The Yellow Wall-paper” 511) that resulted in her being prescribed the rest cure, to begin with.

The story unfolds through the lens of a woman who has escaped to the countryside with her physician husband to hole up for the summer while she endures the rest cure that he prescribed her for her ailments. Through this telling, Gilman subliminally sets the tone for “The Yellow Wall-paper” with her language. Women would typically be associated with romantic flowery language and soft dispositions. Prior to the social empowering phenomena of the New Woman, women wouldn’t have directly or overtly spoken out against men, especially not their husbands. Gilman exemplifies this internalized oppression by layering the meaning of the language she uses. The narrator ceaselessly uses dark descriptors such as “haunted,” “horror,” “dead,” “sick,” “depression,” “hysterical,” “sin,” “destroy,” “suicide,” “suffer,” “broken neck,” “bulbous eyes,” “delirium,” “grotesque,” “creepy,” “hideous,” “unreliable,” “infuriating,” “torturing,” “foul,” “bad,” (“The Yellow Wall-paper” 511-519), and so on to contextualize her surroundings. She doesn’t outwardly speak ill of her husband, and yet her language reveals her true outlook, a double consciousness of sorts. Gilman not only reveals the reality of the protagonist’s experience through her language, but this can also serve as a microcosm for women’s marginalized placement in America. Even

though women might present as complicit, it is because this complacency has been internalized by their patriarchal surroundings, and if one was actually to credit women's experience, it would reveal a much bleaker perspective.

Furthermore, Gilman emphasizes the skewed balance of power between men and women during this period. The narrator's husband is her physician, and so, not only does he have authority over her as a husband, but as a specialist in charge of her care as well. She says,

“He does not believe I am sick! And what can one do? If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assured friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do? My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing” (“The Yellow Wall-paper” 511).

The narrator endures the erasure of her own lived experience because of this power imbalance. Credibility is afforded to men over women, high-standing men above all, husband over wife, and the “knowledgeable” physician over the patient. The narrator is coming up against an onslaught of disenfranchisement, even when it concerns her advocacy for her own body and her own mind. Gilman makes it a point to include these seemingly small details because it is the small details that sum to the reality of systemic oppression happening in America.

We can also analyze “The Yellow Wall-paper” through a metafictional lens in which Gilman emphasizes the complacency of American society. Gilman repetitively includes this line, in the narrator's voice, that seems to address the reader directly, “But what is one to do?” (“The Yellow Wall-paper” 512). The reader takes in this line and can't help but read the underlying absurdity of the line. Surely, there is plenty of steps that can be taken to dismantle this androcentric system of thinking, in which all authority is deferred to men, white men, above everyone else. And yet, it was this complacent shifting of responsibility that afforded oppressors the means to dominate. Gilman purposefully breaks the fourth wall to have the reader face these questions head-on so that they will see the whole work through a lens of how it applies to the reality of American society, not the propagandist and institutionalized patriarchal portrayal of literary realism that was so prevalent at the time.

Another way that Gilman was breaking the mold of realism that so many white male literary greats had solidified before her is that she wasn't writing from her imagination or assumption; she was writing from experience. Gilman herself endured the very same “rest cure” prescribed to the narrator within “The Yellow Wall-paper.” In her piece, “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wall-paper?’,” Gilman recounts that a male physician had

instructed her to “‘live as domestic a life as possible,’ to ‘have but two hours’ intellectual life a day,’ and ‘never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again as long as I lived’” (524). Men’s idea of what a woman should do and what women were capable of was so skewed and underscored by patriarchal hierarchy that it’s no wonder that women, people of color, and anyone not of that privileged distinction would feel disenfranchised and alienated by literary realism. Gilman, a New Woman, valued autonomy and the power that autonomy afforded women, and in that same reflective piece, she admits that she “cast the noted specialist’s advice to the winds and went to work again...ultimately recovering some measure of power” (524). She is the most authoritative figure worthy of speaking on the *real* psychological effects and consequences of men’s actions, imaginings, and assumptions forced upon women. She wielded this authority and newfound empowerment to restructure and forever change literary realism to acknowledge a rightful and forced inclusion of the diverse and infinitely faceted American experience.

Works Cited

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