CH. P. GILMAN'S VIEWS ON WOMANHOOD IN "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"

Smaranda Ștefanovici, Assoc. Prof., PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureș

Abstract: The article analyzes Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", a classic of nineteenth-century feminist literature. Being rejected from society due to her illness, Gilman's heroine examined her inner self and found there a double, a 'real woman' who, in her hallucinatory states, came to challenge her 'true womanhood' gender role, which she played by daylight. She writes about her refusal to conform to restrained gender roles.

A feminist reading of the text will focus on the narrator's growing sense of awareness of her former submissive state and a reversal of the power dynamics of gender. This growing from 'a true woman' into 'a real woman' is seen as a rebirth into a new stage of being.

Keywords: true and real woman, gender inequality, feminist literature, feminist reading, creative autonomy

Introduction

The Cult of *True Womanhood* was a nineteenth century ideology that imprisoned women in the private sphere. Barbara Welter, the feminist American critic, mentions submissiveness, domesticity, purity and piety as four basic tenets of this patriarchal ideology. Women were seen as mere objects, docile and passive; they were restrained socially, acting exclusively as moral wives and mothers.

Men belonged to the public sphere. They were the active breadwinners of the family. Superior biologically, economically and socially, they had disparaging attitudes towards women whom they considered inferior, non-thinking, naïve, and too sensitive to manage anything else except households and children. Men made decisions, which women obeyed passively: "Women were cast as emotional servants whose lives were dedicated to the welfare of home and family in the perseverance of social stability" (Papke 10).

Real Womanhood is an ideology that attempted to overthrow the traditional definition of women's roles and the constraints of patriarchal society imposed on women. These women created a new ideological role, which allowed, to a certain degree, to escape their private confinement and enter the public sphere. They challenged patriarchal ideologies through various forms of rebellion, which permitted them to attack, mostly through writing, the traditional institution of marriage, the passive role of women in society and the way they were treated by their fathers, brothers or husbands.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman – from 'True' to 'Real' Womanhood

Charlotte Perkins Gilman managed, through her feminist literature, to show this leap of a true woman into a real woman. Her fiction is inspired from her own life, a life deprived of love and in an ongoing struggle to be understood by the family and by the society. She is one of the nineteenth century 'true' women, who were imprisoned in the house, not being allowed to express thoughts and feelings. This passivity and restrained thinking role of a woman heightened the mental disorders she was suffering from. Her depressive moods resulted in suicide.

She could not cope with the status of being treated different because she was a woman. She wanted freedom from constraints and self-expression. She started writing articles on

"women caught between families and careers and the need for women to have work as well as love" (Ceplain 19).

Her effort to cope with her writing, husband and her child led to her Post-Partum Depression. Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell's 'rest cure' as a solution to her depression deepened her nervous disease resulting in further isolation from family and society. One of the prescriptions of the 'rest cure' included never writing, which led her to reject both her husband and the physician who gave her the cure.

'True' Womanhood

"The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) was written intentionally as a replica to Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's 'rest cure'. An introspection into her emotional and psychological states, Gilman examines, through the nameless narrator, what she could have done with her life, had she had the courage to fight the demonic fears and dilemmas; unfortunately, she was unable to change her situation.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is a plea for a woman she was not in real life, but who broke free in her hallucinatory stages of madness. Being rejected from society due to her illness, Gilman's heroine delved into her inner self and found there a double, a 'real woman' who, in her hallucinatory states, came to challenge her 'true womanhood' gender role she played by daylight. She writes about her refusal to conform to restrained gender roles, to be protected by her husband, although she pretends she regrets her attitude towards a husband who loves and takes care of her: "He is very careful and loving [….] he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more" (GYW 648).

A feminist reading of the text will focus on "the narrator's growing sense of awareness of her former submissive state and a reversal of the power dynamics of gender (*Studies* 198). Johnson compares this growing from 'a *true* woman' into 'a *real* woman' to "a rebirth into a new stage of being, as she crawls on the floor of the nursery on all fours, exploring her new world as does a child. Simply put, this fate is her psychological confinement and torture as a woman desiring creative autonomy in nineteenth century America" (GYW 527).

"The Yellow Wallpaper" exposes the destructive treatment Gilman received, while experiencing postpartum depression. The 'rest cure' confined her to bed, forbidden to read, write or have visitors. The nameless heroine is a beloved housewife, married to John, a typical (as his ordinary name suggests) patriarchic husband and an 'outstanding physician' who takes his wife, his sister, and their newly born baby to a beautiful summer home in a deserted place, where she is subjected to 'the rest cure'. Although things seem to be going in the right direction according to her husband, she is worse day by day, not from disease, but from the treatment. She is imprisoned in her yellow-papered room, "a nursery at the top of the house… nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium… the windows are barred for little children… the paper is stripped off in great patches all around the head of her bed" (GYW 648).

Devoid of emotional and loving support and isolated from her baby, her mental disorder deepens. The wallpaper is "repellant, almost revolting, a smoldering unclean *yellow,* strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight" (GYW 649).

Lanser (429) associates 'yellow' with disease, ugliness, inferiority and decay, the way John treats his wife. Although she is unhappy, she feels she has no choice but to do what her husband, John, thinks it is better for her. Unlike her, he is wise, practical, rational, scientific, non-religious and non - superstitious: "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*" (GYW 647). He does not believe in her sickness,

assuring relatives and friends that it is "but a temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency" (GYW 648).

Personally, she disagrees with his treatment but she wants to reward John by fitting the 'true' woman ideal John expects. She wants the reader to acknowledge that she has no way out: "You see he does not believe I am sick! *And what can one do*?" (GYW 647).

Indeterminate, unreasonably angry, oversensitive, she makes efforts to control herself, which tires her very much. She does her duty mechanically, tries to be obedient and helpful, and not a burden: "It does weigh on me so not *to do my duty* in any way! I meant to be such a *help* to John, such a real *rest* and *comfort*, and here I am a comparative *burden* already!" her (GYW 649).

She wants to be treated as a human being, "to dress and entertain, and other things… to write, which would relieve the press of ideas and rest me" (GHW 649), but she has no courage and power.

She enacts her true womanhood role when she starts crying before she finishes her bad plea in favor of visiting Cousin Henry and Julia. In fact, she "cries at nothing, and cries most of the times" (GYW 650). But he is indifferent to her feelings and fancies. He laughs at her, calls her his little dear *goose*, and authoritatively says that "the very worst thing [she] can do is to think about [her] condition" (GYW 648). She must control her imagination, which means she is not allowed to write down her thoughts and feelings. John's superiority and his assumption of wisdom and maturity leads him to ignore and dominate his wife: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage," (GYW 648) the wife sadly acknowledges. What John says, dominates the first part of the story, in true balance with her efforts to please him. These efforts break communication between them more and more. She becomes more introvert, more pessimistic and isolated. The state of confusion about what she considers right and he considers wrong deepens her psychological disorder.

As her madness begins to aggravate, she cannot discern between reality and imagination, she has hallucinations –sensations that appear real but are created by her mind: "This paper looks to me as if it knew what a *vicious influence* it had! There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down" (649).

'Real' Womanhood

Her oppressive marriage, in which her opinions do not matter, in which she accepts everything, without willing to change anything, makes us believe Gilman wrote about a conventional, true woman, who is economically, socially and psychologically dependent on her husband.

But things change gradually. Her imagination starts working, she thinks, feels, and hears voices: "there is something strange about the house – I can feel it. I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a draught, and *shut the window*" (GYW 648). The windows of her room are barred from little children; she is treated like an infantile child by her husband. It is the moment of growing up. She is afraid that John would suspect something, and she always locks the door when she creeps by daylight. At the same time, he also becomes suspicious, and she catches him several times looking at the paper. He feels the '*vicious* influence' of the yellow wallpaper and the danger it represents for his patriarchal views.

The paper and its immoral influence awake her senses: from a passive, docile, obedient 'true' woman, she gets "positively angry" (GYW 649). From an inanimate thing, the

paper becomes animated, a strange, provoking sort of figure, a woman or more women living within it: "The front pattern does move and no wonder! The woman behind it shakes it" (654).

Metaphorically, it is a woman's evolution from an object ('true' woman) to a human being ('real' woman). Her illness helps her to strip the paper off with her hands and teeth, and, although crawling around the room on her hands and knees, she manages to escape from her restrained role of a 'true' woman that she has been attributed by her patriarchal husband. She found in the wallpaper the "congenial work, with excitement and change" (GYW 648) she was unable to acknowledge until then.

The relationship between man and woman starts reverting. The more powerful she becomes, the more fragile he becomes. In the beginning, she felt insecure, feeble, unwilling to make a change, which she mentioned in her 'dead paper' diary: "I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to. I don't feel able" (GYW 651). The words she uses now indicate a change of direction: from *I don't, I think, I must not, I should*, she turns to empowering language: "Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal. It *is* a very bad habit. I am *convinced*, for you see I don't sleep" (GYW 653). She is not asking acknowledgement from the reader anymore.

The window is the symbol of liberty. She is sitting by the window, waiting to be released from the imprisoning house. She is determined now "for the thousandth time that [she] *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion" (GYW 650). In the beginning, she *pretended* to be well, now it is he who *pretended* to be loving and kind. She empowers herself more and more: "As if I couldn't see through him!" (GYW 655).

The wallpaper becomes a symbolic image of her suppressed condition. The real source of her madness is the society and her husband's authority. She struggles not to think about her unhappiness, because it makes her feel bad. She tries to convince John to change the wallpaper in her room, because she hates its color. He refuses her: "He said that after *the wall-paper* was changed, it would be *the heavy bedstead*, and then *the barred windows*, and then *that gate at the head of the stairs*, and so on" (GYW 649). The heavy bedstead provides physical confinement, the barred windows suggest limitation, restrictions, closure, while the gate at the head of the stairs indicate impossibility, non-accessibility.

The garden is *delicious*, with its "mysterious deep-shaded arbors" (GYW 649); she fancies people walking there, she sees women creeping under the trees. But using her imagination is bad, according to John. Imagination can create stories, and writing would ultimately create an identity.

She does not want to irritate John. She wants to release the woman from behind the bars alone. She evolves: "I don't like to look out of the windows even – there are so many of those *creeping women*, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all came out of that wallpaper *as I did*?" (GYW 656). It is the first time she acknowledges she is the woman behind the bars who managed to free herself.

Her decisional powers increase: "you don't get *me* out in the road there ! I suppose I *shall have to* get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard! *It is so pleasant* to be out in this great room and creep around as I please! *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" (GYW 656). The yellow color, symbol of illness and inferiority becomes now green, symbolizing rejuvenation, rebirth of the self. The pronoun "I" instead of "woman" is largely used to show this newly acquired identity in the second part of the short story.

By daylight she is a 'true' woman, submissive and domestic. By moonlight she becomes a 'real' woman, *fretful* (worried) and *querulous* (complaining). She is the woman

who takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard, she is trying all the time to climb through, and when she is out finally, she triumphantly shouts her victory: “You can’t put me back” (GYW 656). The imprisoned woman from the beginning of the story had no personality, she was like a child who did not consider herself “so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim” (GYW 649). The woman now cannot lose her way, she looks at him over her shoulder contemptuously. She is not afraid anymore, she looks at the fainted *man*, a stranger now, he is not her loving husband anymore. She defiantly has to creep over him. She is in full control now. She ignores him the way he ignored all her wishes. The lessons he gave to his wife about the importance of not losing control turns against him now. Gently and softly, she repeats: “I can't,” said I. “The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf! ..” (GYW: 656). Begging her first to open the door, then he becomes more aggressive: "What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing! " (GYW 656). He is the weak one now, he loses his control, he is the one who faints.

Conclusion

From a ‘true’ woman, passive, domestic, submissive, and docile, she finds salvation by releasing her imprisoned double, the ‘real’ woman from behind the conventional bars of society. She thus adds animation to her object status. She knows what she wants at least, even if she has limited powers. She can’t be imprisoned again, she can express, to a certain degree, her thoughts and feelings by daylight as well.

One might say that her total madness at the end of the short story shows her defeat or, at least, minimalizes the dreadful effect she has on her husband. It might be true if we think exclusively in medical terms; but taking into account her voracious eyes, her audacity and superiority, which her growing illness build up in her, it is a certain victory of woman over man. John, the patriarchal husband, loses control over her; he loses his temper, becomes agitated, frightened, begs then cries, and finally faints in front of his wife. Ironically, she looks down at the ‘*man*’ lying down on the floor, who blocked her ‘*path’*. She rhetorically asks, “Why should that *man* have fainted?” (656) and continues uncaringly to creep over her dear and beloved husband, now a stranger. The narrator becomes more aware of her previous submissive state and manages to reverse the power dynamics of gender. This developing from ‘a true woman’ into ‘a real woman’ is seen as a renascence into a new, superior phase of female being.

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