

FEMINIST RESISTANCE AND THE POLITICS OF PATRIARCHY IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

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Abstract

*This study examines Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* through a feminist literary lens, focusing on twenty narrative events that reveal the experiences of oppression, confinement, silencing, and resistance endured by the narrator. Using qualitative thematic analysis, the study investigates how patriarchal authority, domestic confinement, and suppression of female creativity manifest in the short story and how the narrator negotiates and resists these constraints. The findings indicate that the narrator's subjugation operates on multiple levels: physical, psychological, and social. Her secret journaling, perception of the trapped woman behind the wallpaper, and ultimate act of tearing down the wallpaper exemplify subtle and symbolic forms of feminist resistance. This research contributes to the understanding of *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a critique of patriarchal structures, highlighting the complex interplay between oppression and agency in nineteenth-century domestic contexts. The study also underscores the relevance of feminist literary analysis for exploring gendered power dynamics in both historical and contemporary narratives.*

Keywords: *The Yellow Wallpaper, Feminist literary analysis, Patriarchal oppression Female confinement*

INTRODUCTION

Literature is widely regarded as a creative and imaginative representation of human experience, articulated through language and shaped by cultural, historical, and ideological forces. Wellek and Warren (1963) argue that literature functions as both a reflection of life and a social institution that transmits values, beliefs, and cultural norms. Similarly, Abrams (1999) emphasizes that literary texts serve as mirrors through which readers can interrogate human behavior, social structures, and the complexities of identity. Through narrative, language, and symbolism, literature offers insight into how individuals experience oppression, agency, trauma, and transformation within various social contexts.

Within the broad spectrum of literary genres, prose occupies a significant position due to its direct, narrative-driven form and its ability to depict realistic human experiences. Prose literature—including novels, novellas, and short stories—allows writers to explore psychological depth, social conflict, and

interpersonal dynamics with clarity and nuance. According to Kennedy and Gioia (2013), prose provides a flexible narrative space that enables authors to construct detailed worlds and complex characters, making it a powerful medium for addressing themes related to gender, power, identity, and resistance.

Among prose forms, the short story is notable for its brevity, concentration, and intensity. Edgar Allan Poe famously described the short story as a narrative that aims to produce “a single, unified effect” upon the reader. Through condensation of plot, character, and atmosphere, short stories often illuminate a pivotal psychological moment or conflict. One of the most studied short stories within the feminist literary canon is Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), a groundbreaking critique of patriarchal control, the medicalization of women’s bodies, and the suppression of female creativity.

Gilman wrote the story in response to her own experience with the “rest cure,” a treatment that demanded women cease intellectual work and remain confined within domestic spaces. Many feminist scholars—including Elaine Showalter (1985), Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar (1979)—interpret the story as an early feminist protest against the restrictive gender norms of the 19th century. Showalter argues that the narrative exposes how patriarchal medical institutions pathologized women’s emotions, while Gilbert and Gubar view the protagonist’s psychological breakdown as a metaphor for the “madwoman” created by patriarchal literary discourse. Tyson (2006) further notes that the act of writing, which the protagonist is forbidden from doing, symbolizes the struggle of women to assert their voice within male-dominated cultural systems.

In recent years, *The Yellow Wallpaper* has received renewed scholarly attention, particularly within analyses that intersect gender studies, psychology, and medical humanities. Rahman (2019) examines the story as a critique of patriarchal medical practices, arguing that the narrator’s loss of agency reflects historical realities in which women were denied authority over their own mental health. Chatterjee (2021) focuses on spatial confinement, viewing the nursery room and its wallpaper as symbols of institutionalized gender oppression. Hayes and Morton (2023) employ affect theory to analyze how emotional suppression contributes to the protagonist’s psychological fragmentation. More contemporary studies—such as Abdullah (2023) and Li (2024)—highlight the formation of female consciousness, resistance through creativity, and the symbolic reclamation of identity as central to the narrative.

While these studies contribute valuable perspectives, they tend to focus on a single dimension of the story—such as spatial oppression, mental illness, or symbolic representation—without fully integrating the medical-historical context in which Gilman wrote. Few contemporary analyses examine how bodily autonomy, mental agency, and feminist resistance intersect within the specific framework of 19th-century patriarchal medicine. Likewise, although many scholars discuss the symbolism of madness, limited research explores how the protagonist’s psychological descent represents both an internalized trauma and an embodied act of rebellion.

Thus, there is a need for a comprehensive feminist reading that synthesizes symbolic analysis, theories of embodiment, psycho-feminist insights, and historical

critiques of patriarchal medical discourse. Therefore, the present study applies an integrated feminist literary framework that brings together modern theories of embodiment, feminist psychology, symbolic interpretation, and medical-historical critique. Through this multidisciplinary approach, the study argues that the narrator's psychological deterioration functions simultaneously as the result of patriarchal oppression and as a radical form of resistance that disrupts the institutional authority seeking to control her mind, body, and voice.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive textual analysis, a method commonly used in literary studies to interpret meanings, themes, and patterns within a text. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is appropriate when a researcher seeks to explore complex human experiences and subjective interpretations. In literary criticism, textual analysis allows researchers to examine the relationship between language, ideology, and representation within a literary work. Tyson (2006) also asserts that feminist literary criticism relies heavily on close reading strategies to uncover forms of power, oppression, and resistance embedded in literary discourse. Therefore, a qualitative textual approach is suitable for analyzing the feminist dimensions of *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

Data Source

The data in this study consist of 20 corpora extracted from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. These corpora include selected narrative segments, descriptive passages, symbolic references to the wallpaper, and dialogues that reflect patriarchal control, mental suppression, bodily autonomy, and expressions of feminist resistance. According to Krippendorff (2018), corpus-based textual analysis enables researchers to systematically identify patterns, symbols, and ideological structures across a text. The selection of 20 corpora ensures analytical depth and thematic representation without compromising textual accuracy.

Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected using purposeful sampling, a technique recommended by Patton (2015) for selecting data that are information-rich and relevant to the research objectives. The steps of data collection include:

1. Close reading of the entire short story to identify dominant feminist themes.
2. Highlighting textual units such as phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and symbolic descriptions that align with feminist analysis.
3. Selecting 20 corpora representing key moments in the narrative—such as the protagonist's emotional responses, descriptions of confinement, interactions with John, and symbolic interpretations of the wallpaper.
4. Documenting each corpus with annotations for initial interpretation.

This method is consistent with Fairclough's (2003) principle that data selection in textual analysis must reflect the discursive elements being investigated.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using a thematic and interpretative approach grounded in feminist literary criticism. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis

framework was adapted to identify patterns related to patriarchal oppression, mental agency, and feminist resistance. The analysis followed several stages:

1. Familiarization: Rereading the corpora and noting initial ideas.
2. Generating Codes: Labeling segments that illustrate gender constraints, medical control, emotional fragmentation, or symbolic resistance.
3. Constructing Themes: Grouping codes into major themes such as confinement and authority, silencing and creativity, embodied oppression, and symbolic liberation.

This method aligns with McKee's (2003) argument that textual interpretation must consider social context, ideological structures, and symbolic meaning.

RESULT

In this study, the data consist of 20 narrative events taken from *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Each event describes a significant moment or development in the story relevant to themes of patriarchal control, gender oppression, spatial confinement, silencing, mental health, and feminist resistance. The approximate location is indicated by paragraph or section number according to the Project Gutenberg edition.

1. Arrival and Rest Cure Imposed — The narrator and her husband John arrive at the rented mansion to begin the “rest cure.” Upon arrival she is instructed that she must not write, think, or engage in creative/intellectual activity. (Beginning, paragraphs 1–4)
2. Placement in the Nursery Room — She is shown the room they will occupy: a former nursery with windows barred, a bed bolted to the floor, and a disturbing yellow wallpaper covering the room. (Early setting description, paragraphs ~5–8)
3. Initial Reaction to the Wallpaper — On first inspection, the narrator describes the wallpaper as “sickly,” chaotic, and unsettling — indicating her immediate discomfort and sense of something deeply wrong with the domestic space. (Shortly after moving in, paragraphs ~9–12)
4. Dismissal of Her Concerns by John — When the narrator voices discomfort and unease about the house and the wallpaper, John laughs and dismisses her concerns as trivial or hysterical. (Early-middle, several paragraphs)
5. Secret Journal Writing — Defying John’s orders, the narrator begins to keep a private journal, writing secretly as a means of emotional expression and mental survival. (First covert writing, mid-story)
6. Perception of Movement in Wallpaper — Over time, she perceives that the wallpaper’s pattern shifts and moves, especially under changing light — a sign of her growing psychological unease and altered perception. (Middle of story)
7. Vision of a Woman Behind the Wallpaper — The narrator imagines a woman trapped behind the wallpaper’s pattern — a creeping figure that seems to beg for release. (Further along, as obsession deepens)
8. Frustration at Not Being Believed — She feels increasing frustration and alienation because John and others refuse to acknowledge or see the woman she perceives behind the wallpaper. (Recurring after visions)

9. Sleep Disturbance, Insomnia, Anxiety — Her mental health deteriorates: she experiences insomnia, heightened anxiety, and emotional agitation caused by isolation and forced confinement. (Middle to late)
10. Wallpaper as Cage — Feeling of Being Imprisoned — She begins to interpret the wallpaper's pattern as bars or a cage, reinforcing a sense of physical and psychological imprisonment. (As fixation intensifies)
11. Identification with the Trapped Woman — The narrator gradually identifies herself with the woman behind the wallpaper — showing the merging of her identity with the oppressed figure. (Later narrative development)
12. Secret and Gradual Tearing of Wallpaper — She begins to tear at the wallpaper in secret, removing small sections piece by piece as an act of quiet rebellion. (Approaching climax)
13. Fragmentation of Mental State — Her entries and thoughts become increasingly fragmented, reflecting her psychological breakdown under oppressive circumstances. (Near climax)
14. Perception of Constant Surveillance — She feels constantly watched and monitored by John; her privacy and autonomy are revoked, reinforcing her vulnerability. (Throughout confinement)
15. Attempts to Reorganize Room Without Permission — She moves furniture or attempts to change the room's arrangement, acts which reflect her striving for control over her own body and space. (Before full rebellion)
16. Obsessive Night-time Observation of Wallpaper Movement — At night, as light shifts, the wallpaper seems to shift and move, feeding her obsession and contributing to her altered mental state. (Late-middle)
17. Imagined Woman Behind Wallpaper Shaking Bars — The creeping woman seems to shake the bars of the wallpaper "cage," an image of desperation and desire for freedom, symbolic of the narrator's inner struggle. (Climax buildup)
18. Medical / Patriarchal Deception: Claim of Improvement While Mental Declines — Despite the narrator's worsening mental state, John repeatedly asserts she is "getting better," reflecting patriarchal control and medical gaslighting. (Toward end)
19. Social Isolation: Forbidden from Interacting / Going Outside — The narrator is confined to the room, prohibited from seeing visitors or leaving, reinforcing her social isolation and erasure of external support. (Throughout)
20. Climax — Tearing Down Wallpaper and Creeping Over John — In the final scene, the narrator rips off most of the wallpaper, then creeps around the room over her fainted husband, proclaiming "I've got out at last ... you can't put me back!" — a radical but ambiguous act of liberation through madness.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the twenty narrative events from *The Yellow Wallpaper* reveals the multifaceted nature of female oppression under patriarchal structures and highlights the ways in which the narrator negotiates, resists, and eventually subverts these constraints. The findings can be discussed under four interconnected themes: patriarchal control and medical authority, confinement and loss of

autonomy, silencing of female creativity, and symbolic resistance and feminist awakening.

Patriarchal Control and Medical Authority

The narrative data demonstrate that John's authoritative presence and the medical ideology he represents enforce strict control over the narrator's body and mind (Corpus 1, 4, 5, 18). The prohibition against writing or intellectual engagement reflects a systematic silencing of female agency. Showalter (1985) observes that women's mental and emotional states were historically pathologized, with medical discourse functioning as a tool to enforce patriarchal norms. Butler (1990) further explains that societal power structures operate to regulate behavior according to gendered expectations; in this story, John embodies such authority, determining what the narrator may think, write, and feel. Chodorow (1978) also asserts that patriarchal socialization fosters dependency in women, which is vividly illustrated in the narrator's initial submission to John's commands.

The interplay of domestic authority and medical power in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is particularly significant. John's repeated insistence that she is "getting better" (Corpus 18) despite her deteriorating mental state exemplifies the epistemic dominance of patriarchal authority — the male figure defines reality and interprets the woman's experience as flawed or pathological. This aligns with Foucault's (1977) notion of disciplinary power, wherein social institutions and authority figures regulate and normalize behavior. The narrator's subjection to these controls underscores the oppressive environment imposed on women and the ways such authority infiltrates private domestic spaces.

Confinement and Loss of Autonomy

Spatial confinement in the story is both literal and symbolic. The nursery room, with its barred windows and bolted furniture (Corpus 2, 10), functions as a space that restricts the narrator physically, psychologically, and socially. The limitations imposed on her mobility and social interactions (Corpus 19) amplify her sense of entrapment, a theme that Chatterjee (2021) identifies as emblematic of the domestic oppression of women in the nineteenth century.

The narrator's growing obsession with the wallpaper and her perception of the trapped woman behind it (Corpus 6, 7, 17) also reflect a psychological manifestation of spatial confinement. The walls and their patterns serve as a symbolic representation of patriarchal restrictions; they are not merely wallpaper but a cage that confines identity, creativity, and freedom. Foucault's (1977) theory of panopticism is relevant here: surveillance and control are internalized, causing the oppressed individual to regulate herself, which is evident in the narrator's internalized fear and self-monitoring throughout her confinement.

Silencing of Female Creativity and Voice

The data reveal that the narrator's creative expression is systematically suppressed, and her acts of writing serve as both rebellion and survival. The secret journaling (Corpus 5, 12) represents an assertion of autonomy within a restrictive environment. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) describe a recurring motif in women's literature — the "madwoman in the attic" — where female creativity is stifled by patriarchal expectations, leading to internalized struggle and eventual psychological strain. Tyson (2006) emphasizes that denying women intellectual and

creative outlets is a form of structural oppression, and this is clearly evident in the narrator's covert attempts to preserve her agency.

The fragmentation of her journal entries and thoughts as her mental state declines (Corpus 13) reflects the psychological consequences of sustained silencing. It also illustrates how patriarchal control extends beyond physical spaces into mental and emotional domains. The inability to express oneself freely is compounded by social isolation (Corpus 19), demonstrating that control is both interpersonal and systemic.

Symbolic Resistance and Feminist Awakening

Despite the overwhelming control and confinement, the narrative also portrays acts of resistance, both covert and overt. The narrator's gradual identification with the trapped woman (Corpus 11) signifies the emergence of feminist consciousness, wherein recognition of oppression motivates attempts at agency. The symbolic tearing of the wallpaper (Corpus 12, 20) represents both a literal and figurative disruption of patriarchal structures. Rahman (2019) interprets this act as the materialization of suppressed female voice; Hayes and Morton (2023) argue that the climax of creeping over John demonstrates the complex interplay between madness, liberation, and empowerment.

The narrator's psychological breakdown is thus inseparable from her act of rebellion. Madness is not merely a symptom of oppression but also a medium of resistance — a theme frequently discussed in feminist literary criticism (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Showalter, 1985). The story portrays a duality in liberation: while constrained by social, domestic, and medical authority, the narrator finds a radical, albeit destabilizing, avenue for asserting selfhood.

Interconnected Themes and Synthesis

Analysis of the twenty corpus events reveals that patriarchal control, confinement, silencing of creativity, and symbolic resistance are deeply interconnected. Physical and spatial restriction (Corpus 2, 10, 19) reinforces the silencing of voice (Corpus 5, 12, 13), while the symbolic resistance through the wallpaper (Corpus 6, 7, 17, 20) emerges as a direct response to these constraints. The findings illustrate that oppression operates across multiple dimensions — spatial, psychological, social, and creative — and that resistance can manifest in both subtle and dramatic forms.

The story thus exemplifies key principles in feminist literary criticism: the domestic sphere is a site of patriarchal control (Chodorow, 1978; Chatterjee, 2021), women's creativity and voice are often suppressed (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Tyson, 2006), and acts of rebellion may emerge in symbolic, imaginative, or unconventional ways (Rahman, 2019; Hayes & Morton, 2023). By examining the narrative events as corpus, this study demonstrates how literary texts can reveal complex mechanisms of gendered oppression and resistance.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman through a feminist literary lens, focusing on twenty narrative events that represent key developments in the narrator's experiences of oppression, confinement, silencing, and resistance. The analysis reveals that the story operates on multiple

levels, illustrating the mechanisms of patriarchal control, the psychological and physical impact of confinement, and the ways in which women's creativity and autonomy are systematically restricted.

The findings show that John, as both husband and physician, embodies patriarchal authority and medical dominance, which dictates the narrator's behavior, thoughts, and access to self-expression. The enforced rest cure, prohibition of writing, and dismissal of the narrator's concerns exemplify the structural silencing of women's voices, as discussed by Showalter (1985), Butler (1990), and Chodorow (1978). The domestic space itself functions as a site of control and confinement, with the nursery room and its disturbing yellow wallpaper symbolizing both physical and psychological imprisonment (Foucault, 1977; Chatterjee, 2021).

The narrator's secret journaling, observation of the wallpaper, and eventual identification with the trapped woman demonstrate subtle and symbolic forms of resistance. These acts highlight the tension between oppression and agency, where madness and rebellion intertwine as mechanisms for asserting selfhood (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Rahman, 2019; Hayes & Morton, 2023). The narrative shows that female resistance may emerge in nontraditional or symbolic forms when direct confrontation is restricted by patriarchal structures.

This study underscores the interconnection of key themes: patriarchal control, spatial and social confinement, silencing of female creativity, and symbolic resistance. The twenty corpus events collectively illustrate that oppression is multi-dimensional, affecting physical, psychological, and social domains, and that literary texts can reveal both the mechanisms of domination and the expressions of subversive agency.

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