

Writing and the Wallpaper: Suppressed Voice and Epistemic Authority in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) has long been read as a feminist allegory of patriarchal confinement, yet existing readings often treat its subjugation, silencing, and madness as separate motifs rather than parts of a single narrative mechanism. This study addresses that gap by examining how the narrator's writing and the wallpaper's visual pattern function as parallel sites through which her epistemic authority is first suppressed and then reclaimed. Using a qualitative feminist close-reading approach, the study analyzes the primary text alongside Gilman's essay "Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*" (1913) as supporting context, focusing on three interconnected strategies: the narrator's clandestine writing, her husband's gaslighting of her perceptions, and her growing identification with the wallpaper's trapped figure. Findings show these elements form a coherent pattern in which the suppression of the narrator's voice and of her writing are structurally identical, and that her final descent into "madness" paradoxically stages a reclamation of narrative authority. The wallpaper thus functions not merely as a symbol of oppression but as a textual mirror of the narrator's silenced authorship, offering a more integrated account of the story's feminist critique than readings that treat theme and technique separately.

Keywords: epistemic authority, feminist literary criticism, gaslighting, narrative voice, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) has been widely read as a feminist allegory of women's confinement in late nineteenth-century American society. Existing scholarship has extensively documented its central feminist themes, including domestic subjugation, the suppression of women's creativity, and the psychological cost of patriarchal marriage (Treichler, 1984). These readings remain valuable, yet they tend to treat the story's symbols and its narrative technique as separate objects of analysis: the wallpaper is read as a symbol, the narrator's madness as a

consequence, and her writing as a minor biographical detail. What remains underexplored is how these elements operate together as a single narrative mechanism, one in which the story's formal choices are inseparable from its thematic argument. This separation between theme and form is understandable given how the story has typically been taught and anthologized: as a period piece illustrating the social position of women in the 1890s, with the wallpaper serving as its most memorable image. Yet treating the wallpaper primarily as an isolated symbol risks obscuring the mechanism by which Gilman constructs her critique. The story does not simply describe a woman's

oppression; it enacts the very silencing it describes, using the narrator's own diary-like account as the vehicle through which readers experience her gradual loss of, and eventual struggle to reclaim, credibility.

This study argues that the narrator's clandestine writing and the visual pattern of the wallpaper are not separate motifs but structurally parallel expressions of the same conflict: the suppression, and eventual reclamation, of the narrator's epistemic authority, her right to be believed about her own experience. Read in this way, the story's famous ending is not simply a depiction of madness but a narrative enactment of a woman seizing the authorial voice that had been denied to her throughout the text. The narrator's writing and the wallpaper's pattern behave, in this sense, as mirrors of one another: what is forbidden in one register reappears, displaced but intensified, in the other. Reading the two strands together also clarifies why the story's ending has so often struck critics as ambiguous, since the convergence of writing and wallpaper in the final pages is not a sudden shift in the narrator's condition but the culmination of a pattern that has been building across the entire text.

During the late nineteenth century, American women were largely confined to domestic roles and economically dependent on men. Marriage functioned as one of the few viable paths to social and economic security, reinforcing women's dependence on male authority, including medical authority, as dramatized in the narrator's relationship with her physician-husband, John. Within this social arrangement, a wife's perceptions, feelings, and judgments about her own body and mind were routinely subordinated to her husband's professional expertise, leaving her almost no independent ground from which to

describe her own condition. The Yellow Wallpaper captures this condition not only thematically but formally, through a first-person, diary-like narration that stages the very silencing it describes: readers are given access to a voice that, within the world of the story, is not permitted to exist openly at all.

This study is motivated by the observation that the narrator's writing and the wallpaper's pattern behave in strikingly similar ways across the story: both are hidden, both are watched over, both are initially dismissed as trivial by John, and both ultimately become the site of the narrator's resistance. The writing must be concealed because John "hates to have me write a word"; the wallpaper, too, becomes something the narrator watches secretly, guarding what she comes to believe only she can see. Treating these as parallel textual strategies offers a more integrated understanding of how Gilman constructs her critique of patriarchal authority, not only through what the story says about women's oppression, but through how its narrative form performs that oppression and its undoing. The two strands converge most visibly in the story's final pages, where the act of writing all but disappears and the wallpaper becomes the narrator's sole remaining medium of self-expression, a substitution that this study treats as the story's central formal argument rather than as an incidental plot detail.

The research gap this study addresses is precisely this fragmentation in the existing scholarship: because the wallpaper, the narrator's madness, and her writing have been treated as separate objects of analysis, no study has yet examined them as expressions of a single underlying mechanism, namely the control and reclamation of the narrator's epistemic authority. Epistemic authority, as used in this study, refers to a person's socially

recognized right to be believed about their own experience, perceptions, and judgments. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this authority is systematically denied to the narrator by her husband John, whose position as both spouse and physician allows him to override her account of her own condition; her clandestine writing and her evolving reading of the wallpaper pattern can therefore be understood as two parallel attempts to reassert a form of authority that the story's social and medical structures otherwise refuse to grant her. Framing the analysis around epistemic authority, rather than around confinement or madness alone, is what allows this study to read the narrator's writing and the wallpaper's pattern as structurally connected rather than as separate symbols, and it is this framing that distinguishes the present study from prior readings that treat the wallpaper as a stable symbol existing outside the narrator's own struggle for voice.

This study is guided by three research questions: (1) How does the narrator's clandestine writing function as the first site of resistance against her husband's silencing in the story? (2) How does the wallpaper's shifting pattern mirror this same struggle between suppression and self-assertion? (3) How does the narrator's final identification with the woman in the wallpaper reframe her "madness" as an act of reclaiming narrative authority? Taken together, these questions are designed to move the discussion beyond a reading of the wallpaper as an isolated symbol, situating it instead within the same structural logic that governs the suppression and eventual reassertion of the narrator's voice throughout the story.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative literary criticism approach, specifically textual close

reading informed by feminist literary theory. Qualitative methods are appropriate here because the research aims to interpret meaning, symbolism, and narrative structure rather than to measure or quantify observable variables. Close reading, in this context, is not merely a descriptive summary of plot but a systematic attention to word choice, repetition, tense, and narrative framing as carriers of thematic meaning, an approach particularly suited to a story whose central argument, as this study contends, is inseparable from its formal construction.

The primary data source is the original text of *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, obtained from a literary anthology reprint (Gilman, 2013). Supporting data are drawn from Gilman's own retrospective essay, "Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*" (Gilman, 2011), which is treated as authorial commentary rather than as an objective account, and is used only to contextualize, not to substitute for, the close reading of the primary text. This distinction matters methodologically: the essay explains Gilman's personal experience with the rest cure and her intention in writing the story, but it is the primary text itself, its language, imagery, and narrative structure, that constitutes the object of analysis.

Data were collected through repeated close reading of the short story, with particular attention to three recurring textual elements: (1) passages describing the narrator's writing and her husband's response to it, (2) passages describing the wallpaper's pattern and the narrator's evolving interpretation of it, and (3) dialogue in which the narrator's perceptions are directly contradicted or dismissed by John. Each of these categories was chosen because it recurs at multiple points across the story's chronological progression, allowing the

analysis to trace not only what these elements mean individually but how they develop and intensify as the narrative advances. These passages were identified, coded thematically, and analyzed for structural parallels between the suppression of the narrator's writing and the suppression of her perception more broadly. Coding proceeded inductively: rather than applying a predetermined set of categories, recurring patterns in the narrator's language, particularly her repeated use of concealment, secrecy, and surveillance, were allowed to emerge from the text itself and were then grouped according to whether they pertained primarily to the act of writing, the visual pattern of the wallpaper, or the dynamic of dismissal between the narrator and John.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, it identifies instances of narrative silencing and gaslighting in the dialogue between the narrator and John, establishing the baseline pattern of suppression that structures the story's opening sections. Second, it traces the wallpaper's transformation across the narrative as a correlate of the narrator's shifting relationship to her own voice, following the pattern from its initial description as merely irritating to its final identification as a trapped figure. Third, it synthesizes these two strands to demonstrate how the story's ending reframes the narrator's "madness" as an act of reclaiming epistemic authority, treating the convergence of writing and wallpaper in the final pages as the culmination of the pattern traced in the first two steps. Findings are presented descriptively and supported with direct textual evidence, following APA in-text citation conventions. Given the interpretive nature of literary close reading, this study does not claim to produce a single, objectively verifiable reading of the text; rather, it aims to demonstrate that the parallel proposed here,

between suppressed writing and the wallpaper's pattern, is textually grounded and offers an integrated account of formal and thematic elements that prior scholarship has largely treated separately.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Social Context of Women's Silencing

The Yellow Wallpaper dramatizes this mechanism through its own narrator, whose forbidden writing becomes the first site of resistance examined in this study. The prescription John enforces, "phosphates or phosphites... and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise," paired with the explicit prohibition on "work," positions the narrator's recovery as something to be managed entirely by others. She is granted no independent authority over her own treatment, and her occasional protest, "personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good" (Gilman, 2013, p. 348), is recorded only within the private space of her secret writing, never voiced successfully to John himself. This gap between what the narrator privately believes and what she is permitted to say aloud is itself a symptom of the social conditions this study examines: her interior life persists, but only in a register that the story's other characters cannot access and would not credit if they could.

Writing as the First Site of Suppression

The narrator's desire to write is suppressed almost immediately by her husband, John, who dismisses her aspirations as symptoms of her "nervous condition" rather than as legitimate expression. This suppression is not presented as an isolated incident but as a continuous condition of her domestic life, one that the narrator learns to anticipate and manage before it is even enforced. This anticipatory self-censorship is

made explicit when she writes, "There comes John, and I must put this away, he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman, 2013, p. 349). The sentence is structurally revealing: writing and hiding are presented as a single, uninterrupted action, joined by the same breath, suggesting that for the narrator, the two have become inseparable. To write, in this household, is necessarily to conceal. Denied a legitimate outlet for her perceptions, the narrator is forced into secrecy, writing "in spite of them" and "having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" (Gilman, 2013, p. 349). The vocabulary here, sly, opposition, is significant: it recasts an ordinary act of self-expression as something illicit, almost criminal, that must be strategically managed rather than openly pursued. This establishes the story's foundational pattern: the narrator's voice survives only through concealment, and every act of writing carries with it the risk of discovery and correction.

This suppression of writing is compounded by John's broader dismissal of her perceptions, a pattern consistent with what would now be recognized as gaslighting, a term referring to the systematic undermining of another person's confidence in their own perceptions and judgment. When the narrator insists that "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (Gilman, 2013, p. 348), she reveals how thoroughly she has internalized the expectation that her judgment will not be taken seriously. The phrase "of course" is telling; it signals that his dismissal is not experienced as an aberration but as an ordinary, even expected, feature of marriage itself. Her husband's authority as both spouse and physician compounds this dismissal, since his medical diagnosis forecloses any space for her to describe her own experience

in her own terms: whatever she feels can always be reinterpreted, by him, as a symptom rather than as a legitimate observation about her own condition. This double authority, marital and medical, means that the narrator's attempts to assert even a modest counter-opinion are quickly overridden. Her tentative protest, "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good" (Gilman, 2013, p. 348), is immediately followed by resignation rather than negotiation, since there exists no register in which her belief could be taken as evidence rather than as a further symptom of her illness. The suppression of her writing and the suppression of her testimony are, in this sense, the same act performed in two different registers: one is a physical prohibition enforced through surveillance ("he hates to have me write a word"), and the other is a discursive prohibition enforced through diagnosis (whatever she says can be reclassified as nervousness). Together, they leave the narrator with only one remaining space in which her perceptions might persist unchallenged: the private page, and, as the following section shows, the wallpaper itself.

The Wallpaper as a Parallel Site of Suppression and Resistance

If the narrator's writing constitutes the first register in which her suppressed perceptions seek an outlet, the wallpaper constitutes the second, and it is here that the story's central formal argument becomes most visible. Where writing is prohibited outright, the wallpaper is, paradoxically, permitted, even encouraged, since John and Jennie regard the narrator's fixation on it as an eccentric but harmless distraction rather than as the continuation of the very interpretive activity they have already forbidden. This misrecognition is itself significant: the

narrator's closest attendants can identify and suppress her writing precisely because they understand what writing is and what it threatens, but they possess no comparable vocabulary for recognizing a woman's private, visual interpretation of a pattern on a wall as an equivalent act of authorship. The wallpaper's transformation across the narrative traces the same arc as the suppression and displacement of the narrator's voice. Early in the story, she describes it only in aesthetic terms, calling it a "flamboyant" pattern that commits "every artistic sin" (Gilman, 2013, p. 350), her irritation confined to questions of taste rather than meaning. As the narrative progresses, however, description gives way to interpretation, and interpretation gives way to identification: the narrator comes to perceive a "strange, provoking, formless sort of figure" (Gilman, 2013, p. 352) behind the surface pattern, then a woman, and finally many women, "creeping" behind bars that the pattern itself seems to generate. This progression is not incidental; it mirrors, point for point, the narrator's own trajectory from a woman merely irritated by her confinement to one who recognizes herself as confined, and finally to one who identifies her own condition within the figure she has projected onto the wall.

Crucially, the wallpaper offers the narrator something her writing cannot: a space of interpretation that John and Jennie cannot police, because they do not believe it carries any meaning at all. Whereas every sentence she writes must be concealed and every protest she voices can be reclassified as a symptom, her reading of the wallpaper unfolds in plain sight, tolerated precisely because it is misread as evidence of her illness rather than as an act of perception. This creates an ironic inversion at the heart of the

story: the very dismissal that silences the narrator's testimony elsewhere becomes, in relation to the wallpaper, the condition that allows her interpretive authority to develop unchecked. She is left alone with the pattern for the same reason she is denied a private audience for her writing, because neither John nor Jennie can imagine that a woman's unsupervised attention, whether to a page or to a wall, might constitute a legitimate act of understanding. The wallpaper thus becomes the displaced site of everything the narrator is forbidden to say directly. Her insistence that "nobody could climb through that pattern" without being strangled, and her growing certainty that the trapped figure "gets out in the daytime" (Gilman, 2013, p. 357), read not merely as symptoms of deteriorating sanity but as a displaced narration of her own circumstances, rendered in a register her husband has no reason to suspect. In this sense, the wallpaper does not simply symbolize the narrator's condition; it performs the same function her writing once did. It is the vehicle through which her suppressed perceptions continue to develop, undetected, until the story's final pages, when the two strands, writing and wallpaper, converge.

Reclaiming Authority: From Silencing to Self-Assertion

The story's final movement brings the two suppressed registers, writing and the wallpaper, into direct convergence, and it is this convergence that allows the narrator's descent into what the text calls "madness" to be read instead as an act of reclamation. By the story's last section, the narrator has all but abandoned writing; her attention has migrated almost entirely to the wallpaper, and the diary entries themselves grow shorter, more fragmented, more urgent. This shift is

not simply a symptom of deterioration but a formal substitution: the visual register has fully absorbed the function the written register once served, becoming the sole remaining space in which the narrator's perceptions can develop without immediate correction from John or Jennie. The narrator's declaration that she has "found out" (Gilman, 2013, p. 358) what the pattern conceals, and her subsequent decision to strip the paper from the walls, mark the moment at which interpretation becomes action. Where earlier acts of resistance were confined to the private page, hidden the instant John's footsteps were heard, this final act of tearing down the wallpaper is conducted in the open, in full knowledge that it cannot be concealed and will eventually be discovered. The narrator's insistence that she is "securely fastened" by her "well-hidden rope" and that no one will "put me back" (Gilman, 2013, p. 358) signals a decisive shift from concealment to defiance: she no longer manages her suppressed perception in secret but acts on it directly, even as she anticipates the consequences of being found out. "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman, 2013, p. 359). This declaration inverts the entire structural relationship the story has established between the narrator and her husband. Throughout the narrative, John's authority has rested on his ability to reinterpret the narrator's testimony, to recast her observations as symptoms and her protests as further evidence of her illness.

John's fainting at this moment is a further sign of this reversal: the narrator, who "had to creep over him every time" (Gilman, 2013, p. 359), replaces her husband's authority with her own physical and narrative presence in the room. In this final scene, that authority collapses entirely, not because John

renounces it, but because the narrator no longer requires his belief in order to act on her own perception. John's fainting body, which she must creep over for the remainder of the scene, becomes a literal enactment of this inversion: the figure whose diagnostic authority once determined what could and could not be believed is rendered inert, while the narrator, speaking now in the voice of the woman she has freed from the wallpaper, continues to move. Read through the lens of epistemic authority, this ending is not only a portrait of psychological collapse but also a moment in which the narrator, for the first time, is neither dismissed nor corrected. The narrator's final identification with the wallpaper's trapped figure is best understood not as a simple depiction of psychological collapse but as the culmination of a single sustained argument: that a woman denied any legitimate register in which to assert her own perceptions will eventually find, or invent, an illegitimate one. Whether this reclamation is genuinely liberating or simply a tragic collapse into delusion remains deliberately ambiguous in the text, and this ambiguity is itself part of Gilman's critique, since it suggests that under a patriarchal system that denies women any legitimate register for self-expression, madness becomes the only remaining space in which a woman's voice cannot be corrected by others, because it no longer depends on being addressed to anyone at all. It is, finally, address only to herself.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that *The Yellow Wallpaper* constructs its feminist critique not only through theme but through narrative form, using the narrator's suppressed writing and the wallpaper's shifting pattern as parallel expressions of a single conflict: the denial and eventual reclamation of a woman's epistemic

authority. The analysis traced this parallel across four interconnected movements. It began with the social context of the “rest cure,” which established confinement and enforced idleness as institutional mechanisms for silencing women rather than as neutral medical treatment. It then examined the narrator’s clandestine writing as the first site in which this silencing operates, showing how her voice survives only through concealment, sustained against a husband whose dual authority as spouse and physician forecloses any legitimate space for her testimony. From there, the study turned to the wallpaper as a parallel, visual register, one tolerated precisely because it is misread as symptom rather than as an act of interpretation, and traced how the pattern’s transformation across the narrative mirrors the narrator’s own movement from irritation to identification. Finally, the study showed how these two strands, writing and wallpaper, converge in the story’s closing pages, where the narrator’s identification with the trapped figure becomes complete and her declaration of having “got out at last” inverts the entire structure of authority that had governed her marriage. Read together, these four movements show that Gilman’s critique of patriarchal marriage operates on two levels at once: socially, through the narrator’s confinement and medical silencing, and formally, through a narrative structure in which the only space left for her authentic voice is the one her husband considers proof of her madness.

This is the study’s central contribution: rather than treating the wallpaper as a static symbol standing apart from the story’s narrative technique, this analysis has shown that the wallpaper’s development across the text performs the same suppression and resistance that structures the narrator’s

relationship to her own writing. The two are not separate motifs that happen to share a common theme; they are the same conflict, staged twice, in two registers that the story’s other characters can police only unevenly. This reading does not replace earlier feminist interpretations of the story as an exposé of women’s medical treatment and domestic confinement (Treichler, 1984); rather, it offers a way of connecting those readings to the story’s narrative technique, showing how the social conditions Treichler and others have documented are not merely reflected in the story’s content but reproduced in its very form. The ambiguity of the ending, whether the narrator’s final act represents liberation or complete psychological collapse, remains open, and this study suggests that this ambiguity is itself part of Gilman’s argument: under a system that denies women any legitimate channel for self-expression, the boundary between resistance and madness becomes difficult to draw. The narrator’s madness, in this light, is not simply the story’s tragic outcome but its structural solution, the only remaining space in which her perceptions can develop and finally be voiced without correction. Future research could extend this approach in at least two directions. First, comparing *The Yellow Wallpaper* with other first-person narratives of the same period could help determine whether this pairing of suppressed writing and symbolic confinement appears as a broader pattern in women’s literature of the era, or whether Gilman’s particular fusion of the two registers is distinctive to this text. Second, further work could examine how this formal parallel between suppressed voice and visual symbol operates in twentieth- and twenty-first-century narratives of women’s psychological confinement, testing whether the structural mechanism identified here

persists, transforms, or disappears as the social conditions that produced it have themselves changed.

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