

## Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

CAROL MARGARET DAVISON  
*University of Windsor*

“Marriage had bastilled . . . [her] for life.” (154–5) Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman: Or, Maria, A Fragment*

“The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians.” (68) Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher”

Concluding his provocative 1989 essay delineating how Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” functions as a Gothic allegory, Greg Johnson describes Gilman’s achievement as yet awaiting its “due recognition” and her compelling short story as being “[s]till under-read, still haunting the margins of the American literary canon” (530).<sup>1</sup> Working from the premise that Gilman’s tale “adroitly and at times parodically employs Gothic conventions to present an allegory of literary imagination unbinding the social, domestic, and psychological confinements of a nineteenth-century woman writer,” Johnson provides a fairly satisfactory general overview of “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a Gothic production (522). Despite the disputable claim that Gilman’s story functions, in part, as a Gothic parody, he correctly identifies and aptly elucidates several of the most familiar Gothic themes at work in this study—specifically “confinement and rebellion, forbidden desire and ‘irrational’ fear”—alongside such traditional Gothic elements as “the distraught heroine, the forbidding mansion, and the powerfully repressive male antagonist” (522). Johnson ultimately overlooks,

Address correspondence to Carol Margaret Davison, English Language, Literature & Creative Writing, 401 Sunset Avenue, University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada. E-mail: cdavison@uwindsor.ca

however, the extent and ends to which Gilman adapts traditional Gothic conventions. He did not then have the benefit of several groundbreaking studies, published within the last dozen years, devoted to the more specialized genre to which Gilman's story may be said to properly belong: namely, the Female Gothic.<sup>2</sup>

In examining Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a work of Female Gothic, the following essay acts, to some degree, as a corrective to Johnson's essay and to the numerous studies that have read this story exclusively as a light and nonpolitical horror tale or as a politically charged feminist piece that explores the ideology of femininity.<sup>3</sup> Their common oversight has been to fail to consider the suitability and implications of Gilman's choice of what later came to be classified as the Female Gothic mode,<sup>4</sup> a form that is generally distinguished from the traditional Gothic mode as it centers its lens on a young woman's rite of passage into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially the joint institutions of marriage and motherhood. As such, the Female Gothic deploys the supernatural for political ends. As Eugenia C. DeLamotte explains in her incisive study of this genre, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*, "[t]he 'fear of power' embodied in Gothic romance is a fear not only of supernatural powers but also of social forces so vast and impersonal that they seem to have supernatural strength" (17). Given that the narrator in Gilman's tale is a *femme couverte* who has no legal power over her own person—like her flesh-and-blood counterparts at the time the story was published (Flexner 62–3)—and that her husband is a physician whose pronouncements about his wife's illness are condoned by a spectral yet powerful medical establishment, it is no wonder that his wife grows increasingly fearful of him and suspects him of conspiring with his sister against her. These fears are magnified by the fact that America seems to be "full of Johns"—as the narrator's brother is a doctor and S. Weir Mitchell "looms on the horizon if she doesn't recover" (Shumaker 593). Given these, among other circumstances, bringing the supernatural to bear on her situation seems an appropriate

strategy. Likewise, a cunning method, ultimately engineered by her creator, underpins the narrator's descent into madness.

Linked to the general oversight of Gilman's generic choice is a frequent conspicuous disregard of her tale's national character. Elaine Showalter's assessment is exceptional in this regard. Noting that "the Female Gothic takes on different shapes and meanings within different historical and national contexts," Showalter labels "The Yellow Wallpaper" "an American classic" (129, 131). Her assessment seems to extend beyond Gilman's artistic achievement to include its calculated and, at times, radical response to the classic American Gothic tradition. Bringing Greg Johnson's trope of haunting to bear on the question of this influence, it could be argued that "The Yellow Wallpaper" not only haunts the predominantly male Gothic tradition in America but is, itself, haunted by that tradition.<sup>5</sup> There are various literary ghosts deriving from the works of such authors as Brockden Brown, Poe, and Hawthorne, which I hope to identify and expose, haunting the ancestral halls that John and his wife rent for the summer. This hereditary estate may be read metafictionally as the Gothic tradition. Just as her narrator earnestly strips away wallpaper in an attempt to improve the "atrocious nursery," Gilman is engaged in renovating an extremely popular and well-established house of fiction (681). Indeed, according to Leslie Fiedler in his seminal study, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), which, among other things, theorizes about the implications of Gothic literature's transplantation from British to American soil, the Gothic nature of American literature has always been preeminent. In his words, "of all the fiction of the West, our own [American fiction] is most deeply influenced by the gothic, is almost essentially a gothic one" (129).

As the relationship between gender and genre is vital and frequently underanalyzed in the examination of American Gothic—and Fiedler is equally guilty on this count as he conceives of Gothic literature in the American tradition as a male form that merely protests against women and is marked by a flight from the domestic and the feminine<sup>6</sup>—the question of gender will be brought

to bear on both Fiedler's comments and Gilman's incursions into what is largely, in American literature, prior to the publication of "The Yellow Wallpaper," an established male tradition. Although, as Alison Milbank has noted, "Gothic writing has been conceived of in gendered terms" since its inception in the eighteenth century, theorizing about the gendered aspects of this genre is a more recent phenomenon that began after Ellen Moers coined the term "Female Gothic" in her classic 1976 study, *Literary Women*, in reference to a mode of literature that taps women's fears about sexuality and childbirth (53,<sup>7</sup> 92–3). Such gender-aware theorizing was also undertaken, almost concurrently, within other genres. Just as theorists of the Female *Bildungsroman* (novel of development) illustrated how gender is a vital component in that genre as the ideal of success is gender-contingent, and men and women tend to be impeded and judged in different ways by their societies,<sup>8</sup> theorists of the Female Gothic called attention to the fact that women's generally repressed fears and desires—Gothic's twin fascinations—differ quite dramatically from those of their male counterparts.

While the exact parameters and nature of the Female Gothic continue, quite justifiably, to be debated and expanded, certain general but valid observations may be made about the most popular and influential branch, which developed from Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. These Female Gothic narratives may be described as cautionary, ritualistic, travel-adventure novels that involve the testing and emotional growth of a heroine on the verge of womanhood and marriage. These texts also function as thinly veiled, somewhat unconventional female conduct guides in that they do not limit themselves to promoting marriage as a woman's primary goal and to delineating the parameters of proper female behavior but frequently advocate a woman's financial awareness of monetary and estate matters.<sup>9</sup> The protagonist's trials commence on the heels of receiving an education promoting benevolence, Christian faith, and moderation in all things (especially sensibility, "the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to

display compassion for suffering”)<sup>10</sup> (Todd 7). Assuming the genre’s starring female role as persecuted maiden, she is transported to, and virtually imprisoned in, an ancestral Castle or manor home by the text’s other star—the enterprising, unyielding, ruthless, and attractive Gothic hero-villain who threatens the young woman’s maidenhead and inheritance. The protagonist’s exploration, often at night, of the apparently haunted Castle’s maze-like interior involves confrontation with mysteries whose ultimate unravelling signifies a process of self-discovery. Generally ideologically conservative, these texts conclude with a more mature, sensible heroine whose marital expectations have been rendered more realistic. Indeed, this genre seems to be driven by Milton’s theory, expressed in *Aeropagitica*, that trial “by what is contrary” purifies us (514–5).<sup>11</sup> The heroine’s virtue, in the form of her unshaken faith and fortitude, is usually rewarded by way of an inheritance and companionate marriage, a union that is figured as both practical and emotionally fulfilling.<sup>12</sup>

Turning to a more specific textual example, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* chronicles the adventures of Emily St. Aubert following the successive deaths of her parents when she is left almost penniless and forced to leave her home and beloved, potential future husband, Valancourt, in order to accompany her newly married Aunt to the Castle Udolpho, a new home lying beyond the borders of Emily’s native land. Her aunt’s new husband, Count Montoni, assumes increasingly terrifying and tyrannical proportions as he abuses his paternal power and repeatedly threatens the young woman with a loveless, arranged marriage and disinheritance. As with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, the grandfather text of the Gothic genre that was published in 1764, some thirty years before Radcliffe’s novel, the contested Castle plays a prominent role, almost becoming a character in its own right.<sup>13</sup> The question of rightful inheritance, which has spiritual, ethical, and material dimensions, becomes paramount.

As the example of Montoni especially suggests, fears and anxieties about sexuality and marriage, including questions about

male loyalty within that institution, loom large on this journey. Emily's nagging concerns about Valancourt are magnified by the haunting memory of her father grieving over a miniature portrait of a mysterious woman (26). This and other mysteries are solved after a variety of adventures in the prison-like Castle—an unchristian (250), vice-ridden locale to which Emily feels her fate connected as if “by some invisible means” (448, 246, 250). The prospects are daunting as Udolpho is figuratively littered with female corpses whose tragic, repressed histories are unearthed during the course of Emily's explorations. These include the wife of Montoni's servant (who was killed when some of the battlements of the north tower of the castle descended upon her) (229–30); Signora Laurentini (whose dead body, Emily fears, is actually located behind the Castle's mysterious black veil); Emily's innocent Aunt, the poisoned Marchioness (whose tragic betrayal and murder Emily uncovers only towards novel's end); and Madame Cheron (Emily's bad aunt who gets her come-uppance when she is incarcerated and dies while under Montoni's care). These numerous spectral foremothers,<sup>14</sup> especially those who have paid for violating the ideology of femininity, haunt Emily's journey. Their fates remind her of the Gothic's foremost moral, which was originally articulated in the Preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto*: “the sins of fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generations” (5).<sup>15</sup> At novel's end, Valancourt, after undergoing his own set of trials involving money and gambling, is reunited with and married to a more practical yet unfallen Emily who has held steadfast to his memory and gained self-assertiveness and control over her financial affairs. In a genre that frequently offers the reminder that Enlightenment Reason involves a perverse, emotional repression that has dramatic and grotesque ramifications, Emily must also chart a course laid out by her father before his death between excessive reason—the paramount characteristic of the heartless Gothic villain—and excessive sensibility, a characteristic frequently attributed to young women of Emily's era, especially those who vampirically consumed countless Romances (5–6, 20).

Emily's tendency towards fancy must, in short, be reined in. Thus, while it is imperative that she put her familial past into perspective, learn to accept death as a natural phase of life, and renew her faith in God, purported supernatural sightings—represented in this novel as promoted by a Roman Catholic Church that preys upon people's fears—must be rationally explained as the product of an overstrained sensibility and overheated imagination and, finally, laid to rest.

In terms of established critical interpretations of the Female Gothic, Sybil Korff Vincent has explained that this genre “expresses conflicts within the female regarding her own sexuality and identity, and uses a highly stylized form and elaborate detail to effect psychic catharsis” (157). The most significant component in this cathartic process is the stylized space in which it occurs—the domestic sphere, a symbolically loaded, psychically resonant<sup>16</sup> site associated with familial inheritance where most middle- and upper-class women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries spent the majority of their lives. Notably, this generally familiar space is displaced in the Female Gothic to unfamiliar territory for the purposes of engendering terror and an institutional critique. As Frances L. Restuccia remarks, “the gothic aspect of a woman's life (as Charlotte Perkins Gilman . . . demonstrate[s] in “The Yellow Wallpaper”) is all in its normality” (247). Drawing upon the Gothic genre in general, which explores the dark underbelly of modernity, the Female Gothic advances a gender-aware commentary on modern institutions by way of a point-blank portrait of domestic relations (Botting 2). As Eugenia C. DeLamotte relates:

[. . .] women's Gothic shows women suffering from institutions they feel to be profoundly alien to them and their concerns. And those institutions were all too contemporaneous with the lives of the women who wrote and read Gothic literature in the 1790s and early 1800s: the patriarchal family, the patriarchal marriage, and a patriarchal class, legal, educational, and economic system. (152)

The Gothic house, therefore, mirrors woman's “ambivalent experience of entrapment and longing for protection” within

these institutions (Rubenstein 312). Perhaps the most provocative description of the Female Gothic to date is that it focuses on “women who just can’t seem to get out of the house” (DeLamotte 10). Eva Figes has noted that the house, “such a central image in women’s novels, takes on a new dimension” in Gothic fiction:

In the clear light of the courtship novel it represents security and status. The house of the bridegroom, into which the heroine will move after marriage, is always of prime importance [. . .]. But in the Gothic novel the house changes from being a symbol of male privilege and protection conferred on the fortunate female of his choice, to an image of male power in its sinister aspect, threatening and oppressive. (74)

Kate Ellis concurs. Claiming that the Gothic is preoccupied with the home, she argues that “[. . .] it is the failed home that appears on its pages, the place from which some (usually ‘fallen’ men) are locked out, and others (usually ‘innocent’ women) are locked in” (*Contested* ix).

In the oneirically charged landscape of the Female Gothic, the ambivalent nature of the domestic sphere is preeminent: the potentially nightmarish, “dark side” of the dreamlike ideals of marriage and motherhood is explored and exposed. As Claire Kahane describes it, “the heroine’s active exploration of the Gothic house in which she is trapped is also an exploration of her relation to the maternal body that she shares, with all its connotations of power over and vulnerability to forces within and without” (338). Especially in its capacity as a “nighttime house,” this locale “admits all we can imagine into it of the dark, frightening, and unknown” (Holland and Sherman 282). The anxiety about boundaries of the self, what DeLamotte maintains constitutes the origin of Gothic terror, is granted expression here (13–14). The fear that self-identity and autonomy are threatened, or that heretofore repressed, possibly dangerous aspects of the self and others may be allowed expression, underpins the action. The theme of transformation, a common Gothic motif, where as DeLamotte says, “[w]hat was x becomes y, the line dividing them dissolving,” is a principal dynamic: the self is revealed to be other, and the Other an aspect of the self (21). Repressed anxieties are explored and exposed, and semiotic

boundaries blurred—the house may be revealed to be a prison and the husband a prisonmaster. The “more intangible prison of female propriety” that may be said to have tyrannized women’s lives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thus assumes a physical reality in the Female Gothic narrative (Clery 1). In this genre where “the subversive nature of the text appears uppermost, in its dark and prisonlike images of feminine experience within domesticity,” marriage threatens to become the ultimate prison. Perhaps no incident better conveys these fears of confinement than Emily’s discovery that her bedchamber in the Castle Udolpho offers her no security from potential intruders (Heller 16). Within it, she is entirely vulnerable yet confined as it is double-bolted on the outside (235).

The seemingly exaggerated and unrealistic terrors often cryptically articulated in the Female Gothic are rendered more comprehensible when one considers that the married woman of the period was frequently commodified and became a *femme couverte* under established law—a woman whose autonomy and identity were denied as she was regarded as her husband’s property. Under such circumstances, marriage signalled a figurative death for women. The numerous conventional reminders of *memento mori* that convey the inevitability of death in *Mysteries*<sup>17</sup> and other Female Gothic texts assume added resonance when considered in the light of this history. Indeed, the haunting, multivalent symbol of the mysterious black veil in Radcliffe’s novel particularly stands out in this regard as it taps the novel’s central theme of revelation and yokes together what were long considered to be the two most important rites of passage in a woman’s life—marriage and death. It also gestures toward a parallelism popularly employed by nineteenth-century women writers critical of non-companionate marriage—namely, marriage *equals* death.<sup>18</sup> Focusing its lens on premarital scenarios and advocating the tempering of marital expectations, the Female Gothic ultimately warns, in text after text, that all marriages are not created equal.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” may have been published a century after *Mysteries*, but it functions as

its daughter-text. Although it offers a more compressed and domesticated version of Radcliffe's traditional Female Gothic narrative and features a *post*-marital scenario<sup>19</sup> where the sins of the husband may be said to be visited upon the wives, and a protagonist who is not a typical Female Gothic model "of virtue and propriety," Gilman's story nonetheless foregrounds the terror women continued to associate with their vulnerability in love and marriage (Day 103). In it, an anonymous narrator charts her "development" during a three month post-partum confinement in an isolated estate under the care of her physician-husband and his sister. The fear of losing autonomy and identity is represented quite specifically as a lack of voice and, therefore, authority over the self. "Authority" is, in fact, crucial as her concerted act of secretly chronicling her side of the story, her unofficial version of events, is outlawed by her paternalist husband who consistently refuses to believe that she is seriously ill (679). As she informs the reader, "he hates to have me write a word" (681). Various historically established, gender-inflected oppositions are drawn upon as the creatively imaginative, fanciful narrator suffering from "temporary nervous depression" and "a slight hysterical tendency," is contrasted with this extremely practical and rational husband who "has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (679). With regard to her case, the narrator confides, "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him" (681; emphasis added). His counsel to his wife to use her "will and good sense" to check her imaginative story-making tendency as it "is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies" (682)—advice he essentially repeats when he later tells her to use her "will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with [her]" (686)—carries over from Radcliffe's day when excessive rationalism, associated with men, faced off against excessive sensibility, associated with women. Other longstanding debates are also discernible. For example, the medieval "battle" between male authority and female experience,

central to such literary works as Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale," is particularly conspicuous. While her husband's assessment of her case is supported by her brother and a body of medical scholarship, the narrator's diagnosis is grounded in personal experience. Although she follows their advice and "take[s] phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys and air, and exercise, and [...] [is] absolutely forbidden to 'work' until [...] [she is] well again," she "[p]ersonally [...] disagree[s] with their ideas" and "believe[s] that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do [...] [her] good" (680; emphasis added). Time and again, her personal experience is dismissed as inadequate and goes unheeded.

In the undeclared battle over the narrator's diagnosis and cure, various conventional elements from the Female Gothic are prominent. Especially central is the leased estate, an Americanized, domesticated format of the psychically charged contested castle. DeLamotte has perceptively noted that the Female Gothic protagonist's adventures in this architectural space function as "an objective correlative for the terrors of 'the spirit engaged with the forces of violence'" (15). In short, a type of psychomachia, or conflict of the soul, is symbolically played out. Rather notably, while the narrator complies with her husband's advice not to dwell on her illness by turning her attention to the house, her true feelings about her marriage and illness are displaced onto that site (680). What DeLamotte refers to as the "superpersonal" aspects of the dangers the Female Gothic heroine confronts are thus revealed: "At the threshold, [...] [she] does not speculate on the intentions of the person who brought her there; rather, she responds to the atmosphere of his house" (16). John may not own the leased estate, but it is he who selects this isolated site for her rehabilitation. The "legal trouble" surrounding this contested castle estate involving "heirs and co-heirs" (680) may be said to carry over to the narrator's dispute with John regarding the assessment of her illness. Her diction conveys the sense of struggle as she runs the risk of meeting "with heavy opposition" should she be discovered writing

(680). This “love is a battlefield” imagery is compounded by the description of another symbol of her oppressive marriage—their “great immovable” and “heavy” bed that is nailed to the floor and “looks as if it had been through the wars” (683–4).

The narrator’s detailed conjectures about this room’s history carry other disturbing resonances. She speculates that “[i]t was nursery first, and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge for the windows are barred for little children and there are rings and things in the walls” (681). The immediate and most disturbing implication is that she is infantilized in this former nursery. John’s consistent patronizing and insistence on her progress despite her protests further establishes the sense of hierarchy in their relationship as does his habit of addressing her with such diminutives as “blessed little goose” and “little girl” (8, 682, 686). As several critics have noted, the “rings and things in the walls” of their bedroom are also highly significant. According to Conrad Shumaker, the narrator unwittingly describes a room “that has apparently been used to confine violent mental cases” (594). While Greg Johnson disagrees, claiming that the room’s “physical details . . . are consistent with those of a typically ‘protective’ Victorian nursery and playroom,” Elaine Showalter concurs, stating that “it seems clear that it is an abandoned private mental hospital. The barred windows are not to protect children, but to prevent inmates from jumping out. The walls and the bed have been gouged and gnawed by other prisoners. The women she sees creeping in the hedges are perhaps the ghosts of former patients” (529, n.11), (133–4). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar broaden the interpretive possibilities when they argue that “[t]he ‘rings and things,’ although reminiscent of children’s gymnastic equipment, are really the paraphernalia of confinement, like the gate at the head of the stairs, instruments that definitively indicate her imprisonment” (90).

True to the traditional Female Gothic setting, the narrator’s nursery-bedroom in which she experiences a post-confinement confinement carries a variety of ambivalent associations that are perhaps best captured in the word “asylum,” a term popularly

employed in the Female Gothic that possesses two primary meanings—an institution where the mentally ill are incarcerated, and a place of refuge.<sup>20</sup> To date, critics have overlooked the torture chamber associations of this “paraphernalia of confinement.” Gilman seems again to draw on the established Female Gothic genre in this instance as it frequently brings Spanish Inquisition imagery to bear on the marriage institution. In *Mysteries*, for example, when Emily courageously seeks out her ailing Aunt in Montoni’s sprawling castle, she passes through a chamber equipped with torture instruments where she fears her Aunt may have been imprisoned and/or murdered (348). Although Emily is ultimately wrong in the specifics of her conjectures, her Aunt’s imprisonment and death in her new marital home of Udolpho reinforce the suggestion that Montoni is a cold-hearted, excessively rational, tyrannical inquisitor. Unlike several other imaginary terrors in *Mysteries*, Montoni is revealed to be a real threat. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” “Dr.” John assumes Montoni’s role as prisonmaster and increasingly engenders fear in his wife. As David Skal has compellingly commented, “The mad scientist wears many faces” (17). Thus does the seemingly innocuous, enlightened paternalist physician assume the role of Gothic villain at the end of the nineteenth century. His control over his wife is real as he, like the obsessive, anti-social Dr. Victor Frankenstein before him, conducts experiments (of a psychological as opposed to a physiological nature) in dangerous isolation from society at large. His wife’s reiterated pleas for social contact as she yearns for “advice and companionship about... [her] work” are ignored or met with inconsistent responses (682). John, for example, issues the loaded statement that he “would as soon put fireworks in [...] [her] pillowcase” as to allow her contact with “stimulating people” who will discuss her work (682). He shortly thereafter invites family (who, it is important to note, require domestic attention and are unable to discuss this work) to visit for the Fourth of July (684). According to Joyce Carol Oates, the essence of American Gothic involves “assaults upon individual autonomy and identity” (3).

The narrator's lack of independence, which reflects the status of American women in general, could not be more cunningly underlined than it is when set against this Independence Day backdrop.

Her husband's failure to respond to her needs and take her seriously, thus denying her experience legitimacy, results in a concerted repression of her natural and authorial instincts and a severe distrust that blossoms into a paranoid conviction that she is the victim of a well orchestrated conspiracy involving her husband and his sister, with whom the lethargic narrator stands in stark contrast. Jennie is the domestic ideal: "a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, . . . [who] hopes for no better profession" and believes that the narrator's writing (still considered a traditionally male occupation in the 1890s) caused her illness (683). As in the many Gothic novels where conspiracies play a central role—such as the German *Schauerroman*, or "shudder novel," which first introduced conspiratorial secret societies to the genre (Tompkins 281)—the nature of the conspiracy often provides a clue to the narrator's worldview and the author's cautionary message. John's prescription of "proper self-control" and the suppression of fancy combined with his apparent collusion with Jennie, the incarnation of the feminine ideal, reveals his true but secret identity as the narrator conceives it (680, 682). Just as the Spanish Inquisitors policed religious heresy, John both promotes, and acts as a policeman for, the constraining ideology of femininity.

A more detailed portrait of the narrator's conspiratorial fears and suspicions is revealed in the yellow wallpaper that decorates her nursery bedroom (681). Indeed, it becomes a type of phantasmagoria screen onto which is projected her sense of her situation. In keeping with the Female Gothic tradition, a relationship is forged between the story's external and internal "action," and between consciousness and physical space. More specifically, the narrator's fears and suspicions are inscribed in the "torturing" and "pointless" pattern that she feels compelled to follow "to some sort of conclusion" (687, 684). Indeed, this complex and very Gothic domestic

symbol that is “like a bad dream,” functions as a type of objective correlative that provides the key to Gilman’s story (687). The detective-narrator’s conviction that this wallpaper contains profound, arcane meaning and that “John and Jennie are secretly affected by it” lends this object noteworthy significance (691). Her declaration that “there are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will” is definitively undermined, however, by the fact that she transcribes her thoughts (686). She may write on what she describes as “dead paper,” but her tale is a potentially permanent record of events that ultimately is conveyed to a living readership (679). Her act of “writing back” as opposed to “fighting back” against a silencing patriarch who refuses to acknowledge her authority may be said to embrace Jane Eyre’s, as opposed to Bertha Rochester’s, strategy of revenge in Charlotte Brontë’s famous Victorian Gothic novel, *Jane Eyre*.<sup>21</sup> Her occasional use of scientific language in this counter-document is also cunning. With it, she effectively turns the tables and becomes a psychoanalyst of patriarchy. On the heels of a dialogue where John insists she is getting better, the narrator confides:

The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John.

He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look.

It strikes me occasionally, *just as a scientific hypothesis*,—that perhaps it is the paper!

I have watched John when he did not know I was looking, and come into the room suddenly on the most innocent excuses, and I’ve caught him several *times looking at the paper!* And Jennie too. I caught Jennie with her hand on it once. (688; emphasis added in the first instance)

Gilman’s narrator, therefore, positions herself as a type of pioneering sibyl who sometimes unwittingly voices dark truths about the status of women in America. Hers is a truly new and radical diagnostic manual as it charts, from the inside, women’s ambivalent experience under patriarchy. In terms of its aesthetics, her creative journal offers a further challenge. Like the Female Gothic whose female authors “flaunted the insignia of the working author” and thus promoted “the legitimation of visionary imagination in women

writers” this journal advances the explosive idea that “women possess creative intellectual powers” (Clery 23, Flexner 113). By way of such creativity, traditionally logical, rational patriarchy is undermined.

While the pattern’s fascinating transformation into a *memento mori* image of strangled women provides a fairly explicit representation of the narrator’s crisis, her decision to fixate on the wallpaper’s pattern as opposed to, for example, its texture, must be heeded (690).<sup>22</sup> The word “pattern” refers, generally, to “an example or model deserving imitation” but it was popularly used, especially in the nineteenth century, in association with the feminine ideal (*Compact OED* 2: 2102). In Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*, for example, an exaggerated and snide reference is made to “two *pattern* young ladies, in *pattern* attire, with *pattern* deportment” (375; emphasis added). In Gilman’s story, Jennie functions as such a “pattern” as she conforms to the established model of femininity. The narrator’s perspective on this “pattern” of femininity is, in contradistinction, markedly ambivalent. While it weighs on her to be separated from her child and “not to do . . . [her] duty in any way,” she also suggests that the social ideal of femininity is irrational and may engender insanity (681). In her words, this “torturing” pattern with its “lack of sequence, . . . [and] defiance of law . . . is a constant irritant to a normal mind” (687). When confronted with the image of the strangled women, the narrator comments that it “strangles so” and that nobody can climb through it (690). These descriptions gesture towards the narrator’s later madness and offer one possible theory as to the cause of her progressive mental division. The wallpaper’s pattern is also characterized by duality. It looks radically different depending on the light thus mirroring the narrator who acts in radically different manners depending on the time of day (687–8). Further, the narrator slowly realizes that the pattern possesses two aspects: an outside pattern of bars and a sub-pattern of a woman attempting to escape from them (688). The dreaded Female Gothic image of the imprisoned woman is again prominent although, in this post-marital Gothic story, marriage has actually

become a prison. In both its dual nature and levels of meaning, "The Yellow Wallpaper" conforms to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's description of the palimpsestic works produced by nineteenth-century women writers where "surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning" (73). The multi-layered wallpaper functions as a metafictional device that mirrors the narrator's journal of "dead paper" (679). Its encoded message regarding the constraining nature of patriarchy is patent. Indeed, the reader seems to have entered a typically Gothic house of mirrors and *doppelgängers* as the narrator conclusively sees herself mirrored by the figure of the imprisoned woman in the wallpaper.

In her reference to the pattern as "florid arabesque," Gilman also encodes an intertextual level of meaning that speaks back to the classic American Gothic tradition (687). In this description, the narrator raises the spectre of Edgar Allan Poe, a famous American Gothic forefather and the founder, according to some, of modern psychological fiction, a category into which "The Yellow Wallpaper" may also be placed. To date, various resonances between Gilman's story and Poe's work have been noted. In fact, Gilman herself compared "The Yellow Wallpaper" to Poe's stories in her 1935 autobiography, claiming both to be equally dread inducing (119). Curiously, Walter Stetson, Gilman's first husband, "found the story more disturbing than Poe's tales of horror" (Golden 3). While critics have tended to follow Gilman's lead and draw a Poe-Gilman parallel, Gilman's feminist slant has been isolated as her story's distinguishing mark. According to Joyce Carol Oates, for example, the "inspired manic voice" of "The Yellow Wallpaper" actually "derives from Poe but [...] [its] vision of raging female despair is the author's own" (4). In her Poe-Gilman comparison, Annette Kolodny effectively describes the popular reaction to the increasing domestication of the traditional American Gothic throughout the nineteenth century. As Kolodny relates, "[th]ose fond of Poe could not easily transfer their sense of mental derangement to the mind of a comfortable middle-class wife and

mother; and those for whom the woman in the home was a familiar literary character were hard-pressed to comprehend so extreme an anatomy of the psychic price she paid” (qtd. in Golden 3–4). Despite this noteworthy distinction, basic links exist between “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Poe’s short stories: both use unnamed narrators, focus on constitutionally nervous characters whose “illnesses” are virtually impossible to diagnose, foreground the subversive nature of the imagination, and share the peculiar combination of haunting mood and rational design that has been deemed Poe’s signature style (Robinson 69). Further, as Dale Bailey claims in his recent book, *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*, “the tale of the haunted house, while rooted in the European gothic tradition, has developed a distinctly American resonance; since Poe first described the House of Usher in 1839, the motif of the haunted house has assumed an enduring role in the American tradition” (6).<sup>23</sup>

Gilman presents an innovative bricolage of elements, especially from Poe’s Arabesques, in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” This specific influence is signalled in the reference to the wallpaper’s “florid arabesque” pattern, a description that strikes the well-versed reader of American Gothic literature as particularly uncanny (687; emphasis added). Albeit somewhat renovated, this site is foreign yet familiar. Poe assigned this term, which generally signifies something “strangely mixed or fantastic,” to the fanciful tales that he produced in mid-career (between 1838 and 1844) and for which he is best known (*Compact OED* 1:106) (Ketterer 181). While Poe’s Arabesque refers, in its basics, to his tales of terror, it also signifies a complex aesthetic that aims “towards mental expansion” (182). As David Ketterer cogently explains in his illuminating study devoted to Poe,<sup>24</sup> “When man learns to view reality as a continuum, the lines that separate one thing from another blur and dissolve to reveal the shifting and fluid state, the quicksand, which may allow a perception of ideal reality. The arabesque designs are active symbols of Poe’s efforts to melt away the rigid pattern that is imposed by man’s reason” (36). Ketterer adds, “the

surface of an arabesque tale becomes as convoluted and fluid as an arabesque tapestry; the distinction between the literal narrative surface and the symbolic meaning disappears” (181–2). In their ability to blur the boundaries between the literal and the symbolic, the natural and the supernatural, Poe’s Arabesques essentially aim to engender an enhanced perception of reality.

This aesthetic, alongside the term “arabesque,” are employed to great effect in what are perhaps Poe’s two most famous Arabesques, “Ligeia” (1838) and “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). Anticipating “The Yellow Wallpaper” in both its locale and major players, the latter tale features an eerie hereditary estate tenanted by an eccentric couple of inhabitants—the artistic, acutely nervous, superstitious, and impressionable Roderick Usher with his cryptic “Arabesque [facial] expression,” and his diseased sister, the lady Madeline, whose illness—like that of Gilman’s narrator—“had long baffled the skill of her physicians” (66, 68). A convoluted, arabesque tapestry such as Ketterer claims Poe models his Arabesques upon, is on display in “Ligeia.” I quote at length from Poe’s story in order to fully render this tapestry’s singular nature. As the narrator describes the haunting locale:

[. . .] in the draping of the apartment lay, alas! the chief phantasy of all. The lofty walls, gigantic in height—even unproportionably so—were hung from summit to foot, in vast folds, with a heavy and massive-looking tapestry—tapestry of a material which was found alike as a carpet on the floor, as a covering for the ottomans and the ebony bed, as a canopy for the bed, and as the gorgeous volutes of the curtains which partially shaded the window. The material was the richest cloth of gold. It was spotted all over, at irregular intervals, *with arabesque figures*, about a foot in diameter, and wrought upon the cloth in patterns of the most jetty black. But these figures partook of *the true character of the arabesque* only when regarded from a single point of view. By a contrivance now common, and indeed traceable to a very remote period of antiquity, they were made changeable in aspect. To one entering the room, they bore the appearance of simply monstrosities; but upon a farther advance, this appearance gradually departed; and step by step, as the visiter [*sic*] moved his station in the chamber, he saw himself surrounded by an endless succession of the ghastly forms which belong to the superstition of the Norman, or arise in the guilty slumbers of the monk. The phantasmagoric effect was vastly heightened by the artificial introduction of a strong continual current of wind behind the draperies—giving a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole. (46; emphasis added)

This golden tapestry is particularly noteworthy when considered in the light of Gilman’s phantasmagoric yellow wallpaper with its

shifting nature and peculiar effect. Indeed, Gilman's mesmerizing wallpaper may actually be modelled on Poe's arabesque tapestry. The impressions of both achieve a similar effect, metamorphosing from an apparently simple monstrosity to a deeper, more complex vision of horror.

The narrator's complex vision of the horrors of patriarchy in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is only matched by the final complex and horrific vision of the senseless and crawling, infantile narrator in a posture that literalizes what she has implied is woman's position in America. Her earlier comment that "[i]t must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight" resonates in this instance (690). Gilman's disjunctive presentation of her now mentally bifurcated heroine as seen through both her own and her husband's eyes is hugely ambivalent in its impact. Rather ironically, John, whom the narrator "suppose[s] [...] never was nervous in his life" reacts by fainting, thus assuming the traditional role of frail female (3, 693). His diagnosis of his wife's "minor" problem is disproved in this subversive conclusion. At the cost of her sanity, she emerges victorious in their undeclared battle over her diagnosis. Despite this drastic and tragic exchange, however, a strange liberty is associated with her situation. Unlike such literary foremothers as Emily St. Aubert, Gilman's narrator achieves what Michelle Massé calls "a dreadful freedom" by way of her fancy (35). She imaginatively transforms an infantilizing, imprisoning "asylum" into a place of refuge replete with a "*beautiful* door" that she feels it would be a shame to demolish (692; emphasis added). As her creative journal of events informs the reader, it is into this space that she "frees" the woman in the wallpaper whom she now recognizes—in a positive moment of union as opposed to fragmentation—as herself (692). The Other is, therefore, revealed to be an aspect of her self, and a seemingly impossible escape from the strangling wallpaper is effected (692). Albeit "[w]ithin a system that only she can understand, she gains autonomy and power" (Massé 35). Anticipating twentieth-century psychology, Gilman intimates that a certain lucidity exists at the core of

insanity. According to materialist psychologist, Wilhelm Reich, for example, “[s]chizophrenics are able in their lucid periods to see through individual and social matters as intelligently as no other character type [...] this lucidity of intelligence in the schizophrenic is one of the major dangers which threaten his existence in present-day society” (413). Given her perceptive analysis of late nineteenth-century American patriarchy, as delineated in her creative journal, Gilman’s narrator may be said to be never so sane as when she appears the most insane. An artful method and proto-feminist message underpins Gilman’s narrator’s madness.

In what may be called *The Yellow Wallpaper*’s “*florid arabesque*” (687; emphasis added)—an appropriate term given the longstanding association in the Western literary tradition between women and flowers (Erickson 90)<sup>25</sup>—Charlotte Perkins Gilman effectively creates a feminized version of Poe’s classic tale of terror with its signature aesthetic. In this enterprise, she not only continues the process, initiated by Charles Brockden Brown and furthered by such writers as Poe and Hawthorne, “to disentangle the Gothic myth from its Old World conventions in order to free it for use in an American context” but highlights a prominent blindspot in Leslie Fiedler’s assessment of the national issues to which the Gothic has been applied in America (DeLamotte 7). To Fiedler’s list of “special guilts” of the Indian massacres and the enslavement of blacks, Gilman adds the oppression of women (130).<sup>26</sup> Especially in her ironic reference to Independence Day, Gilman intimates that America is a nation antipathetic to female autonomy (684). In this trenchant imaginative commentary of established gender ideology, Gilman suggests that until men regard women as vocal desiring subjects as opposed to silenced objects of desire, America—and, more specifically, its domestic sphere—will remain a Gothic locale for women. As works like Ira Levin’s chilling novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972) illustrate, the Female Gothic remains an extremely germane and powerful genre in the American literary canon in the late twentieth century

through which issues of gender ideology may be compellingly addressed.

## NOTES

1. Johnson effectively echoes the words of Conrad Shumaker who said about "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1985, "Today the work is highly spoken of by those who have read it, but it is not widely known and has been slow to appear in anthologies of American literature" (588). As my essay makes clear, Elaine Showalter's assessment of this story is distinctly different. Notably, in more recent years, Gilman's story has been much more widely read in general and readily identified as a popular work of Female Gothic. Joyce Carol Oates includes it in her literary anthology *American Gothic Tales*, and Allan Lloyd-Smith mentions it in two recent entries on American Gothic fiction. He deems it "the exemplar of Gothic fiction" in the late nineteenth century (*Handbook* 7) and "a powerful expression of the Gothicism inherent in the experience of patriarchal society" (*Companion* 120).
2. Literary critic Ellen Moers coined this term in her 1976 publication *Literary Women*, where she used it in relation to the works of Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley. Based on her interpretation of the latter author's *Frankenstein*, Moers defined the Female Gothic as characterized primarily by anxieties associated with childbearing and artistic creativity. As will be illustrated, Moers's rather succinct sketch of this genre is extremely applicable to Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." The foremost studies of the Female Gothic are those by Ellis, DeLamotte, Fleenor (Ed.), Kahane, and Clery. For a brief overview of the genre see Milbank and Chapter 2 in Heller. For a history of critical approaches to this genre, see Ellis's entry in *A Companion to the Gothic* (David Punter, editor) and Chapter 7 of Showalter's *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*, which is devoted to the American tradition.
3. Jean F. Kennard notes a significant shift from the original readership's response to Gilman's story as a tale of horror to late-twentieth century feminist readings (75).
4. I am aware of only two studies that read "The Yellow Wallpaper" through the lenses of the Female Gothic. By way of Gilman's autobiography, published in 1935, Juliann Fleenor issues the problematic claim that Gilman, "a woman at odds with her society," "lived her life as a Gothic heroine might: impetuously, righteously, and reasonably" (*Gothic Prism* 241). Fleenor argues further that "The Yellow Wallpaper" falls into the category of Gothic that "convey[s] a fear of maternity and its consequent dependent mother/infant relationship as well as a fear of the mother and a quest for maternal approval" (227). Fleenor's largely unsupported claim that Gilman's (234–57) tale enacts the narrator's disgust with and punishment of her maternal body seems, among other things, to deny the narrator's concern for the child from whom she is separated 682. Further, this "maternal Gothic" interpretation entirely overlooks what I perceive to be

Gilman's subversive, radical critique of a patriarchy that confines women to a selfless, maternal role and pathologizes such other creative drives as the intellectual and the artistic. In this viewpoint, therefore, I am in agreement with Kate Ellis who claims that the Female Gothic novel offers "an increasingly insistent critique of the ideology of separate spheres" (xv). Michelle Massé's classification of "The Yellow Wallpaper" as "marital Gothic" highlights "the central issues of authority" in that genre (29). Massé offers an astute ten-page close reading of Gilman's tale as a social indictment with which my interpretation is in uncommon agreement. Working from the premise that "The Yellow Wallpaper" speaks back, consciously and otherwise, to various established Gothic traditions—Female, British, and American—my essay endeavors to better contextualize Gilman's story, both critically and socio-historically, and thus to provide an interpretation attentive to this story's rich literary and cultural resonances.

5. This idea picks up on Mary Jacobus's claim that "Bertha Mason haunts this text" (201).
6. This inability to associate American women writers and the Gothic genre seems to have carried over to the Masterpiece Theater version of "The Yellow Wallpaper." As Showalter notes, this adaptation was set in Victorian England instead of America. "The story," Showalter writes, "may have been too Gothic to seem American" (131).
7. Gothic literature was, fairly early on, classified into two major types—terror Gothic and horror Gothic. While the former was generally characterized as "feminine" and defined as engaged in expanding the soul by bringing it into contact with sublime objects of terror, the latter was said to be more "masculine" in its nature as it focused on encounters with graphically-detailed, physical mortality. See pages 71–80 in Fred Botting's introductory text on the Gothic for more detail on the distinction between terror and horror Gothic narratives.
8. See the introduction to Abel Hirsch, and Langland for further details on the distinction between the traditional and the Female *Bildungsroman*.
9. Conduct guides were popular eighteenth-century productions that outlined the nature of proper feminine behavior and promoted marriage as a woman's foremost goal in life. Mary Wollstonecraft denounced these books in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct in the More Important Duties of Life* (1787) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* also seems to take issue with them by way of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile ou de l'éducation* (1762), which delineates the proper education of a young boy. The proper education for Sophie, Émile's young female companion, is provided in the fifth book of Rousseau's work. It is implied that she is naturally incapable of reason. Radcliffe's choice of the name Emily (the feminized version of Émile) suggests that in *Mysteries* she is undermining Rousseau's gender ideology. Emily is introduced to the principles of Reason as a child and embraces them, alongside those of benevolence and sensibility, during her trials.
10. Sensibility was probably, as Janet Todd states in the best overview of the subject, *Sensibility: An Introduction*, the "key term" of the eighteenth century. This cultural movement had engendered a veritable cult by mid-century with a literature all its own that was "devoted to tear-demanding exhibitions of pathos and unqualified virtue" (8). Among other things, sensibility was considered to be reflective of a

woman's sexual nature: when admired it "was assumed to imply chastity and only if denigrated was feared to denote sexuality" (8). Although sensibility began to lose ground in the latter part of the century, and the pejorative term "sentimentality" was coined in reference to "debased and affected feeling" some writers still upheld its precepts (8). Ann Radcliffe, for instance, promotes a tempered sensibility in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* through the mouthpiece of Mr. St. Aubert who advises his daughter Emily that while he "would guard [...] [her] against the dangers of sensibility, [...] [he is] not an advocate for apathy" (80). He warns further that "we become the victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them" (80).

11. The full sentence expressing this idea reads, "Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary." Milton and Radcliffe would disagree, however, regarding humankind's original state. Milton's view of Original Sin would clash dramatically with the portrait of Rousseauesque vision of Original Innocence that characterizes Emily's childhood in *Mysteries*.
12. This is the type of equal, loving partnership advocated by Wollstonecraft in *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.
13. In *The Gothic Quest*, among other works, Montague Summers makes the claim that the Gothic castle frequently assumes this position. According to Summers, "[...] in such romances as [Horace Walpole's] *The Castle of Otranto* and [Ann Radcliffe's] *The Mysteries of Udolpho* the protagonists [...] [are] not Prince Manfred and Theodore, Montoni and the Chevalier Valancourt but the Castle itself with its courts and cloisters, the watchtower-coloured chamber on the right hand and the galleries," or "the gothic magnificence of Udolpho, its proud irregularity, its lofty towers and battlements, its high-arched casements, and its slender watch-tower, perched upon the corners of towers" (410–11).
14. While Claire Kahane maintains that the foremost female figure in the Female Gothic is "the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront," I would suggest that this claim be expanded to include all foremothers given their prominent role in this genre (336).
15. While this message is generally covertly at play in most Gothic fiction, it has been occasionally blatantly mentioned. In the Preface to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), for example, the narrator explicitly states, "the Author has provided himself with a moral—the truth, namely, that the wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief" (2).
16. Indeed, houses in general, and not just within the confines of the Female Gothic genre, have a variety of psychic resonances. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard especially foregrounds their relationship to intimacy and security. He writes, "The house, even more than the landscape, is a 'psychic state,' and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy. Psychologists generally, and Françoise Minkowska in particular, [...] have studied the drawings of houses made by children, and even use them for testing. To quote Anne Balif: 'Asking a child to draw his house is asking him to reveal the deepest dream shelter he has found for his happiness. If he is happy, he will succeed in drawing

a snug, protected house which is well built on deeply-rooted foundations'. If the child is unhappy, however, the house bears traces of his distress. In this connection, I recall that Françoise Minkowska organized an unusually moving exhibition of drawings by Polish and Jewish children who had suffered the cruelties of the German occupation during the last war. One child, who had been hidden in a closet every time there was an alert, continued to draw narrow, cold, closed houses long after those evil times were over" (72).

17. Radcliffe draws a crucial distinction between Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards death as expressed in various forms of *memento mori* in *Mysteries*. She suggests that Catholicism is a superstitious religion ruled by fear and the contemplation of horrifying images of physical death. Protestantism, on the other hand, is a faith marked by a more peaceful and accepting attitude towards death. The latter attitude is best exemplified in the death of Emily's father who says that he returns "in peace" to "the bosom of [...] [his] Father" (81). St. Aubert's viewpoint derives, in part, from the mid-eighteenth century tradition of graveyard poetry, which includes such works as Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1749–51). Although this genre featured tombs, ghosts, and images of decay, its foremost message was that "[f]ears of mortality and associated superstitions are unwarranted if one has faith" (Botting 33).
18. The black veil is a hugely significant symbol associated with women in much Female Gothic fiction. It bridges secular and spiritual rites of passage and is a popular apocalyptic image (*apokalypsis* literally means the uncovering/revelation). The black veil is a central image in Radcliffe's *The Italian* and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, and is adapted, for a more complex, somewhat proto-feminist treatment of identity politics, in Brontë's *Villette*. Even the convent option, which involves a symbolic marriage to God, is also suggested by the black veil. Emily is threatened by her Aunt with confinement in a convent. As the dissenting Radcliffe suggests, such an option involves a type of imprisonment, a death-in-life existence and is, effectively, unchristian as it disallows the contemplation of nature's sublimity (472, 475). Chapter five of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, entitled "The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel," focuses on the figure of the veil in order to offer a corrective to popular depth psychology approaches to the Gothic. Sedgwick examines various readings of this object in the Gothic to illustrate how the veil is "suffused with sexuality" a vital aspect that has been regularly overlooked by critics who are "[...] impatient with its [the Gothic novel's] surfaces, [...] label them [...] 'claptrap,' [...] [and] plunge to the thematics of depth and from there to a psychology of depth [...] [and leave] unexplored the most characteristic and daring areas of Gothic convention, those that point the reader's attention back to surfaces" (143, 140–1).
19. Michelle Massé classifies Gilman's story as "marital Gothic" as it "begin[s] rather than end[s] with marriage, [...] [and] the husband becomes the revenant of the very horror his presence was supposed to banish" (7).
20. At least one subsequent nineteenth-century Female Gothic narrative, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, played on the ambivalence of this term in relation to its principal setting. This cunning semiotic slippage is not, however, exclusive to the British tradition. In Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, which is considered to be the

first American Gothic novel, Clara Wieland refers to her house, which becomes a haunted house of terror, as her asylum (64).

21. It would be recalled that, while Rochester's first wife Bertha Mason (who also goes crazy like Gilman's heroine) vengefully burns down Rochester's house and then jumps to her death, the governess Jane Eyre, Rochester's second wife, gets her own back on her class-conscious, unchristian society by recounting the story of her life wherein her virtue is rewarded. Especially in the loaded image patterns surrounding the young Jane and the adult Bertha, Brontë intimates that Jane possesses an "inner Bertha." While this aspect of Jane becomes more "civilized," Jane's desire for revenge of a sort seems to be retained. On one level, therefore, Bertha and Jane may be described as sisters in arms. A parallel is suggested in Gilman's story in the "sisterhood" of the anonymous narrator and Jennie. In the sequence when Jennie is initially introduced, the narrator comments upon how Jennie polices her and then notes that a sub-pattern exists in the wallpaper. The juxtaposition of her detailed description of this sub-pattern as possessing "a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" and Jennie's sudden reemergence from outside seems calculated to suggest that Jennie also represses a less socially acceptable aspect of herself (684). Other connections exist between Gilman's story and Brontë's novel. The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" assumes Bertha's habit of nighttime activity and while she thinks "seriously of burning the house – to reach the smell" of the wallpaper, she ultimately resists the temptation (689). Moreover, her brief thoughts of suicide are also rejected because, she decides, "a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued" (692). A fundamental ambivalence is also evident at this late stage of the narrator's story: while she continues to regard herself, on one hand, from her society's perspective and deems the suicide option "improper," she also notes that it might be misconstrued. This seems to suggest that this *apparently* senseless act is *actually* a rational act given her experience within a patriarchal society. In other words, the narrator is concerned that the fact that she is *driven to suicide* might be overlooked.
22. As the title particularly suggests, the narrator also pays an inordinate amount of attention to another feature of the wallpaper, namely its color. She calls it "repellant" and "revolting" and associates it with "old foul, bad yellow things" (681, 689). Its foulness is reinforced when she describes it as "a smouldering *unclean* yellow" (681; emphasis added). Gilman's choice of color makes sense as applied to a wallpaper whose pattern indicts oppressive patriarchal institutions when one considers that yellow was identified, since the classical Greek period, with the choleric humor, which was associated with anger and irritation.
23. I would dispute Bailey's claim that Poe introduces this image. Charles Brockden Brown's novel *Wieland* provides an earlier precedent of the haunted house motif in American Gothic fiction. Adam W. Sweeting concurs, arguing further that "Dwellings and terror go hand in hand in early-nineteenth-century American fiction. From the decaying Gothic villas depicted by Charles Brockden Brown to the 'putrefying fungi' that eats away at Roderick Usher's house, psychological distress often accompanies architectural decay [...]. Drawing on well-established Gothic tradition, Brown and Poe use architectural space to locate spatially and

- symbolically their investigations of terror. The spatial figures as the psychological in their works" (224).
24. For further details on Poe's concept of the Arabesque, see Ketterer 35–43.
  25. R.A. Erickson charts this popular trope in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* where a distinct connection is made between Pamela's potential defloration and her purportedly seductive act of "flowering" her master, Mr. B., a waistcoat. Erickson also foregrounds the various significant flower and garden episodes in this novel.
  26. In bringing the Gothic to bear on the Woman Question in America, Gilman also calls attention to what Frances L. Restuccia refers to as the "tunnel vision" of Fiedler's "Oedipal theory of the gothic" (246). Restuccia correctly identifies Fiedler's view of the Gothic "as a reservoir of strictly male desire, anxiety, neurosis" wherein the power of darkness is confined to the villain, thus overlooking the heroine (245, 246).

## WORKS CITED

- Abel, Elizabeth, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, eds. *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*. Hanover: UP of New England for Dartmouth Coll., 1983.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. 1958. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
- Bailey, Dale. *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1999.
- Botting, Fred. *Gothic*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 1847. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993.
- . *Shirley*. 1849. London: Penguin, 1974.
- . *Villette*. 1853. London: Penguin, 1985.
- Brown, Charles Brockden. *Wieland, or the Transformation*. 1798. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1926.
- Clery, E.J. *Women's Gothic From Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley*. Horndon: Northcote House, 2000.
- The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. 2 vols. 1971. London: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Day, William Patrick. *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy*. Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 1985.
- DeLamotte, Eugenia C. *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Ellis, Kate. "Can You Forgive Her? The Gothic Heroine and Her Critics." *A Companion to the Gothic*. Ed. David Punter. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 257–68.
- . *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989.
- Erickson, R.A. *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*. New York: AMS Press Inc., 1986.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. 1960. New York: Dell, 1966.
- Figes, Eva. *Sex & Subterfuge: Women Writers to 1850*. New York: Persea Books, 1982.

- Fleenor, Juliann E., ed. *The Female Gothic*. Montreal and London: Eden Press, 1983.
- . "The Gothic Prism: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Stories and her Autobiography." *The Female Gothic*. Ed. Juliann E. Fleenor. Montreal and London: Eden Press, 1983. 227–41.
- Flexner, Eleanor. *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*. New York: Atheneum, 1973.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 1979. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1984.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, An Autobiography*. New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1935.
- . "The Yellow Wallpaper." 1892. *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. Ed. R.V. Cassill. New York: Norton, 1995. 679–93.
- Golden, Catherine. "One Hundred Years of Reading 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on The Yellow Wallpaper*. Ed. Catherine Golden. New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1992. 1–23.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables*. 1851. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Heller, Tamar. *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992.
- Holland, Norman N. and Leona F. Sherman. "Gothic Possibilities." *NLH* 8 (1976–7): 279–294.
- Jacobus, Mary. *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.
- Johnson, Greg. "Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 26 (1989): 521–30.
- Kahane, Claire. "The Gothic Mirror." *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. Eds. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1985. 334–351.
- Kennard, Jean F. "Convention Coverage or How to Read Your Own Life." *NLH* 13 (1981): 69–88.
- Ketterer, David. *The Rationale of Deception in Poe*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP, 1979.
- Levin, Ira. *The Stepford Wives*. London: Bloomsbury, 1972.
- Lloyd-Smith, Allan. "American Gothic." *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*. Ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts. London: Macmillan, 1998. 2–10.
- . "Nineteenth-Century American Gothic." *A Companion to the Gothic*. Ed. David Punter. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 109–21.
- Massé, Michelle. *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1992.
- Milbank, Alison. "Female Gothic." *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*. Ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts. London: Macmillan, 1998. 53–7.
- . "From the Sublime to the Uncanny: Victorian Gothic and Sensation Fiction." *Gothick Origins and Innovations*. Eds. Allan Lloyd Smith and Victor Sage. Amsterdam and Atlanta, Georgia: Rodopi, 1994. 169–79.
- Milton, John. *Aeropagtica*. 1644. *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*. Gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe. 8 vols. London: 1953–80. Vol. 2. 1959. 485–570.

- Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women: The Great Writers*. New York: Doubleday, 1976.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "Introduction." *American Gothic Tales*. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates. New York: Penguin, 1999. 1–9.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Fall of the House of Usher." 1839. *Selected Tales*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980. 62–78.
- . "Ligeia." 1838. *Selected Tales*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980. 38–52.
- Radcliffe, Ann. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. 1794. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980.
- Reich, Wilhelm. *Character-Analysis*. 1949. Trans. Theodore P. Wolfe. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961.
- Restuccia, Frances L. "Female Gothic Writing: Under Cover to Alice." *Genre* 18 (1986): 245–66.
- Robinson, E. Arthur. "Order and Sentience in 'The Fall of the House of Usher.'" *PMLA* 76 (1961): 69–81.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Émile ou de l'éducation*. 1762. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966.
- Rubenstein, Roberta. "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters: Shirley Jackson and Female Gothic." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 15 (1996): 309–31.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. 1976. New York and London: Methuen, 1986.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991.
- Shumaker, Conrad. "'Too Terribly Good to Be Printed': Charlotte Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *American Literature* 57 (1985): 588–99.
- Skal, David J. *Screams of Reason: Mad Science and Modern Culture*. New York and London: 1998.
- Summers, Montague. *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel*. London: The Fortune Press, 1938.
- Sweeting, Adam W. "Anxious Dwellings: The Rhetoric of Residential Fear in American Realism." *Fear Itself: Enemies Real & Imagined in American Culture*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 1999. 224–36.
- Todd, Janet. *Sensibility: An Introduction*. London and New York: Methuen, 1986.
- Tompkins, J.M.S. *The Popular Novel in England 1770–1800*. London: Methuen, 1932.
- Vincent, Sybil Korff. "The Mirror and the Cameo: Margaret Atwood's Comic/Gothic Novel, *Lady Oracle*." *The Female Gothic*. Ed. Juliann E. Fleenor. Montreal: Eden Press, 1983. 153–63.
- Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto*. 1764. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*. 1787. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1974.
- . *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. 1792. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men with A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Hints*. Ed. Sylvana Tomaselli. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. 65–294.



Copyright of *Women's Studies* is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Women's Studies is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.