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Approaching the Ineffable: "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Gilman's Problem with Language

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The sheer volume of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's oeuvre would seem to testify to Gilman's remarkable facility with language and her passionate belief that "We live, humanly, only through our power of communication."[1] As the author of five books of social criticism, eight novels, numerous short stories, an autobiography, dozens of lectures and articles, and her own magazine, Gilman devoted her life to conveying her ideas to others in hopes of fostering a better society.[2] But for all her productivity and publishing success, Gilman did not feel that language was entirely at her command. Language was for Gilman a rational tool that could be used to explore and mold ideas, but one that was inadequate before the chaos of emotion and psychological pain that tortured her throughout her life. Frustrated by her inability to deal with her personal agony in words, Gilman felt that her pain was locked away in silence and, recognizing that her own experience was not unique, came, as a writer and analyst of woman's condition, to doubt whether language and conventional means of story-telling could ever present an authentic view of a woman's inner experience. Gilman's strong misgivings about

1. Charlotte Perkins Gilinan, *The Man-Made World* (New York: Charlton, 1911; Rpt. New York: Johnson, 1971) 89.

2. In *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: *D*. Appletoil-Century, 1935. Rpt. New York: Arno, 1971), Gilman said that she had "written enough to make a set of twenty-five [books], including volumes of stories, plays, verse, and miscellany" (100).

whether a woman's interior experience of herself could be dealt with at all through language and traditional forms of literature determined the kind of fiction she came to write, as well as the form of her most famous story, "The Yellow Wallpaper."[3] Having found conventional techniques and plots of literature irrelevant to her own and many other women's experience, Gilman attempted to create in "The Yellow Wallpaper" a new kind of story – one that would tell what it was like from the inside.

Except for "The Yellow Wallpaper, none of Gilman's fiction touches upon the inner experience of a woman in crisis, and none of her other works matches "The Yellow Wallpaper" for literary power and psychological terror. Gilman's other stories are fictional dramatizations of ideas she espoused elsewhere, and all pose rational solutions to the problems women experience. Although readers today may lament that she did not write more stories like "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman herself may very well have felt that her later fiction was better both in literary quality and social value.[4] In *Man-Made World* Gilman states that she feels that the great majority of fiction has nothing to do with the concerns that preoccupy people for most of their lives. Nevertheless, Gilman sees literature as "the most powerful and necessary of arts," and maintains that "fiction is its broadest form." She finds fiction in her day "heavily and most mischievously restricted" and cites the "Story of Adventure" and the "Love Story" as the two predominant branches of contemporary fiction in her day.[5] In frustration at the limited scope of fiction in her time, she outlines in *Man-Made-World* new subjects that fiction ought to address: "First, the position of the young woman who is called upon to give up her ' career' – her humanness – for marriage, and who objects to it. Second, the middle-aged woman who at last discovers that her discontent is social starvation ... Third, the inter-relation of women with women ... Fourth, the interaction between mothers and children ... Fifth, the new attitude of the full-grown woman, who faces

3. All page references to "The Yellow Wallpaper" refer to *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Thomas Erskine and Connie Richards (Eds.) (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1993).

4. For Gilman, literary quality was never a primary concern. In *The Living* she reports that she told Howells when he wanted to print her story in *Masterpieces of American Fiction* that it was "no more 'literature' than [her] other stuff, being definitely written 'with a purpose' "She adds that in her "judgment it is a pretty poor thing to write, to talk, without a purpose" (121).

5. Gilman, *The Man-made World* 93, 94.

the demands of love with the high standards of conscious motherhood."[6] Throughout the rest of her life, Gilman went on to write fiction to fit these prescriptions. Ann Lane has observed that Gilman again and again "dramatizes her vision of history, sociology, and ethics" in her stories and novels. Except in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman deals only with problems that could be "resolved by will, energy, and imagination, and so she avoided any situation which lacked that possibility."[7] What is perhaps most striking about "The Yellow Wallpaper" in the context of Gilman's other writings is how different it is from everything else she wrote.

The origin of Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" in her own mental breakdown is by now well known to every student of the work. Gilman commented on her motives in her 1913 article "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper," published in The Forerunner, her own magazine, and explained that she had had two reasons for writing the story: one didactic, the other celebratory. More than twenty years after the story's initial publication in 1892, Gilman testified that she had written "The Yellow Wallpaper" to "save people from being driven crazy" and because she was "naturally moved to rejoicing by [her] narrow escape."[8] Gilman, who had been perilously close to madness herself, wanted to give a first-person, inside account of the experiences of a woman confined and restricted by a rest cure and to show how that treatment could become the immediate cause of insanity. From the safe distance of twenty years, then, Gilman made a public confession of the story's connection to her own life but emphasized that she had written the story for the good of others – so that other people in similar circumstances would not have to suffer as she did.[9] In regard to her personal feelings, she merely emphasized her joy at her narrow escape. Scholars of Gilman's life and works have rightly suspected, however, that it was not just relief that prompted Gilman to write "The Yellow Wallpaper."

There is general consensus that Gilman was taking emotional risks in "The Yellow Wallpaper" that she did not take in her other writing. Lane

6. Gilman, *The Man-Made World* 105.

7. Ann J. Lane, *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: Pantheon, 1990) 290,291.

8. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper," in: *Four Stories by American Women*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff (Ed.) (New York: Pantheon, 1990) 57-58.

9. Ann Lane argues that this was "probably the first time she had made such a public admission" (124).

argues in her biography that the story is considerably more revealing of the fears and mental torment Gilman experienced than anything she reveals in her official autobiographical writings: "'The Yellow Wallpaper' is an intensely personal examination of Gilman's private nightmare. Never again in her writing did she take such an emotional chance or engage in such introspection as she did in this story ... Perhaps the emotional truth and intensity of "The Yellow Wallpaper" drained her; perhaps it frightened her."[10] Gary Scharnhorst conjectures that Gilman was wrestling "with demons even as she wrote the story," and he makes the very relevant observation that Gilman wrote in her diary "a week after completing the final draft [of the story] that she had taken an 'overdose of acid phosphate'."[11] He concisely states what many other readers have felt about the story: after "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman "couldn't write another story as good, as if she belatedly heeded, however unconsciously, the earlier demands that she restrain her flights of fancy."[12] Scharnhorst is referring to Gilman's mother's fear and rejection of her daughter's imaginative and emotional life and her consequent restraints upon it. When Gilman was only thirteen, her mother prohibited her daughter's rich imaginative inner life and demanded that she close off "by far the largest, most active part of [her] mind," thus banning the one comfort she had in the family's bleak household.[13] From Gilman's early childhood, her mother had withheld all expressions of physical affection in hopes of guarding her children against emotional pain and disappointment.[14] In this environment in which emotional and imaginative expression and physical closeness were stifled, Gilman's psychological problems were born, and along with them, her fears that language could never voice her own experience of herself.

Gilman's anxiety about the limitations of language has not been fully recognized, though several scholars have noted Gilman's seeming reluctance to explore her feelings and psyche. In her introduction to her

10. Lane 127.

11. Gary Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Boston: Twayne, *1985)* 20.

12. Scharnhorst 20.

13. Gilman, *The Living* 23.

14. For details of Gilman's life see her own autobiography *Tlze Living* of *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* and Ann J. Lane's biography *To Herland and Beyond.*

edition of The *Living,* Anne Lane writes that "Gilman did not want anyone – a doctor, the public, or even herself probably – to delve into her dark places."[15] Makowsky describes Gilman's "refusal to display emotion" or to examine her inner life.[16] But what is interpreted as Gilman's reticence on matters of her personal emotional torments may have been primarily a difficulty with language itself, rather than a wilful decision on Gilman's part not to discuss the painful parts of her life.

In her autobiography Gilman expresses her frustration at never being able to convey to her friends and associates the depth of her despair during her recurrent depressions. In The *Living* she writes that when friends "gibbered amiably, I wish I had your mind," she wished "they had, for a while, as a punishment for doubting my word."[17] The difficulty of finding language that could convey her feelings effectively was a life-long problem for Gilman. She reports that "would be complimenters" "jocosely denied" the "wealmess of [her] mind,"[18] but she repeatedly emphasizes that she cannot convey her frustration and disappointment at the time she has lost because of her mental suffering. She complains that those afflictions that can be *seen* are accorded appropriate sympathy, but that invisible suffering in the mind is dismissed as a bagatelle or as downright fantasy:

> An orthodox visible disease that sends one to bed, as scarlet fever or mumps, is met by prompt sympathy. A broken arm, a sprained ankle, any physical mutilation, is a recognized misfortune. But the humiliating loss of a large part of one's brain power, of more than half one's working life, accompanied with deep misery and anguish of mind – this when complained of is met with amiable laughter and flat disbelief.
>
> What is the psychology of it? Do these friends think it is more polite to doubt my word than to admit any discredit to my brain? Do they think I have been under some delusion as to all those years of weakness and suffering, or that I am pretending something in order to elicit undeserved commiseration? Or do they not think at all?[19]

Gilman went so far as to summarize her entire adult life as an attempt to learn how to deal with her psychological weaknesses: "To spend forty

15. Ann J. Lane quoted in Veronica Makowsky, "Fear of Feeling and the Turn-of-the-Century Woman Of Letters," in: *American Literary History.* 5.2 (1993) 326-334: 331.

16. Makowsky 330.

17. Gilman, *The Living* 98.

18. Gilman, *The Living* 99.

19. Gilman, *The Living* 104.

years and more in the patient effort of learning how to carry such infirmity so as to accomplish something in spite of it is a wearing process, full of mortification and deprivation."[20]

During periods of despondency, Gilman's difficulties with language extended to her ability to read and write as well. She became incapable of dealing with printed language and reports that "After the debacle I could read nothing – instant exhaustion preventing."[21] She felt that her reading skills had been permanently and severely damaged: "To lose books out of one's life, certainly more than ninety per cent of one's normal reading capacity, is no light misfortune."[22] Reading and answering letters was another burden that Gilman reports she found exhausting: "I answer one, two, the next is harder, three – increasingly foggy, four – it's no use, I read it in vain, I don't know what it says."[23] Gilman suffered a linguistic crisis in her worst periods of depression and found language persistently inadequate for talking to others about her inner life. She said that only those who had *seen* her in long periods of despondency could grasp the depth of her despair: "Only those near enough to watch the long, blank months of idleness, the endless hours of driveling solitaire, the black empty days and staring nights, know."[24] Gilman's emphasis upon *seeing* – upon visual evidence as providing the only adequate proof of her suffering – offers an important context in which to consider "The Yellow Wallpaper."

Jeffrey Berman perceptively links Gilman's problems with reading and letter writing to her relationship with her parents, especially her father who abandoned the family when Gilman was a baby.[25] He maintains that answering letters and reading caused Gilman such pain and anxiety because she associated both activities with her father's abandonment. For

20. Gilman, *Tlze Living* 100.

21. Gilman, *Tlze Living* 99.

22. Gilman, *The Living* 100.

23. Gilman, *Tlze Living* 99. In *Tlze Living* Gilman expounds upon her difficulty in answering letters: "I dread to read them, especially if they are long ... A secretary does not help in the least, it is not the manual labor of writing which exhausts me, it is the effort to understand the letter, and make intelligent reply. . . . I read it in vain, I *don' t know what it says*. Literally, *I* can no longer understand what I read, and have to stop, with my mind like a piece of boiled spinach" (99).

24. Gilman, *The Living* 104.

25. Jeffrey Berman, "The Unrestful Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and ' The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in: *Tlze Captive Imagination: A Casebook on ' The Yellow Wallpaper,'* Catherine Golden (Ed.) (New York: Feminist Press, 1992) 211-241: 219-220.

Gilman "the library, which had once enticed her as a confectioner's shop lures a hungry child, came to represent the feelings of betrayal and abandonment associated with her father's flight from the family into the world of the library and publishing."[26] Likewise, letter writing unconsciously reminded Gilman of her painful pleas as a child to her father to write letters to her.[27] Berinan summarizes saying, "The world of books and ideas remained antithetical to the world of people and emotions, and she could never integrate her paternal and maternal identifications."[28]

Berman is right to identify Gilman's anxieties and difficulties with language as deriving originally from her childhood, but later in life, at the time of her brealtdown, Gilman received further confirmation that attempting to explain and deal with her problems through language was pointless. In *The Living* Gilman explains that she went to Weir Mitchell with "the utmost confidence, prefacing the visit with a long letter giving ' the history of the case' in a way a modern psychologist would have appreciated. Dr. Mitchell only thought it proved self-conceit. He had a prejudice against the Beechers. ' I've had two women of your blood here already,' he told me scornfully."[29] Mitchell belittled Gilman for assuming that she had a "self" and a right to assert it and insulted her proud Beecher heritage. That he also arrogantly rejected and found irrelevant her own account and analysis of her illness must have only reinforced Gilman's sense that language was incapable of conveying her dilemma. Robbed of the right to articulate for herself the nature of her distress and berated for even trying to do so, Gilman must have found herself despairing in silence, and perhaps "The Yellow Wallpaper" became her way of attempting to exorcise herself of the pain of the experience. Mitchell's advice to Gilman betrayed an obvious want of understanding about Gilman's personality and family background. Mitchell merely prescribed the same "cure" for her as he did for his other patients: "Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time ... Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live."[30] Mitchell, very

26. Berman 220.
27. Berman 220.
28. Berman 221.
29. Gilman, *The Living* 95.
30. Gilman, *The Living* 96.

much a man of his time, clearly thought of women mainly as mothers, not as independent, complex, and potentially intellectual and creative beings. Given the inadequate mothering Gilman herself had received, it is no wonder that she also became a nervous, conflicted mother and that Mitchell's advice only further devastated her in her precarious state. As Gilman recounts in The *Living,* Mitchell's advice only exacerbated her insecurity and emotional distress: "Be it remarked that if I did but dress the baby it left me shaking and crying – certainly far from a healthy companionship for her, to say nothing of the effect on me."[31]

Gilman's frustration at her inability to find a language adequate to her own experience of herself and her devastation at being discouraged in even trying to do so finds vivid expression in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and gives the story its distinctive form. The narrator suffers from an illness she cannot name, just as Gilman herself could not define what her own malady was. Every time the narrator attempts to tell her doctor-husband what she thinks is wrong and what would make her better, he interrupts her and tells her that only he is qualified to diagnose and prescribe. Her own perspective is constantly invalidated. She is so unsure of her own power to name and define that even her private statements to her journal are infused with a kind of pathetic diffidence, for example in her use of the expression "personally": "Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do" (30). The short paragraphs – often no more than a sentence – indicate her inability to fit her thoughts and feelings into conventional forms of discourse. Often she makes an assertion and then immediately questions it or even withdraws it before her husband's professional "wisdom": "I sometimes fancy that \in my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus – but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. So I will let it alone and talk about the house" (30). Through its very form, Gilman's story poses the question whether a woman's inner experience will ever be utterable in language that is controlled by male definitions and whether a woman's story can ever be told within the confines of conventional narrative forms. Gilman tacitly recognized what women writers and theorists have

31. Gilman, *Tlze Living* 96.

only recently begun to articulate fully: the profound difficulty of trying to speak of experiences outside of society's dominant conceptual systems. In discussing the Black experience, writer Toni Cade Bambara describes the problem of finding language to contain the experience of oppressed groups: "There have been a lot of things in ... the Black experience for which there are no terms, certainly not in English at this moment. There are a lot of aspects of consciousness for which there is no vocabulary, no structure in the English language which would allow people to validate that experience through language."[32] This was exactly the difficulty Gilman faced as she tried to talk about her own breakdown and then again later as she transformed the experience into the story "The Yellow Wallpaper." How could she convey the essence of her experience when there were no examples to follow? Gilman found an ingenious solution in "The Yellow Wallpaper."

Although Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" has in the last twenty years received more critical attention than perhaps any other American short story,[33] most critics have persistently ignored or evaded discussion of one of its most problematic features: namely, the way in which the form of the story undermines its fictional premise.[34] The story begins as a series of diary entries written secretly by a nameless women who undergoes a rest cure prescribed by her doctor-husband and is hence forbidden to "write." In the first three entries, the woman, who is a writer and is accustomed to "working," resists her husband's advice and records the progress of her illness as well as her own attempts to define and describe it. After these entries, however, the narrative takes a peculiar turn. The narrator's references to her own act of writing disappear completely. Moreover, the fictional illusion that the narrator continues to produce a journal becomes untenable; the woman becomes more and more obsessed by the wallpaper, begins to creep around the room and

32. Tony Cade Bambara quoted in Ellyn Kaschak, *Engendered Lives:* A *New Psychology of Wonzen* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992) 7-8.

33. Erskine and Richards 3.

34. Both Paula Treichler in "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in ' The Yellow Wallpaper,' " in: *Tulsa Studies in Women' s Literature.* 3.1-2 (1984) 61-77 and Richard Feldstein in "Reader, Text, and Ambiguous Referentiality," in: *Feminism and Psychoanalysis,* Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Eds.) (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) 269-279 deal with this aspect of the story, and both focus on issues of language. Neither, however, discusses the connection between Gilman' s own problems with language and the narrator' s hallucination.

gnaw the bedstead, and finally asserts that she herself, together with the other women she has seen there, has escaped from the wallpaper. The narrator, who has become insane, though marvelously and brilliantly so, can no longer credibly be producing the journal from which the story purports to be composed. The story slips from one form into another – from journal to interior monologue, but without any intervening character or explanation to account for the shift. Gilman provides no justification for how the story can continue to be told if the narrator can no longer write. As the narrative voice becomes disconnected from the original journal fiction, the form of the story itself becomes an "unheard-of contradiction," like the tantalizing patterns the narrator sees in the wallpaper. The way in which the original fictional premise dead ends finds symbolic parallel in the narrator's description of the wallpaper itself in her very first entry: "when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions" (32). These wallpaper patterns that obliterate themselves serve as an appropriate image for the structure of the story as a whole. They mirror the narrative premise that deconstructs itself.

Interestingly, no one seems to experience the logical impossibility of the second half of the narrative as a fault. Gilman transfers readers' interest so adeptly from the narrator's journal writing to her attempts to decipher the wallpaper that many never even notice the contradiction upon which the story is founded. In fact, readers generally agree that "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the best fiction Gilman wrote. But the paradox of reading a story that logically cannot have been written is worth examining more closely for what it suggests about Gilman's own experience, her attitudes towards language, and women's lives as represented in fiction.

By undermining the grounds of the original fictional illusion, Gilman produces a consistency of characterization and a convincing portrait of the narrator's descent into madness. The narrator's first mention of the woman in the wallpaper occurs simultaneously with the disappearance of her references to her writing. As the narrator becomes more and more obsessed with the wallpaper and eventually begins creeping around the room, gnawing the bedstead and contemplating hanging herself, the possibility that she is able to maintain her journal becomes implausible.

Gilman faced an either-or proposition. Either she could maintain the premise that the woman continues to keep her journal and thus, limit her own possibilities for portraying the depth of the woman's madness, or she could portray the woman's growing insanity in all its horror, which would destroy the fictional illusion that the woman is still maintaining her journal. It is the latter she chose, of course. The portrayal of the woman's increasing insanity precludes the continuation of the journal fiction. In order to make the narrator's journey to insanity seem believable, Gilman must persuade the reader that the narrator is no longer capable of her usual activities. Gilman's narrator's attitude towards writing in the first part of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not enthusiastic but ambivalent. Although she thinks about and refers to her writing constantly, she both does and does not want to write. Writing is forbidden and yet she continues to do it surreptitiously but without gaining any lasting relief from it. Finally, she appears to decide that it is no longer worth the tremendous effort required – "I don't feel as if it was worthwhile to turn my hand over for anything" (37). She stops writing from sheer exhaustion at trying to assert her own views against those of her husband and the entire medical establishment. Her futile efforts to find appropriate language for the feelings and fears that torment her and to put into words the growing recognition that her surroundings are making her sick leave her enervated. The narrator's sudden silence about writing, something that has preoccupied her greatly in her first three entries, and her subsequent fascination with the wallpaper, are ominous clues that her psychological condition has worsened. The wallpaper convincingly takes the place of writing as the narrator's main fixation, yet the shift of attention from the act of writing to the act of deciphering an image on the wall means that, as Paula Treichler observes, "the narrative is unfolding in an impossible form."[35]

The implication of this paradox is that the story of a woman's experience of mental torment as she lives it within herself and tries unsuccessfully to articulate it cannot be portrayed within the confines of any consistent, traditional literary form. The textual crack that occurs when the original fictional premise can no longer be maintained points to the inadequacy of conventional methods of storytelling for representing

35. Treichler 73

women's inner lives. No narrative form could contain what Gilman wanted to do. In order to portray the narrator's mental breakdown, Gilman had to transgress the bounds of conventional narrative. She tells a story that according to the rules of logic cannot be told. Once the woman stops writing, where does her story come from? There is no answer. The bounds of ordinary narrative reach their limits as Gilman attempts to do what some contemporary feminist theorists have recently come to advocate: "work ceaselessly to deconstruct [male discourse]; to write what cannot be written."[36]

Early readers of the "The Yellow Wallpaper" believed that Gilman was writing in the tradition of Poe, and indeed Gilman's story resembles some of Poe's tales in significant ways. But as she plays upon well-known elements of Poe's tales of horror and madness, Gilman simultaneously suggests how these conventions are inadequate for figuring the predicament of women. Gilbert and Gubar point out that what for Poe was merely a mental exercise, was for Gilman and other women writers literal reality: "Imagining himself buried alive in tombs and cellars, Edgar Allan Poe was letting his mind poetically wander into the deepest recesses of his own psyche."[37] Women authors, however, "reflect the literal reality of their own confinement in the restraints they depict." For women, imprisonment as image and theme is not "metaphysical and metaphorical," as it is for male writers, but "social and actual."[38]

As she uses motifs common to Poe's fiction, Gilman demonstrates how these same motifs cannot adequately contain or represent women's experience.[39] In "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral

36. Mary Jacobus, "The Difference of View," in: *Women Writing and Writing About Women*, Mary Jacobus (Ed.) (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979) 13.

37. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwonzan in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale, 1979) 87.

38. Gilbert and Gubar 87, 86.

39. In "Reading about Reading: ' The Yellow Wallpaper,' " in: *Gender and Reading: Essays on-Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (Eds.) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986) 158-164; Rpt. in: *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Erskine and Richards (Eds.) 181-189, Judith Fetterley accurately observes that Gilman begins her story with "language evocative of Poe." She goes on to comment on the sinister associations this language invokes: "Poe' s ancestral halls serve as image and symbol of the mind of his narrator, and they serve as analogue for the texts men write and read. These halls/texts are haunted by the ghosts of women buried alive within them, hacked to death to produce their effect: killed by and in the service of the necessities of male art: ' The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world – and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover' ." (181-182).

House: Another Look at ' The Yellow Wallpaper,"' Janice Haney-Peritz compares Gilman's "haunted house" with Poe's: "the narrator's writing takes a different tack than that of a Poe text in which a haunted house is revealed to be nothing more nor less mysterious than a house of fiction" (197). Gilman's narrator proposes the idea that the "ancestral halls" they have rented for the summer are haunted; on this point the story resembles Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher."[40] Imprisonment is the main theme of "The Yellow Wallpaper," as it is of Poe's "Pit and the Pendulum." Gilman's narrator suffers a mental breakdown, as does Poe's in "The Black Cat." But the differences are most revealing: the house in which the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" stays is not haunted by supernatural powers or cursed; no revolutionary force rescues the narrator from her captivity; and the narrator's madness arises not from witchcraft, alcoholism or "perverseness,"[41] but from what is done to her by others. Whereas Poe is able to construct fictional premises that can be carried through to a resolution in which the dramatic tension of the plot is relieved (in these three examples, collapse of the house and subsequent end to the family curse in "The Fall of the House of Usher," liberation in "The Pit and the Pendulum," and just exposure and retribution for cruelty in "The Black Cat") Gilman faces an impasse when the fiction upon which she has constructed her story collapses. The narrator's inability to continue her journal is finally the consequence of having been robbed of her own perspective of the situation from the beginning. In Poe's story "The Pit and the Pendulum," the narrator who has been thrown into a dungeon for maintaining a heretical view of reality is delivered by intrusion from the outside world in the form of a revolutionary army, thus confirming that the prisoner has been in the right all along.[42] For

40. Janice Haney-Peritz, "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another look at, The Yellow Wallpaper"' Women's Studies 12 (1986) 113-128; Rpt. in Erskine and Richards 191-208; Edgar Allan Poe, Collected *Works* of Edgar *Allan* Poe (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1979).

41. The narrator of "The Black Cat" believes that "perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart – one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man. ... This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself – to offer violence to its own nature – to do wrong for the wrong' s sake only – that urged me to continue and finally consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute" (852).

42. In her article "A Map for Rereading," Annette Kolodny points out that "a credible argument might be made for reading ' The Yellow Wallpaper' as Gilman' s willful and purposeful misprision of ' The Pit and the Pendulum.' Both stories, after all, involve a sane mind entrapped in an insanity-inducing situation. Gilman' s

Gilman's narrator there is no possibility of deliverance, however. There is no one to confirm her perceptions and her voice and no one who can rescue her from the confinement into which she has been forced. Judith Fetterley rightly compares Gilman's narrator directly with the characters who are allowed no voice in Poe's tales:

> Writing from the point of view of a character trapped in that male text – as if the black cat or Madeline Usher should actually find words and speak – Gilman's narrator shifts the center of attention away from the male mind that has produced the text and directs it instead to the consequences for women's lives of men's control of textuality.43

What the narrator sees in the wallpaper is something that she never could have written in her journal, not just because writing has been forbidden her, but also because she lacks the language to do so. Her husband has prohibited not only her writing but also any expression of her own understanding of her illness. She is incapable of writing, "I am an imprisoned woman. I am trapped in a male definition of femininity, and I am being made sick by a male diagnosis that ignores my own experience of my condition." This is essentially, however, what is suggested in the image the narrator sees on the wall, but the narrator is incapable of formulating this insight in language. She perceives subliminally her confinement within constructs of femininity and diagnosis – that is, she perceives at some level how her status as patient and her position in family and society are responsible for her condition – but she lacks full consciousness of it and therefore cannot articulate it except as an hallucinated image, which is "safe" since those around her cannot see it. It is a realization for which there are no words. Because language is first of all forbidden and second incapable of describing her condition anyway, she ingeniously creates a picture of her dilemma in the wallpaper. She hallucinates – visualizes – that which she cannot express verbally. Juxtaposed with Gilman's own comment that only those who

'message' might then be that the equivalent revolution by which the speaking voice of the Poe tale is released to both sanity and freedom is unavailable to her heroine ... no 'outstretched arm' to prevent Gilman's protagonist from falling into her own internal 'abyss' is conceivable, given the rules of the social context in which Gilman's narrative is embedded"(165). Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," in: New *Literary History*. 11 (1980) 451-467; Rpt. in Erskine and Richards 159-180.

43. Fetterley 182.

had *seen* her suffering could grasp its depth, the narrator's resort to a visual manifestation of her feelings seems strikingly significant. Gilman manages to provide a brilliant answer to Carolyn Heilbrun's question: "How are women to imagine forms and language they never heard?"[44] Only by making a foray outside language, by re-imaging her recognition through another medium not dependent upon words, can Gilman convey her perception of women's dilemma. Writing fails the narrator but not the author who distances and objectifies her own perception through the narrator's hallucination. Gilman's recognition comes to us through the language of the narrator's descriptions, but it is only through the device of the woman's mad visualization of her conflict that we understand its significance.

In *The Living,* Gilman emphasizes that her breakdown was dominated by an intense feeling of guilt and self-blame and absolves Walter Stetson completely of any responsibility for her misery – a generous gesture that critics have rightly suspected may not have represented the situation entirely as it was or as Gilman felt it. In none of her autobiographical writings did Gilman ever admit to feeling like a victim, or attribute responsibility for her mental suffering to anyone but herself, except of course to Weir Mitchell whose rest cure only aggravated her already perilous mental state. In her 1913 article "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman says that she never suffered from hallucinations but that she "came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that [she] could see over" – a metaphor that once again tellingly draws upon the sense of sight.[45] Having been to the edge of madness, Gilman had perceived the ultimate usefulness of losing foothold on conventional notions of reality – of being able to "see over" traditional barriers. It was only because she had "seen over" that Gilman came to know, as Emily Dickinson did, that "Much madness is divinest Sense / To a discerning Eye" (no. 435),[46] and thus was able to escape the inscriptions of language by incarnating her own perceptions in her narrator's hallucinations. From a narrative point of view this was a brilliant coup: by presenting her realizations as the delusions of a mad woman, Gilman could assert what she knew as truth

44. Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman' s Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1988) 39.

45. Wolff 57.

46. Emily Dickinson, *Tlze Complete Poems,* Thomas *H*. Johnson (New York: Faber, 1975)

and still remain safely concealed behind what she knew would appear to most readers as mere insane ranting. She could conceal herself in the conventions of the "mad narrative" and tale of horror, accepted literary forms, while she simultaneously explored new ways to write about women's inner experiences of themselves – experiences that had never before been put into words.

Gilman knew that what was acceptable to society were only those things that a woman was supposed to feel, not what she actually did feel. In writing about fictional literature in Man-Made World, Gilman notes that "Woman's love for man, as currently treated in fiction is largely a reflex; it is the way he wants her to feel, expects her to feel. Not a fair representation of how she does feel."[47] Gilman was profoundly aware that there was a whole realm of women's experience that went unvoiced. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is her attempt to write a new kind of story – one true to women's inner experience.

As the narrator pictures her silent suffering in the wallpaper, Gilman presents her own horrifying recognitions in her portrayal of the woman who is forced to make the only expression of herself she can through a coded image. In portraying the narrator's resort to visualization as a means of laying bare her dilemma, Gilman reveals her own unutterable perceptions about her own condition, and by extension, woman's condition in general. The narrator's full-blown hallucination that there are many women trapped in the wallpaper suggests that her plight is not just personal but shared by many women. That the narrator's hallucination involves other women, makes clear that Gilman saw the language of feeling and inner experience of self as a problem for all women. In other words, the narrator's delusion becomes a political statement as well, and it is in this statement that there is hope. Gilman seems to suggest that collective, shared action can keep women from foundering individually in silence:

> That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.
>
> I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper (47).

47. Gilman *The Man-Made World* 98.

But rather than focusing on the painful silence of women driven into dire psychological states by their place in family and society, Gilman chose, except in "The Yellow Wallpaper," to direct her fictional efforts toward creating models for constructive, cooperative action between women. Rather than centering her attention on what was too anguished for words and languishing in the places language could not reach, Gilman offered women pragmatic ideas and examples of what they might accomplish in the world. Gilman said that "it is a pretty poor thing to write, to talk, without a purpose,"[48] and stories that merely illustrated the inadequacy of language and did not offer any ideas for what to do about it obviously did not fit this requirement.

Apparently Gilman never escaped her intense frustration at her inability to convey to friends and family the true nature of her emotional distress. Her autobiography seems at least in part an attempt to lay bare her mental suffering and show its responsibility for preventing the work she would like to have done: "I try to describe this long limitation, hoping that with such power is now mine, and such use of language as is in that power, this will convince any one who cares about it that this 'living' of mine has been done under a heavy handicap."[49] Even as she writes many years after the initial breakdown, Gilman doubts her ability to convey the true nature of her psychological torment and disappointment at her own limitations. Though Gilman continued to feel misunderstood and defeated in her efforts to alert others to her need for help, she simultaneously insisted on her belief in the importance and efficacy of human communication and spent her life writing to that end. That Gilman suffered a drug overdose just days after finishing "The Yellow Wallpaper" suggests that she may have found the experience of writing the story too psychologically taxing to attempt such work again. That she chose to turn away from fiction that explored the recesses of the psyche was probably wise. Given the ineffable despair that apparently lay buried in her unconscious – that realm from which all deeply moving fiction comes – Gilman demonstrated the profoundest self-knowledge in her turn to writing that was firmly grounded in the outer world and that had a clearly defined purpose. Her good sense in choosing to focus on what

48. Gilman, The *Living* 121.
49. Gilman, *The Living* 104.

could be done – rather than on what could never be reached through words – might provide an inspiring example to those contemporary theorists who dwell obsessively upon the inescapable phallocentricity of language.