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Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Escaping the Sentence

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was a turn-of-the-century feminist who gained a worldwide reputation as a writer and a speaker. She also wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper," a short story reflecting her experiences with her husband and doctor during a nervous breakdown, in 1891. This story reflects her struggles to find her identity in three areas: as a wife of a benevolent, if suffocating, husband; as a patient of a prominent "nerve specialist;" and as a feminist. Written shortly after Gilman left her husband, the story details the descent into madness of a woman who, unlike the author, follows her doctor-husband's instructions to the letter. Feminists regard the narrator's illness and resultant madness as a logical result of the stringent conditions in which society has placed her. It is possible to see the story as a reflection of the struggles Gilman endured while trying to save herself.

Shortly before her death, Gilman wrote The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography. In this book she details the actual events surrounding her breakdown, her encounter with a "nerve specialist," and her failed first marriage. Although she broke away from her doctor's treatment before breakdown occurred, she indicates that as a result of her experience she was a frequent victim of depression and lassitude for the rest of her life.

It is possible to determine whether in fact Gilman was the victim some claim she was, or a strong survivor by using Paula Treichler's linguistic terminology. "Women's language" describes the obsequious, deferential attitude taken by a victim; "women's discourse" is spoken by a stronger woman who remains unintimidated by the male "prescription" (Treichler 67). While Gilman used both women's language and women's discourse, she proved, considering her background and the constrictions placed upon women in her time, survivor.

Introduction

Feminine madness is sanity, Paula Treichler suggests. In her critique, "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" she analyzes the brutal subterranean conflict in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's portrayal of a marriage in 1891. Looking closely at the final "mad scene," Treichler scrutinizes the narrator, mother of a newborn and wife of a young doctor, acting out a dreadful sort of ecstasy. Creeping in circles around her bedroom, she must with every revolution crawl over the body of her fainting husband. He it is who has ordered her to bed, away from society, change of scene and meaningful work in order to "cure" postpartum depression. Threatened with hospitalization and, even more devastating, the loss of her husband's approval, she stifles her doubts, tries to obey. To him the treatment appears successful; she has gained weight and most importantly, stopped complaining. In fact she has said less and less of anything, even eschewing her "women's language," Treichler's term for that tentative, apologetic speech designed to placate the sternest patriarch¹. But the comatose exterior belies the storm within. The fact is, Jane has gone mad.

But in Treichler's view the demented heroine has grown powerful even as she regresses to creeping infancy. Another side of her, intact, "impertinent" (Treichler 64), vital, takes shape. Embedded within the ugly, vibrant patterns in the yellow wallpaper, it embodies her apparently lost

language. Excited, the narrator absorbs herself in this new woman, becoming daily more visible. At the climax of the story she shreds the wallpaper in order to free her potent shadow self. In so doing she gives birth to "woman's discourse," Treichler's term for language, implied or spoken, that dwells apart from the world of patriarchal censorship (62). She has transcended the patriarchal "sentence" (in this case, the husband-doctor's diagnosis) in spite of herself. In so doing she has, according to Treichler, abandoned her male-sanctioned "women's language" in favor of her own autonomous "women's discourse." She becomes a living paradox, reverting to infancy even as she speaks the discourse of a mature woman.

Her husband, as devastated by her autonomy as he is by her madness, falls into a faint. His wife is ascendant; and because of that, nothing will ever be the same. True, he will shortly regain his power, send her to the dreaded S. Weir Mitchell, as Treichler reminds us (67). There she will be put to bed once more, this time under the watchful vigilance of a fulltime nurse who will spoonfeed her, brush her teeth, and not even allow her out of bed to go to the bathroom. There, the message of her helplessness in a masculine world will be reinforced, perhaps beyond her capacity to ever deny it again. Or if transcendent once more, she will only partially restore her divided self. But the "linguistic innovation" has been accomplished;

attacking the very foundation of the political structure of her marriage. If the superstructure appears intact, it is because, as Treichler points out, the material conditions must change as well. At the end of the nineteenth century, dominated by Victorian mores, linguistic innovations had just begun.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, feminist, philosopher, author of "The Yellow Wallpaper," had written a stern indictment on society's disregard for women. Yet her discourse, like her protagonist's, lacked support. Instead of being recognized as a searing piece of realism, it was relegated to the Gothic, literature for entertainment. Nor was Gilman herself given full credence. True, her Women and Economics, a vision of a society in which men as well as women were liberated through economic independence, delighted end-of-the-century readers through seven printings. And her autobiography from 1892 through the early 1920s reads like a diary of lectures, speeches, and major award ceremonies. But sexual politics within the family lay at the heart of Gilman's message as it did in "The Yellow Wallpaper." It was a message too radical for most women of that otherwise intensely feminist period. Not until 1974 did "The Yellow Wallpaper" emerge from its horror story category to take its place as serious literature and social commentary. Even now, as Cathy Davidson claims, the author may be a woman ahead of our time (Davidson ii).

Viewed from a century's distance, the intense introspection, the documented descent into madness do have a contemporary feel. And yet questions arise that create a sense in the reader of being out of touch, of needing to understand the historical context of the story in order to perceive its value in the present more fully. What is this strange disease and even stranger rest cure the narrator must undergo? And why is Weir Mitchell cited as a final authority on it?

The modern reader may vaguely understand that women in the nineteenth-century were homebound, subservient to their husbands. Does she know anything about the dazzling New Woman, emerging as the story was being written? Is she aware of the best kept secret of all--that the decades between 1880 and 1910 were a golden age of feminism, comparable to the last twenty-five years? Finally, does the modern reader understand that women's writing, although a full-blown genre by 1892, began its modernist phase with Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper?" (DeKoven 19)

As this feminist answered these questions for herself, the story became something more than an incisive portrait of the battle of the sexes. Studying Gilman's life in relation to the story told me she was herself a precursor. Although all of her books were out of print by the year of her death in 1935, she had been the leader of a movement that even the "counter-revolution" (Millet 205) couldn't obscure. It told

me that however it falters, the current feminist movement can go forward. Thanks to Gilman, we can find precursors in both the past and the present. Most importantly, we know from her experience that we can draw from ourselves. We have only to improvise on her foundation, making sure we don't, like the narrator, hide our women's discourse. The male prescription-dialogue has predominated for centuries. It is my hope that a look backwards into a young woman's struggle against it in the last century will enable women to write their own prescription in the next century. All discourses will be the better for it.

Notes

¹Treichler makes a clear distinction between women's language and women's discourse. Women's language is "an artificial feminine self" used to please and placate anyone in power, men in particular. It can be denoted textually with intensifiers, fragmented sentences, and repetition of helpless expressions. Women's language can also be defined attitudinally: the user refers anxiously to a male, appears more conscious of his opinion than of her own. Winning and maintaining male approval is its essential goal. To this end the woman monitors her expressions, excising anything that hints of power and self-assertion. In "The Yellow Wallpaper" the narrator demonstrates her affinity for women's language in the early part of her journal entries by using all of the above indications. John, her husband, stands at the center of her thinking. Even out of his presence she defers to his opinions, expresses herself hesitantly, deferentially, as if he were present and ready to censor any wayward ideas.

Women's discourse is less well-defined. Treichler views the wallpaper itself as a metaphor for this discourse, embodying all that women must keep hidden as they speak their women's language. "Impertinent," "visionary," it contrasts with the traditional obsession with power found in the patriarchal discourse in that it is founded on autonomy

rather than hierarchy. Treichler believes the narrator finds her women's discourse when her shadow self emerges from the yellow wallpaper. "Forsaking 'women's language' forever, her new mode of speaking--an unlawful language (that is, no longer subject to the laws of patriarchy)--escapes 'the sentence' imposed by the patriarchy" (67). This language, embodied in Gilman's prose as a narrator's journal, has further implications as a criticism of medicine and of psychiatry. As such it becomes an expression of power as well as autonomy. As Gilman notes, Mitchell, while failing to respond directly to her story, admits he modified his treatment of neurasthenic women after reading her story.

Treichler refers to male discourse as well, primarily characterizing it as that with which women's discourse struggles because it is imbued with greater social power. Treichler points out that in linguistic terms the sentence is "the upper cut-off point" for the study of language. Studied as a structural unit, it has been ignored in the ways that women might find important. For example, the context or the semantic value may be overlooked in favor of the syntax. "Escaping the sentence" refers to the process of going beyond the rational analysis of the sentence in favor of a holistic approach best apprehended through intuition. Language itself must not be "escaped," however. Since language creates as well as reflects reality, women must reformulate it to reflect their unique meaning.

"Frozen out" by a "phallogentric order" that defines reality linguistically in terms favorable to males, women, like the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," are represented in terms that emphasize helplessness and inferiority (71). Women's discourse, by taking into account context and semantics as well as syntax, is a means of escaping the male "sentence" into autonomy. Thus the narrator in the final scene has eschewed her husband's image of her as weak and pitiable, in favor of a new definition of her "sick" self; a powerful, unambiguous New Woman.

"Diagnosis" is a form of the male-defined sentence used by powerful male-dominated medical establishment. This term is an example of the way in which linguistic structures (in this case the intimidating terminology of "rational" medical science) can label a woman to her detriment. "Prescription" is another such term, implying the male doctor knows better than the patient not only the most appropriate treatment but also the very workings of her mind.

Escaping the Sentence in Psychiatry

Jane. John. Jenny. Everyman names that do nothing to detract from the surreal, timeless quality of "The Yellow Wallpaper." Even the common /j/ sound has a purpose, as if to say names don't matter; as if at some level they are interchangeable, that all the characters are mad, including Jenny, who "hopes for no better profession" than housekeeping ("YW" 1152). Like dates, last names aren't mentioned, nor are place names. The horror of madness, its universality, must not be lessened. The yellow wallpaper alone, itself faded by "the slow-turning sun," gives focus to the miasma that envelopes the "ancestral hall" (1150). But as it leaps to life for the narrator, filled with curves that "suddenly commit suicide," reality becomes a generic thing, void of distracting details, shadowy. Against this amorphous background the name Weir Mitchell blazes like neon: "John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall" (1153). For an instant the spell is broken. And we, as Gilman intended, come out of our reverie long enough to inquire blankly, "Who is Weir Mitchell?"

Gilman's answer was that he was an impostor. Firmly established in the didactic tradition popular in her time, she believed she wrote the story solely to enlighten the unsuspecting: "It is a description of a case of nervous breakdown beginning something as mine did, and treated as Dr. S. Weir Mitchell treated me with what I considered the

inevitable result, progressive insanity" (The Living 118). Although invoked by a single notation, Mitchell in "The Yellow Wallpaper" becomes a presence, powerful enough to take up Jane's case should John fail. Madness may be universal, Gilman appears to be saying, but in this time and place it arrives through a human carrier.

But Gilman's searing attack did not prevent her from calling him "the greatest nerve specialist in the country" (119). In terms of reputation she was right. "Medical historians agree that he was the foremost American neurologist of his time," Jeffrey Berman writes (46). Although a major popular novelist, Mitchell was especially noted for his rest cure, which was used widely to treat "neurasthenic" middle-class women. First practiced in 1871, spanning a period of 60 years, Mitchell's regime involved six to eight weeks in bed, excessive food intake, limited intellectual and social activity, and complete surrender (to him) of all decision-making. The objective was to calm a woman, distance her from her "female hysterical tendencies" by helping her to accept her essentially reproductive role (Bassuk 145).

Middle-class women did seem to have widespread emotional problems during this period. Vague names such as "hysteria" and "neurasthenia" cloaked symptoms ranging from uncontrolled weeping to profound apathy. Feminist

historians suggest the problem stemmed from culturally-induced conflict. Ellen L. Bassuck, for instance, concludes that

During the late nineteenth century when the rest cure emerged, many middle class women had started to question traditional roles. Conflicts between autonomy and dependence, sexual expression and repression, activity and passivity, may have been more intense than during earlier periods. (Bassuk 147)

Elaine Showalter suggests that nineteenth-century madness may have been "an unconscious form of feminist protest." Women with professional aspirations such as the Beecher sisters, Edith Wharton, Jane Addams, fell victim of neurasthenia almost as a rite of passage into their professional lives (Showalter 137).

S. Weir Mitchell, aligning himself with "the most conservative political and social positions in the country," had a less sympathetic view (Berman 48). "'Selfish and tyrannical'" women who took to their beds displayed "'evil impulses,'" exuding false helplessness, which must be controlled (qtd. in Bassuk 143). Mitchell observes with some satisfaction that "'when [these women] are bidden to stay in bed a month, and neither to read, write, nor sew, and have one nurse--who is not a relative--then rest becomes for some women a rather bitter medicine'" (Showalter 139).

True to the Darwinian school of psychiatry, Mitchell believed that women's chief task, which took all their strength, is reproduction. Breakdown would result if they tried to use their minds and bodies for any other purpose. Thus, girls between ages 14 and 18 would do best to suspend their education. Believing in the "moral" as well as the physical re-education of his patients, Mitchell encouraged them to realign their responses with a more rational mode. Control of emotions, especially of crying, was essential; nor were they to discuss their problems with friends lest they "make matters worse" (Bassuk 143). Feelings were to be traded for intellect, resulting in "an obsessional style, more characteristic of men" although male power was not to be assumed (Bassuk 144).

Standing alone in her time, Gilman is joined by a chorus of feminists in ours. Showalter suggests Mitchell, "unaware of his hostility to women," had constructed a "cure" designed to send them back to the womb (Showalter 138). Gary Scharnhorst writes that what Mitchell called illness was a refusal to be "feminine--that is, to be passive and self-sacrificial" (9). Ann Douglas indicts the whole male medical establishment who looked upon women's family duties as "the cure, not the cause of the illness" (qtd. in Scharnhorst 9). But it is Ellen L. Bassuk who theorizes something even more sinister was at work.

Detailing the daily regime of the patient, Bassuk notes that along with massages, tonics, and spoonfeeding, the nurse administered "vaginal douches and rectal enemas." Imagine such a treatment," Bassuk writes.

Under the paternalistic, authoritarian control of a male physician, the Victorian woman regressed physically and emotionally. Isolated from her family and children and her usual responsibilities, she was put to bed and taught submission; even her arms and legs were moved for her. Every orifice was invaded-- by vaginal douches, enemas, and milk feedings. When she was fatter and ruddier, she was told how to think and how to express her thoughts. (146).

Besides the usual reasons for such treatments, Bassuk suspects erotic elements, "libidinally gratifying, but in a controlled and manageable way" (149). Such treatment may have reenacted sexual conflicts that brought patients to Mitchell in the first place. Bassuk implies that the "cured" patient, ever after dependent on her doctor, was tied with something less simple than gratitude (149).

It is possible to conjecture that at this point the battle of the sexes gets ugly. A current boon of the modern feminist movement is the acceptance of adult women as victims. Women on trial for killing violent husbands are less likely to be convicted. Women filing suit against

salacious mental health professionals will gain a hearing if not compensation. But the Victorian woman had no such framework for defining herself. Urged to promise her "nerve specialist" total control over mind and body, then isolated by him from friends and family, she was uniquely dependent and vulnerable to any erotic stimulation. Inquiry into nineteenth-century medical practices indicates vaginal douches were employed against reproductive disorders where many illnesses were believed to originate (Bassuk 145). It is probably safe to conjecture that the regular use of enemas was considered by some to be good physical hygiene. Further research would have to be done to determine how widespread and acceptable such practices were in institutions. And yet even when wading through all the cultural overlay, it seems possible to conclude that the employment of these devices was at best thoughtless; at worst, it could be considered sexual abuse. The use of "libidinally gratified" practices would certainly be an effective way to keep the male prescription intact.

Escaping the Sentence: The Women's Movement

Jane rejects her husband's prescription, which has to do with tonics and fresh air and exercise. It bears the futile injunction to avoid thinking about her condition, although idleness makes that a necessity. The prescription enjoins her, a writer with "the habit of story-making," never to give way to "fancy." She dismisses this advice abruptly:

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good ("YW" 1149).

Her words tell us she wants to get well. It appears she has a plan that involves taking control, acting in her interests. She can, it seems, take issue, state her opinion. We hear the mature language of women's discourse, free of the need to seek patriarchal approval. We hear an autonomous speaker who would discard the prescription with the scorn it deserves. But in fact her discourse never goes beyond her journal, which she then hides. Only to herself, a woman, can she speak in her own voice.

The narrator uses another more diffuse women's language with her husband. Shy, apologetic, tentative, she is careful to deal with the concrete that he is comfortable with. There is something strange about the house, she suggests timidly. Might she need a different bedroom? Or at the least new wallpaper? Only once is she bold enough to enter the realm her husband fears of "things not to be felt

or seen and put down in figures" ("YW" 1148). Fearing for her sanity, she hints her mind is going. But his panicked reaction and stern lecture send her scuttling for cover once more. By the next entry, husband forgotten, she has established in earnest her riveting kinship with the yellow wallpaper.

Yet the climax of the story finds the narrator triumphant. She has gained her husband's attention at last. He must ask for the key, retrieve it according to her directions. When he faints with alarm, she simply crawls over his body and goes on. She does not weep over his disapproval; does not try to protect him from his panic. She is oblivious to the male-medical authority he represents. The autonomy, once confided to her journal alone, is a fact to be flaunted. She is a new woman, liberated from the terrible need to please. She is also mad.

Who would argue with freedom? Or for that matter, with the myth of the happy madwoman? Any price might be worth an escape from John's stifling strictures. But the fact is, he has won again. Her woman's discourse has been obtained at the price of wholeness; she has split herself to the core. Merged as she is with "dead paper," her discourse becomes pure symbol, coherent only to herself. In fact, it could be argued that, circling the room like an infant or an animal,

she (like them) has no language at all. Against the "heavy opposition" of patriarchy she is uniquely powerless (1149).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman claims the story was an act of vengeance against S. Weir Mitchell (The Living 118). Her contemporaries read it for its Gothic horror. Modern feminists see it as an amazingly fresh inquiry into sexual politics. But dealing as it does with the "three Ms"-- marriage, medicine, and madness within the family--the story also stands as an indictment of sexual politics in the 1890s. The implications are clear: women have their own prescription; women use their own discourse when addressing themselves or each other; women speak their women's language when addressing men; and the male prescription aims at perpetuating itself, often without regard to the needs of women. Turn-of-the-century historians affirm the story's truth.

The New Woman of the 1880s and 1890s, like the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," had a prescription of her own. She believed "congenial work," excitement, change would cure whatever ailed her ("YW" 1149). She tended to be highly educated, economically autonomous, and single. Defined as any woman who was economically and socially self-supporting, she had the lowest marriage rate of any group in the period between 1835 and the present (Degler 230). "She fought for

professional visibility, espoused innovative, often radical, economic and social reforms, and wielded real political power" (Smith-Rosenberg 245). The old female roles no longer interested her. Having gained the confidence to think for herself, she laid claim to areas formerly considered the male sphere. Her work with other women would ultimately result in "a national organizational network that was nearly as sophisticated in its own way as the corporate business world" (Ryan 204).

It hadn't always been that way. True, her feisty ancestors of the 1830s, the First Wave (Davis 17), already had ideas. A reporter for The Advocate of Moral Reform in 1837 wrote

If the sphere of action is limited to private life exclusively, then we have long since left our province and entered that of the other sex. . . . Women have organized associations, held meetings, resolved themselves into communities without alarming the guardians of the public welfare or outraging public sentiment. (Deglar 304)

But the "guardians" she refers to had no reason to be alarmed; women were not leaving home. The doctrine of separate spheres (women in the home, men in the marketplace), formulated between 1824 and 1850, was already well in place (Ryan 161). Whatever the reporter's claims,

the major reforms in temperance, "sexual purity," and illiteracy were accomplished through petitioning, a process that allowed women to remain in the home.

Abolitionism threatened to become a raucous cause as women saw parallels both within and without the movement between the constriction of slavery and the curtailment of their own rights. In fact, the energy of the anti-slavery movement gave impetus to a feminist awareness that culminated in the Seneca Falls, New York, meeting in 1848. Giving official birth to the women's movement, it called for the recognition of equality between the sexes and for suffrage. But more conservative forces were at work as well. In 1837 Catherine Beecher, herself unmarried and employed as founder of a female seminary, reminded women that their influence should remain in the home. Depicting a "divine economy" which ordained the dependence of one sex on the other, she--along with demographic changes throughout the forties--helped reduce the widespread participation of women in abolitionism throughout the fifties (Ryan 139).

But women learned organizational and speaking skills nevertheless. Having been called out of the home during the Civil War, providing for wounded soldiers, they continued in public service. This time they attacked the backwash of industrialization: "They were, they told their husbands, politicians, and industrialists, the conscience and the

housekeepers of America" (Smith-Rosenberg 173). Through their volunteer work "women became the backbone and inspiration of the Progressive movement" (Ryan 168). Arguing that the world was their home, they went after social chaos in the street as vigorously as they would attack dirt on their doorstep. By the 1870s these women, still faithful to their sphere, were demanding educational opportunities and the vote in order more effectively to implement the reforms they envisioned.

Remaining firmly within their sphere, they gained autonomy by cleaning up the ruins left by rapid industrial expansion. By the late 1880s they had succeeded in expanding their sphere to include every area except the boardroom, the political circle, and the financial domain. It remained for the women of the 1890s to challenge these male spheres, although still in the name of the women's sphere. When Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1892, that challenge was just beginning. Women and Economics, written six years later, claimed that men as well as women would never know true liberation until women became as self-supporting and autonomous as men. The book went through seven printings and won worldwide fame. Although the doctrine of separate spheres would continue to be popular through the ratification of the 19th Amendment, it had received a fatal blow.

The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" may have been at a crossroads typical for women of her time. Knowing what she needed--"congenial work" ("YW"1150) and the excitement and change of being empowered--she nevertheless abandoned her prescription in favor of her husband's. It seemed never to occur to her to take charge of her own cure; but neither could she settle into the domestic routine that satisfied her sister-in-law. A few years later she might have read in the Ladies' Home Journal (1899) that mothers shouldn't get so involved with their children, as had been the custom; or that fathers should participate in child-raising (Ryan 212). She might even have read Women and Economics, its encouraging news that women weren't necessarily the best mothers--not even for their own children. As it was, she chose madness. Beyond that she may have chosen, or had chosen for her, the ministrations of S. Weir Mitchell, designed to remake her into the image she rebels against. She didn't have many options.

The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" confides in her journal, a second self. With this "dead paper" she uses her woman's discourse with increasing freedom, sharing feelings she cannot discuss with John. In an era in which motherhood approached the realm of the sacred, it is remarkable she feels free to confess even her antipathy toward her infant.

Nor does it occur to her to do other than hide it from John. With herself--another woman--she finds her own ideal listener. Even as her depression deepens, the narrator, abandoning her writing, finds companionship with the woman emerging from the wallpaper. True, one part of her knows the paper is "dead." But her new reality is that this woman has not abandoned her; that in fact the woman has merged with her. Her woman's discourse, transcending the isolation of madness, can continue.

Barred from discourse with their male peers, the New Women at the turn of the century found it with each other. Lifetime bonds developed between women "who had little status or power in the larger world of male concerns" but who "possessed status and power in the lives and worlds of other women" (Smith-Rosenberg 64). Within the closed world of her own sphere, a woman, using the mother-daughter or friendship-apprentice relationship as a model, found autonomy through intimacy with another woman. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes that "Mothers and daughters took joy and comfort in one another's presence. They often slept with one another throughout the daughters' adolescence, wept unashamedly at separation, and rejoiced at reunions" (32). Women were each others' best friends, providing outlets for each others' discourse.

The New Woman brought these relationships into new

levels of intensity and duration as she moved toward autonomy. Standing on the threshold of power, she turned to her sisters for support. Such arrangements might be designed to protect them "from males" to show their disdain for the masculine culture presumably drenched in liquor, tobacco, and sexual vice" (Ryan 208). More likely they were a protest against what Carl Degler calls the "strait jacket" of domesticity in a world in which career opportunities were opening for women (164). Educated and sophisticated, rejecting traditional roles, turn-of-the-century women "carried sex segregation to its fullest, creating an almost perfect insularity of womanhood, in emotional and erotic as well as political and social terms" (Ryan 201).

In some cases such "Boston marriages" were undertaken as a positive alternative to heterosexual marriage. Degler quotes Jessie Taft's claim that "everywhere we find the unmarried woman turning to other women, building up with them a real home, finding in them the sympathy and understanding, the bond of similar standards and values as well as the same aesthetic and intellectual interests, that are often difficult of realization in a husband." Vida Scudder, an English teacher at Wellesley College, explained her preference for a female companion as the more sensible choice: "If your marriage is like most I know, it will begin as an indulgence but will proceed into a discipline"

(Degler 165). Conceivably the "discipline" Scudder seeks to avoid is the sacrifice of her women's discourse.

Smith-Rosenberg portrays 19th-century women's relationships with each other as intense, satisfying, and in some way complete. A certain glow surrounds these relationships: the March family sufficient unto itself while the men conveniently head off to war. Modeled on the mother-daughter relationship, backed by at least a century of tradition, the homosocial female pairing may have been not only a good answer but the best one. But Degler and Ryan, focussing on the turn of the century New Woman, suggest a different angle. Women bonded with each other because relationships with men were so unsatisfying. If the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is any indication, numerous attempts are made to communicate her discourse to her husband before she finally turns away from him and merges with her double. Even so, she may undergo much anxiety and pain before she surrenders to that relationship.

The New Woman, educated, sophisticated, may have chosen to avoid using women's language altogether. Women's discourse could be spoken to women like themselves. In this light, homosocial pairings appear as an effort on the part of the New Woman to write her own prescription. Like the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," she knew what to do for herself. Like the narrator, she lost hope of engaging male cooperation to make it work.

"Breathless," "apologetic," "tentative," describe an aspect of feminine communication known as "women's language." Paula Treichler notes its familiar textual markings in "The Yellow Wallpaper"--exclamation points, italics, intensifiers (72). There is also repetition as in the woeful refrain, "But what is one to do?" ("YW" 1149). Other markers of women's language include continued worried reference to a male, in this case the narrator's husband, and her tendency not to finish a thought, but to interrupt herself with questions about her own judgment.

One subtle but telling characteristic is her tendency toward what might be called "illogical logic." Linking two disparate thoughts in order to make one of them appear acceptable occurs often enough in the text to be significant. Found mostly in the first journal entry, these non-sequiturs can be seen in most cases as final efforts to cling to a belief in her husband's good intentions. They also have a casual quality, implying the narrator's resignation to a contradictory existence. "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that." Even today this comment might slip past the unsuspecting reader. The narrator, excited by the "ancestral home," gears herself up to "proudly declare there is something queer about it" (1148). But we are in the age of technology still; the

uncanny, despite its romantic appeal, makes us nervous. Like John, we might laugh, not because "queerness" is funny, but because we need to reduce its impact.

But removing the statement from context makes the logic less apparent. It is not necessarily logical to laugh at human beings, particularly when they are struggling with a discovery--even if it is a discovery of the uncanny. The addition of "of course" makes such derisive laughter seem even more offensive. Adding "one expects that" would bring to some ears the sound of mockery (1148).

Placing the statement back in context does little to disperse the unnatural feel of this apparently casual statement. We begin to know something of the sexual politics of the marriage when, rather than deal with possible (and logical) frustration, she chooses instead to justify John: "One must expect that;" "John is a physician and perhaps--perhaps that is the reason why I do not get well faster" (1148).

The tentativeness established through the italicized "perhaps" is only a ploy. In fact it is possible to conclude that she did react to the laughter. In the sentence immediately following, she tells us John is "practical in the extreme," one who "scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (1148). Supposedly a merely descriptive portrait,

this is in fact an incisive comment on a man whose imagination has been controlled out of existence. Going on to identify her husband as a physician, she immediately links this fact with her failure to get well. But it is a measure of the narrator's anger that she uses the very structure that she previously used to protect him to expose him. Once again, the naturalness of the connection is assumed with the conjunction "and," usually employed to connect statements of similar meaning. The result is that John is now portrayed as unnatural. (If the irony seems almost too heavy for this freshly developing character, we may be hearing the sound of the author's voice, missing no chance to scold Mitchell.)

"He is very careful and loving and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (1155). The narrator's pique has ended, and she is back to trying to please John. She must not think about her condition, must avoid strong feelings (such as her "unreasonable anger" at him), must even avoid discussing moving to another, more attractive bedroom. As usual, she reverts to thoughts about John, possibly because there is nothing left to think about.

But once again her logic in this statement is not as apparent as her parallel construction would make it seem. "Loving" is hardly in the same category as "careful"; it

certainly doesn't suggest the total control she is describing. Trying to slip this forced comparison past us, she manages for a while to slip it past herself. The fact that one who "hardly lets me stir" is one who doesn't love her is an insight she can face only as she crawls in circles around her bedroom weeks later.

"It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so" (1155). This observation occurs as the narrator prepares to talk to John for the last time. Lying in bed one night, uneasy about her growing obsession with the woman in the wallpaper, she tries to think of yet another way to approach him. Once again she must convince herself that his inaccessibility is in fact a virtue on par with wisdom and love. The sentence construction implies that his granite veneer has somehow become her problem. As the woman behind the wall begins to stalk her, the narrator affirms once more the fading reality of her link with John. Perhaps if she can assure herself that John is indeed wise and loving, even if she has to believe these are the reasons he is hard to talk to, she will also convince herself that his prescription is right for her. She is employing the woman's language of "illogical logic" to avoid seeing her marriage for what it is. In the process she may be able to stave off the uncanny once more.

Near the end of the century when "The Yellow Wallpaper" was published, the New Woman was still an ambivalent image. Self-assured and self-supporting on the one hand, she was subject on the other to doubts and fears that could culminate in emotional and even physical paralysis known as hysteria. Often acting as a passive-aggressive protest against role restrictions (Smith-Rosenberg 179), this disease was able to communicate weakness and helplessness. As a coping mechanism, allowing women to maintain an identity while avoiding both the terrors of autonomy and the constrictions of domesticity, hysteria was another form of women's language. In fact, by assuming through her symptoms the "hypertrophied versions of traits and behavior routinely reinforced throughout the 19th century in female children, adolescents, and adults," the invalid might be guilty of "women's logic" like the narrator (206). Instead of reaching for newly-won power, she might find it safer to revert to a womblike existence at the very center of her sphere. As such, she could avoid facing the anger and risk involved in speaking her discourse within the male sphere.

The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" may have been uniquely responsive to these pressures, however. Passing up the genteel if vaporous existence of the chronic hysteric, she assumes a clearly defined madness, a variation of the

disease not often noted by Mesdames Showalter, Ryan, and Smith-Rosenberg. Such decisive seizing on what after all appears to be her only alternative is what arouses feminists' admiration. In so doing, the narrator has eschewed the role of the helpless complainer. She has broken the rules, so to speak. In opting out of semi-weakness and into total helplessness, she has laid claim to power. It is this discovery, seeing a kind of ultimate woman's language become bold woman's discourse, that horrifies John so. Lying beneath her as she crawls over him, he acts out the radical fear he has suppressed from the beginning. His wife, once having taken power, will then overpower him.

Moonlight floods the room. From behind the wallpaper a phantom woman tries to shake herself loose. The anxious narrator wakens her sleeping husband, trying once more to advance her own prescription. This time she doesn't ask for company or stimulation or occupation; she simply wants to leave. But the results are the same as they have been. John argues with her, insisting she is better: "'I am a doctor, dear, and I know'" ("YW" 1155). Desperate, she plays her last card. Her mind, she hints, is going. Hearing this, the threat of losing control, John allows the sound of woman's discourse to reach his ears at last.

But he hears it only to deflect it; his answer lies in avoiding her own thoughts, her deepest self. She must adhere even more rigorously to his prescription. "'Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?'" he pleads. The combined power of physician and male has its effects. "So of course I said no more on that score," she concludes (1156). Even knowing how useless, how harmful his prescription has been, even knowing what she needs for herself, she withdraws her woman's discourse. She must trust her doctor-husband for no other reason than the fact that he insists.

Doctors may have been the last persons nineteenth century women should have trusted. Emerging from an eighteenth-century in which varieties of healers--including midwives, homeopaths and herbalists--provided cures, the doctors became increasingly anxious to establish itself as scientifically-trained experts. Degler cites the burgeoning profession of obstetrics as an example of the male-medical sentence assuming collective dominance over women: "When male physicians began to enter the delivery room, . . . childbirth . . . ceased to be a female ritual largely because male doctors brought that to an end." Turning a once intimate process into a "formal, cool, and impersonal" procedure, they had nevertheless failed to improve on

midwives' morbidity statistics by the end of the century (Degler 214).

Male medical dominance occurred not because of patients' needs but because the male commercial establishment had reached a point where it needed other occupations for its sons. In part the established physician owed his power to what Smith-Rosenberg calls the "mercantile elite of the Eastern seaboard" (232). Looking for professions high in status and financial security for their sons, they founded and funded the medical schools and hospitals these sons would ultimately staff. Graduates of these schools, powerfully connected, could then challenge the folk healers who were an important part of the rural culture.

In the process medical school graduates began to assume political weight, joining with politicians in "regulating women of their own class"--for example, bringing about the Comstock Law passed by Congress in 1873, forbidding the manufacture and sale of contraceptive or abortive devices (222).

As males, nineteenth-century doctors were also supported by the popular anti-feminist philosophers of that period. Charles Darwin's impact on domesticity, according to Glenna Matthews, was "reductionist, with respect to women, making reproductive capacity the chief criterion of

female excellence" (117). Insisting women were biologically inferior to men, Darwin elevated males to the status of the "vanguard of evolution" (117). Herbert Spencer, another late-nineteenth-century philosopher, believed that

trying to change this given of nature by overeducating a woman may serve to hamper her ability to reproduce because, since energy is finite, that which goes to the brain in the process of education will have been ineluctably drained from her demanding reproductive system. (qtd. in Matthews 122)

Matthews cites a physician responding with his own version of this idea in 1870: "It was as if the Almighty in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built up a woman around it" (125). Infused with such widely-held beliefs, the nineteenth-century male physician with the best intentions could certainly be understood (if not forgiven) for believing in the inviolability of his prescription-discourse.

Buttressed with so much authority, the medical profession may have operated as a true Gothic villain, purporting to help the heroine but in fact exacerbating her illness. Smith-Rosenberg writes,

From the mid-nineteenth century on, woman had become the quintessential symbol of

social danger and disorder. It is not surprising, therefore, that Victorian men generally and the male medical profession in particular focused some of their earliest . . . efforts at . . . socially controlling these seditious female figures (Smith-Rosenberg 181).

Certainly the rest cure is one example of social control. Treatment psychology is another: "Many doctors felt themselves to be locked in a power struggle with their hysterical patients." One physician wrote that doctors treating hysterical patients must

Assume a tone of authority which will of itself almost compel submission. If a patient. . . . interrupts the speaker, she must be told to keep silent and to listen; and must be told, moreover, not only in a voice that betrays no impatience and no anger, but in such a manner as to convey the speaker's full conviction that the command will be immediately obeyed. (211)

In view of such emphasis on authoritative control, it is not surprising that John in "The Yellow Wallpaper" responds so forcefully when his wife hints she is insane: "I. . . stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word" ("YW" 1156). "The Yellow Wallpaper" was at the

time of its publication categorized as Gothic, a horror story about an unnatural mother. Between shadow selves and ancestral homes with sinister moonlight, such a misreading is understandable. But from the feminist, and surely from the human, point of view, the true horror lies in the husband's duplicity. Beneath his mask as nurturer-healer, John emerges in this scene as an aggressor, determined to win the battle of the sexes at whatever cost to his wife.

The late nineteenth century was "peculiarly masculine," "characterized by the brute muscular strength of the steelworker and the arrogant aggressiveness of the robber-baron" (Ryan 168). Robin Morgan sees something of the terrorist in such raw power displays, even when they occur in disguised form in the middle-class marriage:

She is less threatening only if he can forcibly disconnect her from herself, fragment her into the appendage-selves he defines, and sublimates those selves to aid him in his task [of] trying to make [the male intellect] spiritually self-sufficient. When she does utter the unutterable and name this schism he has created, he will blame the messenger and call her the separatist. The only means by which she can hold him in any check is to deny herself. If she makes his quest her quest, his system her system, his mode of breathing

death-in-life her mode, then she can be accepted (up to a point): the "good woman." Which means, ironically, she may then survive--but as someone she will no longer recognize. (Morgan 79)

However it is characterized, some force certainly prevented the narrator from uttering "the unutterable," that is, her discourse, in the face of John's opposition. Her own helplessness, John's obdurateness, the medical establishment were against her. As a potential New Woman, she was peculiarly threatening--and therefore, peculiarly threatened. That she chose not to survive "as someone she will no longer recognize," however imperfect that choice, may have been a direct reflection on the women's movement of her day.

Escaping the Sentence through Writing

"I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me" ("YW" 1150).

The narrator is getting discouraged. John's "heavy opposition" to her need for work, for stimulation, for a prettier bedroom continue obdurate. Even writing, the one activity she sustains, although "he hates to have me write a word" (1150), gets wearisome. Having "no advice or companionship about my work," having to hide it from husband and sister-in-law who view it as her enemy, she is losing interest. That talent, having no other food, seizes on the wallpaper; and just as John thinks she is recovering, she becomes the vagrant sub-pattern that "slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you" (1153). In the end she, like her story, exposes him as the now-helpless villain, unable even to block her path as she creeps over him.

This powerful image of the decimated male tells us something about what women in 1891 were perceiving in the opposite sex. No longer the Angel in the House, not yet strong enough to be the New Woman, women were writing their

way out from under the male-medical establishment's desperate efforts to maintain control. In "The Yellow Wallpaper" credit is given--barely--for good intentions. John is almost as worried about his wife as he is about himself. The benign façade is maintained; but the malevolent sub-strands are exposed. There is refined brutality in his domination. In the name of healing, the doctor-husband has succeeded in closing off all paths to healing--all but the one, which is the talent that is "death to hide." However the combined efforts of three doctors--husband, brother, Weir Mitchell--impact on her, the narrator has marked her trail with words. Following it closely, we will see as she sees: a woman able to gain power only through madness, yes; but beneath her lies a straw man where the lord of the manor once stood tall.

A measure of compassion or at least pity softens this 1891 word portrayal of a man by a New Woman in the making. He is not yet the frank symbol of evil one finds in Mary Wilkes Freeman's "Old Woman Magoun." But the awakening of the woman writer had been going on for over a decade. Given impetus in 1879 by Ibsen's Nora walking decisively away from her doll's house, the image of men deteriorated progressively throughout the period (Literature 959). It was a time when "literary women no longer felt constrained to write covertly about their rebellion against socially prescribed roles" (959). This

rebellion began in America as early as 1881 when Sarah Orne Jewett, herself a partner in a 30-year Boston marriage, quietly suggests in "The White Heron" that even the most winsome man has his savage side.

The story begins quietly, portraying nine year-old Sylvia and her grandmother as backwoods Maine dwellers. The child, after eight years in a bustling city, revels in the rural setting, having nothing more complicated to consider than driving home a wayward cow. A young stranger, perusing the woodlands in search of bird species, soon endears himself to Sylvia. Meeting her in the pasture one evening, he follows her to her grandmother's house where he requests lodging for the night. Friendly, responsive, he joins their talk, supportive of Sylvia's shy eagerness. The next day, roaming the woods with Sylvia, he confides in her his great knowledge of birds. Normally afraid of people, she is excited by his enthusiasm, allowing him to see her exquisite affinity with nature. As they part branches, creep through underbrush, a new feeling surprises her, a hint of a "woman's heart," a "dream of love" (Jewett 602). It touches him too, "some premonition of that great power" which "stirred and swayed these young foresters" (602). Even the report of his gun, bringing down birds to stuff and to display, doesn't seriously disturb her. Normally identified with helpless creatures, she can only grieve with him when a

rare white heron proves elusive. Back home, she realizes she can locate the heron by climbing a tall tree at dawn. Knowing she can provide the secret he is "desperate" to know is "almost too real and too great for the childish heart to bear" (603).

But the secret of the heron, where its nest lies, proves more important even than pleasing the stranger. Having seen the white bird float from the "dark hemlock," soar to the treetops with the sunrise, she finds her own secret as well. She, like the heron, embodies an irreducible innocence that lies even beyond the invasion of the sweet power she had felt the day before. The stranger asks too much.

Returning from the high branches, scratched and stained, she offers him her woman's discourse--in this case, silence. He rejects it, insisting on his prescription by cajoling her, first with his "kind, appealing eyes," and offering her money. Gentle as he is, we see she must revert to "women's language" to please him. It is a lonely moment for Sylvia. Seeing what she may lose, another day in the woods with her charming companion, she scolds herself. Has she already proven herself a failure in the "great world"? (605). Are birds really better friends than kind young hunters?

But what of her "women's discourse," her silence?

However keen the young man's sensitivities, he ignores the clear message of her obvious struggle, her uncharacteristic retreat. To recognize her discourse would be to abandon his prescription, if only for a moment. Not to recognize her discourse, insisting on his "male sentence," is to encourage her "women's language"--in this case, to tell the heron's secret. The child recognizes the cost of abandoning herself so completely. Had he stayed another day, had they gone together to hunt the heron, she would have "served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves!" (605). Such is the reward to the user of "women's language."

Nevertheless, her eyes have been opened, a fact he could not have been unaware of. At the very least she knows loneliness for the first time. Even in her beloved woodlands, herding the cow home, she is restless, looking for the stranger, listening for his whistle. She wonders whether she should have spoken her women's language after all, although the implicit violence in such an act is reflected in her immediate recollection of "the piteous sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood" (605).

In the end the narrator adds her own comments, praising the child who can keep nature's secrets because she can keep her own. But the child's final bitter thought leaves us in

doubt about the safety of her women's discourse. "Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been--who can tell?" (605). The implication is that given another chance, she might have made a different decision.

If "The White Heron" is a gentler portrait of the turn-of-the-century male than "The Yellow Wallpaper," Freeman's "Old Woman Magoun" is scathing. Published in 1909 as women's impatience with lack of suffrage in particular and men in general was hardening, the narrator shows frank dislike for her male subject. Gilbert and Gubar claim that "Freeman's heroines recognize their isolation and defiantly struggle to preserve their integrity against the demands of the importunate suitors, husbands, and preachers who represent all that is left of a swindling Puritan culture" (Literature 1103). In "Old Woman Magoun" the narrator dispenses with such niceties as aesthetic distance in order to label her male villain "an evil deity" (Freeman 1105). Her heroine, who calls men "a passel of hogs" (1111), has "a mighty sense of reliance upon herself as being on the right track in the midst of a maze of evil" (1106). In the end she proves strong enough to break the most powerful male sentence-prescription. One might argue that she pronounces her own. Borrowing from the male tradition of power-wielding, she becomes a male symbol, exacting women's language from other women, including her granddaughter, and

otherwise emulating the people she tries to defeat.

Old Woman Magoun believes she has reason to be at odds with men. Living in Barry's Ford, she has raised a 14-year-old granddaughter, the offspring of a 16-year-old daughter now dead. Seduced and impregnated by Nelson Barry, a "fairly dangerous degenerate" of an old family, the daughter died a week after her child was born. Lily, who has "the best of the [Barry] strain in her," carries a doll and looks years younger than she is, a direct result of her grandmother's determination. "'I ain't in a hurry to have her git married,'" Old Woman Magoun reminds a neighbor (1107).

But she doesn't count on Nelson Barry's tireless mischief until one day Lily, coming from the store, shows up with candy. It is a gift from her father who, seeing her in the store, becomes aware of her adolescent beauty for the first time. Not even knowing the girl's name, he asks her what it is, tries unsuccessfully to separate her from her doll by giving her sweets. Meanwhile a crony of equally important and degenerate lineage expresses interest in her.

Back home as Lily tells her tale, the grandmother's face "was that of one upon whom a long-anticipated blow had fallen" (1109). Later that evening she is not surprised to learn that Nelson wants the child; and with a gaze "that grew inconceivably keen," she understands that Nelson will

use the child as payment to the crony for a gambling loss.

Having a week to get her ready, Old Woman Magoun awakens the child early the next morning, dresses her in Sunday clothes, and takes her to Lawyer Mason's house. Waiting outside, Lily is treated by Marian Mason, a bereft mother, to cake, sour apples and milk, which Old Woman Magoun scolds her for, alarmed at the prospect of indigestion. After they leave, Lawyer Mason tells his wife that the old woman asked him to adopt Lily, and that he had to refuse because Lily was a Barry. Stopping to rest on the way home, the child with her grandmother's permission consumes nightshade berries. Hours later, tended by a despairing if determined grandmother, Lily dies a prolonged a death. No one, not even Nelson Barry, questions that the combination of sour apples and milk killed her.

Unlike John, the doctor-husband in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Nelson Barry makes no pretense of goodness. When Old Woman Magoun accuses him and his half-witted sister of being too evil to raise Lily, he responds, "'Well, a knowledge of evil is a useful thing. How are you going to avoid evil if you don't know what it is like?'" (1112). Seeing Lily for the first time as a budding adolescent, he caresses her in such a way that she responds as if "nature itself were asserting [itself] in the child's innocent, receptive breast" (1108). He is almost a caricature of the

male prescription; it is as if not just he but the whole male population has become a degenerate seed. We can scarcely doubt Old Woman Magoun's belief that once Nelson and his crony get hold of Lily, the result will be unspeakable.

Old Woman Magoun's language and actions, on the other hand, scarcely add up to "women's discourse." Sternly self-confident to the point of flaunting her power, she would find the idea of male approval irrelevant. She is contemptuous of men, their need to "'drink and chew to keep their sperits up,'" unlike she who needs neither. That most of the men in her town are exactly as she characterizes them is not the point. This is no New Woman, newly disillusioned after years of trying to pronounce her "women's discourse." Her hardened persona more nearly resembles a general long-term, wide-ranging disgust for the opposite sex that characterized Darwin or Spencer. Revelling in her power over most males, she brings to mind the businessmen of that period, caring little for the welfare or dignity of those who must slave for a pittance. She is never openly cruel; and in her mind she is simply fighting a good defence, a possibility that gives pause when analyzing a generalized hostile male attitude. But she projects little patience with anyone's prescription, male or female, besides her own.

The message of "Old Woman Magoun" is not optimistic.

In a world in which men are either impotent or evil, the choices for women are few. Taking power by adopting the male prescription model enervates both males and females. It means for one thing that such a powerful authority figure, demanding "women's language" from both sexes, will separate them from their discourse. Lily's eerie 14-year-old innocence, a product of her grandmother's deliberate cultivation, may have been more sexually stimulating than open flirtation. It is possible to conjecture that Old Woman Magoun raised her daughter to be equally "innocent," thereby rendering her, like Lily, peculiarly vulnerable to Barry's attentions. The possibility of employing women's discourse is not even considered here. Other than occasional employment with a neighbor, it has been subsumed by hard-driving prescriptive tactics. The mystery of the absence of women's discourse may be the central if unasked question of the story. Had autonomy based on an authentic sense of self been tried and abandoned? Or did women in Barry's Ford have to define themselves from the start in relation to the evil maze surrounding them? In other words, is adopting the male prescription the only role women can take, even if it means the destruction of other women and themselves?

The image of the turn-of-the-century male as viewed by contemporary women writers is far from positive. At best we

have a charming if manipulative natural scientist like the ornithologist in "The White Heron." At worst we see an amoral lecher like Nelson Barry who considers his own daughter fair game. In between stands John, the husband-physician of "The Yellow Wallpaper," cloaking his domination with eerie benignity. In each case, a woman is a victim. Sylvia's faith in her woman's discourse is shaken; the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" finds her discourse at the expense of her sanity; and Old Woman Magoun, striding to market with eggs and vegetables in one hand and Lily's doll in the other, is herself reduced to women's language in spite of herself. The message becomes clearer with each decade. The male prescription is powerful and well-entrenched. Women may choose to fight it through their language, as did Lily and the narrator; through their discourse, like Sylvia and in the end the narrator; and through subsuming the male prescription by writing their own, as did Old Woman Magoun. Whatever the choice, however, if these stories are indicators, the outcome will be the same. They will lose.

Conclusion: Part I

Women's discourse in 1891 was still a fleeting thing. Among women it flowed freely, supporting the New Woman as she took her first shaky steps towards autonomy in a man's world. Women's discourse flowed with equal freedom in the world of letters where (under the guise of entertainment) women portrayed males with increasing frankness. Gilman's portrayal of the insensitive doctor-husband in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is far more lethal than Jewett's depiction of the gentle ornithologist. But if the world of "The Yellow Wallpaper" tells us anything, it is that women's discourse found no place at all between husband and wife. Whether the subject is a prettier bedroom or a visit with friends, the narrator pleads, begs, and otherwise clothes her legitimate discourse in women's language. She asks with no expectation of being heard. She never expects to be taken seriously.

The male sentence-prescription, on the other hand, flows freely. In the exploding world of capitalism and frontier exploration, in the heady belief in Manifest Destiny, and in the self-serving theories of Darwin and Spencer, male imperialism dominated everywhere. In "The Yellow Wallpaper" John reflects this unflinching confidence as he addresses his wife's condition. Unfailingly deferential, he nevertheless yields nothing, regarding every request as an irrelevant whim at best and a likely test of his power. That he retains absolute control is taken for granted. That she disagrees is of no importance except as a

symptom of her illness. His goal is to surround and take captive her "fancy," her "gift for story-making,"--her imagination--just as he has subdued his own. John never doubts that a simple rationalism is the key to mental health. He devotes his energy to changing his wife's will through the force of his own.

But John has reckoned without the New Woman. The narrator appears to be, feels herself to be, intimidated by the world of male-medical authority; however, she retains some grasp on her discourse. She knows what she needs, even if she doesn't know how to insist. She writes her story, even though she hides it from John. She befriends her shadow self--and this time she does show herself to John. The cocksure Darwinist is confronted by a powerful stranger. True, she gains impetus from her madness; but John is overwhelmed nevertheless. This is no Sylvia, mourning her loss in quiet resignation; nor is it an embittered Old Woman Magoun. Rather, it is one who, though grievously split, challenges a formidable authority. That she sacrifices health and happiness seems somehow irrelevant. That she crawls over him as she circles the room is everything. Knowing that the bluff can be called, that the male-medical establishment is vulnerable, is a crucial insight. If one woman is destroyed as she pursues such awareness, another may gain the courage to go on. We can only conjecture that

the New Woman's stunning autonomy is based on such incremental progress.

Chapter II

Escaping the Sentence: Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, author of "The Yellow Wallpaper," had all the qualities of the New Woman. In an age in which the domestic was sacred, she left her husband for no "real" reason. Eight years later she outraged her growing public by giving up her daughter as well. Triumphant over depression and poverty, both of which plagued her all her life, she became a strong enough symbol of healthy and imaginative feminine autonomy to be in demand as a speaker and writer worldwide. In mid-life, finding marital happiness at last, she reveled in those times when she, her husband and her daughter (from her first marriage) were together. In later years, having outlived her own popularity, she continued to proclaim her message of economic independence for both sexes. Near the end, faced with cancer, she took control of her death as she had her life, chloroforming herself to avoid helpless suffering.

Such a bold image appears formidable, seamless. And yet the story of the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is by Gilman's own testimony a creative version of her own experience as a new mother. Modern writers, reading her autobiography and studying her letters, see the connection. Juliann Evans Fleenor suggests the subtext of Gilman's personal writings gives her a Gothic personality which is "limiting in that it reduces Gilman's life to that of a victim" (117). Patricia Meyers Spacks believes Gilman's

purpose in writing her autobiography is to claim herself a "psychic cripple" in order to avoid taking responsibility for her decision to leave husband and child (208). Gilman's story is for Spacks "a paradigm of feminine anger" with which, true to her Victorian roots, she fails to come to terms (210). Viewed in this light, Gilman takes on an entirely different aspect. No longer the bold New Woman, she becomes instead the helpless True Woman of earlier decades, firmly entrenched in her separate sphere, unable to see how it could become a vehicle for greater autonomy.

Who in fact is Charlotte Perkins Gilman? In examining her autobiography, its connection with "The Yellow Wallpaper," and critical writings about both, I hope to come to a conclusion. Undoubtedly, like the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," she was a figure in transition, a mixture of old and new. Undoubtedly, like most women of that transitional period, she spoke both women's language and women's discourse. Probably she sacrificed something of herself to both. But did she, like her narrator, suffer a fatal split, despite her autonomy? Or, despite her harrowing young adult experience, did she go forward as a survivor?

Reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman's autobiography is reading for pleasure. The tone is consistently light,

gently self-deprecating, although never apologetic; almost always it is ironic. Though a reformer she maintains an observer's distance, never more than rueful or at most mildly indignant. There is a sense of a larger-than-life writer who is somehow exempt from the petty aggravations of human nature except as they amuse or occasionally irritate her. The Twainesque ease, the enormous stability of tone are meant to soothe as well as entertain. We chuckle and sigh along with her as at age sixty-five she leafs back through old dairies, sharing excerpts and anecdotes. True, there are frequent, even constant references to dull days, weeks and occasionally months of "weakness" which she stumbled through and which sometimes immobilized her (The Living 100). She spends an entire chapter detailing the ordeal of a life in which, because of this "weakness" she could read very little, write no more than three hours a day. Her words tell us there was illness, even agony. But so casual is the narrative, so intimate and positive in tone, we incorporate it as we might incorporate an account of occasional debilitating sinusitis. Gilman had little patience with psychoanalysis. We are and we aren't meant to plumb the full depths of this disease. We are only to understand a "health" problem that formed a threatening but basically minor deterrant to goals she never questioned.

As she peruses her old notes, she amazes even herself:

"As I look over these old diaries, and see how many were kind to me, in how many places, it becomes understandable how I lived for so long on so little. Complete absence of personal desires, and absolute confidence that I should be taken care of, made a lack of money a matter of laughable endurance" (The Living 279, emphasis added). Financial crises abound from early adulthood when she begins to live on free will offerings from lecture audiences. (She received very little from writing until the publication of Women and Economics). Frequently debts pile up, debts she never forgot. Years later her diaries record her delight in paying off twenty dollars here, eight dollars there.

Nor did asking seem to degrade her. Planning a cross-continent train trip, she needed twenty-five dollars more to buy a ticket. That the train would leave the next morning didn't shake her determination not to worry. That evening following a lecture, she successfully accosted a listener, a stranger, for the money. On another occasion a German grocer visited her to collect the large debt she ran up trying to feed her daughter, her mother and several boarders. He left without his money, declaring her a wonderful woman. In later life, internationally famous, she didn't change. About to make a six-week trip to Europe, she left with only her usual two bags, twenty dollars in her purse, and a single evening dress to wear to the many

occasions to be held in her honor.

She resembled nothing so much as an itinerant preacher, and in fact during a five-year period of constant travel (1895-1900) she listed her address as "at large" (181).

"Don't you feel at sea?" inquired an incredulous observer.

"I do," she replied, "like a sea gull at sea" (181).

Sleeping in every conceivable setting from sumptuous English country houses to flea bag hotels, she observed but never complained. "Never having had a settled home, but always feeling perfectly at home anywhere, in this country or others," she was not surprised that even among the staid British, "strangers confided in [her] as at home" (269).

Gilman even had the religious faith of a preacher, albeit a non-orthodox preacher. Her beliefs derived from an individualistic rationalism fashioned in her teen years, a pragmatic philosophy that never changed, only deepened.

"There is plenty of God, enough for us all. We have but to help ourselves to this illimitable force," as she summed it up: "Once solidly convinced of this reliable power--nothing else matters much" (182). It was this faith that she expounded when asked to preach in California in 1891, accepting every invitation that came her way. The Beecher flair for public speaking came to her aid and she was well received. In subsequent years she preached in congregations as varied as Methodist and Universalist.

But it was her lecture experiences that occupied most of her career account. They began shortly after moving to California in the early nineties when, meeting a woman on a bus, she accepted a speaking invitation. Her reputation spread and she got calls to speak on anything from Nationalism to "Being our Best" to "The Brain." Some variant of feminism became her standard topic in later years. Nor was she always sure of her subject. Once, having prepared on one topic, she spoke on another due to a mistake by the moderator. Free will offerings were taken up, expenses were paid, and she was given the remainder, which she received without complaint. Hecklers, small numbers, miniscule fees she received as a matter of course. A rare show of exasperation occurred when in Milwaukee at the Biennial meeting of the General Federation of Women's Clubs she was on the roster with seven other speakers. The first speaker used up the entire two hours allotted for the eight! (149).

Audiences, hosts, second husband, daughter, pompous duchesses and impoverished farmers were all swept up along with herself in some general category called Humanity. Some were described more tenderly than others; some, including herself, she poked fun at. But if we are to believe this autobiographer, we are reading about a life extraordinary in its serene distance from the grunt and grind of daily human

interactions. Most especially is she distant from herself; and it seems we are to believe, and with very little trouble do believe, that the distance is real, and that it is the key to the services she rendered. If, like Jacob, she limps, having wrestled with powers beyond the human, if she suffers occasional depression and despair, the reality is simply enhanced. She did it for us; and she makes us believe it.

American Women; Images and Realities reads the title of the Arno Press series that published Gilman's autobiography. And coming away from a first reading, I was puzzled. Is the Gilman depicted in these pages a reality or an image? She who tried to portray her constant "weakness," those weeks and months of debilitating gloom as normal--she can't be overlooked. Closer reading causes this side of Gilman to emerge as a disturbing other, not accounted for by the author's casual tone. Listen to her own words:

1890: "I am by no means well. Two fits of wretchedness in a week is bad" (135).

1896: (In confidence to a doctor who advises her to think positively): "'You know the state of my health,--what do you advise me to think about?' They concluded I was on the verge of losing my mind" (190).

1897: "Nevertheless, I was down again, though writing

the best I could."

"In August down again, far down."

"All bad days and nothing in 'em" (209).

Reflecting on the decades after her second, apparently satisfying marriage: "For all my happiness at home and various glories abroad, I remained through all these years more sick than well; that is, there was more time spent in dull distress of mind activity" (303).

Finally: "To stoop so suddenly from proud strength to contemptible feebleness, from cheerful stoicism to a simpering avoidance of any strain or irritation for fear of a collapse ensuing, is not pleasant at twenty-four. To spend forty years and more in 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" (100).

These are jarring notes, made more so by their frequency. My impression is that they are found in every chapter. Gilman wants us to understand this dilemma as a serious hurdle to an otherwise normal life. But, given the grand disinterest of the persona in the autobiography, the emphasis nevertheless remains on normal. In fact, her very insistence that her huge dark side merits ineffectual protests (rather than tragic resignation for example), is in itself abnormal. Fleenor goes farther: "In contrast to her

many claims, woman as author is depicted in the autobiography not as the forceful, decisive woman she intended, but as a wounded woman in constant torment" (129). Far from being the survivor she portrays, Gilman is in fact a victim: "The heroine of this work is damaged, controlled by others--male and female--permanently scarred, and not the logical self-supporting woman she appeared to others" (129).

Two questions arise from this paradox: How did such complete crippling occur? Why was it so necessary to pretend being crippled was normal?

Most writers locate Gilman's trauma as originating in her childhood, most specifically in her relationship with her mother. This woman was, in Spacks' words, "the force destroying beauty, hope, and love for her" (210). However, Spacks, like the other writers I am acquainted with, is blaming a victim, never mentioning the father who abandoned the family when Gilman was two. Certainly his daughter is aware of his culpability. We read of his late, often non-existent support payments, for which she sometimes had to beg; his "fatherly" guidance which consisted of reading lists; his cold visitor's call when Gilman arrived alone in San Francisco, fleeing a troubled marriage; and the eighteen moves made in nineteen years by a mother and two children trying to keep a roof overhead.

Gilman portrays her mother as a talented musician,

forced to sell a beloved piano to pay the butcher bill; one who "hated debt, and debts accumulated about her" (The Living 9). Loving her husband to her last day, she nevertheless divorced him after thirteen years of waiting, hoping to free him for another. Gilman writes angrily of his "bitter resentment" that Mrs. Perkins would so disgrace him (9).

An intriguing non-sequitor arises in Gilman's account of her mother's death. Her husband living nearby, Mrs. Perkins "longed, she asked, to see him before she died. As long as she was able to be up, she sat always at the window watching for that beloved face. He never came. That's where I get my implacable temper" (9, emphasis added). In fact the persona of the autobiography is mostly distinguished for her lack of temper, and as far as I know, she never uses the word at any other time in this writing. Given her aching identification with her dying mother, it is more likely the father's neglect brought on not temper but a subterranean rage, one which started early and never slacked.

Knowing this we are in a better position to understand why the strong-minded Gilman, in a misguided effort to "make it up" to her mother, allowed her a control so total as to bring lifelong damage upon herself. Mrs. Perkins' strictness bordered, at least, on abuse. The author recalls

frequent whippings, very early bedtimes, shorn curls (to discourage vanity), forbidden caresses, stifled fantasies, injunctions against novels and, especially, intimate friendships. Implicit throughout is a portrayal of an angry, love-starved mother who could not and therefore did not award approval to her equally love-starved daughter.

But Gilman will only concede that her mother lost touch with her children as they got older; that her mother lacked only knowledge of the techniques of child-raising, the kind that could be acquired by training. "Yet all the best she had, all the best she knew, my mother gave, at any cost to herself" (11).

Gilman seems to gain critical distance from her mother in an incident that took place when she was fourteen. Spying on a friend of her mother's, Gilman was accused by this friend of thinking that the friend had eaten forbidden grapes. When the friend complained to Gilman's mother that Gilman thought the woman had stolen grapes, Mrs. Perkins ordered her daughter to apologize. When Gilman refused, Mrs. Perkins then ordered her to leave. Refusing again, Gilman boldly asked her mother what she intended to do about it. Mrs. Perkins struck her, then left her alone. Writes Gilman, "I was realizing of course that neither she nor anyone, could make me do anything. One could suffer, one could die. . .but one could not be coerced. I was born. .

." (34).

A period of heady but scary turmoil followed during which Gilman realized she was truly her own person. But not for long. Instead she opted for a course of absolute obedience to her mother until age 21 because "I saw that my mother was probably wiser than I, that she had nothing to live for but her two children. . ." (36, emphasis added).

That Gilman could see her mother's emptiness as a reason for slavish obedience gives us an idea of how greatly her new freedom terrified her. It must have traumatized her mother as well, because she made full and excessive use of her renewed authority. And Gilman, having taken the vow of obedience, buckled to the task with all the energy of a novice. As a result, she denies herself many extraordinary opportunities for recreation and friendship. One searing incident occurs when at age seventeen Gilman is invited by a cousin to watch Edwin Booth perform in Hamlet while sitting in the family box.

"Booth! Hamlet! A box! Nothing in all the world could have meant so much to me at the time" (54). Her mother refused lest another cousin, having invited her to a concert the previous day and been refused, would be offended. Gilman's response is haunting: "The unparalleled glory offered and the pitiful inadequacy of the reason for its denial made a ghastly impression on my mind. Something

broke" (51). At the time Gilman was giving much thought to power, both as a law of physics and of human nature. She concluded that to use it is to regenerate it and that God was the limitless source (43). Yet her acceptance of powerlessness, arbitrary and self-imposed, while blaming her mother, results in a split from herself, her own needs, that will never heal. She writes, "I have never since that day felt the sharp sting of disappointment, only a numb feeling" (52). Acting on her own behalf becomes an increasing impossibility. Power, a concept that fascinates her so deeply, is an option only when considering the needs of others. The self must be denied.

But a denied self is an angry self, as Spacks points out: "This curious autobiography paradoxically denies the importance of self; it records the life of a woman for whom power appears not to be an issue. But anger can generate power" (217). Whatever the force responsible, at age sixteen Gilman began exerting it to bring every aspect of her being--physical, mental, and emotional--under rational control. Triggered by an elderly friend who called her "all froth and no foam" (The Living 56), Gilman began a systematic revamping of her character. Each New Year she made and kept resolutions. Thoughtfulness, total truthfulness, treating males and females alike were goals

she accomplished. Systematic reading of history, philosophy and natural sciences was incorporated into her schedule along with languages. Having attended art school, she earned her living in commercial art; but she had time to organize enough women to open a gymnasium. Her health rules pertaining to sleep and fresh air were rigid. At night she slept with windows wide open, regardless of cold, heat or mosquitoes. It was a period of "good health, great hopes, and constant energy," which, along with a close friendship with another woman, made her life "perfect" (77). The culmination came when at age twenty-one she informed her chagrined mother that she no longer intended to obey. Gilman saw herself as free to rejoice in "the triple-plated defense of [her] strong philosophy," and concluded nothing could force her to be unhappy (77).

Three years later the triple-plated defense disintegrated. At age twenty-four, married, a new mother, Gilman, surrounded with help and love, could do nothing but cry. "I lay on that lounge and wept all day. The tears ran down into my ears on either side. I went to bed crying, woke in the night crying, sat on the edge of the bed in the morning and cried--from sheer continuous pain" (91). The problem began shortly after the wedding when "a sort of gray fog drifted across my mind, a cloud that grew and darkened"

(88). Reflecting on her psychic wounds then and later, she attributes a small part of them to her upbringing and her own stringent demands on herself. But she believes the most basic, "the immediate and continuous cause," was "mismatching" (98). As evidence she cites her fast rebound to health whenever she left home for an extended period. The fact that her melancholy spells continued to haunt her for a lifetime had to do, she believed, with the stress of poverty and overwork after she left her marriage. But once again the autobiography raises more questions than it answers.

Everything she writes about her husband Walter Stetson, both before and after their marriage, up to and beyond separation is positive. She recognized him as an immediate soulmate, "quite the greatest man near my own age I had ever known" (82). He shared her passion for self-improvement, was a "noble soul. . . who read and studied and cared for real things" and with whom she shared "the natural force of sex-attraction" (83). That she never felt any clear leading to marry him she attributes to an over-disciplined psyche, not used to being consulted about her preferences. After marriage he brought her flowers, prepared her breakfast. Although "something was going wrong from the first" (88) with restless days and hysterical nights, he devoted himself to her, even staying home from work to wait on her. But

when the nurse departed after the first month, leaving her alone with the child, "I broke so fast that we sent for my mother" (89). Finally convinced of the necessity of divorce, she writes "we sympathized with each other but faced a bitter necessity" (97). She understood the trauma this move entailed for "the young artist, the devoted husband, the loving father, was so bitter a grief and loss that nothing would have justified breaking this marriage save the greater loss that was threatened" (96). Better a divorce, they decided, than their child allowed to grow up with a "lunatic mother" (97).

Nor is there any way to clear up this mystery except by conjecture. A glance back at her childhood suggests a personality that seeks to be controlled. We see this at age fourteen when, finding herself a "free agent" from her mother's control, she promptly put herself under a vow of obedience for the next five years. Out from under it again at age twenty-one, she met Stetson. Sensing disaster, she refused to marry him until "one time when he had met a keen personal disappointment I agreed" (83). Once again she sacrificed herself in an effort to assuage another's unhappiness. One other incident suggests her eagerness to carry on the same submissive relationship with Stetson that she had with her mother. "'Do just as you choose,'" she told him when he decorated their apartment before marriage.

"I have no tastes and desires. I shall like whatever you do'" (85). Perhaps. But the fact that she was making her living as a commercial artist imparts a self-sacrificial ring to her words.

But at this stage of Gilman's life we do not have to rely solely on her autobiography for insight. Gary Scharnhorst properly cautions us against taking "The Yellow Wallpaper" as "unvarnished memoir" as some critics including Elaine Hedges and Mary A. Hill have done (19). However, Gilman herself sees the story as a warning against Weir Mitchell's treatments of neurasthenia (Lane 20). But Hill, in her essay "Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Feminist's Struggle with Womanhood," regards the work as a direct and meaningful contrast to the autobiography in the portrayal of the husband. "She was not inclined publicly or explicitly to indict loved ones in her life. Yet in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' she presented insanity as a form of rebellion, a crucial turning point toward independence" (37).

Still the question remains: What does she rebel against? If Stetson is like John, panicked by his own psyche, finding refuge in a kind of compulsive "normalcy," he is worth fleeing. We have evidence that he tends to her with the same fatherly anxiety John bestowed on his "little girl" in "The Yellow Wallpaper": "A well-nigh sleepless

night. . .Walter is love and patience personified, gets up over and over, gets me warm wintergreen, bromide, hot foot-bath, more bromide--all to no purpose" (The Living 88). Davidson believes Stetson assigned Gilman the role of "submissive, domestic helpmeet to the great artist" (Davidson x). She cites a diary entry during his engagement to Gilman in which he quotes Gilman as saying, "'When I am with you I feel 'little,' you hurt my pride over and over, I don't feel half so powerful or think that I am of half as much need to the world in general'" (Davidson x). It is natural to suspect that his goal was to manipulate her back to "health" and a wife's traditional role. Furthermore, for an ascetic like Gilman, whose wash water in winter was ice because she left her bedroom windows open, a man who fussed over and protected her would be a source of rebellion.

Whatever Gilman's feelings for Stetson, there is no doubt about her feelings for her doctor, S. Weir Mitchell. Applying to him as a last resort after she had left home once, Gilman was inexplicably undeterred by his prejudice against Beecher women. "'I've had two women of your blood here already,'" he told me scornfully" (The Living 95). Gilman faithfully followed his treatment--"a sinister parody of idealized Victorian femininity: inertia, privatization, narcissism, dependence" (Showalter 274),--for months. The result of enforced idleness, heavy feeding, and intellectual

stagnation was that "'I...came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over'" (qtd. in Lane 20). This was one instance in which Gilman's penchant for obedience lost its power. "I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again--work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, . . . ultimately recovering some measure of power" (20). Unlike the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," she found her congenial work.

Gilman claims she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" "to save people from being driven crazy" (20). She is satisfied that the story is a mere piece of didacticism with a single purpose. But more, much more is suggested by the story. The mild-mannered autobiographer becomes "the paradigm of anger" Spacks denoted (217). It is a story of abandonment which points to her father. It is the story of control disguised as benevolence, which points to her husband. It is the story of misogyny masked as healing, a reflection on her doctor. And it is a story of "what if?" As Lane points out, "'The Yellow Wallpaper' must have haunted Gilman all her life because it answered the question: But what if she had not fled from her husband and renounced the most advanced psychiatric advice of her time? The risks in both her actions were severe, and costly, but the alternative, as she posed it in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' was worse; and she

knew it" (xviii).

"What if?" indeed! The "alternatives" are independence through madness, a firm claim to women's discourse; or total capitulation to victimization or women's language according to three critics who analyze "The Yellow Wallpaper." Michelle Massè sees the story as a tale of a Gothic heroine who seeks autonomy. Analyzing previous Gothic tales, she isolates a formula whereby a heroine, rescued by a male from a male, finds "happiness." In fact, according to Massè, such happiness is an illusion because any woman attached to a male, even a benevolent male, cannot maintain her autonomy. Living in such a repressive society creates a trauma not unlike post-traumatic stress disorder which, however, cannot be recovered from since it is not recognized as a disorder. The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" shows symptoms of PTSD by practicing repetitive acts in her speech and by obsessing with wallpaper figures, trying to deal with the trauma of her socially induced illness. As Massè notes, "Because neither John nor society will alter gender expectations, the onus is on the protagonist to change her expectations" (Massè 701). Seeing no exit from her dilemma, she escapes into the "dreadful freedom" of insanity. From the safety of her new self, the woman behind the wallpaper, she can now question her husband, fling the key out the window, and deny him access to the self he has tried to

control. In spite of the fact that Jane, unlike Charlotte, stayed with the treatment and found tragedy, she had, according to Massè, acted from strength: "While other Gothic protagonists struggle to deal with their prohibited identity, this speaker has recognized her dilemma, measured the scope allowed to her, and disabused herself of belief in the benevolent intention behind those limits" (709).

Significantly Massè concludes that Gothic horror will disappear only as the domination of patriarchal authority subsides.

But Jeanette King and Pam Morrison see the heroine of "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a total victim. In a Lacanian reading they first establish that the human personality is doubly split in early childhood. The twofold result, a search for an ideal self and alienation from self as the result of repressed Oedipal impulses, results in a bewildered quest for "metaphoric substitutions" for what we really want (King and Morris 26). Language is seized on by children as a way to bring some order into their now fractured perceptions. Unfortunately for females, self-definitive words reflect awareness of sex roles; and because males dominate, in any given pair of words, the one with the most positive connotation is the one most associated with maleness. For example, in the pair "strong" and "weak," the word with the most positive social connotations, "strong,"

is associated more readily with male than female characteristics (26).

The resulting power gives men the right to name and even to classify women, as does John in "The Yellow Wallpaper." It is his right and authority to announce that Jane is sick. It is his right to denounce her imaginative activities, such as writing and fantasizing, as dangerous. In some ways Jane encourages him, abandoning herself by allowing him to discount her feelings as irrational. She complies, although she experiences some doubt, hardly articulated, which nevertheless constitutes a split in herself. As the split deepens, she applies to John, pleading for the stimulation of a day away from her room. Denied, she absorbs herself in the wallpaper which, however, frightens her. King and Morris depict the wallpaper as a "metaphoric substitution for the desire which haunts her socially conforming self: the desire for an uncanny, forbidden self, unreadable, lawless and mocking" (29). Finally she rips the paper off the wall in an effort to do away with the deepening split, and all that remains is the self her society values: a conforming wife.

But choosing women's language as a permanent alternative has its price. In the end the "uncanny which she has sought to suppress turns its back somersault, gaining possession of the desirable self she has constructed with such self-

sacrificing effort, and transforming it into a grotesque, shameful caricature of female helplessness and submissiveness--a creeping woman" (31). The dark side leaps on her like some loathsome insect, giving her the radical power that only total helplessness can generate. So minimalized, she can only show her power by crawling over the prostrate body of an equally helpless husband.

Care must be taken, of course, not to draw too close parallels between the story and Gilman's life. But it is not too much to say that Gilman's public self was "constructed with such self-sacrificing effort"; and that periodically she was transformed by that repressed, "uncanny" self into what Gilman might consider a "grotesque, shameful caricature of female helplessness" (31). Begun in childhood by the abandonment of her father, aggravated by the coldness of her mother (perhaps resulting from the father's abandonment), deepened by her own radical submissiveness, the split became, finally, irrevocable. Later in life, courted by Houghton Gilman, she would experiment with more personal roles, characterizing herself in one letter as "a sleepy Newfoundland puppy in your overcoat pocket" (Hill 42). But as in her autobiography notes, the dark periods continued, balancing and even, if we read her closely, over-balancing her productive periods. While living a public life of sacrifice and service, Gilman,

as it appears from these readings, lived a private life of despair.

And finally it may not be too much to suggest that some of Gilman's unhappiness included ambivalence about her role as a writer. Breaking away from father, husband, doctor, the feminine role in general, she had to break away from the world of male writers as well. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, noting that the narrator is a writer as well as homemaker, believe her story is one of transcendence over patriarchy in text as well as in society. They cite Harold Bloom's model of literary history as an arena in which males struggle against their precursors for literary dominance. A woman of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, without precursors, faces the "anxiety of influence"--"a radical fear that she [a woman author] cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will destroy her" (Madwoman 49). Women like Gilman who transcended the struggle fought against "an isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness" (51). This alienation is often manifest in literature in which an insane double arises, as she did in "The Yellow Wallpaper," giving voice to "their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be" (78). Gilbert and Gubar see the narrator creeping outdoors and

down the road as "breaking out of the texts defined by patriarchal poetics into the open spaces of their own authority" (91). From this it may not be too much to say that as the narrator triumphed, so did Gilman, taking unto herself the anxiety of non-being as a writer and moving forward.

Insane good girl? Strong if anxious woman writer? Or survivor who chooses madness if that is the only alternative to submission to patriarchy? If the critics are right, Jane fits all three categories. And if her crisis can be seen as representing Gilman's in its essence, then Gilman too fits all three categories.

The most tragic, of course, is the permanently insane "good girl" who plagued Gilman for the rest of her days. As it did the narrator, so it took hold of her, "gaining possession of the desirable self she has constructed with such self-sacrificing effort, and transforming it into a grotesque, shameful caricature of female helplessness and submissiveness--a creeping woman" (King and Morris 31). It appears then that her whole life was to be a replay of those young adult years in which the carefully constructed superstructure periodically disintegrates without warning, leaving Gilman a living symbol of women's language. In fact Gilman herself would agree: "Worst of all was the rapid collapse of my so laboriously built-up hand-made character.

Eight years of honest conscientious nobly-purposed effort lost, with the will power that made it. The bitterness of that shame will not bear reviving even now" (The Living 101, emphasis mine). To blame such a chronic ordeal on a poor marriage is to oversimplify, unless one considers her married to society and patriarchy and family as well. The almost violent decisiveness needed to disentangle herself from such structures would not leave her unscathed.

Nowadays her spells might be called "depressive," or perhaps even "manic-depressive." Gilman tended to refer to them as spells in which "weakness" predominates, giving them physical implications as well. But we could be forgiven if, when reading of her pain and isolation, we caught an image of a submissive, creeping woman lost in an eternal search for the good girl side of herself; one that would, as Weir Mitchell advised, return to her separate sphere of home, husband, child, laying aside her New Womanhood forever. In other words, we catch a side of Gilman that, perhaps, longed to yield to tradition, even if it meant living life as a victim.

At first glance there seems almost no damage fallout on Gilman's writing. Sheer volume aside, the quality of such works as "The Yellow Wallpaper," Herland and Women and Economics is undisputed. The short story is a compelling

metaphor for any woman seeking autonomy in a patriarchal society. Herland provides a vision of a society based on female values of unity and nurture as opposed to male traditions of competition and individuality. As increasing numbers of women assume leadership in such male arenas as politics and business, Herland's goals, the feminization of society, may not be so far-fetched. And the clarity of vision of Women and Economics in which women provide for themselves economically while professionals service the needs of the children and the home makes it strongly appealing.

In all this there does appear some evidence of anxiety and defeat women writers are said to fall heir to. "The Yellow Wallpaper," a work of recognized literary strength, had no successors by Gilman. In this I hear the voice of Nathaniel Hawthorn's Puritan ancestors chiding him for telling tales instead of maintaining a "real" job. Gilman insisted her intent in writing the story was didactic rather than literary, as if she had no time for foolishness. Knowing how my own grandmother bragged about her decision to give up novels, I have concluded the times were not conducive to "fanciful" reading on a broad level. And yet I suspect Gilman's refusal to write at any but a didactic level had something to do with her tendency to deny herself. Fiction writing, it seems to me, requires a certain

narcissism, an allowing of free play with the sub-conscious that could appear as idleness to the sternly structured author. I am suggesting that when Gilman reinvented herself as a young adult, she built herself for speed and for "efficiency." I also suggest "The Yellow Wallpaper" was an aberration which escaped her creative psyche because it seemed so autobiographical and therefore "factual." The pity is that all the speaking, traveling and writing taken together may not have had the long-term impact of that single short story. In the sense that Gilman may have sacrificed her imaginative writing to some more immediate "practical" goal, if that is the case, she is as a writer only a partial survivor.

Finally we consider Gilman in the light in which Massè examines the narrator. Seemingly pursued into madness, the narrator is, according to Massè, a survivor because she has found autonomy. Can we say that Gilman, despite or perhaps even because of her madness, retained autonomy? Fleenor, reviewing Gilman's decision to give up her child eight years after the end of her marriage, thinks Gilman's madness served her well: "Gilman needs to build a very strong case for the loss of her daughter, and she does so by claiming that the mental breakdown scarred her permanently, breaking her mind at age twenty-four" (127). Fleenor doubts Gilman

was as crippled as she claimed, noting the tremendous output of work, which Gilman doesn't deny, and the volume of reading, which she claimed she couldn't do. Spacks suspects Gilman never accepted the maternal role. "One wonders why, after all these protestations, (or because of them): why did she, after all, choose to relinquish her child? It is difficult not to speculate that her sense of inadequacy in personal relationships influenced the decision" (215). Apparently Gilman felt that a simple claim of inadequacy was insufficient explanation for her decision, but that insanity or instability was.

Moral insanity in nineteenth-century America was giving up one's child. It was the thing to be avoided at all costs, although emotional insanity comfortably fits the image of the helpless Victorian woman. Might it be said that Gilman played that game when she left her husband as well? Looking back as early as her teen years, one sees a youth grooming herself for the harsh vicissitudes of public life, although there is no evidence she was aware of such a goal. Tough-minded, innured to discomfort and self-denial, on her way to becoming a New Woman, she must have seen that marriage to Stetson would demand the dismantling of all her hard work. At that time and in this relationship she came to realize that there are no compromises. She had to be true to herself or ruin herself. Simply to leave would be

to engender toward herself the rage she felt at her father, who never needed madness as a reason for desertion. Might it be that she skillfully determined on her own compromise, claimed hysteria and the need for space, and received permission from herself, her husband and society to be free? Like the narrator, according to Massè, Gilman may have found a place in which she could lock out the patriarchy and throw away the key. Such a resounding act would certainly establish her as a survivor and a speaker of women's discourse.

Now we can address the question posed earlier: Why did Gilman in her autobiography want to seem so "normal"? Why were her periods of misery alluded to with such studied casualness, even though she goes into great detail about the pain they caused her? Credibility seems to me an important reason. Gilman's role was that of a reformer, and as such she tried to live as she preached in order to extend her influence. That she occasionally or even often had "the vapors" would not only not affect her credibility; in the eyes of Victorians used to such allusions, it might make her even more believable.

Another possibility refers us back to the Lacanian split whereby people develop a subconscious rather than face the fact that they desire the parent of the opposite sex erotically. Gilman developed an over-sized sub-conscious,

not to avoid sexual feelings for her father (which according to Oedipal theorists goes without saying), but to shield herself from the radical helplessness implied when she, like the narrator, regressed to infant status. That Gilman depicted such a terrible image clearly in fiction doesn't mean she could bring it to life in her own autobiography. To show as well as tell, to break into the smoothly casual narrative and dramatize her own despair as she does in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is asking too much. Society, then and now, would be asked to suspend its rationalism, to examine with her, a "real" person, the wild configurations of the yellow wallpaper. Society would have to feel the split that accompanies the experience of femaleness. In that endeavor she might have found that she had lost a large proportion of readers, women as well as men.

Being a survivor involves measuring what had to be survived as well as how much was overcome. Despite the compromises she had to make, Gilman measures well. Freeing herself up to do what she had to do, she succeeds as does Jane "in what every protagonist of marital Gothic desires: her existence as an autonomous subject has been recognized" (Massè 709). If that existence is often a burden, she bears it. It is the price she chooses to pay.

Conclusion

The 1890s was the period of greatest transition as women struggled to define their roles. Martha Vicinus concludes that "much of what we have come to see as the modern sexual identity was imagined, constructed and defined during this decade" (brochure). When Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1891, she was probably writing at the apex of the transition, the period of modulation from the True Woman to the New Woman. Both she and the narrator of her story had to define themselves without the help of the bold images that inspired women just a few years later. Against the dicta of husbands and doctors, both Gilman and her narrator discovered their own prescriptions; in the face of the women's language used by True Women, they spoke their women's discourse; and both went beyond the gentle ironies of Sarah Orne Jewett in defining and rejecting the male sentence.

The outcomes of both women were different, of course. Gilman "came to her senses" by breaking free of the rest cure. The narrator, lacking Gilman's power, found her own way out, gaining paradoxical strength through helplessness. Each in her own way rejected the half-helpless invalid role of the vaporous Victorian wife.

Neither option would have been easy. The anxiety of influence that a writer experiences, knowing little of her precursors, must have doubled for a leader of a bare defined woman's movement. Nor is there much record of women breaking

out of rest cure treatment through completely surrendering to madness or, most especially, by decisively putting it aside.

Glenna Matthews complains in her critique of Gilman's philosophical writings that Gilman has no interest in domesticism because she rejected intimacy (100). Undoubtedly Gilman, more at home away from home, would feel herself hampered by the close inner workings of family life. Critics in subsequent decades would have plenty of labels for such "defects." Freudians in the 40s and 50s would see her as a victim of penis envy. Followers of pop psychology in the contemporary scene would accuse her of having lost touch with her inner child.

But if she is not the "complete feminist," a concept still in the making, she could certainly qualify as the most courageous. Breaking new ground on three fronts--psychiatry, the women's movement and literature--means working without help and without role models. Becoming one's own role model, in fact, may be a new definition of courage--one that she helped to create.

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