"Not Intended to Drive People Crazy": Genre, Gender, and the Politics of Reception in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper has undergone a complex and evolving critical reception since its initial publication in 1892. Originally dismissed or overlooked by editors and early readers, the story has been reclaimed by feminist scholarship as a powerful literary intervention into nineteenth-century gender politics. This paper examines the shifting reception of the text across three key interpretive frameworks: as a non-political gothic tale, as a female gothic narrative, and as a politically charged feminist work. Drawing on critical perspectives from scholars such as Elaine Hedges, Julie Dock, and Greg Buzwell, the study explores how the story's formal elements and cultural context intersect with the author's own experiences, particularly in relation to medical authority and editorial censorship.

This paper argues that the history of the story's reception reflects the very institutional and patriarchal dynamics that the narrative critiques. By treating reception history as an extension of the story's feminist intervention, the study repositions The Yellow Wallpaper as a metatextual commentary on literary value, canon formation, and the politics of critical legitimacy. Analyzing Gilman's autobiographical writings alongside her critical afterlife, the paper situates the text as both foundational to feminist literary studies and illustrative of how marginalized voices navigate structures of cultural authority. The study highlights the story's enduring relevance and its potential to inform contemporary debates on literature, gender, and power.

Keywords: Feminist Criticism, Reception History, Female Gothic, Patriarchy and Mental Health, Nineteenth-Century American Literature

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, first published in 1892, has become one of the most studied and debated texts in American literature. Although initially overlooked or dismissed by literary critics, the story has been recovered and reinterpreted through various critical lenses over the past several decades. These shifting receptions reflect not only changes in literary taste but also evolving ideological frameworks that influence how texts are read and valued. Gilman's short story, once relegated to the margins as a disturbing or overly emotional piece, is now widely regarded as a powerful commentary on gender, mental health, and the cultural constraints placed on women.

Early reviewers focused on its uncanny atmosphere rather than its social critique, mirroring the narrator's own unease: "It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer" (Gilman 1892, p. 648). The sense of domestic grandeur mixed with confinement set the tone for what many read as a gothic curiosity rather than a political text. Early critics tended to treat the story as a chilling but apolitical gothic tale, emphasizing its depiction of psychological disintegration within a haunted domestic space. The history of *The Yellow Wallpaper*'s reception is marked by contrasting perspectives that range from gothic interpretations to feminist readings. Later scholars challenged this limited view, asserting that the story is deeply political in its critique of patriarchal authority, particularly within the realms of marriage and medicine. As the narrator confesses, "I sometimes fancy that in my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition" (Gilman 1892, p. 655). The line encapsulates the story's core tension between female intuition and male authority.

Feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s were instrumental in reintroducing the story into the literary canon, highlighting its subversive themes and its relevance to broader feminist concerns. Gilman's narrator ultimately articulates what those early critics overlooked: "I've got out at last … and you can't put me back!" (Gilman 1892, p. 657). Her declaration foreshadows the text's later critical liberation, from neglect to centrality in feminist literary studies. This article traces the critical reception of *The Yellow Wallpaper* across three dominant interpretive frameworks: early gothic readings, second-wave feminist reinterpretations, and contemporary classifications within the female gothic tradition. While acknowledging the value of these perspectives, this study argues that what remains underexplored is how the shifting reception of Gilman's story itself enacts the very dynamics of institutional control and gendered authorship the story critiques. By analyzing the critical afterlife of the text as a site of contested meaning, the article reframes *The Yellow Wallpaper* not just as a politically charged

feminist work, but as a meta-commentary on canon formation, disciplinary gatekeeping, and the recuperative labour of feminist criticism. In doing so, it situates Gilman's narrative as both an object of ideological struggle and a mirror reflecting the broader tensions between literary value, gendered authority, and institutional power.

1.2 Methodology and Critical Approach

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in literary reception theory and feminist criticismIt approaches *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a text whose meanings are produced through the historical conditions of its reception, shifting across time as readers, institutions, and critical paradigms redefine its significance.Drawing on a range of critical responses from the story's publication in 1892 to its feminist revival in the 1970s and beyond, the article traces how different interpretive communities, early readers, mid-century editors, feminist critics, and literary historians, have constructed competing meanings around the text.

The approach is largely historical and comparative, analyzing both primary and secondary materials. These include early reviews, editorial correspondences, authorial commentary (such as Gilman's own essays and autobiography), and key academic contributions that reclassified the story as feminist or gothic. The essay does not rely on empirical data collection but instead utilizes close textual analysis, contextual readings, and theoretical synthesis to highlight the ideological and institutional forces that shaped the story's marginalization and later canonization. In doing so, the paper draws on feminist literary theory, particularly the work of scholars like Elaine Hedges, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Susan Lanser, to uncover the intersection of gender, genre, and authority in the critical history of the text. It also incorporates reception theory to explore how changes in social and academic paradigms influence the ways readers assign value and meaning. This method is attentive to the narrator's own struggle to make meaning: "I sometimes fancy there are a great many women behind [the pattern], and sometimes only one" (Gilman 1892, p. 655), a line that metaphorically prefigures the collective recovery of women's voices in later feminist scholarship. This method allows for a layered understanding of how *The Yellow Wallpaper* has functioned as both a product of its time and a site of ongoing political and literary reappraisal.

The study is guided by two central questions:

1. How has the reception of *The Yellow Wallpaper* evolved in response to changing cultural and institutional contexts?
2. In what ways do feminist and genre-based frameworks illuminate the story's metatextual critique of gendered authorship, literary value, and interpretive authority?

By foregrounding the evolving reception of the text, this methodology aims to reveal how literary value is not inherent but historically constructed—and how Gilman's story, long silenced, became a powerful feminist artifact through acts of critical recovery.

2. Literature Review

The critical trajectory of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* has undergone significant transformation since its initial publication in 1892. Early interpretations primarily viewed the story as a non-political gothic tale, focusing on its elements of psychological horror and the uncanny. This approach was reinforced by later critics who situated Gilman's work within the American Gothic tradition, drawing on the authority of H. P. Lovecraft, whose critical study *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927/1973, ed. F. E. Bleiler) briefly praised the story for its subtle depiction of madness. Critics such as Lane and Golden expanded on this connection, citing Lovecraft's appraisal as evidence of the story's enduring power within gothic conventions.. Golden highlights Lovecraft's acknowledgment of the story's powerful depiction of madness, asserting that its portrayal of psychological deterioration within a confined domestic space aligns with classic gothic themes (Golden, 1990; 1992). Johnson (1989) likewise emphasizes its focus on insanity and frailty, positioning Gilman's narrative within the broader gothic genre concerned with the mental and emotional unraveling of its characters, especially within isolated and haunted interiors.

However, these readings have not gone unchallenged. Julie Dock (1996; 1998) provides a powerful critique of such gothic-centered interpretations, arguing that they obscure the story's feminist subtext and reduce its complex engagement with gender politics to a tale of mere terror. She suggests that scholars who emphasize the gothic aspect risk depicting early readers as incapable of understanding the story's subversive qualities. Dock points out that even some early reviews acknowledged that the protagonist was a woman driven to madness by her domestic and marital situation, even if these reviews did not employ explicitly feminist language. Moreover, she criticizes the scholarly overreliance on Lovecraft's singular line of praise, which she considers insufficient to support a full gothic classification. In her view, dismissing the political implications of the story flattens its impact and mischaracterizes both Gilman's intentions and the perceptiveness of her initial readership.

The rise of feminist literary criticism in the 1970s catalyzed a major reevaluation of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, relocating it from the margins of American literary history to a central place in feminist discourse. Elaine Hedges' influential afterword to the 1973 Feminist Press edition was instrumental in this transformation. Hedges framed the story as a pointed critique of patriarchal medical practices, especially the rest cure that silenced women and denied their autonomy. She argued that the protagonist's descent into madness was not merely a gothic trope but a protest against her enforced passivity and isolation. Building upon Hedges' argument, Treichler (1984) suggested that the narrator's act of writing itself functions as a form of psychic release and resistance. Treichler emphasized the significance of the journal format, interpreting it as a symbolic reclamation of voice and identity within a world that systematically suppresses female expression.

The classification of the story as part of the female gothic genre has further enriched critical interpretations. Davison (2004) contends that

The Yellow Wallpaper fits within a literary tradition that uses gothic motifs to reflect women's social and psychological entrapment. He draws on DeLamotte's (1990) framework to identify features such as the haunted house, the sense of confinement, and the surveillance of the female protagonist as hallmarks of female gothic literature. These themes, rather than serving a purely horror-driven narrative, serve as metaphors for the protagonist's—and by extension, women's—powerlessness in the face of medical and marital authority. Though Davison avoids labeling the story outright as a feminist work, his analysis intersects with feminist criticism by foregrounding the role of oppressive institutions in the protagonist's breakdown. This interpretation further bridges the categories of female gothic and feminist literature, showing how these frameworks often overlap in articulating women's resistance.

A more overtly feminist approach is taken by critics such as Gilbert and Gubar (2000), who analyze the ways in which the literary establishment has historically marginalized women's writing. They argue that Gilman's story was dismissed for the very qualities that earned praise for male authors like Edgar Allan Poe. Both Poe and Gilman explored madness and psychological disintegration, but only Gilman's work was censored for its disturbing content. Gilbert and Gubar connect this to broader patterns of literary misogyny, where the discomfort caused by women's narratives often results in exclusion or suppression. Lanser (1989) also engages with these issues, emphasizing the central role *The Yellow Wallpaper* played in the formation of feminist literary theory during the 1970s and 1980s. She sees the story as a turning point in the development of feminist reader-response theory, offering a model for how texts can be reinterpreted through shifting ideological lenses and through the recognition of female consciousness as a critical category.

Gilman's own writings offer further insight into the political and personal motivations behind the story. In her article *Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper* (1913) and her autobiography *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935), she details her experience with postpartum depression and her controversial treatment by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, whose rest cure forms the basis of the narrator's experience. Gilman describes how the enforced inactivity nearly drove her to a mental collapse, and how writing the story served as a therapeutic and political act. Cutter (2001) places Gilman's experience within a broader critique of late nineteenth-century medical practices that defined women's bodies and minds as inherently fragile and in need of male control. Cutter's analysis shows how Gilman's story exposes the ideological underpinnings of hysteria diagnoses and medical silencing, effectively linking literary narrative to institutional critique.

Taken together, the scholarship on *The Yellow Wallpaper* reveals an evolving conversation shaped by changing cultural values and critical frameworks. From early gothic readings to later feminist and genre-based interpretations, scholars such as Dock, Hedges, Treichler, Davison, DeLamotte, Gilbert and Gubar, Lanser, and Cutter have each contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the story's themes and significance. This study builds on their contributions by analyzing the shifting receptions of Gilman's work and exploring how these readings reflect broader ideological currents, particularly regarding gender, authorship, and institutional authority.

3. From Gothic Horror to Feminist Resistance

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) stands today as one of the most widely analyzed and anthologized short stories in American literature. Originally published in *The New England Magazine* following Gilman's persistent efforts against editorial resistance, the story remained largely overlooked for several decades. After falling out of print by 1935, it was not until 1973 that the Feminist Press reissued it with a now-celebrated afterword by Elaine R. Hedges. This republication marked the beginning of a scholarly renaissance, prompting renewed interest in Gilman's life and the ideological significance of her work (Dock, 1998, p. 10). The critical revival of *The Yellow Wallpaper* over the past four decades has foregrounded interpretive layers that early readers largely missed. Socio-political tensions and feminist critiques, initially obscured, have since come to light (Monteiro, 1999, p. 41). Whereas the story was originally received as a disturbing psychological or horror narrative, post-1973 scholarship re-evaluated it through various critical lenses, particularly those of feminist and gothic studies. Some readings situate the text within the tradition of American gothic fiction, while others emphasize its contribution to feminist discourse and its depiction of patriarchal oppression and psychological deterioration.

This paper traces the reception history of *The Yellow Wallpaper* by exploring three major interpretive frameworks. First, it examines the story's initial classification as a gothic tale devoid of political implications. Second, it considers its reclassification as a female gothic narrative, concerned with domestic entrapment and psychological repression. Third, it investigates the work's emergence as a politically charged feminist text. Through these shifting perspectives, the paper argues that while multiple readings remain viable, the feminist undercurrents are central to the story's evolving significance. Finally, it questions whether the reception of *The Yellow Wallpaper* will continue to evolve in the future, as cultural and theoretical paradigms shift. The chilling qualities of *The Yellow Wallpaper* led early readers and some contemporary critics to consider it a ghost tale. This might be attributed to the story's earliest reception in its first decade, as "it was greeted with strong, but mixed feelings" (Hedges , p. 41). According to Hedges, when she rediscovered *The Yellow Wallpaper*, she stated in her afterword that when the story was first published, it was initially received as a "Poe-esque tale of chilling horror — and as a story of mental aberration" (Hedges, 1973, p. 39). This interpretation was reinforced by the story's eerie imagery and atmosphere: "The color is repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight." The house itself takes on the sinister traits of a gothic mansion, as the narrator confides, "There is something strange about the house—I can feel it" (Gilman 1892, p. 651). These descriptions establish the uncanny tone that once led readers to categorize the story as psychological horror rather than social critique.

Conversely, this interpretation is not entirely conclusive, as a number of contemporary critics continue to read *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a non-political horror narrative. Lane, for instance, foregrounds the ghostly dimension of the story's reception, anchoring her argument in H.

P. Lovecraft's appraisal of Gilman's work as one of the finest gothic tales in American literature (Golden, 1990, p. xvii). Golden further supports Lane's perspective by citing Lovecraft's praise that the story "rises to a classic level in subtly delineating the madness which crawls over a woman dwelling in the hideously papered room where a madwoman was once confined" (Golden, 1992, p. 72). Similarly, Johnson argues that *The Yellow Wallpaper* squarely belongs to the gothic tradition, citing its thematic focus on madness and physical debilitation as central gothic motifs (Johnson, 1989, pp. 521–530). These claims gain added legitimacy from Gilman herself, who drew an explicit parallel between her story and the gothic horror of Edgar Allan Poe. In a private letter to Martha Luther Lane, she wrote, "When my awful story *The Yellow Wallpaper* comes out, you must try and read it" (Dock, 1996, p. 90). Gilman's husband, Walter, reportedly read the story numerous times and regarded it as the most spectral tale he had ever encountered (Dock, 1996, p. 90). Yet despite these interpretations, a number of contemporary critics have expressed hesitation, suggesting that the story might extend beyond its apparent horror elements. Ryan, for example, describes *The Yellow Wallpaper* as "one of the best gothic tales ever written," before adding, with notable ambivalence, that "it may be a ghost story. Worse yet, it may not" (Ryan, 1988, pp. 1–7). Collectively, these critics and literary historians base their arguments on the premise that early audiences read the story primarily as a ghost or horror narrative. Consequently, they classify it as apolitical. However, these interpretations warrant scrutiny, as they raise significant questions about early readers' interpretive capacities and imply a general indifference to gendered social critique, an assumption that risks underestimating those readers' critical awareness.

In response, Julie Dock offers a compelling counterargument. She contends that to interpret *The Yellow Wallpaper* exclusively as a horror story is to portray its nineteenth-century readers as "purblind fools insensitive to feminist issues" (Dock, 1996, p. 20). Such an assumption suggests that only modern readers possess the interpretive sophistication to recognize the story's feminist subtext, a claim that is both reductive and historically questionable. Specifically addressing Lane and Golden's reliance on Lovecraft, Dock refutes their interpretation by demonstrating that Lovecraft mentions Gilman only briefly, offering merely a single sentence of praise for her depiction of madness (Lovecraft, 1927/1973, p. 72; Dock, 1998, p. 16). A feminist reading of the story, she suggests, began to take shape as readers identified latent ideological tensions, particularly those related to patriarchy. While it is true that Gilman's complex narrative resists reductive interpretation, and that its gender politics are sometimes veiled, earlier readers were not blind to its critique. Kennard affirms this by noting that "no earlier reader saw the story as in any way positive" (Kennard, 1981, p. 75). Indeed, many early reviewers understood *The Yellow Wallpaper* as the account of a woman writer driven to madness by her husband's oppressive control (Dock, 1998, p. 16). As these subversive elements became more apparent, a new interpretive mode emerged: the female gothic. Introduced by Ellen Moers in 1976, this genre reoriented critical attention toward women's internal struggles within patriarchal frameworks (Kennard, 1981, p. 75). It centers on the lived experiences of women, particularly in domestic spaces, and their resistance to institutional and ideological confinement. Gilman dramatizes this through the narrator's confinement in an upstairs nursery: "The windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls." Her husband's control is equally suffocating: "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (Gilman 1892, p. 650). These domestic details transform the home into a psychological prison, making visible the intersection between patriarchal care and surveillance. Within this framework, early readers increasingly recognized *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a narrative of resistance to socially prescribed gender roles, even as it retained its atmosphere of psychological horror.

Davison (2004, pp. 47–49) raises a central question in the reception history of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, asking whether the story should be categorized as a political ghost narrative or more appropriately understood as a politically engaged feminist text. He argues that much of the critical scholarship has failed to adequately acknowledge Gilman's deliberate engagement with what would later be termed the female gothic tradition. According to Davison, this oversight has led to a reductive reading of the story's genre and ideological function (Davison, 2004, p. 53). The female gothic, as a literary mode, offers a distinct framework for interpreting texts that focus on women's experiences within oppressive domestic and social environments. It is typically characterized by an intense psychological atmosphere, intricate symbolic structures, and a narrative progression that seeks a form of emotional or psychic release. This release, often referred to as psychic catharsis, serves both as a thematic element and a structural mechanism through which the protagonist seeks to reclaim agency or identity (Treichler, 1984, pp. 68–69).

Treichler observes that Gilman's narrator engages in clandestine acts of writing and reflection, which serve as a private form of resistance to the enforced silence imposed by her husband. Her journal becomes a sanctuary in which she can process her trauma, even if the only path to freedom she perceives leads through mental collapse (Hedges, 1973, p. 9). She admits, "I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" (Gilman 1892, p. 652). Later, she adds, "There comes John, and I must put this away—he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman 1892, p. 652). Writing secretly becomes her only means of self-expression.These moments of introspection and rebellion occur almost exclusively within the domestic space, which is expression. Thesecteristic of the female gothic genre. For many women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the home represented both a physical and symbolic confinement. It was the primary sphere in which patriarchal power operated through familial, medical, and legal authority. Consequently, the house itself often becomes a charged site for the expression of female repression and revolt.

Gilman's narrative structure and setting reinforce this pattern. The story unfolds within a single location, a seemingly respectable and peaceful mansion that gradually reveals itself as a space of psychological deterioration. The familiar becomes unfamiliar, echoing the transformation of domestic spaces in gothic fiction. As DeLamotte (1990, p. 288) notes, one of the key techniques in gothic literature is the substitution of a safe environment with one that breeds fear and instability. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this transformation is not fueled by supernatural events but by social and psychological tensions that accumulate in the confined world of the narrator.

Unlike traditional gothic tales that rely on ghosts or paranormal occurrences to generate fear, the female gothic identifies terror as a product

of systemic forces. These forces include patriarchal ideologies, institutionalized medicine, and the gendered hierarchies embedded in everyday life. As Flexner (1972, pp. 3–62) explains, female gothic texts externalize internal struggles and reveal how fear often arises from cultural structures rather than mythical entities. In Gilman's story, the narrator's increasing paranoia is not the result of delusion alone, but rather a reflection of the oppressive reality in which she lives. Her growing suspicion toward her husband John and his sister Jennie exemplifies the relational dynamics in which female autonomy is constantly undermined. The narrator becomes convinced that John is monitoring her behavior and discussing her condition with Jennie in secret. She writes, "And I heard him ask Jennie professional questions about me. She had a very good report to give" (Gilman, 1892, p. 653). This perception of conspiracy is grounded in the social reality that women were often excluded from discussions about their own health and well-being.

What exacerbates the narrator's powerlessness is the professional authority held by her husband and brother, both of whom are physicians. Their diagnoses and treatment plans are legitimized not only by their social roles but also by the broader medical institutions of the time. These institutions routinely dismissed women's accounts of their own experiences, interpreting emotional expression as evidence of mental instability. Gilman captures this dismissal when the narrator observes, "John is a physician, and perhaps... that is one reason I do not get well faster." Her skepticism toward his treatment appears in her reflection: "Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good, but what is one to do?" The rhetorical question underscores the gendered silencing built into medical authority. Davison describes this world as one filled with figures like John, individuals who embody the rational, authoritative voice of patriarchy while simultaneously silencing dissenting perspectives (Davison, 2004, p. 48). In this context, the story portrays madness not as a deviation from reason, but as a consequence of being repeatedly denied the right to speak, to write, and to be believed.

Thus, *The Yellow Wallpaper* aligns more convincingly with the female gothic tradition than with conventional ghost stories. Gilman repurposes gothic conventions to emphasize the psychological toll of confinement, surveillance, and silence imposed upon women. The story's atmosphere of dread and descent into madness arises from the domestic sphere itself, which becomes a metaphor for institutionalized oppression. Instead of haunted rooms and spectral figures, the source of horror lies in the erosion of the narrator's subjectivity within a rigid system that conflates care with control. Through this framework, Gilman redefines horror in terms of gendered power and institutional force. Her story transcends the boundaries of gothic fiction by transforming it into a vehicle for feminist critique, revealing the house not as a supernatural prison but as a mirror of the social structures that render women invisible, voiceless, and ultimately, mad. The narrator's final act dramatizes this reversal of power: "I've got out at last… in spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" What began as madness becomes an assertion of agency, symbolizing the narrator's emergence from patriarchal control.

While Davison's claim that *The Yellow Wallpaper* is best understood as a female gothic tale may be valid in many respects, it is equally important to recognize that this reading does not preclude the story's classification as a political feminist work. Davison does not explicitly engage with the reasons why the story should not be interpreted through a feminist lens, even though elements within his own analysis indirectly support such a reading. The emphasis on the female gothic, rather than being in opposition to feminism, actually provides a framework that reinforces feminist interpretations, especially from a contemporary critical perspective. The classification of the story as female gothic has opened productive avenues for feminist scholars, enabling a reading that moves beyond the surface events and into the ideological and autobiographical substratum of Gilman's work. Feminist critics have long examined the intersection of Gilman's personal experiences with the thematic content of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Insights drawn from her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, along with testimonies from her contemporaries, reveal the extent to which the story reflects the gendered constraints imposed on women writers in the nineteenth century. The protagonist's descent into madness mirrors Gilman's own struggles with mental health, exacerbated by the treatment she received from Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, a prominent advocate of the rest cure. The act of writing in the story becomes an act of defiance against a culture that sought to silence women both medically and intellectually.

Even within Davison's framework, traces of feminist thought remain discernible. For instance, his reliance on DeLamotte's conception of female gothic literature draws attention to the institutions that structure women's lives. According to DeLamotte (1990, p. 152), the female gothic is not merely a genre concerned with mood and setting, but a vehicle for dramatizing women's suffering within the confines of patriarchal society. This suffering is not abstract or metaphorical; it is rooted in real historical institutions that shaped women's daily experiences. Gilman, like other female authors such as Charlotte Brontë and Mary Shelley, wrote within a literary tradition that transformed personal anguish into political critique.

The thematic emphasis on domestic spaces, gendered power relations, and institutional control links female gothic literature to early feminist discourse. The home, often idealized as a place of safety and morality, is revealed in *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a site of entrapment and erasure. The traditional husband-wife relationship is reimagined as a power dynamic in which the woman is infantilized and dismissed, her voice rendered insignificant under the guise of medical authority. It is no coincidence that the story remained outside the literary canon for decades, considered disturbing and inappropriate. Its reintroduction in 1973, largely through the efforts of feminist critics such as Elaine Hedges, marked a turning point in how literary value was defined and who got to decide it. The initial neglect of the story can be understood as a consequence of its radical engagement with themes that exposed patriarchal social norms. Although few early readers explicitly identified the protagonist's madness with her constrained gender role, critics such as Hedges (1998, p. 41) argue that the story clearly dramatizes the psychological consequences of systemic gender oppression.

Feminist interpretations of *The Yellow Wallpaper* have focused on two interrelated domains of critique: the medicalization of women's bodies and minds, and the institutional marginalization of women's voices in literary culture. The first of these is evident in the way the story

interrogates nineteenth-century medical practices. Gilman challenges the authority of a medical establishment that pathologized femininity and upheld the notion of women as inherently unstable or weak. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was widely believed that women were biologically predisposed to illness, particularly mental illness. Education, ambition, or emotional expression were viewed as potential causes of hysteria. Gilman's physician, Dr. Mitchell, famously prescribed rest and isolation as a cure, depriving her of intellectual activity and social interaction. This treatment, rather than healing her, pushed her further toward psychological deterioration. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this critique is dramatized through the protagonist's internal monologue and her secret journal, where she articulates what she is not permitted to say aloud.

The narrator's passive compliance with her husband's treatment is matched by her internal resistance, which takes the form of writing. She voices her skepticism early in the narrative: "Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good, but what is one to do?" (Hedges, 1998, p. 10). Her rhetorical question encapsulates the powerlessness women experienced in the face of medical orthodoxy. Under the norms of the time, it was considered improper for women to question male experts, particularly in the domain of health. Cutter (2001, p. 154) observes that the best patients, according to doctors like Mitchell, were those who asked the fewest questions and followed orders without resistance. Another physician, Carter, explicitly stated that patients who interrupted their doctors were to be silenced (Cutter, 2001, p. 119). Gilman exposes this dynamic by allowing the narrator to write privately what she is not permitted to speak. Her journal becomes a space of subversive authorship, a form of what Hedges (1973, p. 10) calls "dead paper" that paradoxically brings mental relief.

The medical critique embedded in the story also intersects with a broader literary critique. Editors who rejected Gilman's story did so not only because of its content but also because of its tone and message. The protagonist's descent into madness, presented without moral resolution or redemptive closure, challenged the literary standards of the period. The discomfort it provoked in male editors underscores the cultural unease with narratives that refused to romanticize female suffering or restore order by the end. The story's rejection and eventual recovery reflect the institutional barriers that female authors faced in getting published, especially when their work addressed controversial or politically charged topics.

This overlap between the female gothic and feminist literature suggests that the categories are not mutually exclusive but instead operate in tandem to deepen the story's social critique. *The Yellow Wallpaper* exemplifies how gothic conventions, particularly those rooted in female experience, can be mobilized to interrogate institutional structures of gender and power. Gilman's narrative engages with both literary form and cultural history to challenge the norms of her time, making the story an essential reference point for understanding the intersection of genre and feminist thought. This interrelationship opens further questions about how such dual frameworks have shaped the reception of the story over time and how future interpretations might continue to evolve in light of new feminist and theoretical insights.

4. Canon, Control, and the Politics of Authorship

A significant thread in feminist scholarship interprets *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a direct challenge to patriarchal control over literary production and value. This perspective situates the story within the broader historical context of its initial rejection and marginalization, despite its formal innovation and thematic depth. Critics such as Susan Lanser and Sandra Gilbert have noted the double standards that shaped literary recognition in the nineteenth century: while male authors like Edgar Allan Poe were lauded for exploring madness and psychological horror, Gilman's depiction of mental distress was dismissed as excessive and inappropriate (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 417). As Gilman's narrator says early in the story, "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (Gilman 1892, p. 648). This line encapsulates the same cultural condescension that marked women's literary reception—dismissive, paternal, and normalized.This contrast reveals not only the gendered nature of literary taste but also the structural barriers that historically excluded women's voices from the canon.

Lanser draws attention to this disparity in her critique of William Dean Howells' reception of Gilman's work. While Howells admired *The Yellow Wallpaper*, he described it as "too terribly good to be printed," suggesting that its disturbing tone made it unsuitable for publication. Ironically, the story itself mirrors this act of silencing: "There comes John, and I must put this away—he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman 1892, p. 652). Just as editors tried to suppress the story's unsettling truth, the husband forbids the narrator from writing, embodying the same patriarchal censorship. Feminists have responded to this framing by highlighting the gendered nature of editorial judgments. As Gilbert and Gubar argue, Gilman's contemporaries regularly taught what they called "the terrible" and "wholly dire" fiction of Poe, especially those tales that featured intense depictions of madness among women, particularly middle-class wives and mothers (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 418). The apparent contradiction lies in the fact that when men wrote about madness, it was framed as literary artistry, whereas when a woman like Gilman explored similar terrain, her work was seen as unsettling and excessive.

This insight formed the basis for a broader feminist critique of the literary canon and the institutional practices that shaped it. Scholars such as Gilbert, Gubar, and Lanser began to argue that the marginalization of Gilman's story was symptomatic of a larger trend in which literature that exposed or interrogated social realities—particularly the lived experiences of women—was devalued. Instead, the literary canon tended to elevate works that aligned with dominant cultural narratives or that represented male experiences as universal. Feminist studies thus shifted their focus to the role of ideology in literary production and reception, arguing that texts like *The Yellow Wallpaper* do not simply reflect social structures but actively participate in shaping and contesting them. Gilman's story, in this view, becomes a site of resistance. It dramatizes the ways in which women's voices are silenced, distorted, or dismissed—not only within the story itself but in the real-world conditions of literary publication. This is particularly evident in the story's metatextual dimension. The protagonist's secret journal becomes

a powerful metaphor for female authorship, for the act of writing under conditions of censorship and repression. Her confession, "I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" (Gilman 1892, p. 652), turns writing into a subversive act—a reclamation of voice within a system designed to silence her. Gilbert and Gubar famously describe this as the expression of a woman's "speechless woe," the pain and insight that must be hidden in order to survive in a male-dominated society (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 16). The very structure of the story, which unfolds through the narrator's private, fragmented entries, highlights the difficulty women face in articulating their experiences in environments hostile to female expression.

Between 1973 and the mid-1980s, *The Yellow Wallpaper* played a foundational role in the development of American feminist literary criticism. Its recovery by Elaine Hedges and the subsequent scholarly attention it received helped fuel a wider movement to reassess forgotten or excluded works by women writers. As Lanser (1989, p. 418) notes, the story inspired feminist scholars to develop new methodologies for reading literature through the lens of gender and power. Earlier works such as Katharine M. Rogers' *Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* (1966) and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) had already begun to uncover the deeply patriarchal assumptions embedded in literary culture. These scholars argued that the definition of "literary merit" itself was ideologically loaded, often shaped by what seemed culturally natural or aesthetically neutral but was in fact the result of centuries of male-dominated critical tradition (Lanser, 1989, pp. 415–416). Against this backdrop, *The Yellow Wallpaper* emerged not only as an object of feminist recovery but also as a tool for rethinking the politics of reading. Those who found the story disturbing or offensive often did so because they were operating from interpretive frameworks that had historically excluded women's voices and devalued narratives of female resistance. Lanser argues that such reactions are rooted in a bias that has kept works like Gilman's out of print and out of critical conversation for decades (Lanser, 1989, p. 415). The revival of *The Yellow Wallpaper* thus symbolizes the broader success of feminist scholarship in bringing suppressed narratives into the academic and cultural mainstream.

One of the critical shifts brought about by this feminist engagement was the recognition that literature serves not only to reflect society but also to contest it. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this contestation is visible in the narrator's relationship with language. From the earliest pages, the reader is made aware of her limited freedom. She must hide her writing from John, her husband and physician, who infantilizes her and dismisses her concerns. Phrases such as "There comes John, I must put this away" and "John says" recur throughout the text, signaling the constant surveillance and control she is under (Hedges, 1973, pp. 9–23). Indeed, her repeated obedience—"John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition" (Gilman 1892, p. 649)—reveals how patriarchal language itself polices thought and emotion. These repetitions are not merely stylistic but ideological, illustrating how patriarchal discourse infiltrates even the most intimate spaces.Returning to Dock's critique of early readers who dismissed the story as a mere horror tale, Lanser suggests that such interpretations overlook the story's central political concerns (Dock, 1998, p. 20; Lanser, 1989, p. 544). Rather than recognizing the narrator's attempt to critique the structures confining her, early readers focused instead on the vivid depiction of madness. This interpretive move, in effect, erased the feminist impulse behind the narrative and transformed it into a spectacle of mental decline. However, feminist scholars have reclaimed the story's radical vision, highlighting how Gilman uses the motif of the wallpaper not only as a symbol of entrapment but as a metaphor for the dense and obscuring codes of patriarchal discourse. The narrator's growing obsession reflects her desperate search for meaning within those codes: "The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" (Gilman 1892, p. 654). The trapped woman she sees becomes an image of her own silenced self.

Gilman's underlying message is not merely psychological, but deeply political. Women, she implies, are confined within the social structures of marriage and motherhood, institutions that offer little room for individuality or autonomy. In her 1904 book *The Home: Its Work and Influence*, Gilman wrote that women in the traditional family were "noticed, studied, commented on, and incessantly interfered with," conditions she identified as central to the rise of depression among women (Gilman, 1904, p. 40). Through *The Yellow Wallpaper*, she critiques the family as a microcosm of broader patriarchal control, where the father figure dominates and the wife is rendered submissive. The narrator herself internalizes this subjugation: "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (Gilman 1892, p. 649). The tone of docile acceptance underscores how love and control become indistinguishable under patriarchy.

Gilman's own interpretation of *The Yellow Wallpaper* provides compelling evidence that the story should be understood, at least in part, as a feminist text. Through both her fiction and non-fiction writings, Gilman openly positioned herself in opposition to the cultural and institutional forces that sought to regulate and silence women's voices. One of the clearest indicators of this stance is found within the story itself, particularly in the protagonist's declaration, "I did write for a while in spite of them" (Hedges, 1973, p. 10). This statement can be read as a direct reference to Gilman's own battle with editorial censorship, a struggle that extended well beyond mere rejection letters and reflected the broader marginalization of women's perspectives in the publishing world. In her autobiography, Gilman recounts the story's initial submission process, revealing the gendered barriers she encountered. She first sent the manuscript to William Dean Howells, a prominent literary figure who expressed admiration for the story but considered it too disturbing for publication. Howells recommended the piece to *The Atlantic Monthly*, then edited by Horace Scudder. However, Scudder declined to publish the work, returning it with a brief and revealing note: "Dear Madam, I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I made myself" (Lane, 1990, p. 119). Even Howells, who appreciated the story's literary power, framed it in reductive terms, calling it "trouble and too wholly dire, too terribly good to be printed" (Howells, 1920, p. vii; Lane, 1990, p. 119; Hedges, 1973, p. 40). These responses, while cloaked in polite language, reflect an anxiety about the story's content, especially its unflinching depiction of psychological deterioration within a domestic setting.

Hedges interprets these rejections not as isolated incidents but as symptomatic of a larger cultural phenomenon. She argues that American editors in the 1890s adhered to a dominant literary standard that emphasized moral uplift, propriety, and decorum, particularly when it came

to female-authored texts (Hedges, 1973, p. 40). Gilman's narrative, which ends with the protagonist creeping along the floor in a state of psychotic release, violated these expectations. It refused to offer a moral resolution or redemptive clarity, instead confronting readers with the raw consequences of psychological repression and social control. For editors accustomed to narratives that reinforced domestic harmony and female virtue, such a story represented not only aesthetic divergence but ideological subversion. Indeed, it is likely that Gilman's portrayal of her protagonist's breakdown was perceived as a direct challenge to prevailing gender norms. The heroine does not simply fall ill; she rebels against the structures that define her role as wife, patient, and woman. Her madness is both a symptom and a form of resistance, a rebellion against the authority of her physician-husband and the norms he represents. That rebellion reaches its peak in the climactic declaration: "I've got out at last … in spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman 1892, p. 657). The act of tearing the wallpaper literalizes her liberation from both domestic and discursive imprisonment.Editorial discomfort with the story likely stemmed from the suspicion that it was not merely a psychological case study, but rather a revolt against cultural expectations surrounding femininity and domesticity.

In her essay "Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*," Gilman offers further insight into her intentions. She explains that the story was born out of personal experience, particularly her encounter with the rest cure prescribed by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, a leading neurologist of the time. Gilman recounts how, after suffering from postpartum depression, she was instructed to avoid intellectual activity, cease writing, and remain isolated. This treatment left her feeling mentally and emotionally imprisoned, and she feared she would succumb to complete breakdown if she did not resume creative and social engagement (Gilman, 1992, pp. 51–53; Cutter, 2001, p. 151). After abandoning the rest cure, Gilman began writing again and crafted *The Yellow Wallpaper* in part as a fictionalized warning against the dangers of such medical practices. Gilman's purpose was not merely to dramatize suffering but to effect change. She later claimed that after reading the story, Dr. Mitchell altered his treatment of female patients. However, this assertion has been challenged by Dock, who points out that there is no evidence to support the claim that Mitchell changed his methods, and that he continued to advocate for the rest cure well after the story's publication (Dock, 1998, pp. 23–25). Nevertheless, Gilman remained confident in the political efficacy of her writing. She stated that the story "was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" (Gilman, 1992, pp. 51–53).

From a modern feminist perspective, Gilman's interpretation of her own work aligns with the broader aims of the women's movement. Although she did not explicitly label *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a feminist text in her lifetime, the issues she addresses—medical paternalism, enforced domesticity, censorship, and the denial of female agency—are central concerns within feminist thought. It is clear that Gilman was not opposed to domestic life per se. Rather, she advocated for a vision of the home that evolved alongside other social institutions, one in which women were not reduced to passive dependents but recognized as active, intellectual beings. Still, while the story is widely read today as a feminist classic, this interpretation must be understood as part of an evolving conversation. Reception is not static, and *The Yellow Wallpaper* has undergone numerous critical reappraisals across different historical and theoretical contexts. Although feminist criticism has played a dominant role in shaping the story's contemporary significance, future readings may emphasize different aspects of the text depending on new scholarly priorities and cultural conditions. The multiplicity of interpretations does not diminish the feminist reading; rather, it confirms the text's richness and complexity.

This intersection between Gilman's autobiographical experience, the story's formal strategies, and its shifting reception over time underscores the importance of reading literature through both historical and ideological lenses. *The Yellow Wallpaper* should not be interpreted in isolation or confined to a single critical framework. Rather, it invites a multifaceted approach that considers its narrative structure, cultural context, and the critical movements that have shaped its interpretation. Gilman's own writings, including her autobiography and essays, reveal her deliberate engagement with questions of gender, authorship, institutional power, and social reform. This engagement is already implicit in the story's opening defiance of authority: "John is a physician, and perhaps... that is one reason I do not get well faster" (Gilman 1892, p. 648). The statement frames her illness as the product of male dominance rather than personal weakness. These aspects not only reinforce the political implications embedded in the story but also encourage continued reflection on the ways literature participates in broader cultural conversations. As critical paradigms continue to evolve, so too may interpretations of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Yet its sustained relevance across literary and feminist scholarship attests to the story's enduring capacity to challenge, provoke, and illuminate. Gilman's work remains a foundational text for exploring how narrative art can respond to, and resist, the social structures that seek to silence it.

5. Conclusion

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper endures not because it was once misunderstood but because it continues to challenge the boundaries of literary and cultural interpretation. Each generation of readers finds in it a mirror for its own anxieties about gender, authority, and the limits of knowledge. The story's lasting relevance lies in its refusal to settle into one meaning. It demands that the reader confront the conditions that make madness a social construction rather than a private illness, and it transforms the act of storytelling into an assertion of being.

At its core, the narrative explores the price of silence. The protagonist's confinement becomes a form of enforced invisibility, where the body is contained and the mind rendered suspect. Writing is her only means of recovery. When she notes, "John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition" (Gilman, 1892, p. 649), she exposes how language itself becomes a site of control. Each entry in her journal breaks a rule, eroding the authority that confines her. What begins as obedience turns into subversion, and what appears as descent becomes revelation. Through this inversion, Gilman reshapes both the Gothic tradition and the idea of authorship, transforming domestic space into a battleground of intellect and identity.

Gilman's intention, as she later explained in "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper," was "to save people from being driven crazy." Yet the story accomplishes more than a protest against medical practice; it reveals how artistic expression resists any system that denies the human need for voice. Her fiction becomes a meditation on creative survival. By giving form to a silenced consciousness, Gilman transforms private suffering into cultural critique. The text asks how many other voices have been lost to conventions that claim to heal but instead restrain, and it insists that imagination is inseparable from freedom.

The story's endurance in contemporary criticism confirms its capacity to transcend its own moment. Feminist, psychological, and posthumanist readings have all discovered in it a complexity that resists closure. Its power rests not in diagnosis but in disturbance. Gilman's writing continues to unsettle because it compels the reader to recognize complicity in the systems it exposes. The final cry, "I've got out at last … and you can't put me back!" (Gilman, 1892, p. 657), speaks beyond its century, echoing every struggle to escape intellectual or emotional confinement. The Yellow Wallpaper persists as a living document of resistance. It reminds readers that creative expression remains a form of liberation, and that the impulse to write is inseparable from the desire to exist on one's own terms. Gilman's vision affirms that art can illuminate the unseen architecture of power and that even a voice emerging from a locked room can reverberate across history.

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