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Understanding the Feminist Message in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" through Centuries

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Introduction

”John is a physician, and *perhaps* – (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind) – *perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster” (YW 41)¹. This is what the female narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” ponders over. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story is about a woman who is driven into madness because of a rest cure that gives her no room for excitement, change or work – including writing. In lack of such joy, the heroine becomes obsessed with the wallpaper in her bedroom and begins to see first one, but soon several women behind the pattern of the wallpaper. The meaning of “The Yellow Wallpaper” has puzzled Gilman’s audience since the story was first published in 1892, and it did raise issues concerning the woman’s role in late nineteenth-century American society (Bauer 3). However, many critics argue that the story was “unreadable” in its own time. Today it is seen as a feminist text, but Anette Kolodny means that it was impossible to read it as such in the nineteenth century because men and women readers did not have access to a tradition or shared context which would have made the feminist meaning of the text clear (Kolodny 154-155). Jean E. Kennard also suggests that the original audience read it as a tale of horror and that we today see the story as an exploration of the woman’s role because the literary conventions have changed (Kennard 174). Thus most recent research sees the story as an “allegory of patriarchal oppression of women and women’s writing” (St. Jean 239). As Dale M. Bauer states:

It has [since 1973] been read as Gilman’s autobiographical commentary on her own depression and feelings of helplessness in her first marriage to Walter Stetson; as a critique of patriarchy and of male medical practices; as a fiction about women finding

¹ In this essay I will use the abbreviation YW when referring to Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”.

voice within the constraints of masculine language; as a reflection of the invalid women who seemed to be part of an “epidemic” of invalidism, neurasthenia, and disease in nineteenth-century, white, middle-class American culture; and as a study of one woman’s attempt to free herself from social constraints. (Bauer 26)

As seen above, Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” has been interpreted in a variety of ways. But one question that is still not fully answered is why many critics believe that the story was unreadable as a text with a feminist message in the late nineteenth century. The main argument of this essay is that Gilman’s short story indeed was written to make a change for the women of her time and, most importantly, that it was readable as such even by her contemporaries.

A common notion in many anthologies and literary courses is that feminists “recovered” “The Yellow Wallpaper” in the early seventies. This inaccuracy, together with some deceptive interpretations mislead contemporaneous readers into believing that the short story’s feminist message is a new invention. That “The Yellow Wallpaper’s” feminist message has been clear to its audience since it first got published will be shown by the responses Gilman received from readers, critics and reviewers in the nineteenth century, Gilman’s reactions against the unequal access men and women had to the public sphere, and by situating the story in the context of the contemporary struggle by women and women writers to change their oppressive position in a patriarchal society. This will be supported by evidence found in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and other critics’ findings.

Well-read or Unread?

Despite some discussion whether “The Yellow Wallpaper” was widely spread or not, the short story reached a variety of readers. A study in short fiction made by Shawn St. Jean shows that many sources give the wrong information about the publication of “The Yellow Wallpaper”. He has found that the number of pre-1973 editions in print has shrunk considerably according to most scholarly accounts. For instance, in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* it can be read that the story was first printed in *The New England Magazine* in 1892 and reprinted by William Dean Howells in *Great Modern American Stories* in 1920. St. Jean also brings up that Gilbert and Gubar write that the story was “unprinted and unread” between the years 1920 and 1973 when the story was printed in the “Feminist Press” (St. Jean 237). St. Jean’s study, however, shows that “The Yellow Wallpaper” was reprinted well over twenty times before 1973. These findings would seem to kill the myth that the short story was unread and obscure “during any part of its century of existence” (St. Jean 238). He thinks that the reason why most critics and anthologists have adopted the incomplete publishing history is to “lend the story a mystique as a previously unappreciated feminist text [...]” (St. Jean 238). But as St. Jean cautions:

Students and scholars of American or women’s literature, then, are often immediately exposed to three myths when introduced to “The Yellow Wallpaper”: that it was obscure and underappreciated during its author’s lifetime; that it barely escaped a fifty-year oblivion in our own century; and that feminists “recovered” it in 1973. Many excellent critical arguments and student interpretations are directly affected by these basic misconceptions. (St. Jean 237)

St. Jean is concerned that such inaccuracies, like the notion that feminists “recovered” the story in the seventies has a tendency to slant readings in what are perceived by readers as feminist directions. As he points out:

[A]lthough Gilman herself was an active reformer in women’s causes, she never claimed such an agenda for the story. She professed several times that it “was no more literature than my other stuff” being definitely written “with a purpose” to influence her former doctor S. Weir Mitchell to modify the so-called rest cure that he had [...] prescribed for her years before. (St. Jean 239)

The reason for her authorial denial, he remarks, can be a canny ploy by the author to “keep all markets open for her story [...]” (St. Jean 239). He argues that a consequence of the author’s denial is that critics during the past few decades have read “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a symbol for patriarchal oppression of women and women writers, and that critics often link Gilman’s personal treatment with the story (St. Jean 239). Concerning her denial above, it is true that Gilman never *claimed* that her story had another purpose than to influence Dr S. Weir Mitchell, but that does not mean it was the *only* purpose she had. It might also be true that she wanted to “leave all markets open” for her story, because by doing so, she also made sure to get such a wide-spread audience as possible in order to get her message out and change women’s position in society. The important thing here, which St. Jean does not mention, is not how recent critics interpret the short story, but how Gilman’s contemporaries read and understood it. In her autobiography *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* she writes about some of the responses she got from people who had read “The Yellow Wallpaper”. One doctor praised her for the “detailed account of incipient insanity” (Gilman 65). One editor of the *New England Magazine* showed the story to a family who’s daughter

was in similar trouble as the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. They changed the treatment of her after reading the story, and she recovered. Gilman also writes that she was told that Dr. Mitchell had changed his treatment of nervous prostration since reading the story which must have been a great relief for her. Gilman’s statement proves that “The Yellow Wallpaper” reached a variety of readers and that it did make a change for several women.

“The Angel in the House”

Gilman reacts against the view of women as “the angel in the house” which was the nineteenth-century Victorian society’s ideal picture of women. “Any mother find within the scope of her own family circle ample opportunity for the full employment of the noblest endowments of mind and soul which have ever been bestowed upon a human being” (Kellogg 163). This quote made by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg clearly expresses the glorification of motherhood which Gilman tried to change through her writing, including “The Yellow Wallpaper”. In the late nineteenth-century American society men and women had an unequal access to the public sphere. Sons were allowed a space outside the domestic culture and educated to take their place in the public sphere of politics and economics (Bauer 9). Daughters on the other hand were raised to play the role of the “angel in the house,” totally dependent on their husbands. Society’s expectations of young wives and mothers were well understood and strengthened by so-called conduct literature and motherhood manuals which were very popular at the time. They were designed to “provide American culture with the proper etiquette for genteel living [...]” (Bauer 6). Such books prohibited women to take any room and Gilman feared for what the restriction of women’s activity and their greater confinement in the home would do for women’s health (Bauer 15). Gilman reacts against those advice manuals in “The Yellow Wallpaper” when the heroine fails to follow the

decorum in them: “I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!” (YW 44). She has given birth to a baby boy but has no motherly instinct: “It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous” (44). The heroine’s wifely duties are divided between the nanny Mary and John’s sister Jenny who, according to the narrator, “is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper [who] hopes for no other profession” (47). The heroine fails to live up to both the role as a wife and a mother. Gilman questions the glorification of motherhood in her short story in order to make it clear to her contemporary women what might be the result if they will not increase their realm of mental activity, or in other words, if they can only identify themselves as wives and mothers.

The Conflict between Discourses

Since the unbalance between men and women in the late nineteenth century was socially constructed and therefore not evident to her contemporaries, Gilman raised the question of equality between the sexes through the narrator and her physician-husband John in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. John represents patriarchal discourse and is, according to the narrator, “practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (YW 41). This is how the narrator describes her husband on the first page of her diary-like narrative. As a contrast to John’s rational discourse, the narrator has a fertile imagination and thinks that the house (which she calls “a colonial mansion”) they rent for the summer is haunted. The first confrontation between these two discourses is in the opening lines when the heroine declares to her husband that there is something queer about the house. “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in a marriage,” she writes (41). This quote shows two things. Firstly, her expectation of being laughed at in her marriage shows that the

husband dominates his wife. Secondly, the narrator tries to share her discourse with her husband by talking about her imagination but he responds with his common sense reality and laughs at her. Moreover, when the narrator imagines she sees people in the garden John tells her not to give way for such fancy (46). In their study of short fiction, Jeanette King and Pam Morris think that John's rejections of his wife's fancies occur because they do not fall within "the parameters of male rational discourse" (King 27). As King and Morris explain: "Using reason as his measure, John is armed with 'knowledge' which he can use to impose his version of reality on his wife" (King 27). They use a quote from "The Yellow Wallpaper" to show their point: "You really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor dear, and I *know*" (King 27). Another critic, Barbara Suess, has also found that John dominates his wife in all domains; personal, professional and social, since he is both her husband and physician (Suess 82). Their findings above are true, but what King, Morris and Suess have in common is that they all suggest that John is aware of his actions. Suess takes this idea so far as to say that "John's self-reported concern for [his wife's] welfare is not much more than a selfish desire to maintain the order [...] of his own life" (Suess 83). The unbalance between men and women was a social construction, however, which suggests that John is unaware of the mistakes he makes. "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him (YW 44). John's rational discourse makes it impossible for him to take his wife's imaginative mind serious. He treats his wife in the only way he knows and is not aware that it is the cure that he has proscribed on his wife that makes her condition worse.

Constructing an Identity

The narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" tries to create an identity outside the ideal of the Victorian society. The women in late nineteenth-century American society found their

individuality in the role as a wife and mother. Gilman believed that women needed to have a more purposeful – and intellectual – connection to the public sphere (Bauer 9). She early argued that a woman should be able to combine marriage and motherhood with a profession and to do her work in the world (Hedge 127). But at the same time, she knew that the patriarchal ideology was strong and that it was difficult for women to see themselves in a different role than as the perfect wife and mother, and she wanted to enlighten them through her writing. Gilman has once concluded that American men “have bred a race of women weak enough to be handed about like invalids; or mentally weak enough to pretend they are [...]” (Ehrenreich 93). Her statement shows that both men and women helped to perpetuate the ideology, and not all women wanted to change their situation. King and Morris suggest that the identity as a wife and mother promises the protection of male love. Since the narrator in the short story fails to live up to that role, she fears the withdrawal of her husband’s love and therefore “avoids the imposition of culpability in her ‘sickness’. If she is ill, she cannot be held responsible for her failure” (King 28). The narrator does, however, struggle to find her place in society in every possible way and tries to create an identity of her own in two different ways: through writing and through believing in her own self when she shows confidence in knowing what is best for her.

Gilman uses “The Yellow Wallpaper” to show the narrator’s desperate struggle to find her place in society since she failed in her role as a wife and mother. The narrator tries to construct an identity by writing – in other words, she turns to her artistic skills. Her creativity is, however, limited since the rest cure prescribed for her absolutely forbids her to work until she is well again (WP 42). This “work” includes writing: “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” (42). This quote suggests that the narrator has been writing before (her wish might be to have it as a profession?) since she writes “I *did* write” while she actually *is*

writing. Because her writing is met with opposition she continues to write her journal in secret: “There comes John, and I must put this away, – he hates to have me write a word” (44). She cannot confide her writing to anyone: “I verily believe [Jennie] thinks it is the writing which made me sick! But I can write when she is out, and see her a long way off from these windows” (47). The writing is important to the narrator in many ways. Firstly, it is a way for her to express herself since she can not talk to her husband about her feelings and needs. Secondly, it helps her to avoid the boredom of isolation, and thirdly, it is the only thing that keeps her from going crazy. But eventually she writes more infrequently: “I don’t know why I should write this. I don’t want to. I don’t feel able. And I know John would think it absurd. But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way – it is such a relief! But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief” (49). The writing is a help to her to a certain extend, but something more is needed to fulfil her aim to create an identity. The restrictions and oppositions against her writing are too immense, and as she says, the effort is greater than the relief and finally she gives up writing completely, surrendering to madness.

The narrator also attempts to create an identity by thinking she can stand up against the patriarchal values her husband lives by. At first, she shows a quite strong belief in her own self when she thinks that the rest cure will not make her any better: “Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good,” she claims (WP 42). She even makes an effort to make her husband listen to her needs: “I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia” (49). But every attempt she makes to change her cure fails and her situation feels hopeless: “what is one to do?” she asks herself (42). Her faith and her belief to be able to change her situation disappear when she gets no response from her husband, and her attempts even seem to have an opposite effect on him. He becomes more controlling and makes her a schedule for each hour of the day. “He is very careful and

loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction” the narrator declares (43). Even though the narrator feels she is being treated wrongly, she is also shaped by the patriarchal ideology of her time and is unable to see her husband in a different light than as caring and loving. Her “self” is not strong enough to make such a great change that is actually needed in her case. The narrator’s attempts show that the patriarchal ideology is too strong to change alone, something Gilman tries to inform her contemporaneous readers of.

The narrator’s failure to create an identity of her own and her inability to settle in the role as a wife and mother also makes it impossible for her husband to see her in that role. He has already oppressed her unconsciously with his dominant discourse. When he cannot treat her as his wife or the mother of his child, he subdues her even more when he begins to treat her like a child: “He took me in his arms and called me his blessed little goose” (WP 44). He even addresses her as a daughter rather than a wife: “What is it, little girl? he said. Don’t go walking about like that – you’ll get cold” (50). Now the narrator has faced a dead end. There is no way she can find an alternative identity when her husband has taken away her possibility to be an adult.

A Spokeswoman for Other Women Writers

Gilman did not only want to make a change for her contemporary women in general, she also wanted to make them dare to attend the pen and become writers. Bauer suggests that “many of Gilman’s contemporaries would have taken her heroine’s commitment to writing as a distortion of cultural prescriptions about women’s primary duties” (Bauer 7). But it must have been difficult for Gilman’s audience to think that the narrator wrote *instead* of doing her duties since she wrote to relief her mind. It was difficult for a woman to become a writer because the society wanted to keep their image of the “angel in the house”. The “angel in the house” was, however, not created by the Victorian American society in the late nineteenth

century; women who tried to attend the pen as early as in the eighteenth century were attacked by satirists as in Swift's "Goddess Criticism":

The Goddess Herself had claws like a Cat ; her Head, and Ears, and Voice,
resembled those of an Ass ; Her Teeth fallen out before ; Her Eyes turned inward,
as if she lookt only upon Herself ; Her diet was the overflowing of her own Gall :
Her Spleen was so large , as to stand prominent like a Dug of the first Rate, nor
wanted Excrescencies in forms of Teats, at which a Crew of ugly Monsters were
greedily sucking ; and what is wonderful to conceive, the bulk of Spleen increased
faster than the Sucking could diminish it. (Gilbert 33).

This kind of unpleasant image of women writers made them want to try to be angels, or more important, trying *not* to become female monsters. An author was to be a father of the text, and if becoming an author meant mistaken one's "sex and way", it also meant to become an "unsexed" female which led to becoming a monster or freak (Gilbert 34). If satirist's texts were a way to scare women into becoming or staying "angels" in the eighteenth century, advice manuals worked in the same way in the nineteenth century. Advice manuals did not only glorify motherhood, they also contained repeated injunctions against both reading and writing novels, as can be seen in the chapter on novel reading in Kellogg's *The Ladies Guide in Health and Disease* (1882):

Novel-Reading. – The reading of works of fiction is one of the most pernicious habits to which a young lady can become devoted. When the habit is once thoroughly fixed, it becomes as inveterate as the use of liquor or opium. The novel-devotee is as much a slave as the opium-eater or the inebriate. The reading of fictitious literature destroys the

taste for sober, wholesome reading and imparts an unhealthy stimulus to the mind, the effect of which is in the highest degree damaging. Many works which are considered among the standards of literature are wholly unfit for the perusal of young ladies who wish to *retain their simplicity of mind* and purity of thought (Bauer 160-161) (italics mine).

Kellog means that reading novels easily becomes an obsession which he compares to the addiction of opium and liquor. It can be suggested that Kellog wanted to prohibit women from *reading* novels because that makes the step to *writing* novels larger. And since he was a writer of advice manuals himself, it is those he refers to when he writes “sober, wholesome reading” in his text above. Kellog’s intention when he writes that “many works [...] are unfit for the perusal of young ladies who wish to retain their simplicity of mind [...]” is probably to prohibit that the idea of changing women’s position in society would come to their mind. Bauer has found in *Womanhood: Lectures on Woman’s Work in the World* (1881), that Richard Herber Newton argues that “only a few women can produce such masterpieces as Elisabeth Barrett Browning [...]; because too few women have this writing talent [...] they should instead commit themselves to their instinctual skills, especially nurturing the young” (Bauer 8). Bauer argues that the writers of the advice manuals wanted to develop a “higher type of womanhood” which involved “enlightening” women to their physical weaknesses. In other words, they wanted to keep the “angel in the house” just like a hundred years before.

The image of “the angel in the house” had survived over the century, just like the notion that male sexuality was the essence of literary power. The creative gift was seen as a male quality which also marked off men from women (Gilbert 3-4). Gilbert and Gubar explain that: “If male sexuality is integrally associated with the assertive presence of literary power, female sexuality is associated with the absence of such power” (Gilbert 8). The pen was seen

as a tool for men only and the patriarchal notion was that “the writer ‘fathers’ his text just as God fathered the world [...]” (Gilbert 4). Gilbert and Gubar bring up that men’s ownership of the pen lead to the ownership of his text, his readers’ attention and the subjects of his text (Gilbert 7). Men wrote about women from their point of view which turned women either into the “angel in the house” or a monster (which no women wanted to identify with). Morris and King write that this interpretation of women, made by men, was the only images of selfhood that were available to women (King 23). Gilbert and Gubar agree and add that women must kill the aesthetic ideal in order to create their own idea of a true self. Only women have the power to create themselves as true characters (Gilbert 16-17). They continue by saying that her battle “is not against her (male) precursor’s reading of the world, but against his reading of her. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization” (Gilbert 49). Women *had* to attend the pen to break the extreme images of women as angels or monsters and to show their true characters.

Jenny fit Victorian society’s expectation and is an ideal woman, but she does, however, show disbelief in society even though she refuses to do something about it. Gilman uses the narrator’s writing in “The Yellow Wallpaper” to show both Jenny’s reality and the narrator’s own reality which was the “real” reality for many women who aimed to write at that time. Many critics see the wallpaper as a symbol for patriarchal society, a society which John and Jennie help to maintain. If the wallpaper represents society, there are several pieces that can be read as Jennie’s disbelief in society. Firstly, the narrator had seen Jennie watching the wallpaper, and once caught her with her hand on it: “[Jennie] turned around as if she had been caught stealing, and looked quite angry – asked me why I should frighten her so! Then she said that the paper stained everything it touched [...]” (YW 52). When the narrator had stripped off most of the wallpaper “Jennie looked at the wall in amazement, but I told her merrily that I did it out of pure spite of the vicious thing. She laughed and said she wouldn’t

mind doing it herself, but I must not get tired. How she betrayed herself that time!" (57). These lines indicate that Jennie might not be completely satisfied in her role as a housekeeper. She *knows* society affects (stains) people and would not mind doing something about it. But at the same time, she sees what is happening to the narrator who tries to break society's restrictions through writing, so she chooses to live by the rules made by the patriarchal society.

“Keep the Story Away from Young Women”

That “The Yellow Wallpaper” could be read as a text with a feminist message by Gilman's contemporaries can be seen in the reactions made by critics in the late nineteenth century and the selection of other literature with a feminist message that were available at the time. “The Yellow Wallpaper” strongly affected people which can be seen in the response made by nineteenth-century reviewers who argued that “[the story] should be kept away from young women who presumably might avoid marriage as a result of reading it” (Bauer 26). “The Yellow Wallpaper” was also rejected to be printed in the *Atlantic Monthly* by editor Horace Scudder in 1890. Catherine Golden, among others, believes that Scudder refused to print the story because of the climate of Victorian America: “He may well have rejected the story in an attempt to protect his late nineteenth-century readers from the story's attack on the appropriate sphere for dutiful women: husband, child, and home” (Golden 4). Gilman's writing was met with opposition by those who feared change and who was scared for what would happen if women began to claim their rights to live as human beings.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” was not the only literature with a feminist message available in the late nineteenth-century. Gilman has herself written several works with this theme, for instance *Women and Economics* which analyses the economic situation for women in her society. Other women writers also brought up issues from this time. Kate Chopin's *The*

Awakening written in 1899 is one other example of feminist literature from the period. One book that contains several works is Gail Parker's *The Owen Birds: American Woman on Womanhood, 1820-1920*. It includes writers such as Elisabeth Cady Stanton, Jane Addams and Gilman's great aunts Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catharine Esther Beecher (who is also known for promoting women's higher education). These findings show that Gilman was not alone in her work to change women's position in society.

Twentieth-century critics who argue that Gilman's short story was unreadable as a feminist text by the original audience do not seem to have considered what other kind of literature that was available at the time, nor have they considered the reactions made by the contemporaneous reviewers. Jean E. Kennard argues that recent feminist critics can read the story as a woman's quest for her own identity because they interpret the narrator's madness as a higher form of sanity. He refers to Hedges who describes the narrator as "ultimately mad and yet, throughout her descent into madness, in many ways more sensible than the people who surround and cripple her. In her mad-sane way she has seen the situation of women for what it is [...] so madness is her only freedom" (Kennard 176). Kennard has found that many twentieth-century feminist critics even see the narrator's madness as a victory or triumph:

Although the narrator is not seen to emerge either from madness or marriage at the end of the novella, her understanding of her own situation and, by extension, the situation of all women can be read as a sort of triumph. This triumph is symbolized by the overcoming of John, who is last seen fainting on the floor as his wife creeps over him (Kennard 177).

To see the narrator's madness as a "higher form of sanity", and to interpret her creeping over her husband as a triumph do not, however, correspond with Gilman's intention. Gilman

wanted her contemporaries to see the result of the oppressive, patriarchal society. Furthermore, Kennard suggests that we today see the story as an exploration of the woman's role because the literary conventions have changed (Kennard 174). If it would be true that it is the change of conventions that makes us read "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a feminist text, it would also mean that it was impossible for the nineteenth-century readers to make the feminist meaning of the text clear. The reactions made by critics in the late nineteenth century and the selection of other literature available with a feminist message do, however, prove that Gilman's contemporaries could read and understand the feminist meaning in the text.

Conclusion

The feminist message that can be found in "The Yellow Wallpaper" has been there since the day it was written. The short story has, however, been interpreted in a variety of ways and many people read it, and still read it, as a tale of horror. The story does not appear to give a feminist lecture at a first glance, something Gilman did intentionally in order to get such a wide-spread audience as possible. She claimed that she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" with the purpose to influence Dr S. Weir Mitchell to change his treatment of nervous prostration since she personally had experienced that the rest cure only made patients' condition worse. That was, however, not her *only* purpose, which this essay shows. Gilman reacts against the unequal access men and women had to the public sphere, and her aim was to achieve equality between the sexes in all domains – personal, professional and social. John, the narrator's husband, dominates his wife in all those domains, just as he is supposed to do according to the patriarchal ideology of the nineteenth century. Gilman uses John to show that it is not his fault, nor the narrator's fault, that she surrenders to madness. It is society's fault – a society

that wants to keep their image of “the angel in the house” which had already survived a century.

Gilman tries to make it clear to her readers, both men and women, that change is needed, but the patriarchal ideology and Victorian values are too strong which makes it impossible to change on one’s own. The narrator tries to change her situation, but with no support from her surrounding society, she fails. Jenny would not mind doing something about society, but does not dare to. If she would have supported the narrator, the short story would probably have had another outcome. But the horrifying ending plays an important role in Gilman’s attempt to change the position of women of her time; she did in a way scare women from staying at home, submissive serving their husbands and performing the role of “angel in the house”, since she argued that women should be able to combine marriage and motherhood with a profession.

Lastly, it has been proved that the feminist message in “The Yellow Wallpaper” has been understood through centuries. Gilman’s aim to change women’s place in society and to achieve equality between the sexes is still a relevant topic in our society today. That is probably the reason why the short story still is an appreciated text – more than two centuries after it was written.

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