Samuels, Shirley. "How Turn of the Century Feminism Finds Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"." *Feminist Moments: Reading Feminist Texts*. Ed. Katherine Smits and Susan Bruce. : Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 99–106. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474237970.ch-013>>.

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How Turn of the Century Feminism Finds Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Shirley Samuels

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!

I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to. For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.

But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way.

Why there's John at the door!

It is no use, young man, you can't open it!

How he does call and pound!

Now he's crying for an axe.

It would be a shame to break that beautiful strong door!

'John dear!' said I in the gentlest voice – 'the key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!'

That silenced him for a few moments.

Then he said – very quietly indeed – 'Open the door, my darling!'

'I can't,' said I. 'The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf!'

And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly.

I said it so often that he had to go and see, and he got it of course, and came in.

He stopped short by the door. 'What is the matter?' he cried. 'For God's sake, what are you doing!'

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

'I've got out at last,' said I, 'in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'

Now why should that man have fainted?

But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him!¹

At the end of 'The Yellow Wallpaper', a work that has both mobilized feminist attention and served to frighten readers, quite short paragraphs appear from a narrator who seems to have descended into madness. As she crawls around the walls of the room with the eponymous wallpaper, she makes her way over the prone body of her husband. Addressing him, or perhaps the reader, she declares, 'I've got out, in spite of you and Jane'. As it produces a sense of being haunted by crawling women, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' also asks about what it is for women to be visible. The motif of visibility encouraged by the narrator's attention to what can be seen in the room includes the question of what can be seen out the window. What happens to make a yellow smudge at the height of a shoulder all around the room? When does the narrator start crawling? How does it happen that the woman she sees crawling becomes a woman to be rescued from behind the wallpaper? The ambiguities of the story have, since the time of its first magazine publication in 1892, marked it as the place to turn for a number of questions about genre. Is it a horror story, a ghost story or, perhaps, a feminist awakening? Since the story was published around the time of Kate Chopin's similarly ambiguous novel *The Awakening* (1899) and since it was followed by Gilman's defiantly utopian novel *Herland* (1915), it has become a standard classic in literary classrooms that pay attention to feminism. The further details about Charlotte Perkins Gilman's life, including her significant non-fiction treatise *Women and Economics* and her work as a travelling spokesperson for women's financial independence, have made the story subject to intense scrutiny.

In presenting the relation between the crawling woman and the fallen man at the end of the story, I want to ask about the ambiguity of the final sentences as well as to present a somewhat different enquiry into the genre of the story, asking especially what might connect this story to the fallen men of the American Civil War. That is, in addition to the resonance of the domestic space as a fraught space of writing, what concepts of mourning and motherhood resonate through its pages in relation to the great agony of the war? Named in the story, as well as

in its author's life story, is the so-called 'rest cure' developed by S. Weir Mitchell to treat what we now recognize as post-traumatic stress suffered by veterans of the Civil War. Subsequently applied to women, the rest cure was blamed by Charlotte Perkins Gilman for her own descent into terrible depression, and the story displays Gilman as the genius of neurasthenic imagining. Neurasthenia, the nineteenth-century label for forms of depression, could be the diagnosis for this woman who is never named, so that the name of 'Jane' operates as a potential self-naming as well as a potential name for a domestic servant. The anonymity of a narrator who has recently given birth but is herself confined to a 'nursery' at the top of a seemingly haunted house presents her as a potential agent as well as subject, as a writer, since she presents the story as smuggled writing, and as written by someone who wants to tear the paper from the walls of the home. This essay suggests that, in addition to the yellow paper covering the domestic space, the meanings of paper in the text might include the yellow paper packets used to send home the personal effects of dead soldiers during wartime, a connection that threatened the memories of mothers in the still-potent territory of loss in this suggestive story.

The story refers to the American Civil War through the genealogy of the rest cure, a recently developed treatment for traumatized soldiers, but it takes place within the consciousness of a woman confined at home, and its references to the battlefield hinge simply on the doctor named in the story. The treatment of 'nerves' that S. Weir Mitchell's 'rest cure' entailed invokes wounds that are invisible, wounds that we now associate with post-traumatic stress disorder. The rest cure in the story is designed to cure a mental wound; such an invisible wound implies an effect caused by having a child. By treating the mother as a patient, the story repudiates the form of the family that her act of giving birth might be seen to represent – because the mother, not the child, inhabits the nursery. The question of labour suggests labour as multivalent – the labour of writing becomes at once birth and the work associated with inappropriate feminine desires, work that the husband, also a doctor, attempts to prevent. The husband becomes an inert body in the narrator's crawling path at the end of the story, but he is also substituting his prone body for the previously prone body of the narrator who has been told to rest in that same room, and who has now either disappeared behind the wallpaper or managed to get 'out'. What has happened within the story might make the 'rest cure' something portable from the bodies of wounded Civil War soldiers to the post-partum bodies of women. The oddity within the story is that it produces a form of a corpse – the ambiguous casualty

of the man's body that the narrator needs to crawl over. What is it for a woman to crawl as she makes that disturbing last enquiry: 'Now why should that man be lying there?'

Outside the window, during the story, the lingering question remains about the other bodies that appear at the edge of the garden. An apparent menace clings to them, yet by the end of the story, in addition to the narrator, there are many women crawling. The narrator first sees a woman 'always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight'. She turns to see her: 'I often wonder if I could see her out of all the windows at once' (46). A story about a woman confined to a room might lead an alert reader to expect some form of home invasion. The space of the home since the invention of the eighteenth-century gothic novel has invoked violence and mysterious passages behind the walls. What is the configuration that makes the walls of the home still a place that inhabitants leave from and return to? As the narrator continues to look out of the window, she sees 'so many of those creeping women and they creep so fast' (50). Their presence seems linked to the woman that she finds inside the wallpaper at the end of the story when she peels the paper away. After reading this story, the reader sees the home as the site through which the world can be seen, its walls somehow transparent. The woman behind the wallpaper becomes 'that poor thing who began to crawl and shake the pattern. I got up and ran to help her.' What happens when they peel the paper together is a chiasmic structure of entangled longing: 'I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper' (48).

Throughout 'The Yellow Wallpaper', paper becomes entangled with feminist motifs as an aspect of writing, domesticity and intimacy. The use of paper as both an element for writing and a way to decorate houses overlaps in the story, and the overlap engages an aspect of trust. The narrator asks the reader for trust but clearly withholds information. For instance, she complains that, after he has confined her to the nursery, her husband refuses to change the paper: 'He said that after the wallpaper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on' (28). It does sound like a reasonable sequence. But, why do the windows have bars on them? Who has bitten the furniture or the bedstead that has been 'fairly gnawed'? The furniture that was to stay outside the body becomes something that can be ingested. The space that was to be a solid edge to the room becomes permeable. The narrator resorts to personification: 'This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had' (30). Her husband believes there can be no reason for her unease: he 'knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him' (28). His dissatisfaction with reason

emerges even as he explains, 'I am a doctor and I know'. The limits of his knowledge appear in a temporal zone: 'If I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall' (32).

A certain ambiguity persists about the emergence of other women in the story. Noting the smudges along the wall, the narrator protests, 'Most women do not creep by daylight'. And yet, the narrator quickly informs the reader that 'I always lock the door when I creep by daylight'. A woman off in the distance catches her eye: 'I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind' (46). And, we are told of the woman behind the wallpaper that 'she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard' (44). By the end of the story, 'there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast' (50).

Interpretations of the story have traditionally drawn on biographical details from Gilman's life. After her father walked out on them, the family relied in part on the resources of his aunts, including the prominent writers Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catharine Beecher. In addition to her bestselling abolitionist work *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe had co-authored, with her sister Catharine, an advice manual on domestic concerns, *The American Women's Home*. The introduction to this work addresses the need to train women for their lives at home. Gilman's later authorship of *The Home: Its Work and Influence* might be traced to the popularity and effect of the earlier book written by her aunts. In *The Home*, Gilman might also be seen to reflect back on 'The Yellow Wallpaper' as she answers the question (what is the idea of home?) with the bleak statement: 'The man free, the woman confined'.² In this more sociological work, Gilman explores the idea of home as a prison for women. In her still later reflections in *The Man-Made World: Our Androcentric Culture* (1911), Gilman concludes with this last sentence: 'an economic democracy must rest upon a free womanhood; and a free womanhood inevitably leads to an economic democracy'.³

The fictional treatment of the home in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' includes the theatrical space of the nursery. To adapt the formulation of Nancy Cott, what are the bonds of womanhood in this home?⁴ Who performs the labour of the home and the garden? In addition to the cryptic and elliptical references to a child crying, the narrator describes moving into a space that seems to have been appropriated for the use of a family after having been an institution. The narrator exists within a hierarchical structure of the family that nonetheless alludes to companionate marriage. Yet, not only does the story implode that structure, that is, not only does it erode boundaries, it also inverts structures and empties spaces perceived as solid.

Above all, the narrator insistently returns to the form of paper that inhabits the home. Paper to write on is something that she has to hide, while the paper to decorate the walls of the home becomes something to attack. At the end of the story, she works hard to peel it off the walls, even as the act of writing is ambiguously inserted into her apparent insanity. Paper exists in the boundary between the room and the outside world as well as in the relation between utility and decoration. It leaves a smudge on her body even as she attacks it. No wonder her husband cannot allow this message into his consciousness. In fainting, he returns to the status of the enervated casualty of war, in this case a war of the household order and of the separation of the spheres. 'Now why should that man have fainted?' Now that she has to crawl over him – and now that he lies directly in her path, the man who could once say with such authority, 'I am a doctor and I know' – the narrator produces the final act of unsettling the authority of the medical profession and rearranging the status of the home.

The publication of *Women and Economics*, subtitled *A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* and first published in 1898, marked Gilman as someone to turn to for serious grappling with the conditions of the lives of mostly middle-class women in turn of the century Europe and North America.⁵ At the same time, following on the work of writers like Margaret Fuller who, in *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1848), presented a more philosophical rendering of the conditions that might limit such women's lives, the work contains literary and philosophical excursions along with its serious call for women to abjure the economic and social conditions that restricted their activity to the home.⁶ The preface to *Women and Economics* calls for an audience made up of 'thinking women' who will consider 'not only their social responsibility as individuals', but also the 'measureless racial importance' they have 'as makers of men'.⁷

When Gilman refers to race, she imagines the human race, yet within that last phrase lie some ingredients of the criticisms that have been made against her work for its elitism and embedded racism, especially in the utopian envisioning of her later novel *Herland* (1915).⁸ *Herland* presents a group of women who have been isolated in a remote walled off region positioned oddly in South America and have learned to reproduce through parthenogenesis. When they are discovered by male explorers, the description indicates an Anglicized community whose racial composition seems to have little to do with the continent where they are living. Nonetheless, the work shows that the surprise expressed by the male explorers centres on the ability of the women to carry out all the occupations that their intruders imagine to belong solely to the capacities of men.

In *Women and Economics*, Gilman states her premise early on: 'We are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic one.'⁹ The ability of women to make a living, asserts Gilman, depends solely on the social conditions that restrict women to the home and bar them from professions. She acknowledges that 'peasant women' work, but notes pointedly that their ability to profit from their labour depends on men. Besides, as she asserts, 'the women who do the most work get the least money, and the women who have the most money do the least work.'¹⁰ Further, it is 'held to be their duty as women to do this work' and indeed, Gilman argues, in this view 'motherhood is an exchangeable commodity given by women in payment for clothes and food.'¹¹

The surprising lack of sentimentality about motherhood may affect how 'The Yellow Wallpaper' imagines the post-partum existence of a woman who has recently given birth but seems to have little or no relation to the baby heard crying in the house where she has been confined to the 'nursery'. As the story moves towards its disturbing end, the narrator imagines women crawling everywhere, confined behind the wallpaper, beneath the bushes in the garden; the reader might imagine that they are the ghosts of the economic circumstances Gilman describes in *Women and Economics*. That work presents an extended comparison of human families to the factors that lead to economic choice and ends by looking to apartment buildings that have communal kitchens and nurseries, an early call for the style of communal living promulgated in some current progressive communities. According to the social circumstances Gilman depicts, the condition of motherhood unfits women for other work. But, she asks starkly, does 'the human mother, by her motherhood, thereby lose control of brain and body, lose power and skill and desire for any other work?'¹² In 'The Yellow Wallpaper', Gilman first answered that question with an emphatic no.