



"AND WHAT CAN ONE DO?"

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## “And What Can One Do?” Gaslighting in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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It seems that since the first wave of feminism, every now and then someone rediscovers Charlotte Perkins's (1860 - 1935) short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, verifying the author's powerful writing style and even calling her "one of the most commanding feminists of her time" (Hedges 37). Known mostly for her work on the status of women and economic issues (*Women and Economics*<sup>1</sup>), Charlotte Perkins was largely considered an activist, feminist, and nonfiction writer. In addition to dealing with the socioeconomic status of women, she also produced an extensive work of poetry, short stories, and other fiction; none of which have achieved the same status of greatness that *The Yellow Wallpaper* has. It is one of the only nineteenth century literary pieces in which a woman can take the rare position of criticizing the hierarchy that lies in the sexual politics of the man/woman dynamics in a relationship, adding a new perspective to the outraging aspects of the male/female and husband/wife conditions of her time.

The short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, considered by Elaine R. Hedges (63) in the Virgo Modern Classics collection a small literary masterpiece, was published in 1892 by the talented writer Charlotte Perkins. Unfortunately, this short story was forgotten for some reason, and was classified as being of second literary relevance due to the fact that a great deal of the literary movement and the editorial world were/are also sexist. However, since the early dawn of the twenty-first century, Charlotte Perkins has been rediscovered as a feminist icon and, fascinatingly enough, a profusion of editions have spread around the globe with new translations and publications such as: *Die gelbe Tapete* (2005), *O papel de parede amarelo* (2017), *El papel amarillo* (2017).

*The Yellow Wallpaper* is composed of notes from the diary of a so-called "sick" woman. The plot begins with a road trip to a new house; the woman and her husband would now live in "[a] colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity" (Perkins 9). This new home is the place where the protagonist is supposed to find "rest" and "peace" so she can finally overcome her mental illness. From the first moments, the text shows the growing concern of a woman in her new house. She has a bad feeling from the beginning. The vacancy of the house is suspicious, for it seems so big and fancy and, even though the couple

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1 *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* was published in 1898, in the United States of America, by Small, Maynard & Company, 389 pages.

probably has money, they are considered normal folk. Moreover, since it is the peak of the season, the estate should have already been rented. The words the protagonist uses to describe the house are curious, but relevant for the story's development. When she describes the mansion as "haunted" and says, "there is something queer about it" (Perkins 9), she is giving the reader clues about the story she is about to tell. Nevertheless, the most peculiar word used to exemplify the house is "colonial" because the idea of a colonial mansion also carries the meaning of subalternity. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the idea of colonial serves as a metaphor for the subordinate conditions that the protagonist faces throughout the short story.

As the plot unravels, both the woman's husband and her brother notice traces of what they describe as "stress"; they are concerned about the woman's psychiatric situation. The diagnosis, as well as the treatment, is provided by her husband, who confines the protagonist in a room which she dislikes, where there is disturbing yellow wallpaper that makes her nervous and uncertain. The husband also deprives her of having contact with her child, friends, and family, and she is completely forbidden from doing any hard work (or any kind of work really, for even a walk in the garden could do no good for her health, according to the husband). She finds salvation in writing and keeping journals, which is the only joy she has while stuck in what seems like incarceration. Writing is the only form of sanity she is allowed to maintain. However, at a certain moment, even this small act of humanity is taken from her, and she has to hide and write in the darkness of the night. John, her husband, is a physician and so is the woman's brother, who endorses John's decisions. As one may know, being a physician is often considered a very prestigious position and gives the individual certain social and academic power in a society in which women are powerless by the logic of sexism. Thus, being a woman married to a male doctor who believes she is sick entails some catastrophic implications in the story, as the protagonist points out when she says: "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" (Perkins 10).

As the narrative moves forward the protagonist's illness switches from a nervous/stressful meltdown to a far more dangerous form of somatization. Insomnia, hallucinations, delusions, and

voices in her head seem to be the start of severe pathologies taking over someone who, on the first pages, was just “stressed.” These signs suggest gaslighting, a form of overpowering someone using psychological abuse, impacting the psychological state and even the physical conditions of a person. Gaslighting is the act of selectively omitting pieces of information and redrawing the scene in a way that the patients themselves would doubt their sanity. Usually, people under gaslighting influence are not allowed to see friends and family, they are prisoners subordinated to someone more powerful in the social hierarchy. The act of gaslighting can lead to being falsely diagnosed with a specific pathology(ies), and even developing severe levels of psychological illnesses, inducing treatments that consist of isolation, medication, and other methods (Gass 6).

Therefore, it is not right to say that the woman in the story “is” sick, but that she “is getting” sick because *her husband* is pushing her towards illness. John is the one that puts her in that condition and uses unhealthy methods to treat what he describes as a “sickness.” We believe John’s acts can be considered acts of gaslighting because most of the woman’s psychological issues develop after she is placed in isolation. The metaphor of the “colonial mansion” appears in the form of the relationship between the protagonist and the other characters and establishes a clear line of hierarchy in which the protagonist is in the lowest level. She is completely powerless and subordinated to the medical orders of the husband, to the agreement of the brother and even to Jane, the maid of the house. The protagonist is trapped, incarcerated in a situation against her will and she does not have the tools to release herself. That is why the colonialism metaphor is present in the text. The end of the narrative is quite ambiguous; in one possible interpretative reading she finds her way to freedom using what seems to be a suicide, using death as the only possible way out of the subordinate relationships she was dragged into. The plot turns out to be even more perverse if we understand that she already knew something was not right from the beginning of the story. And even though she is able to perceive the situation she is facing, she is not allowed to change those hierarchical relations, as she says, “*And what can one do?*” (Perkins 10). Gaslighting is thus used in the plot of this short story to represent the colonization not only of women’s feelings and acts but also of their health condition.

For years understood as a horror story following Edgar Allan Poe's steps, *The Yellow Wallpaper* was labeled as psychological terror. Even though these literary interpretations are right, there is so much more in Gilman's writing. The writer gives us a strong plot with a dramatic, bizarre, and unique story, a feminist document made at a time in which one was not free to talk about sexual politics as we are nowadays (but are we, really?). *The Yellow Wallpaper* is not just a great story, it is a *feminist masterpiece*.

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