

## Agency and the “Othered” Self in The Yellow Wallpaper

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and Marie Ashton’s 1978 film adaptation to understand the transmigration of a vulnerable character into the “other” self that possesses agency. The protagonist unwillingly submits to the dictates of patriarchy, compels herself to sustain the ‘rest cure’ imposed by her physician-husband, and as a result, slips into insanity. In both the textual and the cinematic narratives, the narrator’s husband disregards her opinions, desires, and her lived experience. The narrator’s attempt at liberating the woman behind the wallpaper is a relentless struggle away from her own self. This paper utilizes Lacan’s concept of the self and the ‘other’ to argue that the narrator constantly oscillates between her confined self and the free one, eventually finding a voice through the shedding of her social identity. This transformation takes a concrete form in the figure of the woman walking on all fours at the end of the story.

**Keywords:** Film adaptation, transmigration, patriarchy, liberation of women, transformation

### **Introduction**

Published in 1892, the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” narrates the descent of the unnamed female protagonist into madness after spending a few days at a supposed “nursery” on the insistence of her husband. The room was meant to cure her by isolation from her family, and suspension of intellectual work. She begins to decipher a sub-pattern in the wallpaper of the nursery, and displaces her entrapment onto a woman relentlessly trying to escape the space.

The story has autobiographical strains as like Gilman, the protagonist is prescribed “rest cure” for her neurasthenia i.e. physical as well as mental exhaustion, anxiety, and depression. This treatment was a Victorian medical practice that sought to treat “hysteria” by enforcing total intellectual and physical passivity. It advocated a change of scene, bed rest, isolation, and lack of intellectual stimulation. Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a neurologist, in the late 19th century developed the rest cure and advised Gilman to:

Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time ... Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours’ intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live. (Gilman, *Autobiography*, 96)

The story is not merely a gothic tale of a woman’s descent into madness; it is a clinical dissection of the “rest cure”. However, when viewed through a contemporary scholarly lens—and when compared to Marie Ashton’s 1978 film adaptation—the story

reveals a more complex psychological architecture. The narrator does not simply "go mad". She undergoes a transmigration of the self. By analyzing the story through Jacques Lacan's theories of the "Self" and the "Other," we can view her eventual psychosis as a radical, albeit tragic, reclamation of agency. She loses her sanity to find her voice, transforming from a passive object of medical scrutiny into an active subject of her own distorted reality.

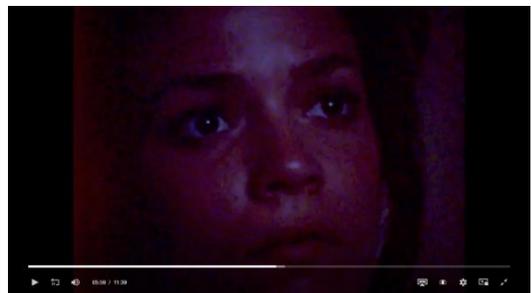
To understand the narrator's transition, we must look at the Lacanian Mirror Stage. In this stage, a child identifies with an external image (the Other) to form a sense of "I." The mirror stage is not merely a moment in development but represents a permanent structure of subjectivity. It marks the entry into the realms of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, where the child begins to engage with language, culture, and social norms. The identification with the reflected image creates a tension between the idealized self and the infant's actual physical vulnerability, establishing the ego as fundamentally dependent on external objects and the "other". In Gilman's narrative, the narrator's identity is entirely constructed by the men in her life—specifically her husband, John. He defines her as a "blessed little goose," (649) "little girl," (652) and a patient. (story)

As the treatment strips her of her ability to write (her primary mode of self-expression), her psyche externalizes its desire for freedom onto the wallpaper's pattern. The "woman behind the yellow wallpaper" is not a hallucination of a stranger; she is the narrator's Lacanian "Other"—the liberated version of herself that she is not yet permitted to be.

John represents the "Physician's Gaze," a concept rooted in Foucault's theories of surveillance. He treats the narrator's body as a site of scientific management rather than a vessel for a human soul. He mistakes her desire for self-expression as a nervous weakness, and treats her impulse to write as a harmful stimulant. Michel Foucault's theory of surveillance in *Discipline and Punish* posits that modern societies operate through a system of surveillance that is both pervasive and invisible. Foucault argues that the power to control and discipline individuals is not exercised through overt violence but rather through subtle, systematic observation and control.

In Marie Ashton's 1978 film, this gaze is captured through claustrophobic cinematography. The camera often lingers on the narrator's face in tight close-ups (Ashton 05:59), mirroring the suffocating nature of John's "care." The film utilizes long periods of silence, broken only by the scratching of the narrator's pen or the rustle of paper, emphasizing that her only true agency exists in the margins of her husband's rules.

The wallpaper functions as a visual representation of the narrator's fractured psyche. At first, she finds the pattern revolting. It is a labyrinth with no exit, much like the social structures of 1890s America. However, as the treatment continues, the pattern begins to shift. The front pattern does move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it! (Stetson 654)



This realization marks the beginning of the transmigration. The narrator stops observing the woman and begins to identify with her. In Lacanian terms, the "I" is merging with the "Other." This is a relentless struggle away from her own self—the self that is a wife and mother—toward a primal, unencumbered existence.

Marie Ashton's 1978 film adaptation serves as a vital companion to the text by externalizing the narrator's internal "Othering." The room in the film is sparsely decorated, making the wallpaper the dominant "character." The bars on the windows are highlighted by harsh lighting, reinforcing the theme of incarceration. The film uses disorienting, non-diegetic sounds to represent the narrator's mental shift. As she becomes more obsessed with the wallpaper, the environmental sounds (birds, wind) become distorted, reflecting her slip into insanity. The film utilizes sickly yellows and muted browns, creating a visual "nausea" that mirrors the narrator's disgust with her forced passivity. (Ashton 257)

To delve deeper into the narrator's transmigration, we must address the Lacanian Symbolic Order—the world of law, language, and social structures. In Gilman's narrative, the narrator's role as a mother is her primary anchor to this order. However, it is an anchor that weighs her down rather than steadies her. The narrator's interaction with her baby is marked by a profound sense of "othering." She notes, "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." (Stetson 649) Inside the nursery, the child is not a source of joy but a symbol of the domestic duty she is failing to perform.



By distancing herself from the child, she is effectively retreating from the Symbolic Order. In Lacan's view, the "Name-of-the-Father" (represented here by John's medical and husbandly authority) dictates the rules of the household. Since she cannot fulfill the role of the "Good Mother" within those rules, she retreats into the Imaginary—a pre-linguistic realm of images and shadows found within the wallpaper. (Lacan *Chains*) The narrator's "nervousness" around her child is actually a manifestation of her fear of the "Self" that society demands. To embrace the "Other" in the wall is to kill the "Mother" in herself. This is why, in the final scenes of Ashton's film, the child is conspicuously absent from the visual frame, replaced entirely by the narrator's obsession with the "creeping" figures.

The final scene of both the story and the film depicts the narrator "creeping" on all fours over the fainted body of her husband. To the patriarchal world (represented by John), this is the ultimate failure—a total descent into madness. However, from the perspective of the "Othered" self, this is a moment of absolute agency. She has locked the door and reclaimed her physical space, destroyed the wallpaper and obliterated the social pattern, and adopted a non-human posture thus, has shed the identity of the lady. By "creeping," she bypasses the intellectual vacuity enforced upon her. She no longer needs words, which John controlled; she uses her body, which she has finally reclaimed. (Ashton 9:55)

The tragedy of *The Yellow Wallpaper* lies in the fact that the narrator's only path to freedom is through the destruction of her social mind. She becomes "Other" because the "Self" offered by her society was a cage. Through the transmigration into the woman behind the wallpaper, she achieves a Pyrrhic victory—she is free, but she is no longer "herself" in any recognizable social sense. Both Gilman's prose and Ashton's film remind us that when agency is systematically denied, the human spirit will create a new, often unrecognizable, territory in which to exist.



Lacan's concept of The Real refers to that which exists outside of language and social construct—it is often overwhelming and traumatic. By the end of the story, the narrator has moved past the Symbolic (John's logic) and the Imaginary (the patterns she saw in the paper) and has crashed into the Real.

The intellectual vacuity enforced by the rest cure was intended to "save" the narrator's mind by emptying it. Instead, it created a vacuum that the "Othered" self rushed to fill. Her descent is not a fall into a void, but a climb into a different kind of reality—one where the physician's voice no longer has the power to define her. She has 'crept' over the threshold of patriarchal control, leaving the Self behind to become the Other she was always forbidden to be.

The film utilizes lighting to emphasize the narrator's fracturing psyche. In the beginning, the room is flooded with a harsh, clinical white light—representing John's "rational" medical perspective. As the narrator becomes obsessed with the wallpaper, the shadows begin to lengthen and deepen. Ashton uses the narrator's own shadow, cast against the yellow paper, to create a double. This visual doubling reinforces the Lacanian idea of the "Other." The shadow acts as a bridge between the physical narrator and the trapped woman she perceives behind the pattern. By the film's climax, the way the shadows fall across the narrator's face distorts her features, making her appear "monstrous" to the viewer. This mirrors the patriarchal fear that a woman without a social "Self" is a creature of nightmare.

Moreover, in the text, the bed is "nailed down." (Stetson 650) In the film, this is depicted with heavy, dark wood and rusted iron, evoking images of a torture device or a cage rather than a place of rest. There is a sort of visual "grid" that the narrator must metaphorically (and eventually literally) break through. The audio shifts from the domestic sounds of a household (clinking tea sets, hushed voices) to a wet, rhythmic "scuffing" sound as she begins to creep. This auditory shift marks her final departure from the "feminine" decorum of the Symbolic Order.

By adopting the posture of a 'creeping' creature, the narrator becomes the very thing the Victorian medical establishment feared most: an irrational, bodily presence that cannot be controlled by logic. In Ashton's film, the final shot often lingers on the narrator's face—no longer a mask of submissive hysteria, but a terrifyingly focused expression of a woman

who has finally seen the Other and realized it is herself. She says “You can’t put me back”. (Stetson 656) She has brandished her freedom by embracing the monstrous, proving that in a world that offers no agency to women, madness becomes the only available form of rebellion.

The synthesis of Gilman’s 1892 text and Marie Ashton’s 1978 cinematic adaptation reveals a harrowing truth about the nature of agency under systemic oppression. Through the lens of Lacanian theory, the narrator’s descent into “insanity” is recontextualized as a necessary, albeit destructive, migration from a Symbolic Order that sought to erase her.

In the textual narrative, Gilman uses the wallpaper as a shifting semiotic map; as the narrator loses her ability to navigate the language of her husband, she learns to read—and eventually inhabit—the sub-textual world of the Other. Ashton’s film reinforces this transition by weaponizing Gothic tropes. The clinical treatment is visually and aurally transformed into a site of abject horror, where the narrator’s creeping becomes a radical physical manifesto against intellectual vacuity.

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