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Absurd Remedies and Gendered Realities: Reading Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper

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Abstract

The article posits that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) transcends its conventional readings as a gothic feminist tragedy or a critique of the "rest cure" as a precursor to the Kafkasesque literary aesthetics of the twentieth century. By comparing the novella with Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), a shared critique of institutions that erase identity is revealed. The article contends that Gilman's work is a foundational text in the critique of institutional alienation where the protagonists' madness emerges as the sole coherent response to an absurd world.

Keywords: The Yellow Wallpaper, Kafkaesque, medical humanities, absurdism, rest cure, feminist criticism, narrative medicine

Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a ground breaking work of early feminist literature that follows the conventions of gothic horror to critique 19th century patriarchal medical experiments**.** Through an exaggerated account of her own experience with a "nervous breakdown," Gilman explores the disturbing reality of postpartum depression and lambasts the prevailing medical practices, particularly the infamous "rest cure." At the time, mental health was stigmatized and often trivialized, leading to reductive and pointless diagnoses for women**.** Gilman believed such forced regimens exacerbated mental illness, a conviction she channelled into this story. Though early readers often interpreted it as a gothic tale, the work is a social commentary. As Gilman stated, "the real purpose of the story was to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways" (Davis). Through enigmatic symbols and an unreliable narrator, the story masterfully critiques the stigma surrounding women's mental health.

The "Rest Cure" Diagnosis

The "rest cure," propagated by Silan Weir Mitchell an American neurologist became the

favoured treatment for hysteria and postpartum depression and, not surprisingly prescribed to women. The brutal routine imposed social isolation, strict bed rest, and a heavy dairy based diet, with force feeding and other punishments for disobedience. Gilman's story expresses the dread of this treatment, which she described in her autobiography**:** "I was put to bed, and kept there… After a month of this agreeable treatment, he sent me home with this prescription: 'Live as domestic a life as possible… 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, 1935).

Gilman's perspective, formed from her own traumatic diagnosis of "hysteria" under Mitchell's care, was dismissed by some critics as subjective. However, her critique is substantiated by the cure's fundamentally flawed gendered application. Mitchell considered intellectual activity an impediment to women's health, while male patients, often war veterans, were permitted activities like riding and fishing. Thus, the "rest cure" functioned as a social tool to discipline women into domesticity, reflecting the regressive mindset of the era. Other authors like Virginia Woolf and Kate Chopin also criticized the practice, solidifying its reputation in literary history as an instrument of medical misogyny.

A Descent into Madness

The novella begins with the unnamed narrator expressing admiration for the secluded mansion her physician husband, John, has rented for her recuperation. Suffering from what John belittles as a "temporary nervous depression," she is subjected to the rest cure, forbidden from work, writing, or intellectually stimulating company**.** She secretly keeps a journal, where her initial descriptions of the house, its rings, barred windows, and particularly the "revolting" yellow wallpaper.

The first person journal entries immediately establish the narrator's restricted reality. The wallpaper evolves from a source of aesthetic distaste into a symbolic prison and, finally, a hallucinatory projection of her fragmented self. The figure of a woman "stooping and creeping" behind the pattern represents the narrator's suppressed identity, struggling within the confines of domestic and medical tyranny. John personifies the patriarchal medical establishment; his dismissive infantilization ("little girl," "blessed goose") systematically invalidates his wife's lived experience, a form of what philosopher Miranda Fricker would later term "testimonial injustice" (Fricker, 2007). His sister Jennie acts as a compliant enforcer, illustrating how patriarchal systems co-opt women into policing one another. As her isolation deepens, her fixation with the wallpaper intensifies, marking her descent into psychosis. She begins to hallucinate a woman trapped within the paper's pattern, struggling to break free. John's patronizing dismissal of her concerns only accelerates her breakdown. In the climactic frenzy, she tears down the wallpaper to "free" the woman, only to realize there are "many" such women trapped and that she herself is the one liberated from its pattern. Her final act of crawling over her fainted husband symbolizes both her complete mental break and her liberation from his control.

The Yellow Wallpaper" masterfully combines gothic horror with psychological realism. The reader is granted intimate access to an "unsound mind" through the narrator's secret journal, making the subjugation personal and relatable. While the plot can be read as pure horror, understanding its historical context reveals the imbued sarcasm and sharp social criticism. The yellow wallpaper becomes the central symbol of her projected psyche. Her initial repulsion turns into an obsessive study, and the trapped woman she sees is a direct reflection of her own stifled self. The climax forces the reader to question whether the "cure" was the cause of the illness, challenging the foundations of the medical and social treatment of women.

Gilman's Narrator and Kafka's Gregor Samsa

A compelling literary association exists between Gilman's unreliable narrator and the protagonist of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis,* Gregor Samsa. Both works use surreal, grotesque transformations to present metaphors of profound psychological and social alienation. Though *Metamorphosis* employs a third person perspective, it is also autobiographical, reflecting Kafka's own anxiety and suffocating relationship with his father. In both works, the central character's trauma is met with a devastating lack of empathy from their families. Gregor's transformation into an insect and the narrator's absorption into the wallpaper are "Kafkaesque" scenarios which are inexplicable and irreversible events that channel a descent into hopelessness. Both authors draw directly from personal trauma. Kafka draws from familial oppression, while Gilman draws from medical oppression to create narratives where the monstrous transformation embodies the hidden psychological truth of the character being misunderstood, and ultimately discarded. Thus, both works transcend their specific contexts to become parables of alienation, where the protagonist's cries are silenced by an indifferent and oppressive system.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" remains a foundational text of feminist literature due to its honest portrayal of how patriarchal systems can problematize and destroy women's identities. Gilman's genius lies in her use of the gothic and the psychological tradition to make this critique visceral and unforgettable. While historically rooted in "rest cure," its exploration of silencing, gaslighting, and the struggle for the expression of the self continues to resonate. The story's power is amplified when its feminist critique is balanced with an understanding of its medical and historical context, and its thematic concerns connect it to a wider literary tradition of existential alienation, as seen in works like *Metamorphosis*. Ultimately, Gilman's story is a powerful testament to the fact that when reality offers no escape, the mind may create its own, even at the cost of sanity.

By setting Gilman alongside Kafka, "The Yellow Wallpaper" moves beyond a narrowly feminist protest and becomes a broader literary statement about alienation, placing it within a major philosophical tradition. Second, this pairing deepens our grasp of the Kafkaesque by giving it a gendered and medical background. The story shows how the most private spaces like the bedroom and the mind can turn into arenas of institutional absurdity.

Future studies could use this idea of "medical absurdism" to read other works at the crossroads of literature and medicine, showing that Gilman's Yellow Wallpaper leaves a longer and more complex legacy than many have recognized.

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