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"Grief as a Political Matter: An Analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*"

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Abstract: Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an American writer of the 19th century who was committed to the feminist cause and struggle. After her marriage, she suffered for many years severe depressive episodes under the "rest cure" treatment from Dr Seir Weir Mitchell. When she recovered, she wrote The Yellow Wallpaper, a semi-autobiographical short story created in part to help other women in her same situation, since depression was a widespread and often misdiagnosed illness amongst women of that century. This dissertation aims to demonstrate that the grief suffered by the protagonist, reflecting that of many other women, is not only personal but also political. To do so, I will analyse the protagonist's description of the control and absolute submission to which she was subjected by her husband and relatives. I will also address her obsession with her grief as the only resource to fight against it. Finally, I will study the end of the short story in which the protagonist gets rid of so much grief and impose her own will. This ending allows to glimpse some hope for all those women who still have to live with so much grief.

Keywords: feminism, grief, women, mental health, submission, hope.

Paula SERRANO ELENA

Grief as a Political Matter: An Analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper

1. Introduction

Women in the 19th century were relegated to their homes. They lived according to the doctrine of the "separate spheres" which defended that woman's domain included the private world of family and morality while man's area encompassed the public world and therefore the economic, political, and social issues. Directly related to this doctrine "The Culture of Domesticity" was implemented, according to which "women were supposed to run the household and production of food, to rear the children, and to take care of the husband" (Landry 22). These women were brought up with the idea that "truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education or political rights" (Friedan 5). Instead, a "True Womanhood" was based on "four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter 152). Women who possessed them were promised happiness and power. By contrast, those who did not would be judged by their husbands, relatives, neighbourhoods and society in general. As a response to the suffocating impositions on the woman figure, it arose the "Woman's Movement", also known as "First-Wave Feminism". This campaign "emerged out of an environment of urban industrialism and liberal, socialist politics, and its goal was to open up opportunities for women, with a focus on suffrage" (Rampton 1). Those women wanted to "improve their status in and usefulness to society" (Cruea 187). This movement was formed mainly by moderate women who understood the need of joining with sympathetic men in power to achieve their aims. They fought for woman to fulfil herself, not in relation to man, but as an individual. As Margaret Fuller stated, "what woman needs is not a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely, and unimpeded to unfold such powers as were given her" (Friedan 61–62). It was linked to other movements as the slavery abolition one. After many years of fight, women achieved not only the right to vote but also reforms in higher education, in the workplace and professions, and in health care ("Women's History in America").

Feminism also responded to social and economic discrimination through literature. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one of the most relevant writers and theorists of the Women's Movement in the United States. She grew up mostly in poverty since her father abandoned her family. She had little formal education, although from her early years she developed a special love for literature. In her adolescence, she attended the Rhode Island School of Design, where she became an artist creating greeting cards. In 1884, she married Charles Walter Stetson, with whom she had a daughter, Katharine Beecher Stetson. After the birth of her daughter, Gilman experienced "dragging weariness miles below zero. Absolute incapacity. Absolute misery—an intolerable condition that eventually led her to Mitchell" (Gilman, *Living* 91). Silas Weir Mitchell was an American physician considered the father of medical neurology. He imposed a treatment on her called "rest cure", and amongst his recommendations, he suggested 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 of intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live" (Gilman, *Living* 96). For some time, Gilman followed Weir Mitchell's orders but rather than getting better, she found herself "perilously near" (Gilman, *Living* 96) to losing her mind. Consequently, Gilman divorced her husband and moved to Pasadena, where she became a fundamental piece in social reform movements. Around

1890, she wrote fifteen essays, poems, a novella, and the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper,* which "has been read by many critics in the feminist tradition as a stern critique of the patriarchal society of the Victorian era" (Haug 26). She devoted the rest of her life to writing and women's rights activism.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a semi-autobiographical short story drawing on Gilman's own health crisis. The protagonist of the story suffers a bout of emotional breakdown and on the pretext that it would be beneficial for her health, her husband (named John) spends the summer in an "ancestral hall" (Gilman, *YW* 29). Once there, she is forbidden to work so that she can recover from her "temporary nervous depression" (29), as defined by her husband. She is relegated against her will to a third-floor room of the house where she is restricted, like a child, from the intellectual activities of reading and writing. However, she rebels against the constraints by keeping a secret diary. After some time, instead of getting well, she becomes obsessed with the wallpaper of her room, to the point of glimpsing a figure behind it, a woman, whom she feels indebted to save. Lizbeth Goodman points out that Gilman's writing of the story is a "process of catharsis, of emotional release, of healing, of coming to terms with herself and being able to use her knowledge creatively" (125).

Part of the relevance of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is due to the way it deals with the mental health of women in the 19th century. It was partly written in order to save other women from what Gilman had to suffer under the rest cure. She declared: "it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" (Gilman, "Why I Wrote" 265). During the 1950s, "approximately one out of three young mothers suffered depression or psychotic breakdown over childbirth" (Friedan 237) irrespective of their age, their social class, where they came from or what they worked as. Partly as a response to the suffering of so many women, second-wave feminism originated, and with it, the development of a new vision of women's issues under the slogan *The personal is political.* This motto "underscored the connections between personal experience and larger social and political structures" (Harutyunyan and Horschelmann 50). The phrase was popularised by the publication of an essay titled "The Personal is Political", written by the feminist Carol Hanisch. She pointed out that political was used in the widest sense of the word; she did not refer to electoral politics. In the essay, Hanisch argued that "one of the first things we discover is that personal problems are political problems" (114). Nevertheless, in the last decades, this idea of "the personal is political" has been examined and studied in depth, and consequently, new conclusions have been reached. Of particular interest for this essay is Leeat Granek's contention that "the expression of grief is always mediated by one's social context and is always political" (61). Feminist philosopher Judith Butler also argues that grief is highly regulated by regimes of power (39). However, placing the focus on the grief of the individual, defined as a deep and poignant distress, "takes away the attention from the wider social forces" (Granek 63). It is crucial to set the sight on the social conditions since they are the source of so much grief. This explanation of the relationship between grief and politics supports my analysis of the representation of grief in the short story.

In this dissertation, by drawing on the second-wave feminism idea that the personal is political, I intend to prove that the grief that the protagonist of the short story experiences is personal since she suffers it in the first person, but, at the same time, it is political, because it is caused by the family and social pressure exerted on her, and because it exemplifies a large social problem. In order to do so, I have divided my dissertation into three different parts, each analysing one element of the short story in depth. In the first section, I will explore the attitude of the narrator's husband and relatives towards her condition, as well as her own reaction to it. Contemporary social expectations of women and men's authoritarian character will be exposed too. Then, I will focus on the protagonist's detailed description of her grief and on her desperate need to recover. Finally, in the third section, I will examine her drive into madness, which is nothing but her release from so much grief.

2. Exposing the Protagonist's Grief

Cultural and ideological values shared by the population of the 19th century were the cause of severe depressions, a common diagnosis amongst women at that time. The protagonist of the short story narrates in the first person her bout of emotional breakdown under the treatment of "rest cured" advised by the doctor Weir Mitchell and implemented by her own husband. Confined in a small room, she is forbidden to write by her oppressive and paternalistic husband, "who feared that her writing could become a confession, a revelation of women's destiny under patriarchy and the want for change" (Armstrong 121). That is why the protagonist keeps a secret journal, "a kind of diary, an accurate record of her turbulent inward journey" (Johnson 523). Through her way of writing, it can be inferred that she is an imaginative and highly expressive woman. She defines her summer house as, "a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity" (Gilman, *YW* 29). Initially, the narrator uses quite long, coherent and complex sentences which reflect that her mind is still in favourable condition. She is the focalizer throughout the entire text, while the other characters are seen through her eyes. Therefore, as Lanser contends, "the narrator is the one we receive subjective information about and thus is the one we feel the closest affinity to" (33). In addition, that the narrator is facing a mental illness makes her "an eligible candidate for sympathy" (Haug 34).

From the beginning of the short story, the protagonist's husband shows very little regard for her and her illness. John is a physician, an absolute empiricist who "scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (29). Besides, at that time, women were frequently judged as hysterical, so when they claimed to be seriously ill, most of the times no one treated them with much consideration. Already on the first page she declares: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (29). She is aware that he does not take her seriously, but she has already assumed that it is something that you must deal with once you are married. Through her statement, she is hinting that her case is not an isolated one but that in a patriarchal society, as the American one in the 19th century, it was usual for most women the condescending attitude of their husbands towards them. Friedan contended:

> confined to the home, a child amongst her children, passive, no part of her existence under her own control, a woman could only exist by pleasing a man. She was wholly dependent on his protection in a world that she had no share in making: man's world. (61)

The model of society of those years forced women to develop a submissive and childlike obedience to masculine authority. Men were the ones who held power and therefore reason. At the beginning of the short story the narrator, with resignation, declares:

> if a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do? My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing! And he says the same thing. (Gilman, *YW* 29)

It is evident how men around her underestimate the protagonist's grief. However, and even though her role is to blindly trust their words, she simply gives in to helplessness and incomprehension because only she knows what she is really suffering. In fact, it was much more than a "temporary nervous depression" (29). Most women of that century grew up internalising that the function of women was to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers. As Friedan pointed out, "over and over women heard in voices of tradition that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity" (5). As a result, many of them ended up feeling incomplete, or as if they did not exist. "Some doctors began to refer to women's persistent complaints of fatigue and depression as the housewife's syndrome" (Coontz), and its symptoms differed little from those of the protagonist. She is suffering a severe depression. As Chesler underscores, "traditionally, depression has been conceived of as the response to — or expression of — loss, either of an ambivalently loved other, of the ideal self, or of meaning in one's life" (102). This view of depression fits perfectly in the protagonist's reality. She had tried to adjust to her role as mother and wife, because that was expected of her, but by doing so, she is missing the chance to live her own life, while falling in an unbearable anxiety crisis.

To cope with so much distress, the protagonist, dominated by her illness and influenced by the education she received as a woman, tries to follow all her husband's commands. However, the stifling control that John exercises over her becomes as powerful as her own sickness:

> I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition. But John says if I feel so I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself—before him, at least, and that makes me very tired. (Gilman, *YW* 30)

Her husband embodies "a figure of dominance in every sense—social, domestic, intellectual and physical" (Johnson 524). His empathetic inability resulting from his impossibility of considering how his wife is suffering makes him reject her grief, considering it less serious than it really is.

Actually, throughout the short story, the figure of John represents the view of society. In the 19th century, "women were understood as being fashioned by evolution for the home

and maternity, nervously fragile, intellectually inferior" (Appignanesi 106). They were expected to remain home, caring for their children and running the household. Basically, they worked tirelessly without recognition because it was expected of them to do so. This ideal was created and defined by men for their own benefit, and most women internalised it and fully conformed to it. A representation of this ideal is John's sister. The protagonist describes her as, "such a dear girl she is, and so careful of me! ... She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper and hopes for no better profession" (Gilman, *YW* 33). However, there are others who were not comfortable within this ideal because they could not fully embody it or adapt to it. Their incapability of adaptation often resulted in deep feelings of guilt. The narrator confesses, "I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!" (31). This sentiment of being a load was frequently accompanied by a severe feeling of exhaustion, which, in many cases, led to long periods of grief, as it was the case of the protagonist.

Due to the narrator's condition, her husband prohibits her to work, and even though she does not agree with such a decision, she has no choice but to accept it. She declares: "personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?" (Gilman, *YW* 29). The use of "one" (29) instead of "I" implies passivity, as if the situation is hopeless. And in fact, it really is, since she does not have any kind of power or authority over herself. She lives totally under the directives of her husband. Therefore, he is the decision-maker, according to his own words, always for the benefit of his wife's health:

> John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to try to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try. (32)

The excessive power of John over his wife reaches the point of even limiting something as wonderful and unique as the narrator's imagination. And her self-confidence is so damaged, because of the dependence, depersonalisation and manipulation by the power figures of society, that she ends up following each one of her husband's advice.

Not surprisingly, John cannot make the protagonist get well, not even speed up the recovery process, despite the control, the hard limitations and prohibitions, and the complete isolation, amongst other desperate measures. For this reason, he threatens his wife with a renowned physician, "John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don't want to go there at all" (Gilman, *YW* 34). Weir Mitchell's treatment for mental illness was known as "rest cure" and it was often prescribed to women who suffered from depression or any other type of emotional disorder, since psychology did not address this type of illness at that time. The damaging treatment mainly consisted of being lying in bed the whole day, restricting as much as possible any type of activity. The protagonist follows these prescriptions and confesses that not only do they not alleviate her grief, but as it is seen, as the short story progresses, her condition is aggravated:

> I don't feel as if it was worthwhile to turn my hand over for anything, and I'm getting dreadfully fretful and querulous. I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time. Of course, I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone. (34)

As the situation lengthens, the narrator loses control of her sanity. As Johnson pointed out, "her physician husband's rest cure can lead only to her psychic degeneration" (529). Besides, due to the emotional abandonment and loneliness at such a hard time, she ends up submerged in a state of frightening despair and distress in which both her physical and mental health are in serious danger.

3. The Intensification of the Protagonist's Grief

The story progresses and the narrator becomes increasingly tense and sorrowful. Despite following all the instructions for her recovery, her grief is more and more asphyxiating, noticeable in the way she writes in her diary. Through the adjectives and their disposition, she conveys a feeling of misery and detachment when describing the wallpaper:

> it is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough constantly to irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame certain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions. (Gilman, *YW* 31)

Even though these sentences at the beginning of the short story are long and coherent, in the middle of it, this tendency changes and the narrator uses simpler and shorter ones: "I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to. I don't feel able" (34). This deviation in her manner of expressing herself reflects her mental state, which grows weaker as she spends the days confined in the room with the yellow wallpaper.

"I never saw a worse paper in my life" (Gilman, *YW* 31) is the first comment the narrator makes on the wallpaper, which is the most significant symbol in the story since it represents the grief of the protagonist. Annette Kolodny points out that in the wallpaper it is possible to "read the underlying if unacknowledged patterns of her real-life experience" (455). The continuation of the wallpaper description is not much more hopeful: "the color is repellent, almost revolting [...] It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others" (31). She uses these words because she pretends to explain how she feels as faithfully as possible. The protagonist is suffering a severe emotional breakdown, and these are the most accurate words that she could use to define her current psychological state.

Despite the immense grief in which the protagonist is submerged, caused partly by the birth of her child and her consequent maladjustment to the ideal of mother, it is astonishing how she can profess so much love for him. She states: "there is one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wall-paper" (Gilman, *YW* 35). She does not want her baby to be with her while she is ill, and for the first time she even appreciates being in the nursery because she "can stand it so much easier than a baby" (35). She feels fortunate by keeping him away from her, thus avoiding him to share her grief. Through these words, in which the narrator names her child for the first time, some hope can

be inferred. Although the patriarchal idea of motherhood imposed on her has provoked her illness, she can still love her son. She finds love in pain.

Days pass in the protagonist's new summer house and she spends, despite the horrible wallpaper, more and more time in her new room:

> I lie here [...] and follow that pattern about by the hour. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you. I start, [...] and I determine for the thousandth time that I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion. (Gilman, *YW* 34)

By saying that she can spend hours there just thinking about the wallpaper, or better said about her grief, it seems as if she were obsessed with it, or even rejoicing in it. However, her actual task is to examine herself in depth, in order to understand the causes of so much grief. She compares her self-knowledge exercise, her attempt to look within, to gymnastics, and she even defines it as good exercise. Both are beneficial for mental and physical health, but at the same time, both, after a little practice, would render anyone exhausted. This is how the narrator feels, she is completely worn out, although she will not stop until she reaches a conclusion, a solution to her "pointless" (34) grief. However, it is an arduous path, and her grief is getting greater and greater, thus causing her levels of anxiety and sorrow that are extremely difficult to manage. She even confesses: "it is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight" (35), since she is falling into a state of utter neglect, and there is no one to hold her in the fall.

Trying to put an end to her suffering, the protagonist opens up with her husband and confesses to him that she is not getting better in this house. She begs him to get away from that place, but all she receives in response are negative answers:

> of course if you were in any danger, I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you. (Gilman, *YW* 36)

All the narrator's pleas and requests are in vain, given that the judgement of a depressive woman in that century was unworthy of any man's consideration. Her husband underestimates her grief once again, and he even dares to say that "she shall be as sick as she pleases!" (36). Through this statement, he is insinuating that her grief is voluntary, that all her agony has been intentional, or that she is unwell just because "she pleases" (36). As a response she does nothing, she cannot. She is quite aware of her limitations as a woman. However, all the undervaluation and contempt that she has been receiving leaves a mark on her. And in her desperate search for help, she ties herself tightly to the horrible wallpaper.

As the narrator sinks further into her grief, she becomes progressively more dissociated from her day-to-day life. She recounts how she can see "behind the outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day ... And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" (Gilman, *YW* 35). This statement symbolises the female imprisonment within the domestic sphere. Similarly, the protagonist is found in the woman behind the wallpaper. Actually, she is the one who "creeps" (35) through her current agonizing

and painful life. Amongst so much pain, the narrator comes to a point in which she is scared, fearful of herself, of her incessant pain, of what she has become or of what she could do to end with so much suffering. She claims: "I kept still and watched the moonlight on that undulating wallpaper till I felt creepy. The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" (36). It is the protagonist who wants to escape. She needs to be rescued from her grief, which has trapped, confined and immobilized her, thus carrying her to a stifling life from which she also seeks to be freed. Linn Kristin Runar Haug argued that the protagonist "tried to identify with the ideal Victorian wife, but it causes so much grief that she starts to identify more closely with the woman who wants to be her own, and free" (37).

Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to underscore that even though the protagonist's grief is making her daily life hard to bear, that grief is also allowing her to gain self-knowledge, and hence to appreciate things about her that nobody else could. She contends: "there is one marked peculiarity about this paper, a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes" (Gilman, *YW* 37). While during the day the woman behind the pattern is "subdued, quiet" (37), when the night comes the wallpaper "becomes bars" (37). The narrator realises that at night, due to the lack of light both outside and in her inner self, her grief becomes unbearable, and she feels like a prisoner locked up in her world of loneliness, helplessness and infantilism. Nonetheless, amongst so much darkness, she for the first time recognises the figure of the woman. Up to that moment, she had only had assumptions or conjectures but now she declares: "I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman" (37). This is the first moment in which she recognises herself behind her grief. Now, she can see herself where days ago she could only see blackness, and this instant of lucidity becomes the hint that indicates that the end of so much suffering is close.

4. The Protagonist's Final Liberation at the Cost of Madness

Towards the end of the short story, there is a change in the protagonist's attitude. She abandons the plaintive tone in order to adopt a more radical and determined one. This evolution is for her the path to freedom, whereas, for the people around her, it means her total abandonment of sanity. It is a paradox that as she loses touch with the outer world; she comes to a greater understanding of her inner reality. This is exemplified through the evolution in the way of referring to herself. In the first pages of her journal, she uses "one" when talking about herself, revealing her lack of confidence in her own judgment. Gradually, though, she increases her uses of "I" statements, since she grows stronger and safer as the end approaches. By the end of the narration, the protagonist uses short simple sentences, all of them with exclamation marks and in a new paragraph, "why there's John at the door! It is no use, young man, you can't open it! How he does call and pound!" (Gilman, *YW* 42). This way of writing lends support to the narrator's new identity, much more secure and firm, although somewhat tense too because the end of so much grief carries too high a price.

Even though depression had devastated the protagonist's life, it was also offering her a chance to discover all her inner strength. Thereby, she sets a goal, to study the pattern of

the wallpaper, or more precisely, to know in depth her grief to overcome it. And she remains steadfast in her task:

> I know she was studying that pattern, and I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself! Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was. (Gilman, *YW* 38)

Thanks to her resolve, little by little, she regains her will to live, because as she mentions, she has something to fight for: her recovery. But she is not the only one who notices her improvement. Her husband boasts about how she is improving:

> he laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wallpaper. I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was because of the wallpaper—he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away. I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. (38)

The narrator laughs at her husband because he does not know, nor even suspect, that she is recovering through her grief. Her desire to recover, to place herself before her family and social pressure, is so great that she can draw a heart-breaking force from her most absolute despair.

Almost at the end of the short story, the protagonist reveals: "I really have discovered something at last [...] I have finally found out. The front pattern does move—and no wonder! The woman behind it shakes it!" (Gilman, *YW* 39). She at last gets to decode what she had been looking for with such determination, the meaning of the wallpaper and what it hides. She has just seen herself plucking up the courage to draw her inner strength and once and for all, bring so much grief to an end. The protagonist makes an allusion to the existence of not only a woman but "a great many women" (39), since she, as an individual, might represent all the women in her same situation. In the American patriarchal society of the 19th century, many women were in analysis or analytical psychotherapy, most of them were taking tranquilizers, others had tried suicide, and some had been hospitalised for varying periods, for depression or vaguely diagnosed psychotic states (Friedan 191). Consequently, the narrator was not an isolated case, but one more of the "creeping" (39) women. The election of the verb "creep" (39) is not random, but it defines precisely what life is like for all those innumerable women who suffered and suffer from depression. Many of them barely have the strength to get out of bed and carry out everyday tasks, that is why they have the feeling of crawling through life instead of living it. However, and despite the social stigma which still continuous today, the protagonist, referring to the woman she sees behind the wallpaper, declares: "I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight" (39). She feels ashamed of her own illness, but symbolizing an important gesture of sorority, she does not "blame" (39) herself or the rest of the women in her same situation. Women were supposed to find their self-identity in the figure of mother and wife, but this was not the reality for all of them. For many "being reduced to a reproductive organism and a housekeeper might have seemed unbearable" (Haug 22), and, as a consequence, they were blamed by society for not living up to what was demanded of them. Something as personal as their own identity as a

woman and as a mother was put into question by the whole of society, thus becoming a political issue and not just personal. Therefore, the subsequent grief of so many women resulting from their lack of freedom must also be seen as political.

Once the protagonist has already discovered the mystery of the pattern, she is determined to save the woman from behind the wall. She is committed to save herself, she claims: "I don't want anybody to get that woman out at night but myself" (Gilman, *YW* 40). This sentence could be considered the turning point of the short story. In it she reveals her deepest desire of getting well, but not through her husband's, brother's or any doctor's means, since none of them could really heal her, but through her purest will and her most intimate strength. It is also the sentence that gets her liberation process underway, since from that moment she meticulously defines the way out from its most profound darkness:

> as soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper. (40)

Destroying the paper seems to be the only way she can destroy the hold of stifling moral conventions that demand female subservience to men. In its description, the narrator employs the pronoun "we" (40) for the first time. Since until then, the woman behind the pattern had always been named in the third person. Now she is getting closer to saving the woman who is behind her grief, and only then, both will be integrated into a single triumphant "I".

Nevertheless, in her way to save herself the protagonist must face some troubles, she argues, "I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise" (Gilman, *YW* 41). The idea of suicide comes to her mind. The way out of darkness is not a simple path. She wants to get out, but in turn, she has been there for a long time and it would require less effort to leave things as they were, or even give up completely. However, her desire to defeat her grief once and for all, is re-imposed above her most recondite fears, and finally the woman behind the pattern escapes:

> I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did? [...] I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard! It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please! (41)

The protagonist's metaphorical escape from the walls of the room, the walls of the written text and the patriarchal structures represent her flight from disease into health (Mínguez 56). She finally makes it. She overcomes her grief, and she does it alone. She had been lying still and docile under her husband's "rest cure", but now it is described how she "creeps around as" (41) she pleases. This progress "suggests an insistent growth into a new stage of being. From remaining supine on her immovable bed, she has become a new woman, insistent upon her own needs and explorations" (Johnson 31).

Now, the room is the protagonist's space, a symbol of her freedom and her self-proclaimed right to do as she pleases. As soon as she assumes this role, her voice becomes quite calm even though her husband is crying desperately stuck to the door. Linn Kristin Runar

Haug argued that "her calmness signals a role reversal; now she is the voice of reason, while John is the hysterical one" (30). For a man of science as he is, it is difficult to understand that neither his methods or directions nor those of the doctor would have worked, but instead, they would have plunged his wife into a serious state of delirium. However, and despite the narrator's derangement, now she feels liberated and determined to not give up what she has achieved. She claims: "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!" (Gilman, *YW* 42). For the first time, she explicitly comments on her husband's culpability. She shows that she is aware of the society's role in her illness. Her husband, as an individual of that suppressive patriarchal society, is partly liable for her severe depression. However, she will not allow him to "put" her "back" (42) once again. Now she is free, she has freed herself from her grief, although in exchange for a very high price. In her fight towards self-identity, she has ended up totally disassociated from herself. Her liberation has brought with it her abandonment of sanity. This ending is a denouncement of what her own liberation implied for a 19th century woman. And it could be an incentive for change towards the healing of women, without previously sinking into madness.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of my dissertation has been to determine that the grief of the protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a political matter. Gilman, the author of the short story, suffered in the first person a severe emotional breakdown because of her not being able to adapt to the norms of feminine behaviour and domesticity expected from her. Nonetheless, after many years of much suffering, she overcame her grief. She confessed in an article titled "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper" written in 1913, "I came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over" (265).

Gilman's grief was shared by many women in the 19th who were kept from growing to their full human capacities at the expense of embodying the figure of the perfect mother and wife. This reality took "a far greater toll on the physical and mental health of all those women than any known disease" (Friedan 296), thus becoming a large social problem. The characterisation of the protagonist of the short story reflects this issue. She presents her depressive condition, as well as the pressure and control exercised by her husband and relatives. Consequently, her grief develops into more and more intense to the point of becoming an obsession. And thanks to the exhaustive exploration of her grief, she discovers a woman behind it, she (re)discovers herself, which gives her enough strength to stand up to her husband, and to impose her own will, although in exchange of her sanity. As Johnson contends, "Gilman allows her heroine a furious and uncompromising rebellion that she could never acknowledge fully as her own" (528).

That is why this short story is a narrative of imprisonment but also of escape. It is a running away from loneliness, infantilism, manipulation, emptiness, but above all, a release from the submission to her husband. Despite her final immersion in a state of madness, the story is also a message of hope for all those hundreds of women who suffered the same grief as the protagonist under the submissive and childlike obedience to men's authority and the

permanent judgement of society. In addition, and unfortunately, *The Yellow Wallpaper* maintains its relevance today as there are still many women suffering great anxiety crises on account of societal impositions that prevent them from living under their self-chosen purpose.

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