Memorandum:

This was a long revision process for me, as I had to completely reframe my argument and topic for the paper. In my draft conference, we discussed how my thesis was not really arguing anything about the text, more really a commentary on the several critics I intended to use. We came up with the topic of the blurring of reality and fiction in the story, and how the line between the two is so ambiguous. At first, I considered using this to do a close-reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, picking out every minor inconsistency, and writing about that. But, I realized that would still not be much of an argument. Instead, I attempted to argue that this blurred line between what is real and what isn’t does not effect the overall “truth” of the story – in fact, certain choices that Gilman made (or as she fondly referred to them, ‘embellishments’) actually made the story more relatable, powerful, and obviously succeeded in sparking the interest in many readers as well as critics. I steered away from trying to pin down “what it really meant”, which I think is a bit of an over-asked question with this story, and instead focused on “where it came from” and “why it works”. I greatly scaled back my usage of Showalter and Thrailkill, but couldn’t resist pitting Gilman against herself as often as possible; I am still quite fascinated by the connection between her authorship as a short story writer vs. a writer of nonfiction commentaries/accounts – her voice is very recognizable in each work, but is somehow able to create a dramatically different effect!
The Reality of Fiction

1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” has prompted a significant amount of critical controversy ever since it was first published in 1891. From early critics that accused Gilman of driving her readers insane to post-1970’s feminist critics that hailed her as “the leading American feminist theoretician … to come out of the 1890s” (Showalter 1583), it seems that the diversity of criticism has one common theme – critics tend to treat Gilman’s story as fiction or allegory. I argue that this strips “The Yellow Wallpaper” of its most important characteristic: it a highly personal autobiographical work. Gilman’s own commentaries on the story reveal that it was based largely in reality, and that the blurred lines between reality and fiction in the text were intentional, allowing her personal reflective narration to reach a wider audience because of its ability to be read as a ghost story, a psychological case study, a feminist social commentary, or a literary masterpiece. However, each of these readings is secondary to the true nature of the text: autobiography.

2. Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” in 1891, just four years after experiencing a rest-cure treatment for a nervous breakdown that profoundly altered the course of her life; it is no surprise that she chose to write a story reflecting on what was possibly one of the most traumatic experiences of her adult life. It is critical to acknowledge this truth before examining the fictionalization of Gilman’s narrative; the story is firstly a personal reflective narration, and secondarily, fictionalized elements were added to make the story more readable and effective. Gilman herself did everything she could to explain to her readers the autobiographical nature of her story. In 1913, Gilman responded to critics in “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper'”, where in nine short, candid paragraphs, she explained that she wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” as an act of rebellion against her rest-cure, “I cast the noted specialist’s advice to the winds and
went to work again [...] ultimately recovering some measure of power" (Gilman 1578). Writing and reflecting on her experiences allowed Gilman to reclaim the power that she lost during the rest-cure; she wrote the story while in the process of making sense of her experiences, and it should be read as such, a personal account written by an author who is still in the midst of the reflective process. Much later, in 1935, Gilman provided yet another essential glimpse into her experience; a de-fictionalized version of “The Yellow Wallpaper” entitled “Undergoing the Cure for Nervous Prostration”. Told in first person, much like “The Yellow Wallpaper”, this short piece explained in detail what happened during and after her rest-cure. This later text is important to the reader’s understanding of “The Yellow Wallpaper” because it is written much later; “Undergoing the Cure for Nervous Prostration” focuses less on the thrilling and theatric aspects of Gilman’s ‘insanity’ and more on its causes and effects, which she identified with the gift of hindsight. Gilman’s commentaries on her own work do not play into the critical debates that surrounded her story at the time she wrote them. Rather, they are two attempts to remind her readers that the story was primarily autobiographical in nature, and that any other meaning gleaned from it was secondary to this primary truth.

3. The first person narrative technique allows Gilman to tell her story, mixing her voice with the voice of her narrator until the two women are nearly indistinguishable. One of the most distinctive characteristics of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is Gilman’s interesting narrative technique – the story is written as a series of twelve entries in a secret journal. The voice of the narrator oscillates between almost clinical, in its short, chopped phrases and one-sentence paragraphs, and profoundly emotive, with vivid descriptions of the narrator’s experience, from the physical to the psychological. Most importantly, the narrator develops over the course of the story from a highly logical, if distressed woman to a madwoman exhibiting dramatic shifts in tone from
sentence to sentence. It seems daunting to try to find Gilman’s voice in a story where the narrator’s voice is so constantly shifting, but several interesting narrative parallels can be drawn between the prose in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and in Gilman’s other, much more obviously autobiographical works. For instance, both Gilman and her narrator tell their stories in a uniquely passive, victimized voice in describing their treatments. Gilman’s narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” speaks of being manhandled, treated as an empty object or a doll “And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me” (Gilman 538). In “Undergoing the Cure for Nervous Prostration”, Gilman uses a strikingly similar description: “I was put to bed and kept there. I was fed, bathed, rubbed […]” (Gilman 1580). This uncanny parallel between the two narrators, along with several others like it, suggests that Gilman and the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” are in fact almost, if not entirely, the same person.

4. During her own rest-cure treatment, Gilman was forbidden from writing, which, to her as an author, was the most maddening part of the treatment. This frustration and emphasis on the value and power of words and writing can be seen clearly in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. According to critics, Gilman’s passion for writing was beyond what one may expect of the typical author – to Gilman, “writing itself could be a separate country for women” (Showalter 1583). Writing was a place of refuge, a source or legitimacy and power, and a profession for Gilman. Naturally, when Dr. S. W. Mitchell told her to “never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live” (Gilman 1580), Gilman was indignant, as to her, words were power, sanity, legitimacy, and livelihood. The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” experiences a similar indignity, stating early in the story that she “did write for a while in spite of them […] having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (Gilman 533). Words and writing hold an
even higher significance in the story, both for Gilman and the narrator, when the narrator’s husband/physician not only denies her the ability to do so, but flaunts his power via writing, giving her “a schedule prescription for each hour of the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more” (Gilman 534, emphasis mine). By its very nature, a prescription is a set of written instructions, and this irony was not lost on either Gilman or her narrator. The next clause critically changes the common ‘takes care of me’ to ‘takes care from me’, indicating the power exchange that takes place when the written word is sanctioned.

Gilman’s narrator toys with this concept of the power of writing throughout the story, frequently noting that “if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me” (Gilman 535). The narrator’s and Gilman’s shared craving for and respect of the written word ties them more closely together.

5. Gilman’s strategic blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality is perhaps most obviously noticeable in her adaptation of the male roles in her story/experience; while it is obvious that her husband was not the famous Dr. S. W. Mitchell, the conflation of the two male roles of husband and medical caretaker in the story allows Gilman to generalize, making it accessible to any woman reader who has experienced a domineering male influence in her life.

While many post 1970’s feminist critics are all too eager to ascribe this detail to Gilman’s feminist activism, displaying the powerful male character as “paradigmatic of the patriarchal silencing of women” (Thrailkill 526), I argue that this conflation has other practical purposes too. Gilman’s experience with the rest-cure is obviously the autobiographical foundation of the text, giving it a unique level of intimacy and a very personal nature, but it is famous for being extremely relatable to readers. Sometimes it was so relatable that it became personally unsettling: “the reader […] feels something of that same chill alarm for his own mental soundness that
accompanies actual contact with lunatics” (*Criterion* Correspondent quoted in Thrailkill 527).

Such a dramatic effect is not achieved by Gilman’s purely factual account in “Undergoing the Cure for Nervous Prostration”, where she explains in detail all of the family and relationship complexities and their impacts on her condition. In other words, Gilman’s conflation of the doctor and husband offers a strategic strength in that it simplifies the text, giving the reader only one domineering male influence to focus on, and making it possible for more people to read, understand, and relate to the story.

6. There are, of course, several other elements of Gilman’s text that are obviously fictionalized; the setting is almost a cliché of “conventional gothic romances that were a staple in women’s popular fiction [at the time]” (Charters 532), and the narrator’s vivid hallucinations are something Gilman later admitted to never having experienced. These inconsistencies do not make “The Yellow Wallpaper” any less an autobiographical work, but rather serve again to widen the potential audience of her work, increasing its reach and efficacy. The abandoned “ancestral hall” (Gilman 533) that the narrator and her husband stay in is a quintessential gothic trope. From the state of disrepair that indicates a lost greatness, to the narrator’s emphasis on the regal, colonial, hereditary nature of the building, to her hints that it is a “haunted house” (Gilman 533), the building takes on a gothic character long before the narrator’s hallucinations begin to actually haunt the house. Similarly, the description of the “delicious garden […] large and shady […] lined with long grape-covered arbors” (Gilman 533) is classically gothic too – throughout the story, the garden takes many forms, as a beautiful decoration, a mysterious labyrinth, and an untamed, rebellious wilderness. These gothic elements make Gilman’s story both thrilling and unsettling, a perfect mix to grab the interest of a broad audience. In her introduction, Charters even argues that these tropes from gothic fiction reinforce the motif of the narrator or woman as
a “passive victim of circumstances” (Charters 532), which plays into feminist readings of the story. It is obvious from the work of historians that Gilman’s treatment happened in no such place, but the literary device adds significantly to the story’s effect nonetheless. In fact, the reader could comb through “The Yellow Wallpaper” and pick out any number of impossibilities – not the least of which is the fact that Gilman never actually experienced hallucinations – but, this misses the point. Gilman’s story is a not meant to be a clinical account of what happened (that can be found in “Undergoing the Cure for Nervous Prostration”), but a glimpse into what the experience felt like; by fictionalizing certain elements of the story, Gilman made it more relatable.

7. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” has puzzled readers and critics for over a century. We cannot seem to decide exactly how the story should be read – is it a ghost story? A thriller? Popular women’s fiction? A psychological case study? A feminist attack on patriarchy? Simply put, the answer is yes. Gilman wrote this story while in the midst of making sense of a complex time in her life. Her story is based in reality, and she herself wrote several times that it was really an autobiographical fictionalization “with its embellishments and additions” (Gilman 1578) to make it accessible and effective. In reality, Gilman wrote this before she herself had decided what it meant; she did not give readers a starkly factual account until 1935, over forty years later. “The Yellow Wallpaper” tells autobiographical truth by utilizing literary devices and tools, bending reality where needed, and blurring the line between fact and fiction – in the end, it creates a much more relatable, compelling, and possibly even accurate portrayal of what Gilman experienced than any terse listing of the facts.


Martin's, 1992. 533-44. Print.

