



An Inquiry into the Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Women Through the Lens of Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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Abstract

This study uniquely explores Charlotte Perkins Gilman's chilling short story, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' through psychoanalysis's enlightening and intriguing lens, particularly the Freudian concepts of the Id, Ego, and Superego. It contends that the story vividly portrays the destructive effects of societal norms and imposed limitations on a woman's mental health. The analysis delves into the narrator's internal struggle, where the Id's yearning for freedom and self-expression, the Ego's battle for control, and the Superego's internalized societal pressures converge, leading to her descent into madness. The Yellow Wallpaper emerges as a potent symbol in this conflict, evolving from an initial source of aversion to a canvas for the Id's projections and a representation of the Superego's stifling constraints. Moreover, the thesis scrutinizes Gilman's use of the story to critique the 'rest cure,' a prevalent yet perilous medical practice of the Victorian era. By examining the narrator's deteriorating mental state under enforced confinement and isolation, the thesis underscores the perils of suppressing a woman's autonomy and the necessity of recognizing her emotional needs, making the audience feel the importance of this understanding.

Keywords: Emotions, Psychoanalysis, Mental Struggle, The Yellow Wallpaper, Victorian Era.



Introduction

Women's rights and privileges were primarily depicted through literature over the years, which resonates with our emotions and keeps us engaged. The Victorian era gave birth to the age of hysteria, as depicted through the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Every piece of literature conveys certain emotions that readers can grasp in awe of what they have witnessed since it is a form of expression through storytelling, symbolism, and the power of words that appeal to human emotions at their core. Literature, with its emotional resonance, provokes various feelings through the narration of events and characters and the signals of emotionally stable memories; the story itself works to trigger and transform emotions (Mar et al., 2011).

Literature can influence readers' behavior and perceptions, and stories can evoke empathy, inspire action, or prompt reflection. Through identification with characters and their journeys, readers may internalize lessons and perspectives presented in the literature, capturing the nuances of human existence, exploring moral and ethical dilemmas, critiquing societal structures, and providing a platform for cultural dialogue.

This paper uncovered the background of the Victorian Era and the effects of postpartum depression, formerly called “hysteria,” for a woman who gave birth to their children in the world of the text of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

The study's findings were visualized using Sigmund Freud's literary approach. Psychoanalytic criticism interprets texts using the same techniques of "reading" that Freud and other theorists did. It makes the case that literary works, like dreams, are expressions of the author's neuroses and reveal the writer's hidden inner wants and fears.

While it is possible to psychoanalyze a specific character in a work of literature, it is typically believed that all characters are mirror images of the creator. Using Psychoanalysis for the current paper provides a framework for understanding literary characters' motivations, conflicts, and behaviors. Representing a character through a psychoanalytic lens allows readers and researchers to delve into their unconscious desires and conflicts.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis has profoundly impacted literature by providing tools for understanding the complexities of the human psyche. According to Frijda/Scherer (2009), the "effect" of literature is frequently the most comprehensive term used in psychology. It includes subcategories like emotions (or emotion episodes), moods, attitudes, interpersonal postures, and affect dispositions.



Concerning dialogues in stories, each character must converse with another to convey such feelings of what the character is portraying. As such, they must act as to why they feel that way, even narration, for that matter, if it is a first-person narrative. The world of the text of the main characters telling such events as if they felt real also lets the reader feel empathetic to the words uttered by the character. In a related study, Lyytikäinen (2017), analyzing a paper on Edgar Allen Poe, stated that emotions are connected to language use, and literary communications always have a certain shared nature. When people speak, they rely on general meanings rather than individually experienced emotions, using shared frames and/or patterns to make feelings understood.

The argument here is that if readers were to read a text, they tend to feel a particular awareness and relation to the character of what they are reading, and if the conflict of the plot shows that a certain era of mental deterioration can reflect in modern society. Kaankinen et al. (2018) state that emotions can vary with people through learning and entertainment according to the positives and negatives of a text immersed through reading, which correlates with the study of Rosenblatt of exploring the reader within the text (1938). With that, the study shall focus on (1) Jane as she highlights the unconscious mind through her actions leading the story. (2) Using psychoanalysis to identify themes and to understand emotional inquiry, including the Id, Ego, and Superego during the Victorian Era; (3) using Appraisal Theory to enhance the meaning behind emotions of Jane (4) To uncover the author's life and background to the story and (5) why mental health is depicted through literature.

To carry out these intentions, the *Appraisal Theory* was utilized to support Sigmund Freud's literary approach. Popularized by Richard Lazarus, it focuses on the cognitive appraisal of a situation as the critical determinant of emotion. In this theory, emotions result from how people evaluate or appraise a situation. Different appraisals, such as threats or challenges, can produce different emotional responses (Gratch et al., 2006). Through this theory, the researchers highlighted the relationship between emotion and cognition since it is the most applicable theory of emotion for people interested in designing symbolic characters in a story.

Essentially, this study acknowledged that literature showcases the struggles of the current era and how a piece of writing and its emotional tendencies affect readers. Many studies of *The Yellow Wallpaper* are mostly centered on the feminist view, which can hinder the study since it will focus more on Jane's emotions, which are rarely touched.

Statement of the Problem

The research aimed to identify notable emotions shown by the characters through dialogues utilizing the Psychoanalytic Theory of Freud.

Specifically, it answered the questions:

1. What are the narrator's underlying psychological dynamics and unconscious mind relating to id, ego, and superego?
2. What are the repressed desires and fears of the narrator shown in her interaction with the yellow wallpaper?
3. How does the author's background, Charlotte Perkins Gillman, relate to the main character?
4. What implications do the psychoanalytic interpretations of the yellow wallpaper have for understanding mental health in today's society?

Methodology

The study used Descriptive qualitative analysis. It required data collection from the story's textual analysis, precisely the dialogues and phrases of *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Gilman (1892). With the appropriate frameworks by Richard Lazarus (1991) and the process from the Conceptual Framework, the study listed the following phrases and dialogues in the story explaining why such emotions were emitted.

Excerpt dialogue from *The Yellow Wallpaper* “*My darling,*” said he, “*I beg of you, for my sake and for our child’s sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?*”

The data used in the study were considered using the Purposive selection method. In the analysis part, understanding the Characters via plot, their origins and roles, and the Environment using Psychoanalysis was made evident. This was enriched through understanding how the Character expressed dialogues using the Appraisal Theory to understand the emotions expressed by the major character. Freud’s Psychoanalytic Approach with the principles of the Appraisal Theory resulted in creating new ways to interpret the plot, using the Appraisal Theory in the Victorian era as well and how Freud’s Psychoanalysis provided extra context for understanding the characters in *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

Results and Discussions

This part presents the necessary data gathered and an in-depth exploration of the following research questions.

1. Underlying Psychological Dynamics of the Narrator Related to ID, Ego, and Superego

Table 1: Revealed Psychological Dynamics from the “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Excerpts from the story	Revealed Psychological Dynamics
<p>1.) “It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer. A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate!”</p> <p>Id: Jane's first instinct was to get a better home for herself and her husband, but she denied the mansion to be considered home due to its haunting looks. Ego: Jane is still unsure of where she will be staying. She then offers a romantic setting, but it is too late since the husband has already purchased the place.</p>	<p>John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.”</p> <p>“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. You see, he does not believe I am sick!”</p> <p>Id: Jane wanted a cure for her mental state. Ego: The husband does not believe her issues are “real”. Superego: Jane addressed her issues about</p>
<p>“Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.” her husband’s foolishness to be able to afford such a place.</p>	
<p>2.) “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.</p>	<p>the place, but her husband will not listen and tries to reason with her with his knowledge as a doctor</p>

Table 1 reveals that the characters portrayed an unconscious mind (hidden desires) that affects her psyche. There are signs of repression of Jane from her husband in the following lines: “*John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage*” and “*You see, he does not believe I am sick!*” To back up this claim, Treichler (1984) states that these factors determined the early struggle Jane was the cause of her husband’s denial of proper treatment, and instead of speaking openly "to a living soul," she called her husband "dead paper" because she feels unable to speak honestly to anyone; the only safe language is a dead language.

John insisted that Jane be a perfect Victorian wife whose duties were restricted to child-keeping and housekeeping. According to the excerpt, Jane claims that being a wife is a kind of punishment that keeps women confined to their houses and separates them

from society. The narrator's illness, dismissed by John, could be seen through this lens (Raj, 2023).

The perspective of the Victorian era is already evident at the start of the short story. Places like big mansions were empty, only for the wealthy to habitually live in. The main character felt uneasy as she entered her new home since she expected to live somewhere "romantic." James (2019) mentions that women in the era had no freedom to express their needs to their husbands as the patriarchal culture had to be sustained for the benefit of both parties.

This is where the Appraisal Theory by Lazarus (1991) can be applied as the environment feels strange to the narrator, where the individuals assess whether an event is relevant to their well-being and, if so, in what way. The primary appraisal can lead to categorizing an event as positive, negative, or irrelevant. As mentioned before by Smith and Kirby (2009), a character's emotional aspect is shown given to a situation affecting their well-being and way of thinking; in a way, it helps psychoanalyze the critical aspect of the narrator.

If Freud's Psychoanalysis is applied, it is to determine the id, ego, and superego as defense mechanisms to protect her from her way of thinking.

The id represents the instinctual and primal part of the psyche. In these excerpts, the id could be represented by the protagonist's unconscious desires and impulses. She longs for something beyond the ordinary, expressing a desire for the ancestral halls and the romantic felicity associated with them. The id seeks immediate gratification and fulfillment of desires without considering consequences, reflected in her longing for the haunted house despite its potential dangers.

The ego represents the rational and reality-oriented aspect of the psyche. John, the protagonist's husband, embodies the ego in these excerpts. He is described as practical and rational, with a disdain for superstition and a preference for tangible evidence. His practicality is a defense mechanism against the protagonist's desires and fears, as he laughs at her concerns and dismisses them.

While the superego is not explicitly represented in these excerpts, it can be inferred through the protagonist's internal conflict and guilt. She feels uneasy about the house and questions why it is available cheaply and has remained vacant for so long.

Table 2: Other Revealed Psychological Dynamics

Excerpts from the story

Revealed Psychological Dynamics

1.1) So I take phosphates or phosphites— whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again. Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?

Id: She wanted to be freer rather than be secluded in the mansion's space.

Ego: She uses tonics, taking part of exercising, breathing air as a way to distract herself

Superego: She claims doing congenial work will excite her, but the husband still

1.2) One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance, they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous

forbids her.

Id: The color of the wallpaper is calling to Jane, fully capturing her attention.

Ego: She has a complete disdain of the color “yellow”.

Superego: Jane saw something haunting in the Yellow Wallpaper that made her obsessed with it more.

angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.

The color is repellent, almost revolting; a shoudering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

Table 2 presents excerpt 1.1, which states that Jane is under the “rest cure” protocol and her descent into madness. To forcefully do nothing while under the pretense of said rest cure, she was supposed to stay in bed only and away from writing, work, and any activity describes the yellow wallpaper in intensely negative terms (Benhamed, 2021).

Benhamed also stated in Gilman's short story that a woman confined to her bed due to her rest treatment develops an infatuation with the yellow wall covering her room because she is not allowed to lie in bed. Eventually, she loses her temper. Perkins illustrated the protagonist's mental breakdown in the final section of the narrative, which was brought on by the protagonist's real-life application of the rest cure for postpartum depression.

Jane describes a variety of emotions and feelings, including tiredness, sobbing, anxiety, synesthesia, wrath, paranoia, and hallucinations. This combination of a "slight hysterical tendency" and "temporary nervous depression" is shown in these excerpts.

In the analysis of Treichler (1984), excerpt 1.2 states the terms: “flamboyant, confusing, outrageous” is the very act of women's writing produces discourse which embodies "unheard of contradictions. Like all effective metaphors, readers interpret the yellow wallpaper in different ways. Some think it symbolizes the "pattern" that underlying sexual inequity, the outside sign of neurasthenia, the narrator's unconscious, or the narrator's position within a patriarchal society.

2. The Repressed Desires and Fears of the Narrator Shown in her Interaction with the Yellow Wallpaper

Table 3: *Repressed Desires and Fears of the Narrator*

Excerpts	Current Ev	Appraisal Process and Emotional Response	Action Tendencies
It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things.	The Yellow Wallpaper	The wallpaper hinders her wellbeing by being unpleasant and possibly contributing to her illness.	Jane was slowly declining her mental state as she focuses more on the wallpaper
		Negative Response: Disgust, possibly fear or aversion.	

<p>I wish I could get well faster. But I must not think about that. This paper looks to me as if it KNEW what a vicious influence it had! There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down. I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere</p>	<p>The Wallpaper</p>	<p>Yellow</p>	<p>The narrator expresses a strong desire to get well, highlighting her awareness of her illness. This can be seen as an attempt to control her situation and achieve a positive outcome</p>	<p>The wallpaper itself isn't an agent, but it becomes a symbol of her lack of control over her situation.</p>
			<p>Negative Response: The wallpaper is no longer just an unpleasant decoration; it's perceived as a malicious entity.</p>	

Table 3 shows excerpts that reveal the main character's desires, forbidding her to cease certain actions that may benefit her conscious mind; these result from the husband trying to limit her capabilities due to his excessive naivety about her condition; his status alone is enough to seek her help.

Appraisal theory can determine the behavioral factors that affect the said story. Showing excerpts of the story's flow should reveal the meaning of each behavior of the main character during the Victorian Era. It all starts with an event, something that happens around a person (The Yellow Wallpaper). Then, the person undergoes a cognitive appraisal process, which means the person assigns meaning and significance to the event, answering the question "why" such an event happens. Next is the emotional response based on the appraisal of the specific emotion that is reacted to in these factors. Finally, the Action Tendencies that a person would do in a situation are to "address" or to "avoid" based on positive or negative feedback from the Emotional Response (Lazarus, 1991).

3. Connection of Author’s Background to the Main Character

Table 4: Relationship of Character to Author

Experiences of Jane in the following excerpts	The Experience of the author
There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word. We have been here two weeks, and I haven't felt like writing before, since that first day.	“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)
He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get.	I was put to bed, and kept there. I was fed, bathed, rubbed, and responded with the vigorous body of twenty-six. (Gilman, 1935)
John does not know how much I really Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this suffer. He knows there is no REASON to narrow escape, I wrote <i>The Yellow</i> suffer, and that satisfies him. <i>Wallpaper</i> , with its embellishments and additions to carry out the ideal (I never had hallucinations or objections to my mural decorations) and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it. (Gilman, 1892)	

Table 4 illustrates the main character in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman, who went through postpartum depression after her daughter's 1885 birth. Her evaluation of the rest of the treatment recommended by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell to treat her depression was motivated by her personal experience (Gilman, 1935). The protagonist's struggle against the harsh treatment she is subjected to at the hands of her husband and the medical system is reminiscent of Gilman's rejection of this therapy and her subsequent recovery through labor and intellectual pursuits (Gilman, 1913).

Gilman criticizes medicine’s paternalistic views toward women's health through the character of John, the protagonist's spouse and doctor. Gilman's encounters with medical professionals who disregarded her mental and emotional health are reflected in John's contemptuous handling of his wife's worries and his determination to manage her conduct (Benahmed, 2021). Gilman's criticism touches on more general matters, such as the stereotyping of women's experiences, especially those on mental health and medical authority.

4. Implications of the Psychoanalytic Interpretations of the Yellow Wallpaper to the Present Society

Psychoanalytic interpretations of the protagonist's descent into madness in "The Yellow Wallpaper" highlight the importance of recognizing and addressing mental health struggles. This includes acknowledging the complexity of mental illness, understanding the impact of social and environmental factors on mental well-being, and advocating for accessible and compassionate mental health care (Hossain, 2017).

"I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. 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."

The excerpt above indicates that women's roles are rendered obsolete as they lose their abilities, vitality, and ability to think clearly. One of Gilman's primary goals in writing this story is to share her postpartum experience with Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell. Mitchell gave her a rest cure, which, as she stated in the essay, she wrote outlining her inspiration for writing the story, did not in any way help to relieve her symptoms but, on the contrary, brought her dangerously close to going insane (Benahmed, 2021). She was warning women about his treatment while simultaneously addressing him with the narrative in an attempt to get him to re-evaluate how he treated them and to correct his flaws and methods of relating to women.

Psychoanalytic interpretations encourage critical examines how dominant discourses around mental health and power influence individual experiences and shape social institutions. By challenging oppressive norms and advocating for social change, we can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive society. "The Yellow Wallpaper" invites readers to question social norms, ideologies, and expectations contributing to the protagonist's suffering and marginalization.

I don't want to go out, and I don't want to have anybody come in, till John comes I want to astonish him. I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her! But I forgot I could not reach far without anything to stand on!

In order to indeed find fulfillment, Jane wants to share control over the patriarchy in addition to seeking acceptance into society. Gilman claims that if the desire to produce was all that was involved, then each of the farmer's wives ought to have been the happiest people on the globe, tirelessly putting in work on the farm every day, metaphorically speaking. Producing herself gives the universal woman true fulfillment (Rasmussen, 2022).

Essentially, psychoanalytic readings of "The Yellow Wallpaper" provide insightful analyses of the complexities of gender dynamics, mental health, and power dynamics. By



applying these analyses to contemporary issues, we can further our understanding of these complex issues and endeavor to advance social justice, mental health, and gender equality.

Conclusion

While "The Yellow Wallpaper" exposes societal issues specific to its time, the underlying themes of mental health and societal pressures remain relevant today. The story is a powerful reminder of the need to challenge restrictive norms and prioritize mental well-being. By recognizing both the progress made and the ongoing struggles, we can work towards a future where these social issues are no longer a source of suffering.

Recommendations

By analyzing the protagonist's internal conflict between the Id, Ego, and Superego, it has demonstrated the devastating consequences of societal expectations and enforced restrictions on a woman's mental well-being. However, the story's richness offers fertile ground for further exploration.

Psychology majors may find this study more intriguing by using their expertise on the subject matter and giving awareness to the mind of a mother experiencing trouble giving birth as they explore the evolution of diagnostic criteria, treatment methods, and the intersection of psychology with broader social and cultural contexts. New readers in the new generation discover the story's themes resonate in the modern world. Explore the possibility of creating a modern retelling of the story that addresses contemporary societal pressures and mental health challenges.

For those who major in medicine, this paper has touched upon the historical context of the "rest cure." Further research could delve deeper into the medical justifications and societal beliefs that supported this practice. Examining primary sources such as medical journals or historical case studies could provide a more nuanced understanding of the "rest cure" and its detrimental effects on women's health.

Lastly, the entire study focuses on Sigmund Freud's expertise and interpretation of Psychoanalysis. Literature experts may research Jungian archetypes of psychoanalytic approaches for further study of the female mind.

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