

تدمير الذات وفقدان الاستقلال في "ورقة الجدران الصفراء" لسي. بي. جيلمان:
قراءة جيغيكية

ذوالفقار عبد الامير سليمان الحمداني

وزارة التربية، الكلية التربوية المفتوحة، محافظة النجف الاشرف، العراق.

البريد الإلكتروني Email : thulfiqarsulaiman@gmail.com

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Self-destruction and Lack of Autonomy in *The Yellow Wallpaper* by C. P. Gilman: A Zizekian Reading

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Thulfiqar Abdulameer Sulaiman Alhmdni

Ministry of Education, Open Educational College, Najaf Governorate,
Iraq.

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ملخص

لقد تم التعرف منذ فترة طويلة على "ورقة الجدران الصفراء" لجيلمان كنص قوي يغوص في تعقيدات النفس البشرية، خصوصاً فيما يتعلق بالقيود المفروضة على النساء في أواخر القرن الثامن عشر والتاسع عشر. تستخدم هذه الدراسة نظرية التحليل النفسي، وبشكل خاص عدسة جيغيكية، لاستكشاف نقص الاستقلال العميق وتدمير الذات الذي تعيشه البطلة، امرأة بلا اسم، أثناء تنقلها في البيئة المنزلية المضغوطة وصراعاتها الداخلية. وكذلك تكشف عن كيفية تأثير حدود العالم المنزلي والسجن المجازي الممثل بورق الجدران الصفراء على انعزالها عن هويتها الذاتية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تفحص هذه الدراسة كيف تأثير (الأخر)، المتمثل بزوجها والتوقعات المجتمعية المفروضة عليها، من انحدارها نحو التدمير الذاتي. إذ يتم تحليل الصورة المشوهة للذات للبطلة، التي تظهر في هوسها بأنماط ورق الجدران، كتجلي للذات المشوهة والاعتراب

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للأفراد. وبالتالي، تقدم هذه الدراسة فهماً أعمق لتدهور البطلنة النفسي وتؤكد على العواقب العميقة لنقص الاستقلال والحصر المفروض على النساء

Abstract

The Yellow Wallpaper by Gilman has long been recognized as a powerful narrative that delves into the complexities of the human psyche, particularly in relation to the constraints placed on women in the late 18th & 19th century. This study employs psychoanalysis theory, especially Zizekian lens, to explore the profound lack of autonomy and self-destruction experienced by the protagonist, a nameless woman, as she navigates the oppressive domestic environment and her own internal struggles. It reveals how the confines of the domestic sphere and the figurative prison represented by the titular yellow wallpaper contribute to her detachment from her own self-identity. Further, this work examines how the Other, represented by her husband and the societal expectations placed upon her, exacerbates her descent into self-destruction. The protagonist's fragmented self-image, manifested in her obsession with the wallpaper's patterns, is analyzed as a manifestation of the fragmented self and the alienation of the subject. Thus, this study offers a deeper understanding of the protagonist's psychological deterioration and underscores the profound consequences of the lack of autonomy and the confinement imposed upon women.

Introduction

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), a female protagonist voices her desires, anxieties, and pains while confined within a rural estate, teetering on the brink of madness. Set against the backdrop of a claustrophobic patriarchal society that restricts female autonomy, Gothic elements intensify her anguish as she grapples with the oppressive control exerted by her physician husband. This story sheds light on the societal constraints imposed on women, stifling their natural urges and confining them to prescribed roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, a repression that can lead to mental deterioration.

This novel encompasses numerous traditional gothic elements, but beneath its facade lies a narrative exploring themes of freedom and repression, communicated through intricate symbolism and the perspective of a disturbed narrator. In Gilman's short story, the protagonist, a middle-class woman of the nineteenth century, illustrates how men exerted control over women's bodies in order to maintain the illusion of familial harmony. Gilman's story, with its subtly asserted claim to women's liberation, especially from feminist literary critics, who have come to view it as an obvious sign of the degree to which





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contemporary feminism has transformed the study of literary texts. Even with all of the analysis and discussion, there are still parts of the text that call for more in-depth investigation, therefore this study will attempt to address the themes of self-destruction, according to the concept of Zizek in this field of study. (Hedges, 2012, p 24).

Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* recounts the gradual descent of a young woman into insanity. It serves as a narrative of oppression, hypocrisy, and inheritance. It's a tale of patterns that lie behind other patterns. The narrator is oppressed by the wallpaper until she begins to recognize and empathize with it. The narrative effectively alludes to the negative effects of female subjugation, particularly in marriage. The wallpaper's intricate, meandering design symbolizes the imprisonment that women experienced as a result of their limited freedom and ability to express themselves (Hedges, 2012, p 26).

Numerous individuals regard, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as an early feminist piece predating women's suffrage in the United States. The author, involved in the first wave of feminism, explored themes of women's oppression, particularly within the institution of marriage, in other works. A widely circulated publication, it tackles complex issues surrounding women's societal roles, mental well-being, and their entitlement to autonomy and self-definition. It clarifies the social, political, economic, and psychological subjugation of women. Put another way, women are devalued and only set apart by their deviations from the characteristics and values of males. The primary issue of this research is to demonstrate how women's personalities are characterized by self-destruction and gender oppression and how the prominent Other affected by the society.

Research Question and Objectives

The main question for this study is: How does C. P. Gilman use lack of autonomy and self-destruction in *The Yellow Wallpaper* to depict the detrimental effects of constrictive gender roles, protagonist's fragmented self-image, and how this can be analyzed through a Zizekian psychoanalysis?

This study depicts how, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, is a harmful consequences of dismissing a woman's efforts to better herself. The narrator is confined to lying down and staring at the brightly colored walls of her room all day, with minimal mental stimulation beyond observing patterns and reflections. This portrayal symbolizes the oppressive nature of patriarchy and societal norms. The image of a woman trapped within the wallpaper, appearing discolored and torn in



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places, serves as a metaphor for the confinement imposed on women by patriarchal society.

Meanwhile, this study aims to elucidate the negative consequences of women's lack of self-autonomy. It examines how complete control over one's autonomous self, as portrayed in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, can be detrimental and may contribute to the perception of failure. (Leticia & Cynthia, 2021, p 11)

Also, the investigation will illuminate the challenges faced by a young woman as she grapples with balancing her duties as a wife and mother while preserving her sense of self. Ultimately, her intellectual identity morphs into a delusion, manifested as the woman trapped behind the wallpaper, a projection of the narrator's psyche.

Gilman shows that man in modern America is isolated, and, even though he struggles, he may be faced with impossible odds. Her tragic heroes live closer to the audience's experience than many protagonists, they are struggling with the gravities of modern life: of money, city, job and the family while their weaknesses are those which ordinary humans share. Loneliness, the inability to decide exactly what one wants.

As an infant, this representation according to Zizek, child sees the world with no suture, all complete whole, but when ones grow up and enter the symbolic universe the illusion of unity and completeness is shattered, and ones as subjects enter a fragmented world where every belief finds its value in differentiation. Meanwhile, Lacan sees our unconscious structured like language, however, another aspect is an animalic side of us which is not symbolizable. Thus, overall Lacan categorizes our psyche in three orders, the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. The most significant and the most difficult order is the real. When human serves as subjects enter the symbolic and become fragmented, and he/she lives with an illusion to reach the complete and the limits to reach the greatness held by the big Other or the symbolic universe. *Object petit a* is the lost object that seeks in the Other, but one will never find, it gives a purpose, motivation and enthusiasm. (Kesel 11)

Dehumanization Norms in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

The significance of the story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, is to highlight the need of giving women a voice in their rehabilitation from mental health difficulties rather than dismissing, controlling, or infantilizing them. It has several main themes, but not just one: mental illness, freedom of speech, and feminism and gender norms (Barry, 2014, p 16).

Therefore, from a psychological standpoint, *The Yellow Wallpaper* portrays a damaging image of a woman attempting to break out from a conventional, dehumanizing marriage because of limiting gender



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stereotypes. She sees herself as unattractive, immoral, suicidal, and trapped in the position of a wife by depicting the wallpaper (Barry, 2014, p 16).

The narrative's dominant male figures—her husband and brother, both esteemed physicians in society—exert control over the woman, exemplifying the oppressive gender norms prevalent in the story, mainly Zizekian lens to the idea of the *Other*. Additionally, *The Yellow Wallpaper* raises challenging issues surrounding women's roles and their mental health as well as their rights to autonomy and self-identity (Barry, 2014, p 16).

Women were typically confined to domestic chores within the household and were expected to be completely submissive to their husbands. Similar to the narrator, affluent middle-class women often spent prolonged periods indoors. As depicted in the story, this societal expectation forced women into a state of naivety, dependency, and ignorance (Barry, 2014, p 22).

Gender Oppression in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, first published in New England Magazine in May 1892 and later released as a book in 1899, stands as a renowned exemplar of nineteenth-century literature. Gilman considered it his least unique work of literature, seeing it as a Gothic horror story. People continue to experience gender discrimination because there is still a persistent gap between what opportunities are available to men and women. This issue is perpetually prevalent worldwide, despite its ambiguous genesis (Burrey, 2021, p. 11).

It introduces the idea of domestic tyranny of women. Because of her illness, the story's primary female character experiences isolation from her spouse. As a result, John is among the guys who believe they are better than the narrator (Ardela, 2020, p 39).

The narrator encounters three different forms of oppression in the course of the narrative: material oppression, psychological oppression, and impotence. As a result, he believes he has complete authority over the homes. The primary form of oppression the narrator experiences is psychological oppression, which arises from her husband's manipulation and psychological injury, which exacerbates her illness.

However, because she is being kept apart from the outer world, she also experiences material oppression. Since she is unable to see her family and engage in activities she enjoys, her right to freedom is also being violated. Powerlessness is the final form of tyranny the narrator encounters. She is a woman living under the restrictions of a patriarchal society, and she lacks the ability to protect herself. She is in a submissive



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position as the oppressed, thus she has to submit to her oppressor. She has struggled and fought against the three sorts of tyranny she is facing. Regretfully, she was unable to flee the persecution from the start of the narrative to its conclusion. She is therefore compelled to acknowledge that she is an oppressed person (Arat, 2015, p 25).

Thus, she suffers from a number of oppressive effects, including emotional instability and a decline in self-worth. She often has mood swings due to her unstable emotions; for instance, she may cry or get irrationally furious. Her lack of confidence stems from her low self-esteem, which frequently depresses her and leads her to believe that she is a burden and a nuisance to her spouse. The narrator's attempts to resist oppression result in further impacts of oppression. She experiences hallucinations and grows connected to her room's yellow wallpaper. She perceives the wallpaper to be imprisoning a lady. And it gradually begins to consume her thoughts and torment her; yet, the imprisoned lady she sees in the wallpaper is actually a mental image of herself. Therefore, it can be inferred that the narrator's longing to liberate herself from oppression, despite her inability to achieve it, motivates her relentless efforts to seek assistance in doing so (Steel, et al., 2012, p. 11).

The portrayal of Loss in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

In numerous marriages, women experienced a total loss of independence in their lives. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist finds herself devoid of control over her own life or body. Her husband dictates their living arrangements, her dietary choices, and her social interactions. Another female author who grappled with the loss of identity and autonomy within the confines of traditional marriage was Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a pioneer in the American women's rights movement. The unsettling tale of a lady ripping off the yellow wallpaper—the outward symbol of her forced confinement—was inspired by Gilman's personal struggles (Stiles, 2012, p 11).

After her daughter was born, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who had been depressed, in the spring of 1887. Gilman describes what she had gone through as "a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia and beyond," in her own words. (paragraph 3 of Gilman, 1913). Gilman's physical well-being was used as evidence to support the ruling that there was nothing wrong with her. As a result, it was decided that she should lead a domestic life and devote no more than two hours a day to her studies, meaning she was not allowed to write with a pen or pencil.

Gilman's protagonist is reliant on her spouse, who takes use of his expertise to extend his patient's illness and decline. Gilman offers a





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potential reprieve from this cruel treatment, though. It creates an image of individuation that exists outside of the symbolic by bordering the real. *Object a* fills in lack within a wholeness, and Lacan defines the *Object a* as the frame of this picture, that which makes the real imaginary in a way that one feels it as *a complete totality* (Zizek, "The Sublime" 12). Recovery for the feminine victim requires achieving freedom from tyranny and seclusion. There's a possibility of salvation, albeit at a cost. Embracing insanity allows for a liberation from societal norms, but it demands sacrificing one's sanity. The price of sanity is the complete rejection of conformity. (Treichler, 2000, p 21)

As the woman's mental state worsens, the wallpaper seems to become harder for her to look at. The stifling wallpaper is attempting to ensnare the woman figure hidden behind the pattern. The protagonist's inner life is evoked by this effort for emancipation. The protagonist's mental stability deteriorates with the degree to which she perceives the person behind the pattern. Thus, taking into account the protagonist's general mental condition, this linear decline establishes a cause-and-effect relationship between the two ideas of captivity and sanity. As well, the remainder remedy is a complete waste of time and resources. When the heroine begins to prowl about her room during her period of solitary therapy, the insufficient and cruel methods of the rest cure ensure her spiral into genuine lunacy. As a result, the wallpaper serves as a representation that carries the ideas of an oppressive atmosphere and method (Woolf, 2020, p 51).

Fragmented Self-image in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, C. P. Gilman illustrates how women self-destruction suffer greatly. Having total control over one's autonomous self might work against one's life or contribute to failure. The novel documents the deterioration of a woman's mental health as she undergoes a "rest cure" at a rented summer country home with her family. As the story unfolds, her fixation in her bedroom serves as a symbol of her descent into madness stemming from melancholy.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's renowned short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, portrays the gradual descent of a young woman into madness. Regarded by many as an early feminist masterpiece predating women's suffrage in the US, the author herself was actively engaged in the first wave of feminism. Her other works explored the historical oppression of women, particularly within the institution of marriage. It is widely recognized for its exploration of challenging questions surrounding women's roles, specifically their mental well-being and their entitlement to autonomy and self-identity. (Monteiro, 1999, p. 42).



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The naïve female narrator describes how her husband, a doctor, treats her condescendingly and implies that she wishes she were ill. In addition, he prevents her from working, maybe because he believes intellectual pursuits could disrupt women. As evidenced by historical records and Gilman's personal experience, the "rest cure" was regarded as a legitimate medical recommendation at the time to prevent women from becoming mad. (Monteiro, 1999 p. 43).

Nevertheless, the protagonist embodies the key features of the female gothic genre, including isolation, defiance, suppressed desires, and an underlying sense of irrational fear. Alongside the archetypal elements of the genre such as the distressed heroine, the ominous setting, and the oppressive male antagonist, she descends into madness despite attempts at rest. (Johnson, 1989, p. 522).

As the narrator's insanity intensifies, creates a dark, gothic mood by introducing an increasing number of illusions into her speech. There's a sense of suffocation since the wallpapered bedroom and her existence are prisons. Numerous things, including her "immovable bed" that is "nailed down" and her acts in the last scene—locking herself in the bedroom and flinging the key out the window—symbolize this confinement.

Since she may now behave whatever she pleases in the bedroom, her ultimate self-imprisonment also triggers her final rebellion: It's so nice to be outside in this large room, free to go about wherever I please! (Gilman, 2012, p. 13).

The woman is explicitly instructed to refrain from working and to deny her illness, instead to remain at home, take vitamins, engage in brief walks, and prioritize rest. Despite being advised against writing, she secretly indulges in it, finding solace in the act and believing it would alleviate the burden of her thoughts and provide relief. The short story contains numerous allusions to the protagonist's condition of subjugation and confinement within a patriarchal framework of marriage and societal norms. The quoted excerpts depict the narrator's increasing anguish, marked by feelings of powerlessness, sorrow, and guilt, stemming from her husband's failure to listen to her concerns and respect her desires:

"John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage"; "You see, he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do?"; "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him"; "Of course, it is only nervousness. It does weigh on me, so not to do my duty in any way!" (Marcia, 2022, p.162).

Certain elements of the short story can be interpreted as reflections of the narrator's internal struggles—between husband and wife, masculinity and femininity, and, simultaneously, as conflicts between the





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characters' conscious and subconscious minds. Through its archaic symbolism linked to the feminine and the subconscious, the interplay of moonlight and sunlight creates a captivating play of illumination and shadow, adding to the projections and revelations within the wallpaper. (Marcia, 2022, p.163).

The feminist movement, spearheaded by figures like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, has secured remarkable and undeniable triumphs. Yet, women's activism remains crucial and potent as they continue to advocate for rights and freedoms in the face of a patriarchal culture that persists and manifests in violent and abhorrent ways.

Conclusion

Gilman's heroine's insanity serves as a kind of revolt against the Victorian norm of invalid women, because her entire act of writing is an assertion of her uniqueness and autonomy. In a denial that she is not capable of having agency. Writing and lunacy work together to undermine feminine decorum and morality as well as expectations of women's sex roles.

Likewise, she is neglected in her responsibilities as a mother and housewife in favor of John's sister, who adheres to the Victorian ideal of domesticity. She has ultimately lost her mind in her last attempt to escape her home oppression, but far from being defeated, her last vision of herself crawling on all fours is the complete opposite of the restrained woman.

On the other hand, John is rendered emasculated when he passes out and witnesses his now-creeping wife's mental instability. Here, Gilman parodies the fainting lady cliché of the feeble woman of the nineteenth century. Women are portrayed in Gilman's story as meek, mentally inferior, and predisposed to the home; any deviation from their responsibilities earned them a delusional reputation. John places his anxious wife in a nursery-like cellar to pacify her, inadvertently reinforcing the nineteenth-century stereotype that portrays non-maternal women as spinsters and hysterics with vulnerable infants.

Gilman's works is simple, but portraying deep seated ideologies in human psyche. This research concentrated on *The Yellow Wall Paper* which shows troubled and disintegrating behavior. What the researcher aimed to show and analyze was the way human psyche is fragmented self-image and there is always an aspiration for perfection and values greater, and this leads to lack of autonomy. By gearing up Zizekian Psychoanalysis, the researcher started to show where the foundation of all these values, which hurls all the characters into self-destruction, lie.



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The great paradox that this work aimed to shed light on, were those characters as subjects believe in truth which are, according to Zizek, hailed by the Symbolic order, and there is no substantial truth in the symbolic order, there is just differentially. Thus, it has obsessed himself with dreams beyond his capabilities and all his life with all the pleasures are sacrificed because of the illusory desires.

The concept of *Other* is of higher significance in Zizekian psychoanalysis, and it helped to show that it is a partial drive beyond the usual pleasure principle that subjects seek. It allows one to exceed the prohibitions that restrict out enjoyment, however, this transgression will further result in pain not in pleasure concerning the totalitarian authority of male among female. In the case of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the study discussed how this novel portrays the society in which people, with the hope of fulfillment of the bliss and happiness that patriarchal authority harbor, undergo a lot of pressure and hardship in the sense of representation to the concept of the Other. Thus, they exceed the normal pleasure that every human (man over woman) can have, even in a hut amid many trees in a forest, with the hope of the most luxurious life, yet, unfortunately, human can bear a certain amount of pleasure.

By drawing upon Zizek who combines Hegel and Lacan, the study discussed the self-destruction and the absence of independence, it is when realizes that the external authority is just an auto-blockage of his/her desire and external repression, he/she loses what was already lost, this moment is the same as Hegelian negation of negation and in this novel reflected by fragmented self-image and lack of autonomy that lead analysis to the concept of 'loss of loss'.

As to *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the study drew upon Zizek's concept of 'parallax view' which shows how different humans are in our perspective, and this difference originates from parallax gaps and parallax objects, and *object petit a* is the best example to elucidate this parallax gap. Return back to the opening point about the restrictions imposed by the patriarchal culture as a source of mental illnesses, which drive from lighter cases to serious traumas and psychotic breakdowns.

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