

CONTEXT, INTENTION, AND PURPOSE IN "THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER", A TALE IN THE POE AND THE ROMANTIC TRADITION

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Over the last twenty-five years there has been a dramatic increase overall in the attention paid to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper." Critics, scholars, and feminists, in and out of the academy, have discovered in this story, first published in 1892, cultural, historical, and ideological conflicts and implications that were hardly perceived by Gilman's readers during the first eight decades of her story's existence. During this period of "rediscovery" there have been some formal analyses of style and structure, but these have been greatly outnumbered by pieces that are predominantly political in intention, designed and narrowed down to serve in the furtherance of causes and attitudes.

The programmatically political, however, is not of major concern here. The vein to be worked here is somewhat different: an examination of Gilman's

sense of her story's purpose and its potential social uses, and an essay at placing "The Yellow Wall-paper" within the Poe tradition of the American short story—a connection discerned by two or three of Gilman's reviewers but subsequently ignored (or denied in the omission) by her readers.¹

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's single most influential piece of fiction had, in its times, its own designs, and in certain important ways, continues to do so. If by the author's own admission "The Yellow Wall-paper" was intended as a cautionary tale regarding the dire consequences of applying the so-called rest cure to treat "nervous" women, it cannot be over-emphasized that it is, after all, a tale, and therefore does not follow the "objective" rules or intentions of what one might call a case history.

This was clear enough to Constance Mayfield Rourke, who writes with approval in 1920, when the story was republished for a new generation: "Mrs. Gilman's 'Yellow Wall Paper' is one of the best available examples of the compact tale of terror with which American writers are so adept; but the final lines of the story make of the tour de force, the adroit fiction rather than the true record."² In the form of a horror tale enabled by "realistic" first-person narration, she dramatizes the story by the use of the diary kept (increasingly less consciously) by a young wife and mother shut up by herself in a large room taking up the top floor of a strange house rented for the summer. As part of her cure she is forbidden by her doctor to engage in any activity, such as writing, that might unduly exercise her intellect. Her true condition worsens steadily over the summer, coming to a terrifying conclusion when her delusions about both herself and the woman imprisoned behind the hideous yellow wallpaper plunge her into a dark and perhaps final madness.

Since recent and current readers have put "The Yellow Wall-paper" to many and varied uses, often involving constructions and re-constructions of literary history, there are good reasons for looking into the details of the story's first publication and the circumstances surrounding its writing. It is well known that when Horace Elisha Scudder decided on behalf of the *Atlantic Monthly* that the story was too "miserable" to inflict on readers of his magazine, William Dean Howells was successful in helping to place the story in the *New-England Magazine* in 1892.³ It is also well-known that this "sad story of a young wife passing through the gradations from slight mental derangement to raving lunacy," as it was described by one contemporary reader,⁴ interested Howells, perhaps not so much for its intrinsic literary merit, as for its subject matter, something that for him cut close to the bone. His own wife suffered from the so-called woman's disease of neurasthenia—privately, in the mid-1890s, Howells' friend and fellow-novelist Henry James referred to her as "insane"—and only recently his twenty-six year old daughter Winifred had died while under the care of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the most famous American proponent of the so-called "rest cure" for women.⁵ Having discovered after her death that her disease was organic and not entirely psychological as both Weir Mitchell and Howells had assumed, Howells now suffered from a deep sense of guilt.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman says that she wrote her story to keep women from going insane from the prescriptions of the rest cure and that she sent a copy to the physician who had treated her. She reports that although he did not acknowledge her gesture, he did, she claimed (though there is no evidence to indicate that it is so), alter his notions of the rest cure for women and his prescriptions for their health. Gilman also makes clear that she herself had recovered from her malady (mainly because of her strong constitution, but even so she later claimed that she never had recovered fully) through medical treatment, but that she nearly went insane trying to follow her physician's prescriptions for maintaining her health in the future. Those prescriptions turned out to be largely proscriptions against activity and work, especially anything involving the intellect. It is misleading at best to say, as the widely used *Norton Anthology of American Literature* has it, that S. Weir Mitchell, Gilman's physician, "specialized in women's nervous disorders," for Weir Mitchell treated men with nervous disorders as well.⁶ He was famous as a neurologist, having done pioneering work with wounded Civil War veterans, but in his time he had done much of the all-round work of the general practitioner of medicine. It was just as much because he was a friend of the family as it was because of his growing reputation as a physician that he was consulted in the case of Owen Wister. The putative father of the nineteenth-century American Western novel —author of *Lin McLean* (1898) and *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (1902) —the young Wister undertook treatment by Weir Mitchell for nervous disorders. Like Gilman, he too was put through a rest cure. But while Weir Mitchell prescribed rest cures for both men and women, those rest cures were entirely different. While women were sequestered from all exciting or potentially exciting activities and usually put to bed to effect their complete rest cures, men were told to exchange their usual surroundings (and customary work) for more salubrious places, climes, and activities. When Owen Wister broke down, suffering from the male form of neurasthenia ("hysteria," as one writer puts it⁷), he was not given total bed rest, but advised to go west—to Wyoming, then the last of the wild territories —and to take up the rugged life, shorn as it was of the debilitating demands and distractions of "civilization." Wister followed his doctor's advice, and the change, he reported, did him much good, so much so, in fact, that the Harvard University graduate was able to return to the East to resume the customary life he had temporarily abandoned. Curiously, when some years later Wister suffered a relapse, Weir Mitchell again prescribed a change of scenery, but this time advised him to go to Europe. One patient stayed home and was put to bed, another was sent out on his travels and told to take up the strenuous life. Undoubtedly, Weir Mitchell had an effect on American letters, not much for his own novels, though *Hugh Wynne, Free Quaker* (1896) had its champions and strong adherents, but for the work of his two famous patients. While Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wall-paper," Wister wrote *The Virginian*.⁸

It is important to note that as in Wister's case, Weir Mitchell's health care contributed to Gilman's at least partial recovery of her health, though the prescriptions were almost antithetical: one was almost banished to an escape in the West from the dust and dirt of Eastern civilization to a life of strenuous activity among "men who were men," the other ordered to an escape into the bedroom and the sitting room of her own house, away from even the very idea of a study or studio. In the fact that despite this discrepancy in treatment Gilman was nevertheless cured (as she reveals in "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper?") lies the principal difference between the biography that went into the story and the thrust of the narrative. The narrator of Gilman's story is considered to be ill at the beginning of the story. Since she has only recently given birth, one might even speculate that she is perhaps suffering from what a later age calls postpartum psychosis. But that is not an important matter in the story. What is important is that she is perceived as suffering from a nervous disorder that, in the wisdom of her doctor (who is also her husband), calls for the rest cure, and that she accepts the diagnosis of her reasonable and practiced doctor.

The movement of the story, however, although the husband-doctor's view of that movement is almost exactly reversed, is from a beginning, somewhat tentative, instability to a snowballing development into some aggravated form of psychosis. Placed in a room that takes up the whole of the house's top floor, a room with windows on all four sides and into which has been placed a bed fastened to the floor (metonymically it stands for the Weir Mitchell sort of bed-rest regimen in which, by symbolic displacement, the chains hold down the bed not the patient, even as, in the bed rest, the bed itself "enchains" the patient). Competing with the bed, however, is not the room (which the narrator says she comes to like) but the wallpaper and the view outside of the garden and its walks surrounding this mysterious rented house. She looks out on the gardens, which seem to become wilder and wilder as her summer-long cure runs along its course. (This garden wildness mimics—one is tempted to say, inadvertently—the wildness of Wyoming to which Owen Wister was temporarily exiled for his cure.) And she looks at the wallpaper, which, through steady watching and close study, she is able to penetrate into its realities of enclosure, incarceration, and entrapment—all of which is first figured in the woman within the wallpaper and finally into the narrator who "becomes" the woman behind the wallpaper. But the narrator is not like Alice (who can go down into a hole into a new world) or Mary Poppins (who can walk into a crack in a sidewalk), for she does not disappear into the world behind the wallpaper but wrenches that world out of the wallpaper and into her room. Indeed, although at a late stage she has seen the freed woman multiplied into many women who walk the paths outside, as she sees from her windowed-room, she has now seen the woman behind the wallpaper and the woman in the room (who is herself) melded into one woman who circles the room, having to crawl as she repeats her rounds around the room, over the prostrate body of her husband—the insane

victory of the madwoman over the man of reason, the advocate of the total rest cure.

Of course, the narrator is now totally mad. Having been deprived of the work that brings dignity and salvation (including thinking and writing), the narrator has reinvented a demonic parody of work. She has solved the riddle of the wallpaper and undertaken the maddening task of removing it. Utterly certain of the importance of her undertaking, she works obsessively against the calendar and the clock. It is the last day of the summer “vacation,” the day before they will return home (though they will go somewhere for a few days to give the maid time to “open up the house”), and she will not be interrupted before she has finished her work. That is why she locks the door and throws the key out onto the walk, revealing its whereabouts to the exercised husband threatening to break down the door. She does this rather than opening the door herself because she will not interrupt the terrible crawling around the room’s walls—which is the work that in her madness she has devised to replace the intellectual work her doctor has proscribed.

The Poesque qualities of “The Yellow Wall-paper” seem to be obvious. Gilman gives us a self-dramatizing narrator, like those of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “William Wilson,” “Ligeia,” and “The Black Cat,” to mention only a few, whom it would be a mistake to equate with the author. In these stories by Poe, moreover, the dramatized narrator is a male, with the result, of course, that the illness or madness of Poe’s heroines is always conveyed through and established from the male’s point of view. In “Ligeia” Lady Rowena’s “sudden illness” leads to this description of her hallucinatory behavior: “She partly arose, and spoke, in an earnest low whisper, of sounds which she *then* heard, but which I could not hear— of motions which she *then* saw, but which I could not perceive. The wind was rushing hurriedly behind the tapestries, and I wished to show her (what, let me confess it, I could not *all* believe) that those almost inarticulate breathings, and those very gentle variations of the figures upon the wall, were but the natural effects of that customary rushing of the wind.”⁹ What would this same scene be like when imagined from the point of view of the woman? The point of view of a woman who is not vampire-like, as are so many of the female figures in Poe? “The Yellow Wall-paper” makes that very shift in gender while retaining the features of Poe’s technical point of view.

Mutatis mutandi, then, in these stories—Poe’s and Gilman’s—the reader makes his way through a rational first-person narrative that gradually widens the gulf between what the narrator knows about himself and what the reader learns about him, a narrative that enacts dramatically in his own words the insanity that motivates his over-focused obsessions. There is also the existence of a mysterious place, perhaps a “haunted” house, in which a stranger is kept. He must “learn” the house, though in Gilman’s case it is the top floor and not some catacomb or crypt and pit that becomes her consuming interest. It is unlike the “melancholy House of Usher,” however, in that this house will not craze and fall into a tarn; yet it too has to

be dismantled, at least in part. The “madness” of the house, according to the lights of the narrator, lies, finally, in its wallpaper, and that only in the one top-floor room. (Notably, Gilman asserted that in her own case she did not object to her “mural decorations.”¹⁰) The paper she invented for her story is itself as animate or anthropomorphic as any house in Gothic fiction (the narrator calls it “arabesque” (“whether on carpets, or curtains, or tapestry, or ottoman coverings,” writes Poe, “all upholstery of this nature should be rigidly Arabesque”¹¹): it touches (and smudges, soils) people, it moves to the eye, and it gives off a yellow odor.¹² As one reviewer described it, “a loathsome fungus sort of yellow paper with innumerable spirals and arabesques and a general motive of toadstools in endless iteration.”¹³

The main point, however, is that Gilman’s heroine chooses to focus her attention on the wallpaper. In so doing, she exercises what Poe’s mad narrator in “Berenice” diagnoses as the essence of his own “disease,” that is, “those properties of the mind” that can be “termed the attentive.”

[M]y own disease—for I have been told that I should call it by no other appellation—my own disease, then, grew rapidly upon me, and assumed finally a monomaniac character of a novel and extraordinary form—hourly and momentarily gaining vigor—and at length obtaining over me the most incomprehensible ascendancy. This monomania, if I must so term it, consisted in a morbid irritability of those properties of the mind in metaphysical science termed the *attentive*. It is more than probable that I am not understood; but I fear, indeed that it is in no manner possible to convey to the mind of the merely general reader an adequate idea of that nervous *intensity of interest* with which, in my case, the powers of meditation (not to speak technically) busied and buried themselves, in the contemplation of even the most ordinary objects of the universe.¹⁴

The objects of his obsession might be something “frivolous”: a “device on the margin, or in the typography of a book”; “a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry or upon the door”; “the steady flame of a lamp, or the embers of a fire”; “the perfume of a flower.”¹⁵ What he finally obsesses on, however, is “the white and ghastly *spectrum* of the teeth.”¹⁶ Berenice’s teeth have their analogue, in Gilman’s story, in the yellow wallpaper. In the shifting patterns of that wallpaper, Gilman’s heroine will discover a double, one with whom she must merge, rather than release herself from by murder as does, for example, Poe’s William Wilson.

Unlike Poe’s narrators, who are more often than not motivated mysteriously (often by what Poe called “the imp of the perverse”) but are usually agents in the delivery of their own fate, Gilman’s heroine is victimized by others—doctors and caretakers alike. While the causes of the madness afflicting Poe’s narrators are not convincingly known, there is no “mystery” as to what causes the madness of Gilman’s narrator. Gilman’s story adopts a more-up-to-date rationale for both character and social circumstance, that is to say, she offers a late nineteenth-century explanation. The “horror” of her story arises from the recognition that an identifiable medical practice has combined with social circumstances to drive the heroine insane.

Significantly, the blame that is fixed in Gilman's story does not implicate the victim, as it does in most of Poe's stories, where self-blame is the rule, except, notably, in "The Pit and the Pendulum."

This now brings us to the matter of how, in other no less interesting ways, "The Pit and the Pendulum" does anticipate "The Yellow Wall-paper." Banished as if she were guilty of some crime (all of it done under the aspect of "medical" treatment) Gilman's narrator tries to fathom the dimensions and implications of her prison. Unlike Poe's narrator, who will try to save himself, Gilman's will free the desperate woman behind the wallpaper. The nature of their experience differs as well. Poe's narrator will use reason and his knowledge of mathematics to discover where he is and what he can or cannot do about it. While he deals in inductive reasoning and sensory perception, she soon moves beyond the attempt to discover orderly and rational patterns in the "walls" of her prison to the kind of over-focus that presents by superimposition ever-changing, self-denying possibilities for escape. Poe's narrator is caught between his enlightenment approach to a mysterious romantic dilemma, while Gilman's is led by her derangement to turn away from the Reason (embodied in her husband) to a solution by destruction. That is to say, that Poe's narrator's faith lies (though inefficiently at the last) in order and Reason, Gilman's lies in the wilderness of unbridled Feeling. There is no General Lasalle, as there is in Poe's tale, no *deus ex machina* to deliver Gilman's madwoman to any kind of "normal" freedom. Her would-be deliverer—her husband and physician—lies senseless within the open door to the room that the madwoman resolutely ignores.

Gilman knew Poe's fiction. If Henry James was dismissive, announcing superciliously twenty years before he himself evoked the horrors of "The Turn of the Screw," that an "enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a primitive stage of reflection," Gilman continued to read Poe well into adulthood.¹⁷ In her diary for January 9, 1885, she notes that she read "The Black Cat" to Mother Stetson, her mother-in-law, and three days later that her husband has been reading Poe to her. On March 21, 1887, she records having borrowed a volume of "Poe's works." On November 17, 1893 she reads aloud "Murders in the Rue Morgue."¹⁸ When her husband reads "The Yellow Wall-paper," then, well before its publication in the *New-England Magazine* in 1892, and finds it to be, fittingly, "the most ghastly tale he ever read," Gilman reports, in a letter written in 1890, that he "says it beats Poe, and Doré." She pretends to dismiss his comment by calling it "only a husband's opinion," but immediately adds: "I read the thing to three women here however, and I never saw such squirms! Daylight too. It's a simple tale, but highly unpleasant."¹⁹ She could not have been entirely surprised if disappointed when Scudder turned it down for the *Atlantic Monthly*, writing: "I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself."²⁰ As she would later recall, in her autobiography, "the story was meant to be dreadful, and succeeded. I suppose he [Scudder] would have sent back one of Poe's on the same ground."²¹ In 1923, a teacher at the

University of Chicago wrote to Gilman on behalf of herself and her students, “a group of very eager readers, grateful to you for a very ugly jolt (that is a terrible ending).”²²

It is interesting that reviews of Gilman’s story in the 1890s noted that the story centers on the nexus of marriage and madness and that explores the ways in which the narrator-heroine’s husband is implicated. One anonymous reviewer, in 1899, writes in this vein: “the author would rejoice if her lifting the surface from one woman’s subdermal processes of thought should illuminate for some other blundering, well-intentioned male murderer the effect of a persistent aversion upon knotted and jangled nerves.”²³ In *The Woman’s Journal* (1899), the male reviewer concludes that the book deserves “to be perpetuated and widely circulated.” He described this “most striking and impressive study of morbid psychology, in the shape of a story”:

A woman goes insane through the effort of her husband, a well-meaning physician, to cure her of “a temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency” by keeping her confined in a quiet house, where she takes phosphates and tonics and air and exercise, but is absolutely forbidden to work. The poor woman believes that what she needs is congenial work, with excitement and change, less opposition, and more society and stimulus. She keeps a journal, and mopes. With frightful simplicity and naïveté she records from day to day her mind’s gradual passage from melancholy to madness, which last takes its hue from a disagreeable yellow wall paper.

He generalizes as to the large social truth of the story: “Nothing more graphic and suggestive has ever been written to show why so many women go crazy, especially farmers’ wives, who live lonely, monotonous lives. A husband of the kind described in this little sketch once said that he could not account for his wife’s having gone insane— ‘for,’ said he, ‘to my certain knowledge she has hardly left her kitchen and bedroom in 30 years.’”²⁴ If many beings live lives of quiet desperation (as Henry David Thoreau noted in *Walden* at mid-century), at the end of the century it was being noted that many women were living lives of desperate and mad insanity.

If “The Yellow Wall-paper” is to be swooped up into a category, along with the many earlier narratives focused on the syndrome of theme and incident, of the catch-all — “the madwoman in the attic” — it belongs to the subset of the “madwomen” who were squirreled away in the attic before they were mad. Their stay there was certain to drive them mad. This is the case in “The Yellow Wall-paper.” The quest for sanity leads to neurosis and insanity. It is not explicit but there are indications that the heroine of “The Yellow Wall-paper” may have had a predecessor in that upper-floor chamber. Just who that predecessor or predecessors were one cannot know, though the evidence of the gnawing on the bedstead and the torn wallpaper imply that the predecessor may also have gone mad. One reason we do not know this for certain, of course, is that Gilman does not permit her heroine to have any kind of information that might make her seem less hallucinatory, less mad at the end.

In Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Black Cat" a felon tells his story as he awaits execution. He has sunk an axe into his wife's skull, an unpremeditated act that is almost instinctual. When she caught his arm as he was about to murder the "second" of his black cats, he turned to her and delivered the blow he had intended for the cat. Because all that we know about the events, thoughts and motivations that appear in the story emanates from a demented murderer's narrative, we cannot even be sure about crucial details. Were there two cats, for instance, one totally black who is first blinded in one eye and then hanged and a second one, a replacement that is also black except for a patch of white on its chest that the narrator tells us gradually took on the shape of the gallows used to hang the "first" cat? The madman-narrator's report that the white patch took on this appalling shape is prescient of Gilman's madwoman-narrator's gradual discovery of the woman in the yellow wallpaper.

My wife had called my attention, more than once, to the character of the mark of white hair, of which I have spoken, and which constituted the whole visible difference between the strange beast and the one I had destroyed. The reader will remember that this mark, although large, had been originally very indefinite; but, by slow degrees —degrees nearly imperceptible, and which for a long time my Reason struggled to reject as fanciful— it had, at length, assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline. It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name —and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster *had I dared*— it was now, I say, the image of a hideous —of a ghastly thing— of the GALLOWS! —oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime— of Agony and of Death!²⁵

In each narrative it can be said that the husband has "walled-up" his wife. In Poe's story, breaking down the wall reveals the still gory, partly decayed body of the woman with the live cat sitting on her head. In Gilman's story breaking in the door reveals the demented woman crawling around the perimeters of her room. Murder most foul is revealed in both cases, if not literally in "The Yellow Wall-paper." Indeed, Poe's opening paragraph could serve for either story, if, in Gilman's case, we affect the husband's point of view and allow him —the rational man, the man of science, if you will— to tell his story retrospectively and in his own terms.

For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not —and very surely do I not dream. But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified—have tortured—have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them. To me, they have presented little but Horror—to many they will seem less terrible than *baroques*.²⁶

Coleridge explained that in his poems for the *Lyrical Ballads* he had tried to make the familiar strange. On the other hand, Wordsworth said that his

own task was to “make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them . . . the primary laws of our nature.”²⁷ Something similar might be said about Poe’s “The Black Cat” and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper.” Gilman turns into a mystery, almost a supernatural mystery, her story about a wife’s decline into madness by having her act out into a new reality her delusions about the woman imprisoned in the wallpaper and herself. Poe’s stories had shown her one effective way to trace, to repeat Wordsworth, “the primary laws of our nature.” She has not reduced the phantasm to the commonplace, as Poe’s narrator in “The Black Cat” fears will be done, but she has found the horror in what others would take to be the very norms and commonplace assumptions of what would otherwise be an ordinary marriage. The tragedy in marriage in her own time, as she saw it, was that it might precipitate its own kind of death. Although it might not be murder-by-the-axe as in Poe’s “The Black Cat,” the result was as lethal when it took the form of the death-in-life of Gilman’s mad heroine in “The Yellow Wall-paper.”

If we take one large step backward, away from the particulars of the story, so many of which derive from, or play off against, Poe’s best-known stories, it is possible to locate Gilman’s story even more solidly in the fictional and mythic traditions for which Poe served her as something of a conduit. The tendency to demonize the husband offers a clue into how “The Yellow Wall-Paper” fits in with those earlier traditions. The husband is accused of “subconsciously” seeking to make her into “a creeping creature, an animal and an automaton.”²⁸ Just as grievously, a similar, if more generalized, charge is leveled at Weir Mitchell: “his specialty was the cure of neurasthenic women, women whose complaints were believed to be largely neurotic, by reducing them to a condition of infantile dependence on their physician.”²⁹ Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, “the leading exponent of rest cure,” was, simply, “Charlotte Gilman’s nemesis.”³⁰ Whatever their merit as biographical fact, such characterizations of the physician-husband and the Dr. Weir Mitchell he threatens to send his wife to, they are perfectly in tune with the requisites for a tale of the “unfortunate, persecuted maiden,” delineated in *The Romantic Agony*. As Mario Praz writes, “the subject is as old as the world, but was refurbished in the eighteenth century” and became something of a commonplace in nineteenth-century writing, cropping up everywhere, even in such unlikely works, as Praz lists them, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*, J. S. Le Fanu’s *Uncle Silas*, and Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*.³¹ As the poet A. G. Swinburne observed of Collins’s novels, “the suggested or implied suffering of such poor innocent wretches, the martyrdom of perpetual terror and agony inflicted on the shattered nerves or the shaken brain of a woman or a girl, is surely a cruel and a painful mainspring for a story or a plot.”³² In fact, Ann Radcliffe, who along with Matthew “Monk” Lewis and Charles Robert Maturin, is to be credited for inventing “that most successful branch of literature, the ‘tale of terror,’ makes the persecuted woman a regular type in her horrifying

stories.”³³ In the *Sicilian Romance* (1790), as a matter of fact, it is a cruel and pitiless husband who imprisons his persecuted wife in a dungeon.

That is all well and good, but —one hears it said sweetly and reasonably—‘Gilman wrote from personal experience’. No argument there, but she did cast that experience in fictional terms, as Howells, Scudder, Constance Rourke, and most of her readers, to tell the truth, and as such she found need to invent. The wallpaper itself was fictional, she admitted, as were, probably, the nursery and the imprisoned woman. What the author started out, needed to find were some objective correlatives to fulfill her intentions in the story, more specifically, to create the effect of “horror” produced by a fable in which well-meant medical treatment did not cure hysteria but brought about a full-blown madness. She took what was at hand and made some changes and substitutions. For the priests and monks and aristocrats of the Gothic tradition she substituted the husband (as Poe had done) and made him a doctor (as Mary Shelley had). For the virginal maiden, she substituted the young mother, and the dungeon of the Romantics or the attic of the Victorians she turned into the top-floor nursery of a rented mansion. Because of these changes, which were made to accord with the probabilities of her day, she was able to write a tale that is unique or at least rare in its overall effect. It is her “realism,” allied, in its implications, to the actual or the biographical, that “makes” Gilman’s tale of terror. Because all the “gothic” actions of the persecuted woman imprisoned behind bars takes place within the brain of a woman going mad and therefore not available, as such, to any of the other characters in the story, including the doctor-husband, the “realism” of the story is maintained to the end. Hence the circuit she follows stays within the room in the story, not as one corrupt version of the tale has it (and is accepted by Gilman’s latest biographer), that she crawls outside away from the house. In fact, so strictly does the narrative stay within the heroine’s brain that we find that we cannot know anything more about the reaction of the husband, the only witness to her final mad scene, than that he faints at the sight. The implication, of course, is that he has been an inadvertent experimentalist, who, like Dr. Rappaccini in Hawthorne’s tale or Dr. Frankenstein, has created a monster. But also implied in his fainting are his helplessness and his loss of agency. Falling unconscious at the sight of the mad woman on course around the room signals the change in Gilman’s heroine from the “persecuted woman” to the potentially dangerous vampire who has absorbed into herself the “other,” the woman imprisoned in the wallpaper. It is possible that Gilman intended as prophetic the dramatization of changes in roles and potential exchanges of power—a bit of the fire next time, and all that— but that is a different story.

NOTES

- 1 Gilman's contemporary reviewers often invoke Poe, if only in passing, in discussions of the "The Yellow Wall-paper"; see *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" and the History of Its Publication and Reception: A Critical Edition and Documentary Casebook*, ed. Julie Bates Dock (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1998), pp. 111, 114, and 116. Significantly, the idea that "The Yellow Wall-paper" can be profitably considered within the context of Poe's stories is dismissed out of hand in 1930 by Amy Wellington in *Women Have Told: Studies in the Feminist Tradition*, ed. Amy Wellington (Boston: Little, Brown, 1930), p. 115. Later feminists have used Poe's stories to make certain contrasting points by establishing differences but do not consider Gilman's story to be in the Poe tradition of the American short story. See, for example, Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," *New Literary History*, 11 (Spring, 1980), 451-67; Judith Fetterly, "Reading about Reading: 'A Jury of her Peers,' 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 147-64; and Rae Beth Gordon, "Interior Decoration in Poe and Gilman," *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 3:2 (1991), 85-99.
- 2 Constance Mayfield Rourke, "The American Short Story" [a review of *The Great Modern American Stories: An Anthology*, ed. W. D. Howells], *The Freeman*, 2 (Oct. 6, 1920), 91; reprinted in Dock, *Documentary Casebook*, p. 113. Rourke is well aware of the "contemporary effort of the short story with its heightened and sophisticated consciousness of technique."
- 3 Charlotte Perkins Stetson [Gilman], "The Yellow Wall-Paper," *The New England Magazine*, n.s., 5 (Jan. 1892), 647-56. References to the story are keyed to this text.
- 4 M. D., "Perilous Stuff," *Boston Evening Transcript*, Apr. 8, 1892, p. 6; reprinted in Dock, *Documentary Casebook*, p. 103. Following the Gilman's own lead, most critics have assumed that the initials "M. D." stand for "Doctor of Medicine." (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper?" *The Forerunner*, 4 [Oct. 1913], 271) Dock argues persuasively that the space between the initials indicates that these are the initials of a proper name and not initials indicating the letter-writer's profession (pp. 20-23).
- 5 For a useful survey of the facts surrounding Mitchell and the consequences of his controversial treatment, see Suzanne Poirier, "The Weir Mitchell Rest Cure: Doctor and Patients," *Women's Studies*, 10 (1983), 15-40. Weir Mitchell's personal and medical sins are totaled up in Ann Douglas Wood, "'The Fashionable Diseases': Women's Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of interdisciplinary History*, 4 (Summer 1973), 25-52; reprinted in *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, ed. Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 1-22. See also Catherine Golden, "'Overwriting' the Rest Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Literary Escape

- from S. Weir Mitchell's Fictionalization of Women," in *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, ed. Joanne B. Karpinski (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), 144-58.
- 6 *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 3rd edition, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: Norton, 1989), II, 648. In the fifth edition (1998), however, this identification of S. Weir Mitchell has undergone an interesting sea change. It now reads, "a specialist in women's 'nervous' disorders" (II, 656).
 - 7 Ben Merchant Vorpahl, *My Dear Wister—The Frederic Remington—Owen Wister Letters*, foreword by Wallace Stegner (Palo Alto: American West Publishing, 1972), p. 17.
 - 8 In *Owen Wister: Chronicler of the West, Gentleman of the East* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), Darwin Payne devotes a chapter to Wister's summer of "rest cure" in the American West (pp. 75-90).
 - 9 Edgar Allan Poe, "Ligeia," in *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Stuart and Susan Levine (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), p. 85.
 - 10 Gilman, "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper" , p. 271.
 - 11 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Furniture," in *Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 16. Of the wallpaper in "a small and not ostentatious chamber with whose decorations no fault can be found," Poe writes, "the walls are papered with a glossy paper of a silver grey tint, spotted with small Arabesque devices of a fainter hue of the prevalent crimson. Many paintings relieve the expanse of the paper." (p. 17).
 - 12 Gordon makes some suggestive observations about the pattern in Gilman's wallpaper and the psychological dangers of decorative repetition ("Interior Decoration," 90-99).
 - 13 Anon., "Minor Fiction," *Literature* (American edition), n.s. 27 (July 14, 1899), 18; quoted in Dock, *Documentary Casebook*, p. 110.
 - 14 Edgar Allan Poe, "Berenice," in *Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 72.
 - 15 Poe, "Berenice," p. 72.
 - 16 Poe, "Berenice," p. 74.
 - 17 Henry James, "Charles Baudelaire," in *French Poets and Novelists* (London: Macmillan, 1878), p. 76.
 - 18 *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, ed. Denise D. Knight (Charlottesville and London: University press of Virginia, 1994), I, 310, 311, 380, and 562.
 - 19 Quoted in Mary A. Hill, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist 1860-1896* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), p. 186.
 - 20 Quoted in Dock, *Documentary Casebook*, p. 87.
 - 21 *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton, 1935), p. 119.
 - 22 Quoted in Dock, *Documentary Casebook*, p. 97.

- 23 Anon., "In Book Land," *Newport Daily News*, June 27, 1899, p. 3; reprinted in Dock, *Documentary Casebook*, p. 111-12.
- 24 H[enry] B. B[lackwell], "Literary Notices: The Yellow Wall Paper," *The Woman's Journal*, June 17, 1899, p. 187; quoted in Dock, *Documentary Casebook*, p. 107.
- 25 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat," in *Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 257.
- 26 Poe, "The Black Cat," p. 254.
- 27 William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 743.
- 28 Wood, "Fashionable Diseases," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, p. 12.
- 29 Gail Parker, Introduction to *The Oven Birds: American Women on Womanhood, 1820-1920*, ed. Gail Parker (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. 49.
- 30 Parker, Introduction to the *Oven Birds*, p. 156.
- 31 Mario Praz, *Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson, 2nd ed., foreword by Frank Kermode (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 173.
- 32 Praz, *Romantic Agony*, p. 173.
- 33 Praz, *Romantic Agony*, p. 114.