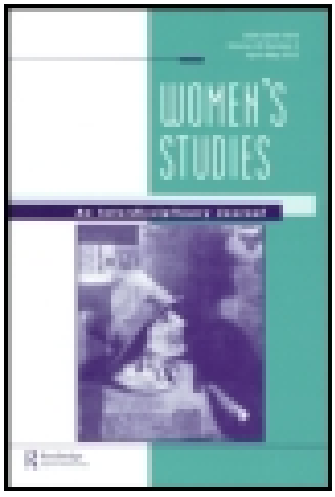

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Monumental feminism and literature's ancestral house: Another look at "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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Monumental feminism and literature's ancestral house: Another look at "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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IN 1973, the Feminist Press brought forth a single volume edition of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," a short story which had originally appeared in the May 1892 issue of *New England Magazine.* Since William Dean Howells included Gilman's story in his 1920 collection of *Great Modern American Stories,* it can not be said that between 1892 and 1973 "The Yellow Wallpaper" was completely ignored. What can be said, however, is that until 1973, the story's feminist thrust had gone unremarked; even Howells, who was well aware not only of Gilman's involvement in the women's movement but also of her preference for writing "with a purpose," had nothing to say about the provocative feminism of Gilman's text.[1] In the introduction to his 1920 collection, Howells notes the story's chilling horror and then falls silent.[2]

Although brief, Howells's response does place him in a long line of male readers, a line that includes the following: M.D., the anonymous doctor who in an 1892 letter to the Boston *Transcript* complained about the story's morbidity and called for its censure; Horace Scudder, the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* who in a letter to Gilman claimed to have been made so miserable by the story that he had no other choice than to reject it for publication; Walter Stetson, Gilman's first husband who informed her that he found the story utterly ghastly, more horrifying than even Poe's tales of terror;[3] John, the physician-husband of "The Yellow Wallpaper's" narrator who in coming face to face with his mad wife is so

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astonished that he faints; and last but not least, Milton's Adam, the 'first' man who is represented as being both chilled and horrified by a woman's story-telling:

> Thus *Eve* with Count'nance blithe her story told;
> But in her Cheek distemper flushing glow'd.
> On th'other side, *Adam*, soon as he heard
> The fatal Trespass done by *Eve*, amaz'd,
> Astonied stood and Blank, while horror chill
> Ran through his veins, and all his joints relax'd.[4]

It is this male line of response that the 1973 edition of "The Yellow Wallpaper" seeks to disrupt and displace, implicitly by affixing to the text the imprint of the Feminist Press and explicitly by appending to the text an afterword in which Elaine Hedges reads the story as a "feminist document," as "one of the rare pieces of literature we have by a nineteenth-century woman which directly confronts the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship."[5] So effective has this disruption and displacement been that it is not much of an exaggeration to say that during the last ten years, Gilman's short story has assumed monumental proportions, serving at one and the same time the purposes of a memorial and a boundary marker. As a memorial, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is used to remind contemporary readers of the enduring import of the feminist struggle against patriarchical domination; while as a boundary marker, it is used to demarcate the territory appropriate to a feminist literary criticism.[6] Although I am interested in pointing out some of the more troubling implications of a literary criticism in which Gilman's story functions as a feminist monument, before doing so, it is necessary to take another look at "The Yellow Wallpaper" itself.

From beginning to end, "The Yellow Wallpaper" presents itself as the writing of a woman who along with her physician-husband John and her sister-in-law Jennie is spending the summer in what she calls an 'ancestral hall," a home away from home which has been secured in the hope that it will prove beneficial to the narrator's health and well-being. In ten diary-like entries that span her three month stay in this ancestral hall, the narrator not only recounts her interactions with John and Jennie but also describes in detail the yellow wallpaper that covers the walls of a large upstairs room, a room which at one time seems to have been a nursery

and, at another, a gymnasium; this summer, however, it has become the master bedroom, a place where the narrator spends much of her time, drawn in, it seems, by the very yellow wallpaper which so repels her.

However, before her attention becomes focused on the wallpaper, the narrator attempts to grasp her situation by naming the kind of place in which she finds herself as well as the kind of place she would like it to be. In the opening lines of her text, she refers to the place as both a "colonial mansion" and an "hereditary estate"; however what she would like to believe is that the place is really a "haunted house."[7] According to the narrator, a haunted house would be "the height of romantic felicity," a place more promising that that which "fate" normally assigns to "mere ordinary people like John and [herself]" (p. 9). Since haunted houses are a peculiarly literary kind of architecture, the narrator's desire for such a place may be associated not only with her desire for writing but also with her interest in the wallpaper; in all cases, what is at issue is the displacement of a colonial inheritance that fate seems to have decreed as her lot.

But even though a haunted house may be desired, the possibility of realizing that desire is seriously in doubt. Not only does John find his wife's desire laughable but in the beginning, the narrator also demurs, afraid that at this point, she is demanding too much too soon of either fate or John. As the narrator sees it, the problem is that John scoffs at "talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (p. 9). To John, the narrator's haunted house is nothing; however, so too is her feeling that she is not well. Nevertheless, at the same time that he assures his wife that there is really nothing the matter with her, John also prescribes a regimen which will help her get well; she is not to think about haunted houses or her condition; nor, given her habit of fanciful story-making, is she to write. Instead, she is to eat well, exercise in moderation, and rest as much as she can in the airy upstairs room, the master bedroom.

Ironically, it is precisely because the narrator is patient enough to follow some of the doctor's orders that she finds it necessary to deal with the yellow wallpaper which covers the walls of the master bedroom. At first glance, that wallpaper appears to be nothing more than an error in taste — "one of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (p. 13); at second glance, however, more troubling possibilities emerge, for as the narrator notes, the wallpaper's pattern "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 angles, destroy themselves in *unheard of contradictions*" (p. 13, emphasis added). Although commentators have seen in this description of the wallpaper a general representation of "the oppressive structures of the society in which [the narrator] finds herself" (*Madwoman*, p. 90), the word "pronounced" as well as the phrase "unheard of contradictions" suggest that the specific oppressive structure at issue is discourse. Furthermore, since we have just been treated to an account of John's discourse on his wife's condition, a discourse based on the unspoken and therefore "unheard of contradiction" that somehow she is both well and ill, we may want to be even more specific and say that the oppressive structure at issue is a man's prescriptive discourse about a woman.

However, as it is described by the narrator, the yellow wallpaper also resembles the text we are reading — that is, it resembles the narrator's own writing. In part, this resemblance can be attributed to the fact that the narrator's writing not only recounts John's prescriptive discourse but also relies on the very binary oppositions which structure that discourse — oppositions like sick and well, the real and the fanciful, order and anarchy, self and other, and male and female. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the narrator's reflections produce a text in which one line of thinking after another "suddenly commits suicide — plung[ing] off at outrageous angles, [and] destroy[ing itself] in unheard of contradictions." For example, although the narrator claims that writing would do her good, she also says that it tires her out (p. 21). Worse yet, at the very moment that she is writing, she expresses a wish that she were well enough to write (p. 16). Such contradictions not only betray the narrator's dependence on the oppressive discursive structure we associate with John but also help us to understand why she jumps from one thing to another, producing paragraphs that are usually no more than a few lines in length. Since a discursive line of reasoning based on binary oppositions like sick and well is bound to "destroy" itself in "unheard-of contradictions",[8] one way the narrator can continue to produce at text that has some pretence to being reasonable is quickly to change the subject, say from her condition to the house or from the wallpaper to John.

If the resemblance between the narrator's writing and John's

discourse is disturbing — so much so that it often goes unremarked — it may be because what we want of a woman's writing is something different, a realization of that *écriture féminine* which figures so significantly in many contemporary attempts to specify what makes a woman's writing distinctive.[9] However, if we repress this resemblance, we may forget to pose what Luce Irigaray calls "the first question": that is, "how can women analyze their exploitation, [and] inscribe their claims, within an order prescribed by the masculine?" Having posed this first question, Irigaray suggests that one answer might be for a woman "to play with mimesis," to deliberately "resubmit herself to 'ideas', notably about her, elaborated in/by a masculine logic." Although such miming runs the risk of reproducing a discursive system in which woman as Other is repressed, according to Irigaray, it may also have the uncanny effect of making "'visible' . . . what should have remained hidden: the recovery of a possible operation of the feminine in language."[10]

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator's labor of mining does seem to produce just some such uncanny effect, for not only does her writing expose the "unheard of contradictions" in a man's prescriptive logic but in dealing with those contradictory impasses by jumping from one thing to another, it also makes the reader aware of gaps in that discursive structure. Furthermore, since the narrator occasionally notes what she might have said but didn't, those gaps can also be read as "unheard of contradictions"; that is, they can be read as the places where the narrator might have contradicted John's prescriptions, if only the woman had a voice to do so. Lacking such a voice, the narrator partially recoups her loss in a writing that is punctuated by the "unsaid," by what remains muted in a discourse which at this point seems to be what matters most.

To the extent that the narrator's writing does indeed display discourse to be what is really the matter, then we can not presume that the text's "hereditary estate" is built on or out of the bedrock of a real anatomical difference between the sexes. However, if the ancestral hall is not to be considered a real "hereditary estate," neither is it to be considered a real "colonial mansion," a place defined by the non-discursive social relations between masters and slaves. Instead the ancestral house must be thought of as in and of what Lacan has called the symbolic order, the order of Language.[11] By committing herself to a writing about discourse and by focusing her attention on the yellow wallpaper as a discursive

structure, the narrator has turned what seemed to be a real hereditary and colonial estate into an uncanny place in which no-body is or can be at home — no matter what s/he might say to the contrary.

If "The Yellow Wallpaper" ended at this point, we might consider it a Poesque text, for as Joseph Riddel has convincingly argued, what Poe introduces into American literature is the theme of "de-constructed architecture," a theme which later American writers obsessively repeat.[12] By locating man's ancestral house within the symbolic order, Poe produces a writing that disrupts all non-textual origins which might once have made the house of man seem sufficient to have stood its ground. "The Yellow Wallpaper," however, does not end at this point — the point of deconstructed architecture — for in the text's crucial third section, the narrator discerns something "like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind [the wallpaper's] pattern" (p. 22) and with this vision, the register of the narrator's reading and writing begins to shift from the symbolic to the imaginary.

The possibility of such a shift was foreshadowed in the text's second movement wherein the narrator counterpointed her description of Jennie as the perfect housekeeper with a remark that the wallpaper had some kind of sub-pattern — a "formless sort of figure that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (p. 18). However, at this point no explicit splitting of the subject occurred, for the narrator still appeared to be both willing and able to comprehend this nascent imaginary figure within the symbolic order. Instead of apprehending the formless figure as a really different body, the narrator merely noted that from one perspective, the paper's design seemed to be composed of "bloated curves and flourishes . . . [which] go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity" (p. 20).

By the end of the third movement, however, the imaginary does emerge as a distinctly different way of seeing and an explicit splitting of the subject does indeed take place. This crisis of sorts seems to be precipitated by a failure of intercourse; first, there is the narrator's unsuccessful attempt to have a "real ernest reasonable talk" with John; then, there is a prohibition — John's refusal to countenance his wife's proposed visit to Henry and Julia; and finally, there is a breakdown in the master bedroom itself as John reads to his wife until her head tires. The scene is now set for the emergence of something different; as the moonlight creeps into the

darkened bedroom, something "*like* a woman" is seen "creeping about" behind the wallpaper's outer pattern. Although this vision initiates the shift in register from the symbolic to the imaginary, the explicit splitting of the subject only takes place after the awakened John resolutely dismisses his wife's apprehensions by reminding her that as a doctor, he is the one who really knows. From this point on, the narrator sees things otherwise; now the wallpaper's "outside pattern" is perceived to be bars, while its sub-pattern is perceived to *be* a woman rather than something "*like* a woman" (p. 26).

With the emergence of the imaginary over the symbolic, the narrator's writing takes a different tack than that of a Poe text in which a haunted house is revealed to be nothing more nor less mysterious than a house of fiction. Unable to rest secure in the no-place of such a deconstructed architecture, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" turns a symbolic house into the haunted house she initially feared might be too much to demand of fate. But even though this haunted house may seem to promise "the height of romantic felicity" — that is, the realization of a self — we should not forget that it is located within and constituted by what Lacan calls the Imaginary.[13]

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Imaginary is specified not only by its assimilation to a dual relation between on the one hand, a subject and an image and on the other, a subject and an other but also by the absence or repression of a symbolic mediation between the subject and its doubles. Without mediation, a subject has no access to the symbolic dimension of his or her experience and is therefore driven to establish the imaginary in the real. As a result of this realization, a complicated interplay between the eroticism and aggression characteristic of unmediated dual relations surfaces, as does a child-like transitivism.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the emergence of the imaginary as well as its assimilation to an unmediated dual relation first produces a clarity of perception and purpose which temporarily obscures the transitivism the story's ending exposes. As the shadow-woman becomes as "plain as can be," the narrator finds that it is possible to distinguish clearly day from night, sleep from waking, and most importantly, "me" from them. Now the woman who had earlier wondered what one was to do when caught in a contradictory situation (p. 10) knows exactly what she must do: she must free the shadow-woman from the paper-pattern that bars her full self-

realization and through identification, bind that woman to herself. However, since this process of identification necessitates the alienation of the subject by and in an image, it engenders not only an implicitly ambivalent relation between the narrator and her imaginary double but also an explicit rivalry between the narrator and John. Perceiving John to be her other, the narrator acts as though she could only win a place for herself at his expense; hence, when she undertakes the realization of her imaginary double, she does so with the express intention of "astonish[ing]" John (p. 34). Apparently, the narrator wants to amaze John as Eve did Adam and as the Medusa did many a man.

If at one level this desire seems aggressive, then at another it appears erotic, for what is involved is a transitivism in which it is unclear exactly who is doing what to whom. Indeed, if it can be said that by becoming another woman, the narrator realizes herself in spite of John, then it can also be said that the self she realizes is not "her" self but a self engendered by John's demands and desires. On the one hand, the narrator seems to have become the child John has always demanded she be, for like a child, she crawls around the perimeter of the master bedroom, bound by an umbilical cord that keeps her firmly in place. On the other hand, however, the narrator's identification with the wallpaper's shadow-woman seems to have turned her into the woman of John's dreams, for not only did the shadow woman first appear while John was sleeping, but the narrator also suspects that when all is said and done, she is what John really desires, the secret he would reveal if he were given the opportunity to do so.

In the final words of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator describes how she must crawl over John's astonished body. Like the transitivism of the narrator's 'self-realization,' this closing image displays a conjunction of erotic and aggressive impulses, a conjunction which once again suggests that by identifying herself with the wallpaper's shadow-woman, the narrator has firmly installed herself in the realm of the imaginary, the realm of haunted houses.

Although the text of "The Yellow Wallpaper" ends at this point, the story does not, for it has been repeated by a number of important feminist critics who have seen in "The Yellow Wallpaper" not only an accurate representation of the situation of woman in patriarchical culture but also a model for their own reading and writing practices. While Elaine

Hedges can be said to have begun this repetition in her influential afterward to the Feminist Press's edition of the text, it is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who turn repetition into monumentalism. In their magesterial work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar not only repeat the story but also present it as a paradigm, as "*the* story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their 'speechless woe'" (p. 89). According to Gilbert and Gubar, that woe begins when like the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," a woman writer senses her "parallel confinements" in patriarchical texts, paternal houses, and maternal bodies (p. 89); and, it ends when like the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the woman writer "escape[s] from her textual/architectual confinement" (p. 91). The way to this end, however, is fraught with difficulty for like the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the woman writer must engage in a revisionary reading of the handwriting on the wall; only then will she discover her double, the other woman whose passion for escape demands recognition. By identifying with this other woman, the writer effects her liberation from disease into health and thereby finds that she has entered a new space, "the open space of [her] own authority" (p. 91).

Although my reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper" makes me doubt that an imaginary revision and identification can indeed free women from either textual or architectural confinement, at this point I am less interested in questioning the specifics of Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation and more interested in pointing out some of the side-effects such a monumental reading may have on feminist literary criticism. These side effects are particularly evident in two recently published essays that attempt to delineate the nature and function of contemporary Anglo-American feminist literary criticism.

In her 1980 essay entitled "A Map for Re-Reading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," Annette Kolodny continues the story of "The Yellow Wallpaper" more or less along the feminist lines set down by Hedges, Gilbert and Gubar. However, since Kolodny is interested in explaining why this feminist story was not recognized as such in its own time, her essay can also help us towards an understanding of what is involved when "The Yellow Wallpaper" is turned into a feminist monument. According to Kolodny, "The Yellow Wallpaper" was unreadable in its own time because neither men nor women readers had

access to a tradition or shared context which would have made the "female meaning" of the text clear. Men readers may have been familiar with Poe but Poe would not have prepared them for a woman narrator whose problems are socio-cultural rather than idiosyncratic. On the other hand, women readers may have been familiar with domestic fiction but such fiction would not have prepared them for a narrator whose home life is psychologically disturbing. Although Kolodny contends that Gilman uses the breakdown in communication between the narrator and John to prefigure her story's unreadability, she also declares this unreadability to be historically contingent. Nowadays, it seems, we have the wherewithal to read the story "correctly," for nowadays we have the shared context, if not the tradition we need to identify what she calls the story's "female meaning."

In an attempt to be more precise about how we know what we now know about female meaning, Jean Kennard takes up the story of "The Yellow Wallpaper" once again in her 1981 essay entitled "Convention Coverage or How to Read Your Own Life." Linking the feminism of the 1970's and 1980's with a massive reversal of both literary and non-literary conventions, Kennard claims that a new and explicitly feminist set of interpretive conventions has made it possible to agree on the following ideas: that the oppressive use of power by a male is an instance of patriarchy; that a patriarchical culture's socialization of women makes them ill; that a woman's discomfort in ancestral halls indicates a healthy desire for a room of her own; and that both a revisionary reading of texts and a descent into madness are creditable ways for a woman to find and therefore free herself. Although Kennard shows how all these ideas engender a reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper" as the story of woman's quest for identity within an oppressive patriarchical culture, what I find particularly valuable about her essay is its explicit linking of a certain kind of feminism, a certain kind of feminist literary criticism, and a certain reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper."

But what, we might wonder, accounts for this linking? Here too Kennard may be of assistance, for to some extent she realizes that even before new conventions can be used to engender this feminist reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the contemporary critic must recognize and accept the narrator as a double with whom she can identify. However, in so doing, the contemporary critic can be said to repeat the move the narra-

tor of "The Yellow Wallpaper" makes when she discovers and identifies herself with an imaginary woman, the woman behind the wallpaper's pattern. As I see it, this repetition accounts for a number of similarities between the narrator's imaginary mode of conceiving and representing her situation and the seemingly 'new' conventions that support a certain kind of modern feminist literary criticism which might also be called imaginary. Like the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," some contemporary feminist critics see in literature a really distinctive body which they seek to liberate through identification. Although this body goes by many names, including the woman's story, female meaning, *écriture féminine*, and the maternal subtext, it is usually presented as essential to a viable feminist literary criticism and celebrated as something so distinctive that it shakes, if it does not destroy, the very foundations of patriarchical literature's ancestral house.[14]

However, if it is at all accurate to say that in repeating the story of "The Yellow Wallpaper," this kind of modern feminist criticism displays itself as imaginary, then it seems to me that it behooves us to be more skeptical about what appears to be "the height of romantic felicity."[15] Although inspiring, imaginary feminism is locked into a rivalry with an other, a rivalry that is both erotic and aggressive. As I see it, the transitivism of this dual relation belies not only claims to having identified the woman's story or female meaning but perhaps more importantly, assurances that identification is liberating. Just as we can't be sure who engenders the shadow-woman of "The Yellow Wallpaper," neither can we be sure that the story we're reading is the woman's story; indeed, it may be the case that in reading "The Yellow Wallpaper," we are reading the story of John's demands and desires rather than something distinctively female. If so, then the assurance that identification is liberating becomes highly problematic, for it too appears to be an assurance generated and sanctioned by the very ancestral structure that feminists have found so confining.[16]

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator does not move out into open country; instead, she turns an ancestral hall into a haunted house and then encrypts herself therein as a fantasy figure.[17] If we wish to consider the result of this turn to be a feminist monument, then perhaps it would be better to read such a monument as a *memento mori* that signifies the death of (a) woman rather than as a memorial that encloses the body

essential to a viable feminist literary criticism. Unlike a memorial, a *memento mori* would provoke sympathy rather than identification and in so doing, would encourage us to apprehend the turn to the imaginary not as a model of liberation but as a sign of what may happen when a possible operation of the feminine in *language* is repressed.

If such an apprehension seems an uninspiring alternative for those of us committed to feminism, then I suggest that we look to Gilman rather than to the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" for the inspiration we seek. By representing the narrator as in some sense mad, Gilman can be said to have preferred sympathy to identification, a preference which becomes all the more significant once we recall that much of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is based on Gilman's personal experience. However, Gilman did more than sympathize, for as Dolores Hayden has documented, she also involved herself in efforts to change the material conditions of social existence through the construction of kitchenless houses and feminist apartment hotels — new architectual spaces in which alternative social and discursive relations might emerge.[18] Although those of us interested in literature may find Gilman's concern for the material conditions of social life a troubling defection,[19] it is also quite possible to consider that concern a thoughtful deferral based on a recognition that the prevailing social structure made it idealistic, if not dangerously presumptuous to lay claim to having identified either the woman's story or female meaning. Indeed, it may just be that what Gilman learned in writing and reading "The Yellow Wallpaper" was that as yet, a woman could only *imagine* that she had found herself, for until the material conditions of social life were radically changed, there would be no 'real' way out of mankind's ancestral mansion of many apartments.

Notes

1. When Howells requested permission to include "The Yellow Wallpaper" in his collection, Gilman responded that the story "was no more 'literature' than [her] other stuff, being definately written with a purpose." See *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1935), p. 121. For evidence of Howell's familiarity with Gilman's interest in the 'woman question', see p. 113.
2. William Dean Howells, ed. *The Great Modern American Stories* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1920), p. vii.
3. For the letters by M.D. and Horace Scudder, see *The Living of Charlotte Perkins*

Gilman, cited above, pp. 119-120. For Gilman's account of Walter Stetson's response, see Mary A. Hill, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist 1860-1896* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), p. 186.

4. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1962), p. 226. To my knowledge, no critic has yet noted in print the connection between *Paradise Lost* and the ending of "The Yellow Wallpaper." That connection rests not only on John's response to his 'mad' wife but also on the narrator's statement to John that the "key" to the room is to be found in the garden under a "plantain leaf." In *Paradise Lost*, Eve tells Adam that she first "espi'd" him, "fair indeed and tall/Under a Plantan" (Book IV, 11.477-8). Although a plantain leaf is not exactly the same as a Plantan or plane tree, there is a sound resemblance between the two words as well as an etymological connection by way of *plátano, plátano*, the Spanish words for plane tree. Since I am interested in other matters, I do not deal at length with the connection between "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Paradise Lost*; nevertheless, I trust that the reader will keep the connection in mind, for it does have a bearing on both my interpretation of the story and my response to critics who read the story as a feminist monument.
5. Elaine Hedges, "Afterword" to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1973), p. 39.
6. Although much of this monumentalizing occurs within classes devoted to women's studies or women's literature, at least three influential publications treat the story as both a memorial and a boundary marker: Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 89-92; Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," *NLH*, 11 (1980), 451-467; and Jean Kennard, "Convention Coverage or How to Read Your Own Life," *NLH* 13 (1981), 69-88. Hereafter, Gilbert and Gubar's book will be cited as *Madwoman*.
7. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1973), p. 9. Subsequent references to "The Yellow Wallpaper" will be to this edition.
8. For a more theoretical explanation of why and how a discourse based on binary oppositions is bound to destroy itself in unheard of contradictions, see the work of Jacques Derrida, especially *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
9. The term *écriture féminine* names the desired or hypothetical specificity of woman's writing; as a concept, it underwrites the work of certain French feminists, most importantly Helene Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1 (1976), 875-893 and Luce Irigaray's *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977). Portions of Irigaray's text have been translated and printed in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). In both France and America, the concept of *écriture féminine* has occasioned much debate; for a French questioning of the appeal to *écriture féminine*, see "Variations sur des themes communs" in *Questions feministes*, 1 (1977), translated by Yvonne Rochette-Ozzello as "Variations on Common Themes" in *New French Feminisms*, pp. 212-230; for Anglo-American responses to the postulate of *écriture féminine*, see the following: Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of L'Ecriture Feminine," *Feminist Studies*, 7

(1981), 247-263; Helene Vivienne Wenzel, "The Text as Body/Politics: An Appreciation of Monique Wittig's Writings in Context," *Feminist Studies*, 7 (1981), 264-287; Carolyn Burke, "Irigaray Through the Looking Glass," *Feminist Studies*, 7 (1981), 288-306; Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 9-35; Mary Jacobus, "The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, pp. 37-52; and *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston: G.J. Hall & Co., 1980). As this essay indicates, I am both sympathetic to the utopian political impulse that undewrites appeals to *écriture féminine* and wary of various and sundry claims to having produced or identified a demonstrably feminine writing. Like Mary Jacobus, I think such claims too often "founder on the rock of essentialism (the text as body) [or] gesture towards an avant-garde practice which turns out not to be specific to women;" see Jacobus's essay cited above, p. 37.

10. Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p. 78 and p. 74 respectively; I am using Mary Jacobus's translation of these passages in her essay "The Question of Language: Men and Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*," p. 37 and p. 40 respectively.
11. Although the significance of the Symbolic order is best apprehended in terms of its relationship to what Lacan calls the Imaginary and the Real, it is possible to describe the Symbolic as if it were a determinate space in which the relations between subject and sign as well as subject and other are mediated by the law of the signifier or the structure of Language. This triadic relation in which the subject is alienated in and by the symbolic mediations of language rests on a necessary separation of the paternal role from the biological father, a separation effected by the subject's awakening not only to the "Name-of-the-Father" but also to the general naming function of language. It is this separation which allows me to claim that discourse is a structure in which no-body is or can be at-home; by (dis)placing the subject in a chain of signifiers, the symbolic institutes a double disruption between on the one hand, biological need and articulate demand and on the other, articulate demand and unconscious desire. For a more detailed exposition of the Symbolic order, see the following texts: Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, translated by Anthony Wilden (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968); Jacques Lacan *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Sueil, 1966); Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982); Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978); Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, translated by David Macey (London: Routledge & Kegan paul, 1977); Samuel Ysseling, "Structuralism and Psychoanalysis in the Work of Jacques Lacan," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 10 (1970), 102-117; Martin Thom, "The Unconscious structured like a language" in *Economy and Society*, 5 (1976), 435-469; Frederic Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject," *YFS*, 55-56 (1977), 338-395; Richard Wolheim, "The Cabinet of Dr. Lacan," *NYRB*, 25 (Jan., 1979), 36-45; Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 382-398; Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 1-55; and Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds. *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: w.W. Norton, 1982).
12. Joseph Riddel, "The Crypt of Edgar Poe" *Boundary 2*, 7 (1979) 117-144; the refer-

ence to 'de-constructed architecture' appears on p. 125.

13. Although the significance of the Imaginary is best apprehended in terms of its relationship to what Lacan calls the Symbolic and the Real, it is possible to describe the Imaginary as if it were a specific kind of psychic space wherein bodies or forms are related to one another by means of such basic oppositions as inside-outside and container/contained. Developmentally speaking, the Imaginary originates in what Lacan calls the "mirror stage," that period between six and eighteen months during which the infant becomes aware of its image in the mirror, thereby fixing the self in a line of fiction, a line of imaginary doubles. Although this doubling is the precondition of primary narcissism, it is also the source of human aggression, for in both cases there is a transitivistic substitution of images, an indifferentiation of subject and object which leads the child who hits to imagine that s/he is being hit. For more on the Imaginary, see the works cited in note 11.
14. For the appeal to "the woman's story," see Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*; for the appeal to "female meaning," see not only Annette Kolodny's "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts" but also her more controversial essay, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies*, 6 (1980), 1-25; for the appeal to *écriture féminine* as a body, see Helene Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa;" for the appeal to a maternal subtext, see Judith Kegan Gardiner's "On Female Identity and Writing by Women," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 177-191. In "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," Elaine Showalter distinguishes between feminist critics who appeal to the difference of the woman's body and feminist critics who appeal to the difference of a woman's language, psychology, or culture; in practice, however, much feminist criticism belies the theoretical distinction Showalter makes, for the identification of a woman's language, psychology, or culture is often presented as though it were the discovery of a distinctly feminine body, even though that body may now be defined structurally rather than biologically.
15. Since the imaginary is associated with pre-oedipal relations with the mother, the thrust of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to value the symbolic over the imaginary. Like many other feminists, I do not accept wholeheartedly this value judgment; however, I also do not believe that a simple reversal wherein the imaginary is valued over the symbolic suffices. Thus, I ask for skepticism rather than either denigration or celebration of the imaginary. For a more detailed exploration of the claims of the imaginary and the symbolic as well as an account of Julia Kristeva's attempt to effect a semiotic displacement of the Lacanian Imaginary, see Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis.*
16. Although 'identity' is often considered to be one of the key benefits of the women's liberation movement, it seems to me that the relationship between identity and liberation is much more problematic than we sometimes care to admit. To the extent that identity means being at-one with oneself, then it necessitates the repression of a difference within, a repression which Jacques Derrida sees as characteristic of the phallologocentric discourse of the West. However, even though I am not willing to equate identity with liberation, neither am I willing to claim that it is either possible or desireable to forgo identity; again, I ask only for a more skeptical approach to the issue of identity, an approach that refuses to accept wholeheartedly the

notion that identity is liberating.

17. For a meditation on crypts and encrypting, especially as they relate to the psychoanalytic processes of introjection and incorporation, see Jacques Derrida's "Fors," translated by Barbara Johnson in *The Georgia Review*, 31 (1977), 64-116.
18. Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 182-277.
19. Some such discomfort may account for Gilbert and Gubar's defensive insistence that "we can be sure that Gilman ... knew that the cure for female despair must be spiritual as well as physical, aesthetic as well as social" (*Madwoman*, p. 92).