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The Writing's on the Wall: Symbolic Orders in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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Although it is traditionally and appropriately read in a social, particularly feminist, context and has most recently inspired several perceptive linguistic analyses, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" also lends itself especially well to a psychiatric, particularly Lacanian, reading. Jane, the narrator whose diary constitutes the story, describes in words sometimes horrifying and sometimes sarcastically biting her gradual descent into postpartum psychotic delirium. She transcribes her perspective of the circumstances of her disorder in narrative and discourse, leaving us to interpret a complex and subversive text that is both psychologically realistic and impossible.[1] But there is another text for the willing reader to interpret: that of the wallpaper, with which Jane has an ever-expanding relationship. Gilman's emphasis on the importance of language and text, and the fact that "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a tale of mental breakdown, make Lacanian psychoanalytic theory a natural way to shed light on the intricately entwining texts of Jane's unconscious, her written words, and the wallpaper, all of which play a part in Jane's psychosis and her attempt to constitute herself.[2] More specifically, my analysis of "The Yellow Wallpaper" depicts the story as a literary representation of a Lacanian psychosis, complete with such Lacanian postulates as self-constitution, the Name-of-the-Father, the Symbolic

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Order, and the mirror stage. Importantly, it also implicitly critiques the patriarchal bias of any theory like that of Lacan which, whatever its brilliance, ultimately valorizes the patriarchal structures it isolates and analyzes.

FROM FEMINISM AND LINGUISTICS TO LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS

Earlier readings of "The Yellow Wallpaper" provide valuable insight into the ways in which Gilman's story chronicles how women have been socially, historically, and medically constructed as not only weak, but sick beings. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, two of Gilman's first and strongest modern library critical proponents, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, portray "The Yellow Wallpaper" as symbolizing the "oppressive structures of the society in which [the protagonist/narrator] finds herself" (90). Naming the text "censorious and overwhelming," Gilbert and Gubar recognize the mood of the story as overtly critical of Gilman's social milieu (90). Early feminist readings such as this were important because, as Jeannette King and Pam Morris explain, they rectified the "tendency to enclose the heroine's problems within her own abnormal psychological state" (24).

Critics following Gilbert and Gubar's lead continue to interpret "The Yellow Wallpaper" primarily as a feminist manifesto.[3] Paula A. Treichler, for instance, reads the story as an indictment of the complex and unhealthy relationship between women and medical language. Conrad Schumaker argues that it demonstrates "what happens to the imagination when it is defined as feminine (and thus weak)" (590) in a patriarchal Victorian society that values only the practical. Similarly, evoking the Foucaultian perspective, John S. Bak sees the narrator as almost literally bound and gagged by what he calls the oppressive structures of "her male-imposed shackles, her Panopticon" (40). Bak shows the narrator in a sympathetic light, as a woman whose increasingly frantic attempts to

escape the monitoring gaze of the panoptical wallpaper in fact represent a quite logical aversion to her being defined by "that identity that her husband (and his patriarchal society) had inscribed on her" (45). These interpretations further develop feminist analyses of "The Yellow Wallpaper" that relocate the cause for the narrator's unhappy state from woman's supposedly inherent, biological state of hysteria to a byproduct of the Western world's patriarchal social condition. In doing so, they enter the realm of identity theory by highlighting Gilman's critique of socially, and especially patriarchally, inflicted definitions of normality.

Although recent critics of "The Yellow Wallpaper" almost always contextualize their interpretations somewhere within the framework of feminist analysis, the latest trend has been a more specifically linguistic one in which the issues of language, reading, and writing have emerged as the hermeneutic tools of literary and social analysis.[4] Critics including Jenny Weatherford, Vanashree Tripathi, and C. S. Wiesenthal discuss the story in terms that render it either a literal or metaphorical representation of, as Weatherford puts it, Gilman's own doubt that "language and conventional means of story telling could ever present an authentic view of women's inner experience" (58). King and Morris, as well as Beverly A. Hume, focus their analyses, respectively, on the narrator's ability to read or name reality and on the difficulties of self-constitution represented by the "inexplicable, unreadable" wallpaper (Hume 482). Although these critics disagree on whether or not the narrator—or Gilman—succeeds in breaking free from the masculine "construction of meaning" (Tripathi 69) or on whether we should pay more attention to the text comprised of the narrator's scribblings or that of the wallpaper, they focus primarily on the formal and linguistic elements of the text.

As do most feminist and linguistic analyses of "The Yellow Wallpaper," my Lacanian reading of the story represents patriarchy, or specifically the arrogant abuse of patriarchal authority, as the primary source of the protagonist's ultimately complete inability to separate fantasy from reality. Although it diagnoses the

protagonist as psychotic, however, my reading does not fall in line with those of early critics who "enclose the heroine's problems within her own abnormal psychological state." (King and Morris 24) Nor does it support the claims of more recent critics who insist on reading as complete submission Jane's outward acquiescence of social order.[5] The problem with both lines of thinking is that they, in the first instance, subtly or, in the second, overtly blame the protagonist as the source of her own troubles. Allowing us to acknowledge the "abnormality" of her psychological state without blaming the victim, a Lancanian reading of the protagonist's psychosis not only renames psychosis as a, if you will, normal function, or, in any case, a predictable consequence—of the social order. That is, Jane cannot—as her husband, the Victorian medical establishment, and many literary critics would have it—be held accountable for her psychotic, or sometimes merely atypical gender, behavior. Rather, my Lacanian reading compels us to see as heroic (if ultimately tragic) her attempts, in Michael Walsh's terms, to "reinven[t] and reimagin[e]" a world of "her own device" (78). Understanding Jane's experience as that of a Lacanian-diagnosed psychotic foregrounds Gilman's critique of the Victorian obsession with defining and presiding over "normality" and, in doing so, further elaborates the complexities of Gilman's representation.

LACANIAN PSYCHOSIS

In Lacanian terms, self-constitution within language is, in part, a matter of moving from the realm of Imagination to that of the Symbolic Order. A major step in this process is the mirror stage, the function of which Lacan sees as the establishment of "a relation between the organism and its reality" (Lacan 4). During this period, a person begins to recognize his or her place in a social context, which initiates the recognition of the Name-of-the-Father as "law." The Name-of-the-Father, the metaphorical governor of the Symbolic state, provides a basis for, and rules over, language

and society, and consequently anyone who is capable of constituting himself or herself in this Order.

Lacan also maintains that there is a close and necessary connection between language and the unconscious. Specifically, he sees "[l]anguage [a]s the condition of the unconscious" (Hogan 19). Lacan additionally not only understands the unconscious to be structured like a language but, in content, "the unconscious is the discourse of the other" (Lacan 193). Therefore, when a person enters the Symbolic Order, he or she does all of the following: enters the realm of language, gains a connection with the Name-of-the-Father, finds a place in the world of others, and is provided with "the foundation of the objectification and unity of the self" (de Waelhens 70).

In his essay, "Structure and Ambiguity in the Symbolic Order," Patrick Colm Hogan describes Lacanian self-constitution as "an act of synthesis which involves the fusing of discrete perceptions, beliefs, etc., into a unified conception of a single object" (17). In connection with this, Hogan underscores Lacan's belief that there are "two conditions for full responsibility of the subject: social similitude and personal identity" (Lacan qtd. in Hogan 18). For the nonpsychotic person, this fusion into a single identity and the understanding of these responsibilities are the norm. Unlike the psychotic, he or she at least is capable of such conditions.

The psychotic individual, in contrast, is unable to obtain either a sense of communality or self-identity because he or she, barred from entering the Symbolic Order, cannot symbolize "what ought to be symbolized"—that is, the Name-of-the-Father (Laplanche & Pontalis 168). The basis of this inability, that which "lie[s] at the origin of the psychotic phenomenon," is *Verwerfung/foreclusion*/ forclosure, which "consist[s] [of] a primordial expulsion of a fundamental 'signifier' [i.e., the Name-of-the-Father, the psychotic has "a mere hole, which, by the inadequacy of the metaphoric effect will provoke a corresponding pole at the place of the phallic signification" (Lacan 201). Thus, the psychotic person is devoid of any "normal" connection to society or language.

In his article, "Reading the Real in the Seminar on the Psychoses," Michael Walsh presents an interesting argument in regard to what the psychotic *does* do—as opposed to the usual emphasis on what he or she does not do—which benefits a Lacanian interpretation of "The Yellow Wallpaper." Because he or she has no established relationship with the Name-of-the-Father, the psychotic individual is "in deep trouble with the ensemble of signifiers, with the signifiers as such," writes Walsh. Therefore, "the psychotic seems to pursue [. . .] a reinvention or reimagination of this signifier in such a way that it does not partake of the other." That is, "the psychotic is someone who seeks to initiate or institute a Symbolic of his or her own device." Because the individual cannot enter into the communal Symbolic Order, she attempts to create a new order in which, perhaps, she can find her own sense of "social similitude and personal identity" (Walsh 78).

The next question to broach, then, is what, according to Lacan, triggers a psychotic episode? And what prompts the individual to attempt to create his or her own Symbolic Order? Lacan posits that "[f]or the psychosis to be triggered off, the Name-of-the-Father, *verworfen*, foreclosed, that is to say, never having attained the place of the Other, must be called into symbolic opposition to the subject" (217). Lacan has offered several specific examples of such situations. Another is provided by "The Yellow Wallpaper."

JANE AS LACANIAN PSYCHOTIC

At the beginning of the story, the protagonist/narrator, Jane, has just given birth to a baby boy. Although for most mothers a newborn's infancy is a joyous time, for others, like Jane, it becomes a trying emotional period that is now popularly understood to be the fairly common disorder, postpartum depression. For example, Jane describes herself as feeling a "lack of strength" (6) and as becoming "dreadfully fretful and querulous" (9). In addition, she writes, "I cry at nothing and cry most of the time" (9).

However, as the term postpartum depression was not extant in the Victorian vocabulary, John has diagnosed Jane as suffering from "temporary nervous depression [with] a slight hysterical tendency" (30).[6] It may be more accurate, however, to view the symptoms she develops later in the story—visual hallucinations, delusions, paranoia—as stemming from a psychotic condition that, prior to the birth of her son, was subdued or in control. I propose that the birth of her son precipitated a confrontation with an A-Father and therefore was a catalyst in the initiation of her psychotic break. This incident necessitated that Jane face the Name-of-the-Father in the "symbolic opposition" mentioned above.

Jane's child may be considered an A-Father because, although he is not named for us by the narrator, custom tells us he will be the recipient of his father's surname, that is, *a* Name-of-the-Father. For this reason, Jane's son can function, to some degree, as an incarnation of the Name that she has foreclosed. In his discussion of similar "situations," Walsh points out "the stress laid in the Lacanian clinic on the father as word and figure, so that what is finally important might be called the perception of paternity or the relation to paternity" (78). When applied to a reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper," this tenet translates into the following: The birth event is one of the times, perhaps the first, that Jane actually confronts her (non)relation to paternity. However, because she has had no stable relation to or understanding of the Symbolic Order that paternity represents, this perception has sent her headfirst into psychotic delirium. In other words, "called upon by some exigency of paternity"—in this case, pregnancy—Jane, "the incipient psychotic subject[,] discovers that [her] relationship with the signifier has been at best a makeshift, a simulacrum whose collapse renders imperative a thoroughgoing reimagination of subjective circumstances" (Walsh 77–78).

A related embodiment of Jane's nonrelationship with the Name-of-the-Father is the fact that, until the very last few lines of the story, Jane herself, is unnamed.[7] This absence correlates with the void she has in the place at which a nonpsychotic person would

have a relation to the Symbolic Order. Furthermore, even though her name eventually is revealed, it is, in essence, a nonname: Jane, as in Jane Doe, as in anonymous, without a history or connections of any sort.

Aside from Jane's anonymity, there are other indications that Jane does not fit into the Symbolic Order. From the very first, Gilman makes it clear that the world of the story is patriarchal. For example, Jane describes the house that she and John rent as an "ancestral hall' and an "hereditary estate" (3), phrases that recall the patrilineality of Western society. Also, the story's representative patriarch, John, is described as "practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (3).

John represents law and order and reality. As Jane's physician-husband, he is identified as ruler—that is, of Jane—in all domains, personal, professional, and social. Unfortunately for Jane, the methods by which John attempts to cure his wife are superrational and as structured as he is. A devout "empiricist" (Shumaker 591), he orders for Jane "a schedule prescription for each hour in the day" (4) and bids her time and again to maintain "proper self control" (5) and "to use [her] will and good sense" (7) to suffocate any imaginative or disruptive/disordered tendencies. The power of John's medical diagnosis, as Treichler perceptively points out, goes far beyond the limits of loving advice, however, as Jane's descent into psychosis evinces. By suffocating her imagination ("women's discourse") with the patriarchal language of medicine, John does more than merely diagnose the medical problem from which Jane suffers; rather, he "speaks to define woman's condition" (65).

Most critics would agree with Treichler's assessment of John as patriarchal bully. However, some, including Hume and King and Morris also fault the narrator for her illness, seeing her not as disobedient but submissive to the demands of her doctor/husband. Hume maintains that Jane represents women who, "failing to see

or becoming unduly preoccupied with the grotesque nature of [their cultural and/or psychological] circumstances, [. . .] move toward an increasingly distorted understanding of themselves" (482). Likewise, King and Morris contend that Jane "accepts the terms that are used to define her" (28), and they see her attempts to appease John as self-acknowledgment of her mental illness. They believe Jane's illness stems from guilt over her failure to achieve the feminine ideal of caring mother and dutiful wife. What they call the narrator's insistence that she is sick suggests, for King and Morris, "complicity with the ideology that labels such dissatisfaction as 'abnormal'" (27).

Although this interpretation of Jane holds some merit, it fails to take into consideration the many instances in which Jane displays a strong fighting spirit against John's condescending medical advice. While King and Morris go so far as to recognize Jane's behavior as showing "an increasingly submissive exterior" (30), they do not in any other way differentiate between Jane's exterior and interior responses to John and the patriarchal order. However, the text of Jane's diary not only reveals Jane's awareness that John continuously tries to manipulate her, it also provides evidence that she has learned to turn the tables on his supposed authority. As Greg Johnson has pointed out, Jane's descriptions of John are typically sarcastic and mocking (524). For instance, even as Gilman makes it clear that Jane recognizes John's enforced confinement as largely to blame for her continued illness—"I wish he would take me away from here!"—immediately after this entreaty, Jane writes "It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so" (11).

Any astute reader cannot help but perceive the conscious irony inherent in Jane's overt pairing of her awareness of John's counterproductive medical advice with her (supposed) verification of his sagacity and devotion. Moreover, the fact that she continues to write, move about, and study the wallpaper—thus disobeying John's strict orders—reveals her acquiescence to John's demands to be merely superficial. Jane does, in fact, make several sugges-

tions about what she thinks will make herself well: for instance, writing. When denied the right to undertake this task openly, she performs it secretively and, I suggest, with direct revolutionary fervor. Condescending to John almost as much as he does to her, she continues to partake in the forbidden behaviors, all the while "cultivat[ing] deceit" (13). However, as doctor and husband, John has more control over Jane than she has the ability to withstand. He eventually wears her down to the point that she ultimately does, as he fears she will, lose her grasp on reality.

For John, that of which he is not in strict control, such as Jane's writing (10), is considered" absurd" precisely because it reduces his power. The idea that there is such a thing, for example, as "ghostliness" is inconceivable to John because it cannot be "felt and seen." Therefore, he refuses to even listen to Jane's thoughts on the topic. Similarly, because of his insecurity, his distrust of what is other to him (fancy, imagination, anything not Ordered), John continually attempts to suppress Jane's belief in such matters, which ultimately interferes with her own efforts to help make herself well. For instance, when she "tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how [she] wish[ed] he would let [her] go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia" (10), John disallows such an action as it would constitute a break in the schedule he had, in his patronizing belief that "Father" knows best, set for her. Rather than consider the potential validity of Jane's suggestion, "dear John gathered me up in his arms and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, as sat by me and read to me till it tired my head. He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take care of myself for his sake, and keep well" (10).

Here, it is apparent that John's self-reported concern for Jane's welfare is not much more than a selfish desire to maintain the order/Order of his own life. His attempt to relieve her by reading to her had the effect of "tir[ing her] head," which may be interpreted in two ways. More conventionally, we imagine Jane lulled into a peaceful slumber by the drone of John's voice as he reads to

her. An alternative reading could be that Jane tires from the pressure of being bombarded by a barrage of words that are part of the same patriarchal structure that oppresses her. If this latter interpretation is the case, John's attempt to help his wife only serves to intensify those outside pressures that Jane feels bearing down upon her. However, John, who wants merely to maintain the "normal" pattern of his life, sees only that he has suppressed this "disturbance" and is satisfied that, for the moment, anyway, his order/Order is intact.

John's suppression of Jane's efforts to gain control of her own life through her choice of medicine—"less opposition and more society and stimulus" (4) and the opportunity to write in her own words—reflects the more general oppression of Jane, as a woman and as a mentally ill person, by the patriarchal nature of the Symbolic Order. However, although John has faith in what he believes to be the logical, Reality-based strength of his Order, incidents such as the one discussed above show that the Symbolic Order does not gather its strength from the logic of Reality but from the patriarchal tradition that engendered it. From this viewpoint, even the nonpsychotic woman who, according to Lacan, has been able to constitute herself fully within this order may either fail to recognize or choose to reject the supposed logic inherent in this patriarchal Order. Therefore, Jane, who is not only a woman but who is also psychotic, is twice-removed from an understanding of the Symbolic Order.

From the beginning of the story, Gilman indicates that Jane recognizes at least some level of incompatibility between law/order and imagination or, in Lacanian terms, between the Symbolic Order and the Imaginary Order. For example, in explaining how she and John acquired the lease on an ancestral home, Jane recalls: "There was some legal trouble, I believe, something about the heirs and coheirs; anyhow, the place has been empty for years. That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid, but I don't care—there is something strange about the house—I can feel it" (4). In these words, Jane reveals that law is a troublesome concept for her, particularly

law that concerns the passing on of property. This mirrors Jane's unsteady progenitorial relationship with the ruling Order, which stems from her inability to inherit or subsume that law of ancestral laws, the Name-of-the-Father. In addition, we see that this "legal" trouble "spoils [her] ghostliness," or that the Symbolic Order (law) clashes with her Imaginary Order.

The passage above also reveals some of the characteristics of Jane's unique relationships with the Symbolic Order and with the house containing the yellow wallpaper. First, if the house, with its connection to the tradition of patrilineal inheritance, does represent the Symbolic Order for Jane, she admits here that she is fully aware that this Order has been, for her, "empty for years." Second, Jane's feeling of almost supernatural affiliation with the house displays her premonitory awareness that she will have a special relationship with the house. Indeed, it is her association with the yellow wallpaper that ultimately leads her to believe she can establish an alternative Order.

Because of her relative nonrelationship with the Symbolic Order and her correspondent inability to fully constitute herself, Jane attempts to create her own order, and thus to constitute herself, at first through writing. She remarks several times that she feels such "congenial work [. . .] would do [her] good," but also indicates that in order to write she must "be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" (4). John will not allow her to gain possession of her own language (and therefore her own Order) or to "relieve the press of ideas and rest me" (7).

It is important to note the precise language used here. Jane perceives ideas to press against her, but are they pressing from inside or outside? Although one could argue this point from both sides, it is more likely that a Lacanian-diagnosed psychotic would perceive the ideas to be pressing her from without. If we continue to follow the course of foreclosure, we see that which has been foreclosed returns to the individual not from the inside, as with a signifier that has been repressed, but from the outside. This backlash from one's exterior, an "hallucination," is defined by Lacan, following

Freud, as that which "'has been foreclosed from the Symbolic [and which] appears in the Real'" (qtd. in LaPlanche & Pontalis 440). Lacan, again quoting Freud, thus explains psychosis as follows: "The ego breaks away from the incompatible idea, but the latter is inseparably connected with a piece of reality, so that, in so far as the ego achieves this result, it, too, has detached itself wholly or partly from reality" (qtd. in LaPlanche & Pontalis 167–68).

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Jane often feels influenced or pressed by external forces, which may be seen to represent both the foreclosed Name-of-the-Father and Jane's own "detached" ego. For example, Jane's perception of the effect of outside influences is discernible in such statements as, "This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had" (7) and less obviously, "John has cautioned me not to give way of fancy in the least" (7). Although John seems to consider fancy an inner weakness of Jane's, the wording in the latter phrase indicates that John registers fancy as a "real" threat that exerts its influence on Jane as an Other. From this perspective, Jane is at the mercy of a *Paradise Lost* type of serpent-fancy that tempts her to stray from reason and Order. If read from a Lancanian perspective, this wording provides yet another example of John's (unreasonable) fear of disorder, a dis-Order he perceives to stem from the use of fancy or imagination and which, he suspects, will obliterate the Order upon which he so much relies for personal and social power. Furthermore, although the fear is John's, his social, personal, and medical power over Jane allows him to also convince her that the "threat" is real.

Jane's relationship with the room that constitutes her prison provides another example of the influence of outside forces or of the Other. Throughout the story, Jane characterizes the room as a nursery, but its description better fits a prison and/or mental institution. The bed is bolted to the floor, the "windows are barred," and "there are rings and things on the wall" (5). In addition, the wallpaper on the wall above the bed is torn off as far as she can reach, and the "bedstead is fairly gnawed" (5). Although this is all explained away for us—notably, by an unstable narrator—as the

doings of the previous tenants' raucous children, there is a darker side to the ruin which recalls (not so) ancient cells and mental asylums.

At the end of the story, after Jane's long and intense relationship with this room and especially with the wallpaper, Gilman describes her as "creeping" like a child and tethered like a prisoner (18). At this point, Jane appears obviously insane. Thus it seems that the room, as other, has influenced Jane's state of being. Lacan's view of the psychotic supports this assessment. He writes, "the condition of the subject [. . .] is dependent on what is being unfolded in the other" (193). That which is *not* Jane—including, presumably inanimate objects and that which she has foreclosed—has a bearing upon what/whom, Jane becomes. In other words, because proponents of the patriarchal social order thwart Jane's attempts to create her own Symbolic Order through writing, they force her to turn elsewhere to find her own Order. And because, over time, the wallpaper gains more and more authority over her, it becomes the recourse to which Jane turns. It is within the text of this paper that Jane both confronts her own nonunderstanding of the Symbolic Order and, through a sort of textual struggle with that order, seeks to create her own, alternative Order.

Although at first Jane despises the wallpaper, she not only grows to like it, but goes so far as to become, in her mind, literally one with it. Her relationship with the wallpaper, in part, reflects Lacan's mirror stage, albeit in an unusual, psychotic way. The mirror stage "manufactures for the subject [. . .] the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality" (Lacan 4). For the nonpsychotic person, this process involves the literal recognition that the body parts constitute the whole body. But for the psychotic Jane, whose mirror stage constitution was not stable, the mirror stage occurs with a twist. More specifically, Jane creates a new self-identity and sense of communality through her connection with and ultimately her transformation into the women/woman in the wallpaper.

Early in the story, Jane perceives specific, disembodied body parts within the wallpaper. For example, she notes that "nobody

could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads" (15). In this initial contact with the wallpaper, which represents the mirror stage, Jane sees herself—or what will become her self—in the fragmented body images of the women/woman in the wallpaper. At this point, Jane continues to struggle with the process of constituting a whole self. However, Jane moves beyond this stage, and, through a "succession of phantasies" that she perceives as reality, constitutes herself as a whole. For Jane, as for the nonpsychotic person, this process follows the Lacanian pattern of moving from a perception of one's self as fragmented to a perception of one's self as unified. Jane first reports that she sees from the window people whom she perceives as having escaped from the wallpaper "walking in these numerous paths and arbors" (7). Next she sees "a woman stooping down and creeping about" (11) both in the same paths and arbors and in the wallpaper. Eventually, Jane not only recognizes but becomes the woman in the wallpaper. And it is only then that she achieves at least a fantastic "social similitude and personal identity" within her own Symbolic Order.

The woman in the wallpaper is, according to Jane, restricted by the front pattern, which she first describes as "that silly and conspicuous front design" (8) and later likens to the more intensely negative image of "bars" (13). In a sense, the front pattern represents the standard Symbolic Order from whose undecipherable (external) forces Jane wants to be freed. Her accounts of the front pattern indicate her lack of comprehension of and consequent frustrations with the order of its design. For example, she notes, "I determined for the thousandth time that I *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion" (9); and, "I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing is not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of" (9); also, "the interminable grotesques seem to form around a common center and rush off in headlong plunges of equal destruction" (10); and finally, "on a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law that is a constant irritant to a normal mind" (11). From

these passages it is apparent that Jane associates the front design of the wallpaper with law/order. The last passage also indicates that Jane believes her own mind to be completely sound. Consequently, she sees the wallpaper as the culprit of her confusion.

Jane's notion that the outside pattern (or law/order) produces her confusion is quite in keeping with a feminist critique of Lacan's Symbolic Order. As, for example, Judy Little, Julia Kristeva, and other feminist theorists argue, the patriarchal structure of language, and therefore, of society, leaves women with a less than complete, liminal, and consequently frustrated relation to both language and society.[8] Thus, the Symbolic Order empowers men to control the personal, professional, and social lives of women. Even if Jane does not consciously recognize the socially oppressive character reflected by the physical pattern of the wallpaper, her observation that "I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still" (13) indicates her awareness of the futility of any attempt made by the woman in the wallpaper, or herself, to receive any relief, understanding, or satisfaction from this oppressive Order.

Again, Jane's first comprehension of any order whatsoever comes through her identification with the woman in the wallpaper. As part of this association, a battle ensues between the woman/Jane, who is Jane's own ego supplanted outside of her and the front pattern, which represents the Symbolic Order. Ultimately, the woman/Jane wins this battle, in the sense that she "escapes" from the wallpaper, which consequently releases her from the forces that have been pressing upon her from without.

Lacan describes self-constitution in terms that similarly invoke imagery of confrontation: "[T]he formation of the *I* is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium—its inner arena and enclosure, [. . .] dividing it into two fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle whose form (sometimes juxtaposed in the same scenario) symbolizes the id in a quite startling way" (5). However, Jane does not dream her battle scene but instead apprehends it as real. As a psychotic with a disrupted relationship to the Symbolic Order, her attempt to reach the

"lofty, remote inner castle" becomes a quest leading her outside of her psychotically, incompletely constituted self.

CONCLUSION

Because Jane, as the woman in the wallpaper, does escape from the wallpaper, she believes she has succeeded in creating her own Symbolic Order. At the end of the story, we see, in fact, that Jane does not belong to the same world or have the same identity as earlier. She says to John, "'I've got out at last, [. . .] in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the wallpaper, so you can't put me back'" (19). Thus, Jane is no longer Jane, floundering in what she perceives as an orderless world. Instead, Jane is the woman who fought her way out from behind the oppressive bars of the outside pattern/Symbolic Order, so that she is able to "creep by daylight"—she acts independently of the usual confines of the patriarchal oppression of the Symbolic Order—and even to question out loud the reasons for the actions of those around her. Within this new Symbolic Order, Jane feels capable of wondering about John, "Now why should that man have fainted?" and still remains strong enough in her new sense of identity to "creep over him" (19). In this one brief moment, Jane (and her own Order) triumphs, in the sense that she overturns or literally walks all over the Order that John represents, the Order that did nothing but oppress her.

On the other hand, how can living in a state of psychosis be considered triumphant in any way? It cannot. Jane is really no freer at the end of the story than at the beginning. In fact, we can assume that her intensified mental illness will only lead her to suffer even more at the hands of the same patriarchal establishment whose (mis)diagnosis defined her mental illness in the first place (Treichler 67). Her role in bringing to light the fact that social oppression helped to both create and sustain what could have been a less tragic illness is an accomplishment that, after all, only the reader, and not Jane, can appreciate.

NOTES

1. Weatherford explains that the story "slips [. . .] from journal to interior monologue" without explanation; "as the narrative voice becomes disconnected from the original journal fiction, the form of the story itself becomes as 'unheard of contradiction'" (67). C. S. Wiesenthal similarly discusses the significance of the "apparent sacrifice of psychological realism entailed by Gilman's narrative mode" (2).
2. See King and Morris for another Lacanian analysis that reads Jane as a "decentered subject" (25) and the wallpaper as representative of the "threat of the oppressed other" (30).
3. For more on the history of reception of "The Yellow Wallpaper" see Julie Bates Dock's "'But No One Expects That': Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the Shifting Light of Scholarship." *PMLA* 111.1 (Jan. 1996): 52–65.
4. Feminist, social, and linguistic theoretical angles are, of course, not the only approaches the literary critics have used with "The Yellow Wallpaper." However, I have chosen to focus on these threads of argument because they are the most relevant to my Lancanian analysis.
5. See, for instance, Hume and King and Morris. I discuss this issue more specifically later in the essay.
6. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term "postpartum" was first used in 1844, but "postpartum depression" did not make an appearance until 1929, when it was used in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. Although the Victorian medical and psychiatric establishments were aware of postpartum depression's symptoms, they most commonly attributed them to the more general "women's" ailment of hysteria.
7. The name of the protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a controversial issue among Gilman critics: Some claim that her name is Jane, others that she is never named. I subscribe to the former view but, clearly if the latter view is taken up, my "no-name" argument holds.
8. See, for example, Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. For her critiques of Lacan, see Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* and "Within the Microcosm of 'The Talking Cure'" in *Interpreting Lacan*. Also see Judy Little's *Comedy and the Woman: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism*.

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