English & Cultural Studies 1A03

"Shorter Genres"

11 November 2016

Study Notes for Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper."

One of the things that Adrienne Rich means when she speaks metaphorically of "diving into the wreck" is the difficult but important work of repeatedly returning to the depths of time to salvage the lost or drowned histories of women's desires, bodies, imaginations, work, and communities—all those stories, lives and texts that had otherwise been ignored and forgotten in a culture that is traditionally much more fascinated with and worried about the stories of men. Rich always urged readers and scholars to dredge up from the ocean of history the water-logged remains of otherwise forgotten or missing women's lives--a vast but fundamentally important labour. And in fact that is what happened at universities across the English-speaking world during Rich's long lifetime. For the last several decades, feminist scholars have worked assiduously to recover literature by women and about women who had disappeared from view but who deserved a second chance at life. For example, in my own research field of British Romantic literature—i.e., the literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century—a massive recovery effort has saved dozens of sophisticated novels by women that were widely read and discussed in their own time yet largely forgotten by the beginning of the twentieth century. The recovery of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," is another case in point of what it can mean to dive into the wreck. Originally published in 1892, the short story eventually slipped out of public view, as indeed did its author, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. "The Yellow Wallpaper" became a "drowned" text that awaited its rediscovery and revival by feminist scholars in the twentieth century.

Gilman was a leading public intellectual in the early history of modern feminism in the U.S., a writer of poetry and fiction as well as an important socialist and sociologist. In 1915 she wrote a novel entitled *Herland*, a vision of a future and peaceable world of women who reproduced parthenogenetically, i.e., without men. Written at the historical moment when the catastrophe of the First World War begins to unfold, it is easy to understand the attraction of this fable of a world without the belligerent posturing of men and without the war machine driving so many men to their deaths on the battlefield. *Herland* is Gilman's way of saying, as Hammad will say many years later, *I will not dance to your war drum*. Yet for all of Perkin's power as a writer and thinker, by 1935, the year that she died at her own hand in the last stages of an incurable breast cancer, she had all but disappeared from public view—one of the many, many women whose names are missing from the book of myths, as Rich says so memorably at the conclusion of "Diving into the Wreck."

That all changed when "The Yellow Wallpaper" was rediscovered in the late 1960s and early 1970s--like a wonderful piece of buried treasure. The story itself was written during a few very warm days in California in the summer of 1890. Perkins had newly separated from her husband, an artist named Walter Stetson—a man she very reluctantly married and only after he promised her that neither

he nor their marriage would interfere with her work as a thinker and writer. Stetson broke that promise after they were married, a major part of why the marriage subsequently failed. Gilman came to see that her husband was like many other middle-class men she knew or knew about, men who wanted their wives to be perfect late Victorian hostesses, dutifully tending to the home but mostly seen rather than heard. –A bit like a glorified domestic servant. Stetson wanted his wife to do that kind of work and not any other kind of work. Here you might recall how the speaker of "The Yellow Wallpaper" says she is *absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again* (43). Why is "work" in quotation marks? It is the speaker's way of reminding us that the meaning of "work," what it means for a woman to work, is in her world and in her experience very much still a question, a problem and so something she puts in "scare quotes." For her husband, "real" work is housework and her efforts as a writer are at best a fanciful distraction and at worst the source of her illness. For the speaker, "real" work must include her labours as a writer and thinker, the very things that her physician husband, and the medical authority upon which he draws, forbids. The very fact that the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" must put the word "work" in quotation marks says a great deal about what it means to live in the land of the fathers. As the narrator says, *What is one to do?* . . . meaning, 1) I can't do anything, I'm not at liberty to put up much of a fight against my husband, who thinks he is doing me well, who thinks he means no harm and 2) What work is in fact available to a literate woman who wants to write and think but who is compelled instead by convention to do quite different sorts of work? *What is one to do?* The story itself answers that question by reminding us that one thing the speaker can do is write the entries in her diary. That's not much, indeed, hardly anything, and where it leads is madness . . . but the diary isn't nothing either. The narrator leaves a vivid and lively trace of herself in the world, for what it is worth. "What is one to do?" That's also a question that Plath asks in "Daddy" and in fact she gives it the honour of being the opening of her poem: "You do not do," her speaker says, "you do not do." Meaning: 1) Father, whoever you are, wherever you are, you simply won't do, you aren't what I want and need you to be and 2) I am immobilized by the ghost of my father and by the paternalistic culture in which I am trapped, I can't "do" much of anything . . . except cast this angry and articulate counter-spell of a poem in the hopes that the words and the rhythms of my words will break the spell that the fathers have over me.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" was greeting initially with disdain by publishers, who found the story to be "perverse" and "miserable." It *is* in fact perverse and miserable although undoubtedly *not* for the reasons the publishers had, since it brings to life the perverse and miserable life of a woman whose woundedness goes unseen and unheard. In some sense, Gilman must sometimes have felt a bit like her narrator, writing without an audience willing or able to listen to what she was saying. But unlike her narrator, who writes in secret, Gilman found a publisher and a reading public, even if, in the end, that readership didn't last. The story was successfully brought into print in 1892 and then again in 1899. But then, as I 've said, after a certain number of years it vanished from sight, reprinted only in 1973 (a year after "Diving into the Wreck" was published). That's a long time for an important piece of the history of English literature to be lost at sea. The story has since been reprinted and republished many times and is now firmly a part of the history of English literature and a part of the long history of women's literature in English.

"The Yellow Wall paper" is a story that is richly suggestive and thus open to being understood and engaged in several different ways. It can be read as a critique of what it means to be a "woman living in the kingdom of the fathers," as Rich said of her own work. It can also be read as a snapshot of the life of a 19th-century middle-class woman, not the life of the impoverished sex worker (or "youthful harlot") whose cries we hear in Blake's "London," but the *other* woman who haunts that same poem, the woman who is at home who is confined to what Blake so sharply calls the "marriage hearse," i.e., the woman for whom marriage is metaphorically her own funeral, the end of her life as she knows it, trading sex and unpaid house work for personal safety and financial security. The story is also clearly a critique of the dominant medical regime of the time which, rather than dispassionately and objectively treating mental illness in women *as* illness (which is what the doctors *claimed* to be doing) instead characterized women living with emotional trauma as unruly and irresponsible subjects who were shirking their domestic duties as wife and mother and who required control, administration and pacification.

Gilman had first-hand experience with that medical regime. She has suffered from various forms of neuroses and depression all of her life. In her memoirs she wonders aloud about how much more work she might have accomplished had these illnesses not soaked up so much of her time and energy, a lament I always find deeply moving. She was often ill, suffering from what was then called *neurasthenia*, a generalized condition of nervousness, anxiety, depression and fatigue. This condition intensified over the two years following the birth of her daughter, Katherine, and it seems evident now that what Gilman was suffering was a severe post-partum depression, an illness that often remains undertreated even to this day because of the stigma associated with a mother who is unable to attach emotionally to her newborn child and who doesn't view the birth of her child with the unalloyed happiness she is told she must experience. In the spring of 1887, Gilman was sent to Philadelphia see the famous neurologist Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, who initially made his name treating the wounded soldiers in the Civil War before turning his energies to the emotional illnesses he saw or thought he saw in middle-class American women. You'll recall how in "The Yellow Wallpaper" the narrator's husband, himself as physician, threatens to send his ailing wife to see the very same Dr. Mitchell: *John says if I don't pick up any faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall*, a prospect she views with deep dread because a friend has told her that Dr. Mitchell is like her husband and brother (also a doctor!) . . . but *worse*. Mitchell became widely known for what was called "the rest-cure," a therapy he devised in which women were subjected to forced bed-rest and compelled to eat fatty foods, often in complete isolation and immobility. Gilman endured three months of the rest-cure before she discharged herself from Dr. Mitchell's care. She didn't experience his regime as care at all but rather as a kind of medical incarceration, a bit like the old Soviet practice of confining political dissidents to psychiatric hospitals. As Gilman said after her release, the treatment didn't alleviate her illness but in fact drove her to the very brink of madness.

Dr. Mitchell had nothing but contempt for Gilman, knowing that she as a writer and thinker. He resented the fact that she came to his office with a careful set of notes in which she described her symptoms in detail, something he felt was "conceited." It is possible to read the diary entries making up "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a kind of lurid fictionalization of those very notes . . . only in this case, the

patient really does fall into madness, unlike Gilman, who walked away from Dr. Mitchell's treatment in order to preserve her sanity. It's interesting to consider how the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" may well be in Dr. Mitchell's clinic by the time we read her diary entries. Recall how the diary entries end on the last day that she and her husband are living in their rented house and on the very threshold of a move. Does the narrator return home in her psychotic state (once John, her husband, wakes from his fainting spell at the sight of his mad wife) or is she transported to Dr. Mitchell's care and admitted to his clinic involuntarily? We don't know because the diary entries making up "The Yellow Wallpaper" end abruptly before we can find out, giving the closure of the story a wonderfully abrupt suspensefulness, an attractive open-endedness. Gilman's female narrator my have dissolved into a kind of psychosis, but Gilman herself, as the talented author of the short story, is in complete command of her materials, shaping her story in ways that involve and challenge the reader.

Dr. Mitchell also hated the fact that Gilman came from a family of famous American women writers. She was related to the Beecher sisters, who were political activists and abolitionists—agitating against slavery—and writers earlier in the 19th century. Dr. Mitchell told Gilman that "there was nothing the matter" but that she should scrupulously follow this advice: "live as domestic a life as possible;" have your baby with you at all times; indulge but two hours of intellectual life a day," and "never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live." Consider for a moment how deeply contradictory this medically authorized advice is: you aren't ill, not really, yet you are a patient who must follow a strict therapeutic regimen that confines you to a very particular sort of life—much more of half-life, actually. The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is subjected to the same sort of torqueing incoherence: she is repeatedly told that "there is really nothing the matter . . . but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" (43), and yet she lives under very strict conditions, no writing, no thinking, no child nearby, not to mention being prescribed lots of drugs. Like Gilman, the narrator is required to be ill and not ill at the same time, her condition at once minimized and patronized *and* subjected to strict medical surveillance. As the narrator says several times in "The Yellow Wallpaper," her physician-husband's treatment is *worsening* her condition, not alleviating it. It is part of the problem, *not* its solution.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman makes art—a short story—out of the madness that she narrowly escaped in life at the hands of Dr. Mitchell. Gilman herself insisted that the story should be read not so much as a narrative of her own mental illness but instead a public memorandum delivered to the powerful American physician who had mistreated her, backed by the authority of the American medical system. It is, in other words, an indictment of late 19th-century medicine for women. "The real purpose" of the story," she said, "was to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell and convince him of the error of his ways" in treating depression in women, although in her memoirs Gilman adds that she had herself never had the hallucinations that the narrator of her story endures. Gilman is said to have sent a copy of the short story to Dr. Mitchell, but she never heard back from him. That's too bad, for a real conversation between the two would have been revealing, to say the least! As an undergraduate, I remember researching and writing an essay on Dr. Mitchell in the years immediately following the rediscovery of "The Yellow Wallpaper." But at the time I had never heard of the story or of Gilman's close call with the doctor and his treatment. (Gilman's work wasn't then taught in any of the courses I was taking or, for that matter, in the entire program in which I was enrolled.) I wish I had known of "The Yellow

Wallpaper" because in my essay I could have put Gilman and Mitchell into a kind of dialogue, reading Mitchell's own writing about the emotional illnesses of women through the lens of Gilman's work. What I do recall is sitting in the stacks at my university's medical library, pouring through volumes and volumes of a journal from the end of the 19th-century, Gilman and Mitchell's age, called *The Journal of Moral Illness.* In those days, mental illness was called "moral" illness, as if mental illness were a failure of morality, a failure of being a good person! That's the world in which Gilman struggles to be heard. But what's worth hanging on to is this: Gilman's own life was to become so very different from the life she describes in her own short story. Far from living with psychotic breaks, like her narrator does, Gilman recovered, broke with her husband and the domination he embodied and established herself as a successful thinker, writer and educator . . . even if, after he death, "The Yellow Wallpaper" vanished from sight.

John threatens to send his wife for treatment by Dr. Mitchell—the implication being that in some faint sense he too realizes that the rest-cure is a kind of punishment as much as it is a treatment, an eventuality to be feared rather than embraced. But the fact is that the narrator is *already* Dr. Mitchell's patient because she is under the paternalistic control of her doctor husband, who is characterized in the story as a kind of mini-me version of Dr. Mitchell.

Let's briefly consider two important elements to understanding short fictions like "The Yellow Wallpaper" and indeed any of the other texts we study next on this course, namely: <u>the structure of the narrative</u> and <u>the narrative voice.</u>

1) The narrative of the story, i.e., the way in which the story unfolds or unfurls, is paced by twelve separate diary entries. An important part of understanding "The Yellow Wallpaper" is tracking these entries and determining the distance, so to speak, that the narrator travels between the opening diary entry and the last one. How has she changed? Why does she change? How does the author register those changes and prepare us for the shocking end of the story? Each of the diary entries are without dates, set apart by a handful of blank spaces, as if to picture for us the narrator's fragmented sense of herself, at once adrift in her own thoughts but also confined. Early on in the story, the diary entries are stopped when the narrator writing them is interrupted by someone from whom she must hide her writing—John, for example, or her sister-in-law. (What is her name?) Those interruptions capture something important about the narrator's life, which is lived under constant surveillance. Isolated in the room that was once nursery, she is rarely unwatched, always under the threat of being caught doing something she has been told she should not and cannot do. In truth, she lives an interrupted life, meaning her life's progress is now arrested, a condition that she experiences more and more in the form of a madness. So those diary interruptions carry a lot of weight. They create the illusion of the diary happening in "real time," but they also bear symbolic significance, the local interruptions inviting us to consider the generally interrupted existence endured by the narrator.
2) The narrative *voice* is closely related to the structure of the narrative. As in poetry, voice is a matter of asking "Who is speaking? Who is telling the story?" In Joyce, an omniscient and unidentified narrator, someone who has the power to move in and out of a character's

thoughts, is the voice who tells the story. (I discuss this question in more detail in subsequent Study Notes.) In this story we hear only the voice of the female narrator. We see everything only from her unique and increasingly unstable point of view. No narrator says, "And then the woman decided to rip some of the wallpaper from the wall." Instead, all we hear is the woman's own voice, *her* telling us that she has decided to rip some of the wallpaper from the wall. What is real and what is imagined or hallucinated in her mind mixes together with no outside perspective offered to us as readers. No "third person narrator" intervenes, i.e., there is no voice that reports on the woman, saying things like "And then John's wife took out her notebook and started writing," or "John's wife started to see things, horrible but fascinating things, in the wallpaper." Instead, what we hear and read is only the narrator's own impressions, experiences, thoughts and words. In the next couple of lectures, I will say more about how fiction writers manipulate the narrative voice of their texts to achieve certain effects. Gilman has created a narrative voice that can feel a bit oppressive or claustrophobic. That voice is unashamedly impressionistic and subjective, with no interest in or attempt to see things from any other point of view than that of the narrator. Several early readers remarked on this feature of the story, and even warned readers that Gilman's narrative voice put readers is very close quarters with a "miserable" and "mad" narrator . . . too close, they said. What's interesting too is that as intimate with the narrator's fantasies, hallucinations, dreams, fears and thoughts as we are compelled to be, she nevertheless comes across as a bit two-dimensional. We never know the narrator's name and that helps contribute to that sense of her as undeveloped. We get almost nothing in the way of a backstory; we know next to nothing about her by the time the story comes to its strange ending. Because she hardly interacts with anyone else (her most vivid encounters are with the woman or women in the wallpaper), the narrator feels oddly flat, less of a "real" person and thus someone with psychological depths of the sort, for example, that we will see in James Joyce's short fictions, written not long after Gilman's story. Why would Gilman have deliberately left her narrator this way? Gilman creates a speaker who is *flattened* out by a culture that is fearful of three-dimensional women and prefers its women to be charming but depthless creatures. She is a ghost: and indeed, in the first diary entry she describes herself in terms of "my ghostliness." The diary in which she commits the story of herself is nothing but "dead paper," as she says; it is the mirror in which she sees herself. Our narrator feels depthless and has been rendered depthless by an oppressive culture. She longs for company and to be out there in the world but has been denied this opportunity. The flatness of her character helps us grasp what that feels like.

Let's consider some of the story's details. The narrator and her husband are renting a house for the summer while their actual home undergoes rebuilding. Right away, that home feels strange and estranging because the narrator can't quite land on how to describe it. Within the opening sentences of the story the house is "a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate," "a haunted house." Note how each of these terms describes the narrator's own condition: living in a place that is not her own and that she cannot claim for herself, living in a place that is haunted by ghosts and by history. What does that

mean? In some sense, *she* is the one who haunts this home, a troubled spectre, an ethereal creature, hardly there . . . and as a kind of ghost of herself she is in a position to communicate with another spectre, namely the woman or women that she more and more starts to see incarcerated behind or within the wallpaper of her bedroom, the apparition she ends up joining at the end of the story.

Almost every part of the narrator's life is watched over. She is effectively jailed in her own home, and that sense of imprisonment is reinforced by some of the details of the room where she rests most of the day and night: a room with bars on the windows, a gate at the head of the stairs, an enormous bed that is nailed to the floor. Gilman's narrator is sentenced to isolation and silence and immobility but she nevertheless struggles to write: *I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little, it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me . . . It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work* (45). The irony of this entry is that she *is* writing *a little* in the form of her diary entries.

Listening carefully to the *voice* of the narrator, we notice something very curious. On the one hand, her fantasies and hallucinations about the wallpaper and about the woman or women she discerns in it or behind its patterns grow more and more intense. The wallpaper's patterns come to life—a strange, roiling, complicated life—at the same time that she sees another creature coming into being there. The last picture we have of her is vividly realized: she is crawling around and around the room, one shoulder to the wall (to maintain a visceral contact or communication with it, but through her own body, and thus to be joined with the wall that now literally and metaphorically "guides" her), and with each revolution she must crawl over the inert body of her unconscious husband. She has in effect become the woman in the wallpaper who she had seen crawling about as well. But listen to how she describes what has happened: *Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!* (56). The narrator adopts the voice of a kind of mock incredulity or disbelief. She of course knows exactly why he fainted and perhaps even intended for her husband to be silenced or arrested in this way, if only for a little while. So the psychosis into which the narrator slips as the story unfolds, culminating with this final scene, doesn't mean that she is simply in a state of mental and emotional chaos. Far from it. There something slyly knowing about her state of mind, even a bit playful, as if to say, "I can't for the life of me understand why my husband, otherwise always so in control of himself, is so upset with me" while also winking at us . . . or rather, strictly speaking, winking at herself, since she is confiding these words not to us but to her private diary. In other words, at what is arguably the maddest moment of her life as she records it in the diary, she is also strangely in control of the scene, capable of irony and even a bit of detachment about herself, just enough to be able to stand back from herself and find a macabrely pleasurable humour in what is taking place. Gilman leaves things nicely open-ended here, inviting us to consider these details closely and carefully. On the one hand, we have a narrator who is acting bizarrely and yet shows substantial signs of being in control, the sign of which is her wittily ironic diary entry about her husband having fainted. On the other hand, we have a narrator that now looks and sounds like some of the most imbalanced characters in horror fiction, i.e., the narrator who *sounds* completely "sane" or "rational" but is acting in ways that suggest exactly the opposite. What are some examples? Consider, for example, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, the lead character in the movie *The Silence of the Lambs*. He sounds perfectly reasonable but

what he does is criminally insane. Gilman would have encountered such characters in the strange and supernatural or "Gothic" fictions of fellow American writers like Edgar Allen Poe who thrilled 19th-century audiences with tales of spooky stories involving tortured psyches. There is an important way in which "The Yellow Wallpaper" is part of that tradition of gothic fiction that emphasizes uncanny events, spectres, derangement, and haunted houses. Among the many contexts informing this text, then, is gothic fiction. Gilman's story soaks up some of the key elements of that already existing and very popular literary tradition and reworks it for a feminist context. How so? Note how Gilman's narrator herself likes to think of herself as if she were a character in a gothic story by Poe. When she briefly considers how the rental home is in some unspecified "legal trouble," she quickly corrects herself, preferring to think of the strangeness of the home—there is "something queer about it," she says early on—in ways that won't "spoil my ghostliness," as she says, i.e., that won't detract from revelling in the gothic possibilities of this home. To think of the home as subject to litigation is too quickly to bring the home down to earth, away from the "romanticized" version of the story of the home that better suits the narrator's imagination. So perhaps it isn't surprising that John plays the role of a stock character we still see even today in gothic stories, namely the one reasonable guy who can't or won't "believe." He scoffs at what cannot be "felt and seen," the narrator tells us (78). Gothic horror stories almost always include this kind of character. They are often the first one to get maimed or killed off. (Although not always. For those of you old enough to recall *The X Files*, Agent Scully was always the rational character—she's a physician, if I recall--who most resisted going down the strange rabbit-hole of Agent Mulder's supernatural interests and beliefs.)

Note that at the end the narrator refers to her husband as *that man*, not as *John*. The unnamed narrator now mockingly refers to her husband as if he doesn't have a name; now he's just *that man*. His very name disappears at the end of the diary, in which John is simply referred to as *he* or *you* or *him*. Contrast that with how many times John's name appears in the opening of the short story. In the first few paragraphs we hear about how *John says, John laughs, John is*, etc.. But in the last diary entry the speaker, even in her hallucinatory state, and perhaps because of her hallucinatory state, can pull away from her husband that she no longer needs to say his name. At the same time, the narrator increasingly uses the pronoun "I," signally her ability, step-by-step to affirm herself . . . the paradox being that this is happening at the same time as she unravels. The fact is that the more she asserts herself, the more her actions and thoughts condemn her to a kind of madness.

As the story unfolds the narrator gradually increases her use the pronoun "I." Consider, for example, the jump between the 3rd and 4th diary entry:

I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!

This brief passage captures the impossibly contorted mental state of the narrator. Here we see that the narrator moves between worlds, perhaps a bit like the amphibian creature that Rich's speaker imagines herself to be. She moves back and forth between quite contradictory understandings of herself: I don't want to write . . . yet I must write; I don't know why I write . . . yet I do know why I write; I'm not able to write . . . yet I am writing. Although it won't be for several diary entries that the narrator slips into a more legibly psychotic state, already we can sense the kind of incoherent world in which she lives. In a sense, she is already mad, or rather, maddened by a culture that demands these completely contradictory things of her. The cluster of repeated "I's" in the passage must compete with all those "don't's," so that her own language is split. This is the point in the short story in which the narrator says clearly that the writing is what keeps her going, even though John disapproves. But it is also the point in the story in which the narrator takes the first substantive steps towards her concluding delusional state.

In the end, as you know, the narrator throws the key to the bedroom in which she has locked herself out the window "under a plantain leaf." Note how she has to tell her husband several times where the key lies, as if her were unable or unwilling to comprehend his wife as having a kind of power of her own, of having a say in when or how "her" room will be entered. When he finally gains access to the room he sees his wife in a shocking new way. She is now no longer the sexless and fragile thing he had kept so carefully up there in the "attic" (it's not really an attic, of course, but the room at the top of the home occupies the place that the attic often does in gothic fictions, i.e. the out of the way place in the home where you hid your bizarre secrets), but is now quite the opposite, more like an animal, now fully embodied. And he faints dead away, as if the narrator has managed to cast a spell over him, rendering his power impotent. The fact that he faints is significant because in 19th-century women's medicine, fainting was associated with psychological disturbances that had no physical cause. Those faints were called *hysterical faints*. For a moment John succumbs to a symptom that had conventionally been associated with women. And yet . . . even as inert and powerless as he is, sprawled on the floor of the nursery, he is still a force to be reckoned with. After all, the narrator is forced to *creep over him* as she makes her circuits around the perimeter of the room, a bit like those caged animals you see in zoos pacing endlessly around their cells. Is fainting John's way of saying, with his body, "I don't need to see you or hear you, in fact, I refuse, with all my being, to see or hear you"? Or is his fainting the result of encountering something new, powerfully, and terrifying in his wife?

What are we to make of that concluding state? Gilman deliberately leaves the question open-ended. On the one hand, the ending marks a kind of escape, a liberation from the confines of the life the narrator has been living? "I've got out at last," she says; "you can't pull me back." On the other hand, the narrator has gone nowhere. She remains in her room, now mostly lost in her own hallucinations.