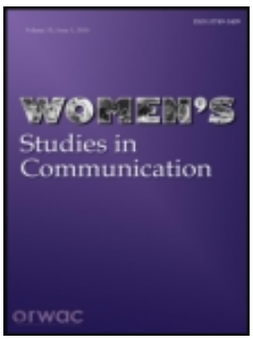

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper": Rhetorical Subversion in Feminist Literature

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"When a doe wishes to run far and fast, she is not making a buck of herself—it is because she is a deer, just as much of a deer as he is" (Gilman, cited in Boxer, 1982, pp. 141-142). These words, written by turn-of-the-century feminist, historian, and social analyst Charlotte Perkins Gilman, express a sentiment that continues to resound in contemporary feminist thought: namely, that women may establish their humanity without sacrificing their identity as women. During her lifetime, Gilman was a key voice of the feminist movement; in both her fiction and sociological writings, she radically confronted androcentric attitudes that constrained women and were perpetuated to the detriment of both sexes.

Her works include a number of significant sociological treatises examining the role of women in her time (including *Man-Made World: Our Androcentric Culture, Women and Economics,* and *The Home and Its Influence*) as well as hundreds of essays and short stories. She is, however, best known for her haunting short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," a work that has been heralded as a masterpiece of feminist literature, and which continues to stand as a staple of courses in both feminist literature and women's studies (Hedges, 1973).

Whereas previous critical readings of "The Yellow Wallpaper" have focused upon its feminist underpinnings and literary qualities (e.g., Fetterley, 1986; Hill, 1980; MacPike, 1975; Schopp-Schilling, 1975; Treichler, 1984), the present study seeks to examine the *rhetorical* functions of this remarkable short story. Given the traditional distinctions between rhetoric and poetic, the selection of a rhetorical perspective for an analysis of a literary work may appear incongruous. However, we would argue that such a perspective is justified in two ways. First, the very phrase "feminist literature" implies a rhetorical purpose: the presentation of a particular ideological view of society and human relations as salient, and indeed, preferable. Thus, by its very nature, feminist literature invites and merits rhetorical analysis. Second, a rhetorical approach is consistent with the movement away from foundationalism and toward interdisciplinary studies in feminist criticism. As Carolyn Allen (1987) argues, if feminist criticism is to advance its concerns successfully, it must address the full range of signifying practices and symbolic forms that are manifest in feminist discourse. This study is one attempt to examine a function of signification, rhetoric, and a symbolic form, literature, that, in conjunction, have been largely neglected in contemporary feminist criticism.

Our general thesis is that "The Yellow Wallpaper" functions to subvert a dominant patriarchal ideology through the development and presentation of what Kenneth Burke (1941) has termed "associational clusters": implicit equations between terms within discourse that reveal and, indeed, recommend an author's attitudes to his or her audience. Accordingly, in this essay we will: (a) provide a brief summary of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and describe its rhetorical functions; (b) present an overview of Burke's conception of associational clusters and its application in rhetorical criticism; (c) report the findings of our cluster analysis of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and discuss the ways in which these clusters function rhetorically; and (d) present our conclusions concerning the rhetorical effectiveness and limitations of associational clusters in feminist discourse.

"The Yellow Wallpaper"

"The Yellow Wallpaper" was first published in *The New England Magazine* in 1892. The work bears a remarkable resemblance to

biographical details of Gilman's own life, but is presented as a work of fiction. The story's narrator is a woman writer who has retreated to a colonial mansion for the summer with her husband, a physician, in order to remedy a "nervous condition." Her husband prescribes phosphates and bedrest and forbids her to continue with her writing until she recovers. The story centers around the narrator's response to the wallpaper in her bedroom, which she detests. Eventually, she resolves her hatred of the wallpaper, but only at the expense of her sanity and her humanity. At the end, she "creeps" around the room, compulsively peeling the wallpaper off the wall, convinced that she herself is a figure in the wallpaper's disturbing pattern.

The rhetorical function of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is to subvert the dominant patriarchal ideology: to undermine the salience, appeal, and/or coherence of that ideology in the minds of the reader. Indeed, one of the most notable characteristics of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is that it is so thoroughly subversive, with no corresponding affirmation of an alternative ideology to replace the dominant patriarchy. As Judith Fetterley (1986) observes, the story exposes how men may drive women to insanity through control and calls for women to escape this fate, but the *narrator's* "escape"—into madness—clearly is no solution, as it denies the narrator both an identity and a place within humanity.

Previous feminist criticisms of "The Yellow Wallpaper" have focused primarily upon the ideological functions of the story: that is, the ways in which the story reveals hegemonic structures perceived by Gilman. For example, Paula Treichler (1984) maintains that the prohibition against writing that is imposed upon the narrator by her husband reveals the conflict between a patriarchal ideology and women's expression through discourse. Similarly, Fetterley (1986) writes that "The Yellow Wallpaper" is, in fact, "an analysis of why who gets to tell the story and what story one is required, allowed, or encouraged to tell matter so much, and therefore, why in a sexist culture the practice of reading" is controlled by men (p. 159).

The present analysis, however, focuses not upon the relationship between Gilman's story and society, but rather upon the relationship between the story and the attitudes it may induce in the reader. It is this

emphasis upon inducement that characterizes such an analysis as rhetorical, even though the object of analysis is literary.

It is important to note that our claim that "The Yellow Wallpaper" functions as a rhetorical act of subversion does not *require* an explicit or intentional rhetorical purpose to Gilman's story. Indeed, it is always problematic to attribute such an intention to literary authors. On the one hand, literary authors rarely seem to have as their *primary* concern the immediate practical rhetorical effects of their discourse (Burke, 1966, pp. 296, 303-305). On the other hand, to attribute an explicitly rhetorical purpose is often taken as a denigration of the literature as "mere" rhetoric.

In light of Gilman's later works, however, she was undoubtedly concerned with the feminist attitudes her story might induce in her audience—an audience that was plainly "women," specifically the women who were avid readers of short fiction during the period in which "The Yellow Wallpaper" appeared. Further, given the constraints upon women writing in nonfictive genres at the time, it seems likely that writing in a literary form was itself a rhetorical strategy for Gilman, a way of reaching her audience and advancing her ideology in an effective and appropriate manner, for in the early twentieth century, one of the *only* forums available to women was short fiction for women readers.

As Burke has argued in both *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), the rhetorical function of inducement lurks in modes of expression that are both explicitly and implicitly suasory, affecting attitudes that are both manifest and latent in the minds of the author and reader. The problem of establishing an explicit and intentional rhetorical purpose need not be resolved in order to warrant the rhetorical analysis of literary texts, and, as our analysis reveals, "The Yellow Wallpaper" does indeed imply a viable rhetorical function: it serves to create a feeling of "dis-ease" within readers, leading them to question the acceptability of a dominant social order in which women's roles are circumscribed and submissive.

Kenneth Burke's Associational Clusters

Due largely to the efforts of rhetorical theorists such as Wayne Booth (1961) and Kenneth Burke (1941), the proposition that poetic

works may function rhetorically is generally accepted. As a result, a number of methods for analyzing the rhetorical functions of literature, drama, and even poetry have emerged over the last several decades. One of these is Burke's technique of analyzing associational clusters, an approach that is particularly well-suited to an analysis of "The Yellow Wallpaper." Burke explicates this concept most clearly in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941):

> The work of every writer contains a set of implicit equations [or] 'associational clusters.' And you may, in examining [a] work, find 'what goes with what' in these clusters—what kinds of images and personalities and situations go with [the author's] notions of heroism, villainy, isolation and despair, etc. And though [the author may] be perfectly conscious of the act of writing, conscious of selecting a certain kind of imagery to reinforce a certain kind of mood, [he or she] cannot possibly be conscious of the interrelationships among all these equations. (p. 20)

Burke (1941) goes on to provide a relatively simple example of this type of analysis: "If you kept a list of subjects, noting what was said [every time someone with a tic blinked] you would find out what the tic was symbolic of" (p. 20).

Although Burke focuses upon the usefulness of this method in understanding an author's attitudes and motives in creating a particular work, it is clear that such clusters also function to encourage similar attitudes and motives in the reader. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) note that, syntactically, "closeness is the strength of effect" (p. 128). In other words, the strength of the effect one term has upon another in an utterance depends, in part, upon how close the terms are structurally. Thus, terms that cluster together in discourse will have a stronger effect on one another than terms that appear in separation. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) maintain, the "strength of effect" gives rise to metaphorical meaning by implicitly encouraging the reader to view one term in relation to other terms that appear near it. Whenever we have metaphorical meaning, we have *rhetoric*, for metaphors urge us to view an object, idea, or sentiment from one particular perspective rather than another (Burke, 1945).

In her discussion of Burke's concept of association, Christine Oravec (1989) draws a similar conclusion: "to effect the transfer of motives from the substructural to the superstructural level, a transfer of motives occurs in language" (p. 188). The substructural association of terms within a text "articulates, or 'bodies forth,' a strategy which encompasses its author's motivations" (Oravec, 1989, p. 188), thereby recommending the author's motivations to the reader on a superstructural level, the level of attitudes and ideas in the minds of the audience. As Oravec (1989) observes, an analysis of associational clusters in discourse may therefore reveal "the power of the text in constructing [the author's] identity, and possibly that of his [or her] audience" (p. 188).

The application of this method to "The Yellow Wallpaper" has two major advantages. First, whereas other methods for uncovering the rhetorical functions of poetic works emphasize characterization and plot (e.g., Booth, 1961; Fisher, 1987), these elements are less prominent in an analysis of a work's associational clusters. As even a cursory reading reveals, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is much more a work of images and perceptions than characters and actions. Second, as both Burke and Oravec observe, an analysis of associational clusters is demonstrable through citation: the critic can identify the clusters in the language of the discourse itself (Burke, 1941; Oravec, 1989).

Our analysis of associational clusters in "The Yellow Wallpaper" focuses upon the narrator's descriptions of the wallpaper that dominate the story. Although other elements in the story are relevant to Gilman's feminist perspective (e.g., the narrator's relationship with her husband, the "prescription" she is given for her ailment, etc.), the wallpaper itself is clearly the central focus of the narrative, and further, has been the main object of literary and feminist criticisms of the story to date. These previous readings have suggested that the wallpaper is a symbol representing the narrator's mind, the narrator's unconscious, the hegemonic structures that disenfranchise women, or women's discourse, among others (see Treichler, 1984, for overview). Our purpose is not to argue that the wallpaper represents a particular object or phenomenon, but rather to reveal the variety of terms and meanings that cluster around the narrator's description of the wallpaper in order to explicate the rhetorical effect such clusters may have on the reader.

Associational Clusters In "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Clusters in "The Yellow Wallpaper" were derived through a method almost identical to that suggested by Burke's example of the person with a "symbolic" tic—every time the narrator mentioned the wallpaper in the story, a list of associated descriptions was recorded and later categorized.[1] Our analysis reveals four associational clusters manifest in the narrator's descriptions of the wallpaper. These clusters are organized around three different characteristics of the wallpaper: the wallpaper's color, the overall pattern or design of the wallpaper, and a figure the narrator perceives within this larger pattern.

The color of the wallpaper is associated with nausea and disgust. The narrator describes it as "repellent, almost revolting," an "unclean yellow"—"dull, yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others" (p. 13). She characterizes the color as "hideous" (p. 25), writing that the color reminds her of "all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things" (p. 28). At one point, the narrator describes an unsettling odor that lingers in the house. As she attempts to identify the smell, she exclaims, "The only thing I can think of is that it is like the *color* of the paper! A yellow smell" (p. 29).

The overall pattern of the wallpaper is associated with two related but distinct sets of meanings. First, the pattern is associated with disorder and chaos. Indeed, the narrator's first description of the pattern is that it is "sprawling, ...committing every artistic sin" (p. 13). She observes "lame, uncertain curves" that "destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions" (p. 13). Later, she notes that the pattern is "pointless" and arranged against any "principle of design" (pp. 19-20). Each breadth of the paper "stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes... waddling up and down in isloated columns of fatuity" (p. 20). In fact, the pattern is so chaotic that the narrator becomes exhausted in "trying to distinguish [its] order" (p. 20).

The second set of meanings associated with the pattern of the wallpaper relate to death and horror. The narrator writes, "There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down" (p. 16). These eyes, she continues, are

"unblinking," and "everywhere," crawling "up and down and sideways" (p. 16). At another point in the story, she describes the pattern as "a bad dream," resembling "an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions" (p. 25). These images persist throughout the story, for as she is tearing the paper off the walls, she imagines that "all those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!" (p. 34).

The final cluster is organized around a shape or figure that the narrator perceives within the overall pattern of the wallpaper. While scrutinizing this pattern, the narrator detects "dim shapes ...like a woman stooping down and creeping about" (p. 22). As the story progresses, the shapes become less dim and she becomes certain that this figure is, in fact, a woman, "plain as can be" (p. 26). Eventually, the narrator identifies so closely with this figure that she becomes convinced that she is herself a figure in the wallpaper.

This figure in the wallpaper is associated with images of both constraint and resistance. The narrator writes that "by day, she is subdued, quiet," and further, speculates that it is the pattern of the wallpaper that "keeps her so still" (p. 26). As night falls, however, the figure begins to "shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" (p. 23). The image of the figure shaking the pattern is repeated twice more in the story. While watching the wallpaper one night, the narrator detects a movement in the wallpaper and is surprised to discover that "the front pattern *does* move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!" (p. 30). A few nights later, the figure once again begins to "crawl and shake the pattern" (p. 32). That this shaking represents an act of resistance is evidenced by the fact that at night the pattern of the wallpaper "becomes bars" with the womanlike figure held within (p. 26).

These four clusters constitute the core of the narrator's descriptions of the wallpaper, and further, provide an explanation of the rhetorical functions of Gilman's short story. As noted above, associational clusters function rhetorically by suggesting particular metaphorical views of objects, ideas, or sentiments—views that entail corresponding attitudes towards the central terms or meanings in the clusters.

Note that the various characteristics of the wallpaper that form the organization of the clusters are arranged hierarchically: its color, its overall pattern, and the figure inside the pattern. The color of the wallpaper is the most immediate and most general characteristic, while the figure in the pattern is the least immediate and most interior characteristic. Thus, these characteristics establish a chain of contexts: the color is the context for the pattern, and the pattern is the context for the figure. In describing the various clusters, we began with the most general characteristic, the color of the wallpaper, and follow the order in which the clusters are revealed in the story itself. In describing the metaphors established by these clusters, however, we will move in the opposite direction, beginning with the womanlike figure within the pattern. This is consistent with both the general feminist concerns of Gilman's story and with the nature of the metaphors themselves, fundamentally organized around the role of women in a patriarchal society.

The associational clusters manifest in "The Yellow Wallpaper" suggest a series of three interrelated metaphors which are consistent with Gilman's ideological concerns. Each of these metaphors reveals how Gilman views the situation of women in society, and further invites and encourages the reader to share in this view, thereby giving rise to a rhetorical effect. The first metaphor is established through Gilman's repeated associations of the feminine figure in the wallpaper with images of constraint and resistance. These associations suggest to the reader a view of women as subjects of oppression.

The clusters surrounding the pattern of the wallpaper characterize Gilman's view of the cause and "context" of women's oppression, for, in the story, it is the pattern of the wallpaper that subdues the figure during the day and which the figure resists at night. The pattern is associated with images of both disorder and horror, which implies a metaphorical view of the "oppressor" of women as a *monster*: an unnatural and destructive force.

The association of the color of the wallpaper with nausea provides a more general contextual metaphor for the oppression of women, inviting the reader to see such oppression as a sickness. This metaphor is more general, extending to both the oppression of women (as

represented by the figure within the pattern) and the cause of this oppression (as represented by the pattern itself). Perhaps it is significant that this metaphor is the result of a cluster of terms organized around the *color* of the wallpaper: The term color itself means, in one of its senses, to characterize generally, as in "to color a situation." Certainly, color is a suitable metaphor for ideological oppression in that color is both pervasive and yet, in and of itself, intangible. One cannot, for example, point to "yellow" as a particular object or entity; one can only point to a yellow *something*. Like ideological oppression, color is always "hiding" in something else, be it the wallpaper in Gilman's story or the social, political, and economic structures that characterize a patriarchal society.

These metaphors, and the corresponding attitudes they suggest, can be summarized in the following manner: Women are oppressed by a monster; the whole situation is a sickness. The nature of these metaphors reveals the essential rhetorical character of Gilman's story as an act of subversion. Each of these metaphors seeks not to advance or affirm an image, but rather, to disturb an image, to undermine its salience or appeal in the mind of the reader.

Conclusions

In the previous sections of this essay, we have sought to describe and explain the rhetorical function of "The Yellow Wallpaper." In this closing section, we will evaluate this rhetorical function and, in so doing, discuss some general implications concerning the rhetorical effectiveness and limitations of feminist literature.

Typically, rhetorical artifacts are evaluated against standards of aesthetics, ethics, truth, and/or results. In assessing "The Yellow Wallpaper," we have adopted the results criterion. This criterion is consistent with the ideological agenda associated with feminist literature: by its very nature it is driven by ideological concerns and, accordingly, the rhetorical success or failure of such literature may appropriately be assessed by its effect upon the attitudes and ideologies of its readers. Of course, assessing the rhetorical effectiveness of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is somewhat problematic in that the story is not addressed to any concrete, practical exigence, but rather to an exigence

that is enduring and pervasive. Nonetheless, it is possible to offer some general conclusions concerning its rhetorical power and limitations in relation to effecting attitude change.

The rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of "The Yellow Wallpaper" both derive from the subliminal nature of associational clusters. Subliminal modes of persuasion, such as the associational clusters manifest in Gilman's story, may have an effect that more explicit modes do not precisely *because* they address the reader's unconscious. Burke (1966) himself notes the subliminal power of associational clusters in his essay, "Mind, Body, and the Unconscious":

> A rhetorician . . . may deliberately identify certain acts with courage, cowardice, negligence and so on. Or such equations may be but implicit in a work (as when the poet, or the neurotic, spontaneously attitudinizes towards persons and things, thereby in effect pronouncing them admirable, despicable, consoling, fearsome, and the like). And however unconscious such equations may happen to be, the critic or the analyst can make all such associations as explicit as though they had been deliberately intended. The more 'unconscious' such equations are (in the minds of an audience), the greater their effectiveness is likely to be as 'stimuli' that provoke 'responses.' (p. 74; see also, Oravec, 1989, p. 188)

Of course, the "response" elicited by the associational clusters (or equations) in "The Yellow Wallpaper" may not be sympathetic to the feminist ideology that informs Gilman's story. A reader may respond negatively to associational clusters, just as he or she might respond negatively to the explicit associations advanced in argumentative forms of discourse. At least for those potentially persuadable, however, the subliminal effects of associational clusters may be significant.

Another way of viewing the rhetorical power of associational clusters is suggested by Michael McGee in his essay "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture" (1990). McGee (1990) argues that contemporary discourse is best conceived in terms of fragments that imply a larger "text" than the discourse itself:

> Critical rhetoric does not *begin* with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the

> apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent. The apparently finished discourse is . . . fashioned from what we call 'fragments' [and as such, the discourse] is only a featured part of an arrangement that includes all facts, events, texts, and stylized expressions deemed useful in explaining its influence and exposing its meaning. (p. 279)

For McGee (1990), the only way to address an issue in contemporary culture is to "provide readers/audiences with dense, truncated fragments which cue *them* to produce a finished discourse in their minds. In short *text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse*" (p. 288).

From this perspective, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a fragment that invites readers to "complete" the text by drawing associations between elements of the discourse (such as those highlighted in the present analysis) and other facts, events, and situations. The rhetorical effect of the associational clusters in "The Yellow Wallpaper" derives from the reader's construction of a "text" from not only the clusters in the story, but also from other sources, including the lives of the readers themselves. This construction, of course, need not be deliberate or conscious, and in the mind of a naive reader the construction is more likely to occur as a series of implicit "snap judgments" made about the story's salience and meaning (McGee, 1990). From this view, whether "The Yellow Wallpaper" induces feminist attitudes depends upon the types of constructions made by readers, which in turn depend upon other discourse and experiences that the readers are familiar with. Thus, it is not surprising that the story should be most effective for audiences of women and perhaps others who are sensitive to women's concerns.

The subliminal nature of associational clusters also reveals certain limitations of "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a rhetorical artifact. As an implicit mode of persuasion, associational clusters are typically ambiguous. As Burke (1941) notes, associational clusters lead to "hunches" rather than neatly circumscribed definitions or statements. Although "The Yellow Wallpaper" may induce a disturbing feeling or attitude, especially for a naive reader precisely *what* should be found disturbing about the narrator's situation may remain ambiguous. The reading we have advanced is in part grounded in an understanding of Gilman's

work as a feminist, and therefore, we conclude that Gilman intends to disturb or subvert the prevailing patriarchal ideology. However, a naive reader might attribute the disturbing attitude aroused by the associational clusters to either: (a) the woman's alleged insanity; (b) her own doubts and inhibitions; or (c) the dominance of her husband.

Although the first of these alternative interpretations has no feminist implications, the other two interpretations are at least compatable with a feminist view of society, in that they reflect more specific problems that are often associated with an oppressive patriarchy. Of four possible interpretations, three may advance, at least to some extent, a feminist perspective in the mind of the reader. There is no guarantee that a given reader will be induced toward one interpretation rather than another, but in those cases where readers *are* induced towards a feminist perspective an analysis of the associational clusters implicit in the text provides a basis for understanding the story's rhetorical effect.

In addition to the limitations associated with the ambiguity of associational clusters, there are also limitations of exposure and reader ideology. Exposure to "The Yellow Wallpaper" is largely a matter of choice, and it is perhaps unlikely that the audiences most resistent to feminist discourse (e.g., those adherent to a sexist ideology) would read a short story written by a woman author, especially if she were known to be a feminist activist. Further, such audiences, by virtue of their sexist ideology, may be most likely to "read" the cause of the woman's oppression as her own madness, an interpretation that is likely to preclude the inducement of a feminist perspective or attitude.

Each of these limitations suggests the same general conclusion concerning the rhetorical effectiveness of associational clusters in feminist literature: such clusters may be persuasive only to those already persuaded or potentially persuadable. Although this may seem a harsh evaluation of an entire genre of rhetorical discourse, it is important to note that in the arena of public discourse ideological battles are rarely if ever won by converting the opposition; rather, success comes by sustaining the converted and converting the uncommitted or the ambivalent. Those who are already persuaded or potentially persuadable are perhaps the most suitable audiences, from a purely rhetorical perspective, for feminist literature.

As with any particular rhetorical strategy, the use of associational clusters cannot ensure adherence or conversion to a particular ideological perspective. As our analysis has sought to demonstrate, however, associational clusters in feminist literature may be a liberating resource for advancing feminist concerns: they invite identification with women's experiences of oppression at the level of attitude and feeling, and they may, by virtue of their implicit nature, circumvent attitudinal resistance in readers who are ambivalent or uncommited toward a feminist ideology. To the extent that the audience for feminist literature most likely is women, such clusters may be a highly effective strategy, for the reasons suggested by Burke (1941) and McGee (1990). Clearly, from a rhetorical perspective, feminist literature deserves a respected place among the various forms of feminist discourse, as well as further critical attention. It is hoped that the present analysis will serve to reaffirm this claim and to persuade other critics of feminist literature to consider carefully not only the ideological functions of such discourse, but also its *rhetorical* function—a function that is absolutely necessary in the real-world struggle against sexism.

Notes

1. The edition of "The Yellow Wallpaper" used in this analysis is published by the Feminist Press (Old Westbury, NY: 1973). All page citations are from this edition.

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