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**A NEW WOMAN'S JOURNEY INTO INSANITY:
DESCENT AND RETURN IN
*THE YELLOW WALLPAPER***

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Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a discerning Eye—
Much Sense—the starkest Madness—
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail—
Assent—and you are sane—
Demur —you're straightway dangerous—
And handled with a Chain—
Emily Dickinson

In the nineteenth century, women, as agents of moral influence, were expected to maintain the domestic sphere as a cheerful, pure haven for their husbands to return to each evening. Both the North and the South, different as they were, agreed on one issue—the cult of true womanhood and domesticity. The new emerging middle-class women of the rising entrepreneurs of the North together with the Southern lady supported firmly the cult of true womanhood with its four attributes “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (152).¹ Put together they “spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman” (Welter 152). Only those women who adhered to such qualities were believed to be happy, contented and powerful in their home: “Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement of wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power” (Welter 152).

The cult of true womanhood was basically a compound of four ideas: a sharp dichotomy between the home and the economic world outside that paralleled a sharp contrast between female and male nature; the designation of the home as the female's only

proper sphere; the moral superiority of women; and the idealization of her function as a mother and a wife. At the core of this cult was a rigid conceptual distinction between the home and the economy and a determination to preserve that separation as desirable. It was believed that while the world outside the home, with its highly competitive character, brutal environment and fluctuating fortunes, was a man's sphere, the home, the moral sanctuary of society, was the temple of woman and her only proper sphere. Books and articles written by women and men asked women to be religious, domestic, and womanly and instructed them to glorify their domestic role and to seek fulfillment within their sphere.²

However, despite the spread and popularity of the cult of true womanhood and domesticity, and in the tradition of protest and reform that was a basic dimension of American culture in the second half of the nineteenth century, a significant number of American women not only refused to be diminished by the constraints of domesticity, propriety, and feminine virtue that paralyzed so many Victorian women but they also expressed their grievances against sanctioned views of women and male authority and political power. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, one of the leading writers who lived in this tumultuous age of two contradictory ideologies, "True Womanhood" and "Women's Rights," made it clear that her essential task was to work for her own rights and the rights of all American women. Writer, philosopher, socialist, and feminist, Gilman stood for the potentialities of American womanhood and struggled to free herself from true to free woman. As a woman and as an author, she perceptively analyzed the most basic conditions under which women live out their lives and developed her seminal ideas: the crucial necessity for women to have careers outside the home; the ironclad oppression of patriarchal culture; the stultifying effects of the nineteenth century doctrine of the "woman's sphere"; the impossible "double-bind" experience of the woman artist, and the depression and emotional breakdown which often result. Her ideas clearly indicate that women should be *in* the world as well as *of* it. After all, Gilman repeatedly insists that there is one race, the human race. Also, her concerns are the hallmarks of contemporary women's literature. In other words, Gilman marks an early part of the tradition in which writers such as Marge Piercy, Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich, Erica Jong, Sylvia Plath, and countless others now stand.

Gilman was ahead of her own time. An innovator in her own right, she defied cultural stereotypes and patriarchal assumptions

and planted her feminist ideas in her own writings to enlarge the woman's sense of what was possible. In her autobiography, Gilman recalls, "The social philosophy I was teaching included my organic theory of social economics . . . the theory of the economic independence and specialization of women as essential to the improvement of marriage, motherhood, domestic industry, and racial improvements; with much on advance in child culture."³ In accordance with true womanhood, Gilman agreed that woman's gentle moral hand could uplift her family and home, yet she seems to have used logic as a means to propel women out of the home. If woman is morally perfect, she should not confine her influence to the home only, but rather share her abilities with her community in order to "clean" it. Gilman wanted women and men to "clean" their communities, but she added women's education and economic independence as prerequisites for the community housekeeping effort. From *Women and Economics* (1898) to *Herland* (1915), Gilman clearly believed that true womanhood was an ideal (if ever it really was) whose time had passed.

In addition to personal experience of economic independence, marital inequality, and household drudgery, Gilman learned through her avid reading that true womanhood was dysfunctional. In early 1887, she announced her decision to begin reading about women to educate herself. She began with Monod's *Life and Mission of Women* (1858), *Women in America* (1873), Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1855), *The History of Womankind in Western Europe* (1869), and Charlotte Yonge's *Womankind* (1877). Other authors who surely contributed to Gilman's emerging feminist perspective include Helen Gardener, Marietta Holley, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Olive Schreiner, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Beatrice Webb. It comes as no surprise, then, that Gilman was working in the company of women who believed in alternatives to true womanhood. Each of these women represents a piece of Gilman's anti-true woman philosophy. She came to believe that society as a whole could not move forward with an unequal, less evolved part (women): "When the mother of the race is free, we shall have a better world, by the right of birth and by the calm, slow, friendly forces of social evolution."⁴ Gilman urged the creation of a society in which women could develop their full human potential.

Gilman is one of the leading intellectuals of the feminist movement in the twentieth century. Throughout history, when women have chosen to write, they have been haunted or crippled by what Gilbert and Gubar call an "anxiety of authorship." In Gilman, however, we find a writer who dares to assert her right and

ability to address public issues, to intervene in public discourse, and to reinforce her cultural authority. Infusing her fiction with socialist and feminist ideologies was a way for Gilman to show how progress and democracy in society could be advanced if only people would act on the need for change. “I have nothing to offer the world but what I *think*,” she wrote her future second husband, George Houghton Gilman, in 1897. “I think that the thing I am here to do is a big thing—the truth. I see deep basic truths; and that I have been given unusual powers of expression.”⁵ Throughout her literary career, Gilman never compromised her quest for human truth and her search for the complexities within human experience.

As a woman, a humanist, and as a writer, Gilman manifests not only a fresh, new talent but also a decidedly female point of view in the handling of theme, characterization, and narration. In *The Man-Made World* (1911),⁶ and “Coming Changes in Literature” (1915),⁷ she called for a new kind of fiction about women that would transcend conventional literary paradigms. Her comments are highly significant for they claim new topical grounds for women authors in the realm of Art. In *The Man-Made World*, particularly, she calls for a literature that presents women with complexity and in a realistic variety of ways, rather than merely as innocent ingénues, angelic wives and mothers, or shameful fallen women. As she does in “Coming Changes in Literature,” she mentions the thematic treatment of the New Woman in Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, whose fiction treats the New Woman in a more varied and realistic exploration of the concerns of mid-nineteenth-century “woman’s fiction.” Admittedly, Gilman herself had begun, even before the turn of the century, to depict critically middle-class Victorian culture through her portraits of New Women. By showing women rebelling against the dominant feminine ideal in Victorian culture, the fiction of Gilman broke with a nineteenth-century literary tradition that essentially upheld domestic ideology and tended to present female characters as either pious angels or shameful objects of pity and scorn. Many of the characters in her works ignore the dictates of “respectable” Victorian values in working outside the home, refusing to marry, or leaving their husbands.

Indeed, Gilman devotes herself to writing the “new” literature of female experience that she called for in *The Man-Made World* and “Coming Changes in Literature.” She dramatizes her ideas and gives them imaginative vitality, in what Elaine Hedges has called “visionary Realism.”⁸ In an era that discouraged or was even hostile to female candor and self-expression, she is bold in her

authorial/narrative voice and in her delineation of female characters. As a fiction writer, she challenges received notions of gender in her era and calls into question assumptions about what is “feminine” and “masculine” that were often assumed to be biologically ordained.

Critical views about the new roles of women at the turn of the century were not unique to Gilman, however. A fellow writer and close friend of Gilman, Mary Austin, was active in several feminist causes. Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, and Elizabeth Phelps also displayed a variety of attitudes toward women’s public occupations and economic independence, the idea of marriage as a companionate union entered out of choice, the ending of the sexual double standard, and women’s opportunity to be artists. Their fiction treating the New Woman may be regarded as a more varied and realistic exploration of the concerns of woman’s fiction and may also be seen to anticipate the reaction against Victorian attitudes that was the inception of modernism. In a thematic sense, their fiction enriches the tradition of American realism and naturalism that has often been exemplified by such works as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Red Badge of Courage*. In contrast to the subjects and themes of masculine experiences, such as life in the Old West and warfare in books by Mark Twain and Stephen Crane, the work of American women writers, especially of Chopin, Wharton, and Gilman, focuses upon the lives of women within well-established social contexts.

Interestingly, Gilman’s fiction has the distinction of being written by an individual who herself lived as a woman in that time, providing more insight into the nature of that existence. Her work might be considered “female social realism,” distinct from the work of Henry James and William Howells in the same way that critics have distinguished the concerns and themes of local-color fiction by Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and other female regionalists as distinct from that of Bret Harte and Mark Twain. Raised in a century in which the dominant ideology, for better or worse, asserted eternal, essential differences between women and men, Gilman must have written from a different perspective than her male colleagues on the subject of female experience. Nearly all of her fiction contains female heroes who gain financial autonomy outside the home through entrepreneurship or traditionally masculine professions, marrying only if they find an appealing mate who will support their pursuits. Her protagonists in *What Diantha Did*, *Mag-Marjorie*, *The Crux*, and *Benigna Machiavelli* revolutionize their homes, reject the beliefs and social expectations of their

society, and radically challenge the Victorian cult of domesticity usually upheld in earlier woman's fiction.

Most obviously, Gilman replaces the "pure woman," the Victorian angel in the house, with the New Woman who rejects in the words of Olive Schreiner "the biological yoke of femininity" and claims the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of a human being.⁹ As Alys Pearsall Smith argues, the New Woman "demands to belong to herself. . . . She asks . . . for freedom to make out of her own life the highest that can be made, and to develop her own individuality as seems to her the wisest and the best."¹⁰ The New Woman's claim to the right of self-definition is articulated in Gilman's fiction. Her stories daringly treat the theme of the woman's growth in life and presents her *Bildung* in the form of a quest that incorporates an arduous journey to self-discovery and to self-expression. They unflinchingly depict women who gradually surface from their submerged existence and awaken to a new perception of reality, which embodies a desire for personal choice and self-determination. Released from bondage to myths about themselves, her new women characters grow and finally emerge to free themselves and to attain financial autonomy. They come to reject age-old assumptions and play roles other than those of financially dependent, housebound wives, mothers, or spinsters.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a particularly interesting and rich example of her audacious and defiant writing. Her enduring and endearing story blazed a trail in the wide terrain of turn-of-the-century literature and broke new ground in the treatment of female rebellion against Dr. Mitchell's rest-cure treatment of nervous prostration or "neurasthenia" that included a prohibition of prolonged intellectual stimulation or writing. In the story, Gilman chronicles the groping and growth of its narrator and protagonist and depicts her arduous struggle against the hegemony of male power and many of society's patriarchal values and self-denying myths that have been incorporated within women's consciousness. The unnamed narrator/protagonist¹¹ is endowed with possibilities beyond those of the conventional female hero. In spite of her oppression, she achieves a superior sanity and at least a relative liberty in the assertion of a self. In fact, she is the embodiment of the New Woman who is in the process of becoming, struggling to assert her individuality and to construct her own identity in a society where the prevailing intellectual and ideological issues of the age are inimical to the very existence of women. She is a new voice that verbalizes its own desire to deconstruct the prevailing order of patriarchal societies where men are dominant and women

subservient. Her developing awareness of her stifling plight and her capacity to raise questions and to explore answers are emphasized as unique to the creation and birth of a new, authentic self.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman presents the narrator's insanity as a form of rebellion against the medical practices and the political policies that have kept women out of the professions, denied them their political rights, and kept them under male control in the family and the state. Women's Rights advocates believed that neurosis—a diagnosis for many Victorian women—was a result of women's repressed anger and enforced passivity and inactivity. Women's mental diseases, hysterias, anxieties, and perpetual invalidism were psychological enactments of the insubstantial and insignificant roles they were allowed to play in a male-dominated Victorian society, a world that literally rendered them invalid. For instance, the very act of writing for women, who had no rights, no identity or existence, was basically “an assertion of individuality and autonomy and often an act of defiance.”¹² It was, in essence, an act of being, creating, and existence. It was probably an attempt on the part of these women to present their viewpoints in a society that deprived them of many of their rights.

Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* in 1890, three years after the personal experiences that inspired it.¹³ In an essay entitled “Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*,” she confesses how her social and political activism worked: “Many years later I was told that the great specialist [S. Weir Mitchell] had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*.”¹⁴ Julie Bates Dock, in her essay on textual authority, notes Mitchell's plans to broaden his rest cure to include the poor many years later after *The Yellow Wallpaper*'s original printing.¹⁵ Whether Gilman fabricated the effect on Mitchell's methods or not, this “confession” still expresses desire to make her readers re-evaluate old values and change their lives. She hoped her readers would reconsider the effects of women's economic independence and marital inequality. On fiction, Gilman felt that:

The makers of books are the makers of thoughts and feelings for people in general. Fiction is the most popular form in which this world-food is taken. If it were true, it would teach us life easily, swiftly, truly, teach not by preaching but by truly re-presenting; and we should grow up becoming acquainted with a far wider range of life in books that could even be ours in person. (*The Man-Made World* 21)

Several scholars in the past two decades have made new connections between the prevalence of female invalidism and its treatment in the nineteenth century and cultural expectations of the middle-class Victorian woman. This exploration began in the 1970s with the work of Gail Parker, Barbara Eichenrich, Deirdre English, and Ann Douglass Wood, and more recent critics have continued such inquiry.¹⁶ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg reveals the cultural phenomenon of female “hysteria” or neurasthenia in middle and upper-middle class urban Victorian women as a means of “passive aggression and protest” against their required role.¹⁷ Elizabeth Ammons, in her discussion of Gilman’s story, sees the cure that Mitchell devised as a “violent process of feminization,” the turning of a woman into a “helpless, docile, overgrown infant—that is, a feminine adult,” emphasizing the infantilized, passive role expected of women at that time.¹⁸ Ann J. Lane has also noted that the central irony of the rest cure is that its methods—enforced passivity, lack of physical exercise, lack of intellectual stimulation, and the prescription that a woman must return home and devote herself to husband and children—were essentially an exaggerated version of the expected role of women, the very set of expectations that caused many of them to become neurasthenic in the first place.¹⁹

Since the republication of *The Yellow Wallpaper* in 1973, it has captivated the attention of critics who have read Gilman’s text in widely contrasting ways, from feminist, psychoanalytic, new historicist, post-structural, and cultural studies perspectives.²⁰ The power of *The Yellow Wallpaper* emerges from its fascinating treatment of insanity through first-person narration, its development of the symbolic significance of the enigmatic wallpaper, and the tantalizing nature of its conclusion. The most radical aspect of the feminist reading of *The Yellow Wallpaper* lies in the interpretation of the narrator’s descent into madness as a way to health and well being, as a rejection of and escape from an insane society. Gilman’s main contribution to feminism is, in fact, her de-authorizing and de-privileging of the ideologically-saturated discourse of insanity. In her discussion of insanity, she confronts and critiques, either explicitly or implicitly, the patriarchal version of insanity and disempowers its authority. She condemns social systems, both political and private, which contribute to women’s psychological fragmentation, alienation, and madness.

How to prevail as an authentic self against role prescriptions and how to survive psychologically and assert individuality are major considerations in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The story itself traces the descent into insanity of a woman undergoing a rest cure. Her

husband, John, a physician, has taken the narrator, a new mother, to a rented country home for the summer in order for her to recover from nervous exhaustion. He isolates his wife in the upstairs nursery, a room with barred windows and hideous yellow wallpaper, rather than in the attractive bedroom downstairs that she prefers, and he forbids her to write, in accordance with the philosophy of the rest cure. However, the wife keeps a diary in secret, the ten entries of which form the text of the story. The early entries are long and contemplative, first mentioning the wallpaper merely as “committing every artistic sin.”²¹ The entries decrease in length as they become consumed with the woman’s discoveries about the wallpaper: its anthropomorphic patterns, its smell, and most importantly, the “woman” she begins to see trapped within it and with whom she begins to identify. The final entry describes how she and the “woman” peeled the wallpaper away and, now “freed,” she may creep about as she pleases on the floor. She lastly records that when her husband saw her, he fainted with shock, and she continued to crawl around the edge of the room, climbing over him each time.

The first way in which Gilman’s story appropriates conflicting ideals of womanhood and provides a cultural context in which to understand the narrator’s actions is through her relationship with her husband. This doctor “of high standing” (29) reflects the views of S. Weir Mitchell and of the medical establishment in general, concerning his neurasthenic wife. Following in the footsteps of Mitchell, he paradoxically tells her that there is really nothing wrong with her and forbids her to think of her condition at the same time as he strictly imposes on her an isolation that is devoid of the “society and stimulus” she desires (30). It is true that John offers tender love, but he enforces the inactivity which deepens her despair and desolation. I “am absolutely forbidden to ‘work’ until I am well again” (30). Here he comes, “I must put this away—he hates to have me write a word” (32). Rest is what her physician husband says is right so “he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal” (42). John becomes her jailer, policing every move and forbidding her to affirm her creative self. He denies her an autonomous existence as he tries to reshape her in accordance with all that being a wife/patient entails, including being submissive, childlike, and subservient. She becomes a victim of what Kate Millett calls “internal colonization.”²²

Indeed, the first sentence in the story that suggests a feminist reading is a comment on John’s character: “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (29). John fails to

understand the needs of his wife and even to consider the possibility that his wife's imagination could be a positive, healing force. His description as rational rather than emotional emphasizes his position as a true representative of the repressive patriarchal society, a "censorious and paternalistic physician," as Gilbert and Gubar call him.²³ His treatment of his wife's mental illness is isolation and the removal of all intellectual stimulation, "a cure worse than the disease," (89) as Gilbert and Gubar call it. The narrator's deprivation of the practice of writing, the opportunity for self-expression, is very significant. Annette Kolodny and Gilbert and Gubar (89) remind us that the narrator thinks of writing as therapeutically relieving.²⁴ The narrator wants very much to work, but by keeping her unemployed and secluded, her husband ensures his wife's reliance on him. She must remain the child he treats her as. Her husband, after all, calls her "blessed little goose" (34) and his "little girl" (40), and the room she stays in was once a nursery, outfitted with iron rings, as in a gymnasium, barred windows to prevent accidents, and a bed bolted to the floor.

The narrator is torn asunder between her own personal feelings, which are indeed healthy and positive, and the patriarchal society's view of what is proper and decent behaviour for women. Since she has internalized society's expectations of women, this conflict is felt as a schizoid within herself. The narrator writes, "So I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to 'work' until I am well again" (30), but she adds, "Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good" (30). This is one of the most significant statements in the entire story concerning the ideals of the New Woman, for here the protagonist asserts her need for a life outside of strictly domestic and familial cares. Here, she declares her need for something beyond the duties of being a dutiful wife or mother.

However, the narrator's unconventional views must be kept secret or they will be met with "heavy opposition," (30), as is her writing. Her repeated references to John's orders and prohibitions in the first section of the story highlight the patriarchal nature of their relationship, as when she comments, paradoxically, that "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (31). In their relationships both as husband and wife and as doctor and patient, John takes a patronizing, if well-intentioned, role; he treats the narrator as if she were a little girl who does not know what is best for her. His treatment of her, including his

administration of the rest cure, illustrates the paradoxical double bind of nineteenth-century behavioural expectations of women. Believed to be intellectually inferior, passive, and domestically inclined by nature, women are expected to live their lives according to such traits. If they showed discontentment in the role allotted to them, their behaviour might be categorized as “hysteria.” Furthermore, they were expected to be “cured” by a treatment that essentially exaggerated the qualities of helplessness, intellectual weakness, and passivity expected of them.

John’s attitude toward his wife reflects in another way common views of nineteenth-century women who complained of depression or postpartum psychosis. He assumes that she is intentionally choosing not to get well and return to the domestic and maternal duties expected of her. When John assures her that she has improved physically and she tries to contradict him, he responds, “Bless her little heart! . . . She shall be as sick as she pleases!” (40–41), but when she tries to discuss her mental state, rather than her physical condition, he tells her flatly, “It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?” (41). In fact, the narrator notes repeatedly how John accuses her of letting her imagination run amok and orders that she must try to use her “will and good sense to check this tendency” (34). Moreover, the narrator shows how she herself has internalized such thinking when she comments early on in the story, “It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way!” (33).

Just as John’s actions and words reflect conventional views of womanhood and female hysteria in Gilman’s day, the narrator’s actions and words may be read as a rebellion against the passive, domestic role that clearly does not agree with her but is nevertheless enforced through the rest cure. Throughout the story, the narrator continues to avoid her domestic duties, letting Jennie manage the household and take care of the baby. She manages to question the ideological and social validity of her husband’s discourse and to produce a feminist counter discourse that opposes John’s dualistic nature with its precepts of right/wrong, and, most relevant to the story, rational/irrational. Her construction of strategies to circumvent her husband’s wishes and her continuing to write in the diary, despite her husband’s injunctions, are transgressions against the oft-quoted directions that Mitchell gave to Gilman herself upon her return home: to “live as domestic a life as possible” and “never to touch pen, brush or pencil again as long as I lived” (“Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*”? 271). Most importantly, the narrator’s growing obsession with the wallpaper

leads her to discover a woman trapped within it, to associate herself with this figure, and to resolve to “free” the woman and, by association, herself.

The direct identification of the narrator with the wallpaper woman marks a turning point in the story. The wallpaper, which commits every “artistic sin” (32), disturbs the narrator because she sees inside it suicide victims with broken necks and bulbous eyes. At first glance, the yellow wallpaper appears to be “one of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin” (32). At second glance, however, more troubling possibilities emerge, for as the narrator notes, the wallpaper’s pattern is “dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions” (32). However, the yellow wallpaper does not end at this point. In the text’s crucial third section, the narrator discerns something “like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind [the wallpaper’s] pattern” (39), and, with this vision, she begins to see things differently. Now the wallpaper’s “outside pattern” (39) is perceived to be bars, while its sub-pattern is perceived to be a woman rather than something “like a woman” (41). As the shadow woman becomes as “plain as can be” (42), the narrator, who had earlier wondered what one was to do when caught in a contradictory situation, knows exactly what she must do: She must free the shadow or wallpaper woman from the paper-pattern that bars her full realization, and through direct identification, bind that woman to herself.

Upon recognition of the wallpaper woman, who in this story clearly represents not only the narrator’s own divided self but all women who are bound and inhibited by a society that insists that women are childlike and incapable of self-actualization, the narrator begins a descent into the vicarious experience of madness through a virtually self-conscious and planned inducement of hysteria. *The Yellow Wallpaper* depicts insanity in relation to sexual politics and states that madness, to a greater or lesser extent, is connected to the female social condition. Contemporary feminist philosophers, literary critics, and social theorists have been the first to call attention to the existence of a strong alliance between “woman” and “madness.” The psychologist Phyllis Chesler, for example, in her important study *Women and Madness*, maintains that the women confined to American mental institutions are failed but heroic rebels against the constraints of a narrow femininity, pilgrims “on a

doomed search for potency,” whose insanity is nothing more than a label or a tag applying to gender norms and violations, a penalty for “*being* ‘female,’ as well as for daring *not* to be.”²⁵ French feminist theory points to the deranged woman as a representation of the female’s anger against the rigidities of patriarchal tradition. For such writers as Hélène Cixous and Xavière Gauthier, madness has been the historical label applied to female protest and revolution. In a society that perceives women as childlike, irrational, and sexually unstable, it is certainly possible to see madness as a desirable form of rebellion against confinement rather than seeing it as the desperate communication of the powerless.

To be sure, one of the approaches to philosophy and psychoanalysis which can be applied here is that of R. D. Laing. According to Juliet Mitchell, Laing’s work “helped to introduce a new phase of radical humanism to which the women’s movement is heir.”²⁶ His assumptions about feminine dependence, passivity, chastity, obedience, and submissiveness that governed the behavior of his eleven families toward their daughters have become the springboard for feminists in their analysis of women’s oppression and have given the women’s movement a “vocabulary of protest,” as Mitchell maintains (291). Laing’s relevant theories include the conviction that psychosis, whether in women or in men, is an understandable or even a “sane” response to life in a destructive society. Schizophrenia, Laing says, is not an organic disease to be treated with psychology, drugs, and shock, but a social process that is comprehensible as a response to family transactions and interactions. He goes on to say that it “is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation.”²⁷ It is a kind of temporary answer to social and political oppression. It is but a stage in the evolution or spiritual quest of a conscious, truly sane person. What Laing refers to throughout his works as “superior sanity” is achieved only through the experience of recognizing the general illness of society and its subjective implications.

Laingian theory attends to the woman’s social circumstances, provides a way of looking at feminine insanity as the violation of sex-role expectations, and interprets female madness as the product of women’s repression and oppression within the family. Madness becomes not only a form of rebellion but an intelligible and potentially healing response to conflicting social demands. Just as Laing perceives the psychotic personality to be a victim of oppression in search of a lost and divided self, so Gilman uses schizophrenia as a metaphor for female consciousness and sees her

schizophrenic narrator questing for some form of truth. The narrator does go mad because she recognizes that she has lost her self among the socially prescribed false selves which she has assumed, consciously or unconsciously. She is, of course, torn between male society's prescriptions for female behavior, her own tendency toward the internalization of these roles, and a nostalgia for some lost, more authentic self. Her madness becomes a tutorial experience, a way of learning, of getting around or breaking through the paralyzing impasses of her life.

If one cannot communicate, cannot feel, has no name or identity, has been so thoroughly divided, one has been, in the sense of Laing in *The Divided Self*, engulfed, "drowned," ceased to exist as a self.²⁸ Drowning, however, comes to represent not only death or loss of self, but also a quest for finding the self. The narrator's peeling away the wallpaper in search of the entrapped woman within is symbolic of her descent into her own psyche, from which return, resurrection, "surfacing," is possible. The narrator descends into madness before she can emerge as truly and divinely sane. In her dive deep into the wallpaper, whose color is "repellent, almost revolting" (32), she discovers not only hideous images of suffocation and confinement but also a mirror image of her own split psyche, a doppelganger who serves an essentially positive function and is depicted in what Florence Howe and Ellen Bass have seen in relation to women poets as "the wild and holy woman."²⁹ As Kolodny observes, the narrator begins to read in the patterned wallpaper "sprawling outlines" of her own predicament and to record in her diary her desperate need for emancipation (455). From her immovable bedstead which suggests a "sexual crucifixion,"³⁰ she watches "her own psyche writ large . . . the underlying is unacknowledged patterns of her real-life experience. . . ." (Kolodny 460).

Although the wallpaper is inexplicable at first, in the course of several weeks, the narrator begins to see a "subpattern in a different shade" hidden in the paper (36). She writes: "There are things in that wallpaper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day. . . . I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind that dim subpattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman" (39-42). With this recognition and perception, the narrator begins to act wildly and assertively. "I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards

of the paper" (47). Eventually, the narrator begins to separate herself from the perception of others, to resurrect that part of herself which she has killed, and to reunite the two halves of herself. She even refers to her "other" self, John's wife, in third person: "I've got out at last," she declares, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (50). In a moment of victory and triumph, she demonstrates the power to see through John when he pretends to be loving and kind and to integrate herself and the woman trapped in the paper into a single triumphant "I." Her experience should be seen not as a defeat but as a necessary stage in her progress toward self-identity and personal achievement.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman presents insanity as a form of rebellion, a crucial point toward independence and liberation. "Madness," according to Laing, "need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough" (Laing, *Politics of Experience* 84). Certainly, what the narrator feels after her intense and terrifying experience is what Dante must have felt as he exited from hell: a sense of resurrection, of *rebirth*. Gilman indicates that the result of going mad may well be the emergence of a state of mind far saner than that understood by the normal world. For the narrator, madness becomes a kind of refuge for the self rather than its loss. Gilman sees a necessity to protect the self by withdrawing from what is perceived as a negative, masculine world in which the self can be violated psychologically and spiritually. After all, and as Laing has asserted, if the world is in truth inhospitable, unhomelike, then perhaps withdrawal from that world is a sane and reasonable method of self-preservation. It is not surprising then that the narrator rejects the Victorian adoration to the female, "suffer and be still." She recognizes her power and the fact that she can refuse victimization and demonstrates that she possesses the courage, strength, and inner sources to stand alone in her preservation of self. She awakens from a male-defined world to a world defined by her own feeling and judgment. Her triumph is symbolized by her growing sense of self as evidenced in the increased use of "I" in the final four paragraphs and by the overcoming of John and reducing him to an impotent lump on the floor. Certainly, it is a living, vital, renewed Jane who returns from her descent into insanity, capable of generating in John a terror, an excitement, and a faint. The agony of madness is a terrible price, but Jane has achieved a sense of self, an integrity, in the face of those who would rob her of her such assets. She defies John and the male-dominated medical profession

he represents and is left with at least a deep knowledge, or a vision, which helps to give birth to a potentially better world.

Like the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a significant number of critics see in the story a variety of meanings and interpretations. In fact, the story has become, as Elaine R. Hedges would have it, the feminist's "white whale" for the extent of its different, changing interpretations.³¹ Undeniably, the story is itself a great feminist achievement for as Adrienne Rich said in 1971, "hearing our wordless or negated experiences affirmed" in literature could have "visible effects on women's lives."³² Reading *The Yellow Wallpaper* can enhance people's understanding of the "woman question" in the nineteenth century and develop or extend their historical sense. Gilman has special meaning for us for the changes she advocates involve much more than the readjustment of power relations: They involve transforming society's conception of what it means to be male or female, and what it means to be human. As she expands the horizons of gender, she presents the tale of a woman who has the courage to demonstrate a positive change in her self-presentation and to unbind the social, domestic, and psychological confinements of a nineteenth-century writer.

The behavior of Gilman's narrator diverges from that of the "old" woman, the Victorian angel of the house. Unlike docile Victorian women who acquiesce to social conventions, the narrator becomes aware of her submissiveness and subverts her husband's treatment by writing secretly and thus exchanging domestic for artistic concerns. As the story unfolds, she discovers the pattern of the wallpaper, tears it away, and then frees the woman (and that part of herself) trapped behind the pattern. Her defiance and rebellion lead her to crawl and creep over John, who faints before his wife. Needless to say, she serves as a New Woman who claims the ordinary rights of a human being to develop her own individuality in an oppressive, uncomprehending society and to articulate her own stance toward her culture. What makes Gilman's story radical is that it articulates the values of her culture and society and, in that very assertion, calls them into question. She opens up the issue or ideology of the rest cure as a topic of discourse and demonstrates how her narrator has internalized this ideology and must stand in opposition to this treatment in order to escape its tyranny. It is certain that Gilman did interpret the experience of being a woman in America with power and sensitivity, rendering for the first time the invisible truth visible, giving the silence of the inner life a voice, an inner discourse that is disruptive of her social order. Through the narrator, she showed us,

with a staggering fearlessness articulated in a quiet lyricism, the inward life which questions, and whose answers denied the inherited traditions of the feminine ideal as a source of meaning and value.

NOTES

1. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-74.
2. According to J.N. Danforth, in *The Token of Friendship*, the home became the "empire, the throne of woman. Here she reigns in the legitimate power of all her united charms. She is the luminary which enlightens, and the talisman which endears it." (Quoted in Meade Minnigerode, *The Fabulous Forties: 1840-1850* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing, 1924), 75.) Similarly, Harriet Beecher Stowe in *The Minister's Wooing* indicated that the home became the "appointed shrine for woman, more holy than cloister, more saintly and pure than church or altar." (Quoted in Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America: 1789-1860* (New York: Octagon, 1975), 281.) In like manner, the home was relentlessly celebrated throughout Sarah Josepha Hale's *Ladies Magazine* and other journals. "The Government and the glory of the world might belong to man," Hale told her readers in 1832, "but nevertheless, what man shall become depends upon the secret, silent influence of women." (Quoted in Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 102.) Clearly enough, any sort of female achievement outside the home was a difficult task in a world that expected women only to be submissive, subservient, and obedient.
3. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 186.
4. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1898), 340.
5. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *A Journey from Within: The Love Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1897-1900*, ed. Mary A. Hill (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1995), 340.
6. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture* ([1911] New York: Johnson, 1971).
7. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Coming Changes in Literature," *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Study of the Short Fiction*, ed. Denise D. Knight (Boston: Twayne, 1997): 125-32.
8. Quoted in Carol Farley Kessler, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Toward Utopia With Selected Writings* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 81; 275 n. 60.
9. Olive Schreiner, *Women and Labor* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1911), 25.

10. Alys Pearsall Smith, "A Reply from the Daughters, II," *Nineteenth Century* 35 (1894): 446–50.
11. The Narrator's name, spoken at the end of the story, may very well be Jane, a generic name for every/any woman.
12. Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel* (London: Pandora, 1986), 3.
13. For a biographical discussion of the story and Gilman's life, see Ann J. Lane, *To "Herland" and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1990), 98–135.
14. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper?" *The Forerunner* (Oct. 1913): 271.
15. Julie Bates Dock, "'But One Expects That': Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the Shifting Light of Scholarship," *PMLA* 3 (1996): 52–65.
16. See Gail Parker, "Introduction" to *The Oven Birds, The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on The Yellow Wallpaper*, ed. Catherine Golden (New York: The Feminist Press, 1992), 83–89; Barabara Eichenrich and Deirdre English, "The 'Sick' Women of the Upper Classes," *The Captive Imagination*, 90–109; Ann Douglas Wood, "'The Fashionable Diseases': Women's Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America," excerpted in *The Captive Imagination*, 110–18.
17. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 179.
18. Elizabeth Ammons, "Writing Silence: *The Yellow Wallpaper*," *Conflicting Stories: Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 34–43.
19. Ann J. Lane, ed., *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).
20. For two excellent essays that summarize the range of critical reactions to *The Yellow Wallpaper* in the past twenty-five years, see Elaine R. Hedges, "'Out at Last?' *The Yellow Wallpaper* after Two Decades of Feminist Criticism," *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, ed. Joanne B. Karpinski, (New York: Hall, 1992): 222–33; and Catherine Golden, "One Hundred Years of Reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*," *The Captive Imagination*: 1–23.
21. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "*The Yellow Wallpaper*": *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Women Writers Texts and Contexts Series*, ed. Thomas L. Erskine and Connie L. Richards (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1993), 32.
22. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 24.
23. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 89.
24. Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," *New Literary History* 11 (1980): 451–67.

25. Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), 31; 16.
26. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), xviii.
27. R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Random, 1967), 79.
28. R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (New York: Random, 1969).
29. Florence Howe and Ellen Bass, eds., *No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 32.
30. Greg Johnson, "Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in *The Yellow Wallpaper*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 26 (1989): 521–30.
31. Elaine R. Hedges, "Out at Last? *The Yellow Wallpaper* After Two Decades of Feminist Criticism," *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, ed. Joanne B. Karpinski (New York: Hall, 1992): 222–33.
32. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, ed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: Norton, 1985): 2044–55.