

A Silent Monologue of the Narrator's Psyche: An Archetypal Reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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Abstract: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" has been widely analysed through feminist, Gothic, and Freudian psychoanalytic lenses, primarily framing the protagonist's descent as repression, madness, or protest against patriarchal medicine. This project departs from these readings by employing a Jungian framework that combines archetypal theory with feminist psychoanalysis to reinterpret the protagonist's breakdown as a process of individuation. Focusing on the Shadow archetype and the collective unconscious, the study argues that her merging with the wallpaper signifies not psychological collapse but self-discovery and awakening. By reading Gilman's own rest-cure experience alongside the text, this research reframes the protagonist's journey as one of authentic identity formation rather than mere silencing.

Keywords: Gilman; Rest - Cure; Archetypal reading; Jung

Introduction

The history of women from the 7th century to the present demonstrates a significant role in literary force. This transformation reflects a shift from societal norms that often oppressed women, along with struggles and a lack of education and recognition, to the growing recognition of women's intellectual contributions to the world. Women's literature makes people aware of the societal norms that women must navigate. It discusses gender inequality and how women were repressed by their husbands. The narratives they share inspire people to engage with feminist movements that shape the world. Now, generations of women continue to write and encourage discussions on gender and equality. It played a crucial role in the past, leading to various social and political movements that addressed gender inequality. Despite the societal barriers that prevented women from performing domestic duties, female writers emerged and voiced their problems. Their writings were a powerful tool that brought about change in the world. The authors revealed the untold stories that had never been heard or discussed by men.

Bingen used her ecclesiastical position to compose music and medical texts, while Christine de Pizan, widowed and destitute, became the first woman to earn a living through writing. Her *Book of the City of Ladies* argued that women's disadvantages stemmed from denied opportunity, not inherent inferiority. Mary Sidney elevated women's poetry and translation to literary prominence, laying the groundwork for later generations. In English literature, the 17th and 18th centuries saw women gradually enter essay writing, fiction, and political theory. Aphra Behn, an early professional writer, addressed colonialism and power in *Oroonoko*; Mary Astell advocated women's education in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. The 19th century brought Jane Austen and George Eliot, who questioned gender norms in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Middlemarch*. Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison later examined gender, war, and empowerment.

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* reflects her own struggles with mental illness and prescribed rest. Charlotte Brontë and Emily Dickinson similarly depicted women's suppression through comparable treatments. This rest cure, also prescribed to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, appears in "The Yellow Wallpaper," where the protagonist's obsession with the wallpaper symbolises psychological imprisonment. Read through a psychoanalytic-feminist lens, her descent into "madness" becomes an awakening—a refusal to be silenced.

Charlotte Anna Perkins Gilman (July 3, 1860 – 1935) was an American humanist, novelist, writer, lecturer, sociologist, and eugenicist, best known for "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), a landmark in feminist literature and psychological horror. Born in Hartford, Connecticut, she was related to Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a connection that likely shaped her literary sensibility. Her father's desertion left the family in financial hardship, and her schooling was fragmented, ending at fifteen. In 1878, aided by her estranged father, she enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design, later working as an artist and tutor. She married Charles Walter Stetson in 1884; their daughter, Katharine, was born in 1885. Severe postpartum

depression followed, worsening into suicidal despair and prompting her divorce and the "rest cure" that partly restored her health. These experiences inspired "The Yellow Wallpaper," which serves as a critique of the era's masculinized medical establishment.

After her divorce, Gilman relocated to California, lecturing on women's rights, economic independence, and social reform. In 1890, she joined the Nationalist Clubs movement opposing capitalist inequality and produced fifteen essays, poems, a novella, and her landmark story that year. Her poetry collections *In This Our World* (1893), *The Home* (1903), and *The Crux* (1911) followed, alongside six major nonfiction works that established her as a founder of sociology.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" as a feminist text

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a seminal work in the first wave of feminist literature. It was first published in January 1892 in the *New England Magazine*. The narrator keeps returning to the wallpaper in her journal, obsessing over every odd detail. She talks about how the color makes her feel sick, how there is this strange yellowish smell that just lingers, and how the pattern twists and curls in the most unsettling way, like mushrooms growing in all the wrong directions. Some parts of the wallpaper are torn or peeling, and weirdly, it even rubs off on people, leaving yellow stains on their hands and clothes. Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a semi-autobiographical account of her battle with postpartum depression. After the birth of her daughter in 1885, she experienced severe mental distress and sought treatment from Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a leading neurologist of the time, who prescribed his infamous 'rest cure'. In later years, Gilman stated that her story had real-world effects. Dr. Weir Mitchell reportedly changed his treatment approach after reading it, proving that literature can influence social and medical reform. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is her masterpiece, and this story is still widely studied in literature and gender studies courses, exploring themes of mental health, autonomy, and patriarchal control.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman stated that "The Yellow Wallpaper" was "not meant to drive people insane but to prevent them from losing their sanity—and it succeeded" (Gilman 1983). Throughout the story, the narrator expresses various ways she believes could aid her recovery, such as engaging in physical activity, working, or interacting with others. As the protagonist observes the trapped women in the wallpaper, she realizes that she cannot continue living in confinement. By the story's conclusion, as her husband collapses to the floor unconscious, she crawls over him, symbolizing her rise above him, though at the cost of her mental stability.

However, this victory comes at a great cost as she descends into madness. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's works address a "struggle in which a male-dominated medical establishment attempts to silence women." (Gilman) The woman behind the wallpaper becomes a symbol of her repressed self, persona, and individuation process. To understand her masterpiece more clearly, the project aims to employ psychoanalytic feminist analysis along with Carl Jung archetypes such as persona, shadow, self, anima-animus, and individuation to understand the madness that Gilman has employed as an

agency that transformed the protagonist into a person who is not silenced anymore but rather understands and gets self-realization.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" has largely converged around psychoanalytic and feminist readings of repression and madness. Kayani and Farrzana offer a Freudian analysis, reading the wallpaper's symbolism as a manifestation of the protagonist's subconscious resistance to societal constraints, illuminating broader questions of feminine identity formation under patriarchal norms. Building on this psychological framework, Park examines the protagonist's displaced anger—her hostility toward her husband, John, redirected onto the wallpaper, which becomes a paradoxical site of both ownership and safety, culminating in her eventual merging with it as an act of protest. Shi extends this analysis through female psychoanalysis, identifying the "uncanny" and "confined spaces" as Gothic devices that encode women's repression, emphasizing the genre's psychological rather than purely narrative concerns.

A second strand of scholarship addresses the medical dimensions of Gilman's text. Villar situates the story within Gilman's own experience of the rest cure, arguing that the treatment's failure—for both Gilman and her protagonist—demonstrates the necessity of patient-centred healthcare. Blackmore similarly critiques the gendered dismissal of women's pain, noting Gilman's own testimony that her physician, Mitchell, prioritized bodily symptoms over her voice, reflecting institutional disbelief toward women's suffering.

Research Gap

While Kayani and Farrzana, Park, and Shi analyze "The Yellow Wallpaper" through Freudian repression and female psychoanalysis, and Villar and Blackmore address the rest cure's harms and medical silencing, none apply a Jungian framework to the protagonist's breakdown. This project combines Jung's theory of archetypes with feminist psychoanalysis to reread her descent as a journey of individuation rather than mere madness or protest. Where existing scholarship frames her unraveling as a symptom of repression or as resistance to patriarchal medicine, this study argues that it constitutes a process of psychological awakening, revealing the emergence of a true, unified self beneath imposed silence and confinement.

Psychoanalytic Feminism

Psychoanalysis, established by Sigmund Freud in the 1890s, studies the unconscious mind through the id, ego, and superego, exploring how suppressed tendencies shape behavior. His colleagues Alfred Adler and Carl Jung later developed Individual and Archetypal Psychology, respectively. Emily Zakin describes psychoanalytic feminism as linking sexuality and subjectivity, revealing how unconscious drives shape identity beyond individual agency. This framework helps explain gender inequality as rooted in unconscious processes and early experience, connecting psychology and feminism to illuminate women's silencing under patriarchal dominance.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the protagonist's rest cure treatment denies her self-expression; tearing down the wallpaper becomes a symbolic escape from confinement. Freud viewed 19th-century women's hysteria as sexual repression, applying an androcentric lens that deemed women psychologically incomplete—a view later challenged by Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous, who argued women's voices deserved autonomous expression rather than male interpretation.

Jung, Freud's student, diverged through his theory of the collective unconscious, which includes shared archetypal patterns, including the Self, Persona, Shadow, and Anima/Animus, alongside individuation. Applied to the protagonist, her "madness" reflects a merging with her Shadow, which is the repressed self, suggesting not a breakdown but self-discovery. Gilman, having undergone the rest cure herself, used fiction to protest this widespread suppression of women's autonomy.

Methodology: Jungian-Psychoanalytic Feminism

According to Jung (1921), archetypes are not fixed ideas passed down through generations but rather inherited instincts or behavioral patterns—natural tendencies that guide how living beings act. Just as a chick instinctively breaks out of its shell or birds know how to build nests, these internal blueprints shape responses and actions without needing to be taught. From this perspective, such behavior patterns fall under the domain of psychological science. When analyzing *The Yellow Wallpaper*, one can draw on a Jungian-feminist perspective to explore layers of the psyche, such as outward identity, the hidden self, internalized gender traits, and the quest for self-realization.

Persona

Persona is the mask we wear to fit into society, helping us adapt to our daily lives. For an actor, wearing a mask to fit into a play is not their true self—it serves to meet societal expectations. The persona allows us to interact with different people and navigate social situations politely. However, if we become too attached to our persona, believing it to be our true self, we may lose touch with who we truly are. A persona begins to form in childhood, and over time, our behavior patterns are shaped by societal influences. The parts of ourselves that we do not show to the world are pushed into the shadows, hidden from our personality.

In the context of "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the persona represents the mask the woman puts on to be accepted, adhering to the values prescribed by her husband, who recommends the "rest cure" treatment. She plays the role of the perfect wife, obedient, subservient, and compliant with her husband's wishes. Her husband treats her like a child, limiting her freedom and independence. The writing reflects her true self, a self that seeks independence, hidden behind the persona she wears in front of her husband. The protagonist is surrounded by relationships, objects, and situations that may appear normal but are, in reality, quite oppressive. Both her reasoning and emotions reveal the harsh treatment she has endured, yet she is still compelled to wear a persona. As time passes, she becomes increasingly distant from her true self, which has been repressed due to the social conditions of that period. "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in

marriage" (Gilman 647). This demonstrates how her husband dismisses her views and how she has come to accept this as part of marriage. She now sees it as her duty to set aside her happiness and emotions, accepting that her opinions are secondary to his. *"I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind"* (Gilman 647) reveals how her opinions are consistently ignored, and the "dead paper" becomes the only space where she can express her true self. It also highlights the persona she must adopt, a strong woman expected to suppress her feelings and act as a dutiful wife, keeping her emotions at bay. *"What is one to do?"* (Gilman 647) This line reflects her helplessness under the oppressive rest-cure treatment, where she is forced to isolate her true feelings and wear a mask for her friends and relatives. Her question, *"What is one to do?"* encapsulates the power dynamics at play; she is silenced and trapped in a marriage where she cannot voice her concerns.

These monologues illustrate the societal expectations placed on women, particularly married women, who are supposed to be dutiful and obedient wives. Society expects them to disregard their own emotions and suppress their true selves. The text explores the psychological breakdown women experience when they are aware of their oppression yet remain silent, bound by the constraints of their roles.

Shadow

The shadow is the archetypal part of an individual that they do not recognize; it remains hidden from their true personality. It often contradicts the persona, the outward mask we show to the world. However, the shadow represents our animalistic side. It has both positive and negative aspects that can help us navigate the world and maintain balance, or, if left unchecked, can have a detrimental impact. The shadow harbors unacknowledged desires that do not fit societal norms.

Nevertheless, it can lead to inner conflict, which can harm us mentally or manifest as negative habits. However, the shadow plays a crucial role in our growth, helping us become more balanced. It serves as the controlling force that prevents us from being dominated by the unconscious mind. The shadow is the hidden aspect that breaks free when she becomes the woman behind the yellow wallpaper. *"Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good"* (Gilman 648). She reveals her true self, which has been repressed, and challenges her husband's belief that the rest cure is best for her. This line shows how she is fighting against the persona to reclaim her authentic self. *"I did write for a while despite them"* (Gilman 648). This demonstrates her getting closer to her true self through writing, where she can fully express herself without fear of judgment. It also highlights how her true self must remain hidden from the societal world, as she writes in secrecy. *"I sometimes fancy that in my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad."* (Gilman 648) This illustrates her yearning for freedom and escape from the cage where she has been repressed, leading her to ignore her true feelings. The last line reveals how she feels guilty even for allowing her emotions to surface. The tearing of the wallpaper is not an act of calm or balanced harmony but an outburst of long-suppressed violent rage.

"I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition" (Gilman 648). She believes that it is all because of her nervous condition, but it is the shadow that is trying to break free and show her true emotions slowly in an uncontrolled way. "He said what I felt was a draught and shut the window," Gilman 648 explains that when she talks about her repressed feelings to John, he does not validate them and brushes them away. "I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin... The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smoldering, unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight." (Gilman 648) When she says this, it means she doesn't have freedom, and her writing initially reflects how she is deprived of it. The circumstances in which she has been placed have made her feel that the wallpaper is ugly, as she is forced to stay in the room for a long time and, while looking at it, she projects all her negative thoughts onto it.

"I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!" (Gilman 649) This sort of role comes into focus when she feels she is not able to provide comfort and joy to John, but rather a burden to him by suppressing her feelings, and she prioritizes a figure she is not. Furthermore, she feels like a burden because she is not able to fulfill the role she is expected to partake in, i.e., persona. Instead of being able to voice that John is controlling her, she blames herself for being a burden and represses her shadow. Initially, the more she represses, the stronger her shadow grows. "No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long" (Gilman 649). This line conveys her repressed feelings she has put aside, and now she sees her distress in the yellow wallpaper itself. Moreover, when she states about all the children, it eventually becomes universal, which means anyone who would have to go through 'rest cure' treatment goes with this problem of trying to break free. Moreover, when she says that she hates it, she shows her considerations towards certain things, which she doesn't express in front of her husband, John.

"This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had!" (Gilman, 649) Explains how she feels that there is a negative side in the wallpaper that has been repressed and is not seen by everyone, just like the shadow. Unconsciously, she represses all her desires and repressed feelings in the wallpaper, which is hidden from everyone. Embodying the shadow archetype, the character slowly develops and begins to realize her true self. The yellow wallpaper slowly becomes her self-image. Previously, she repressed her shadow, felt like a burden, and tried to play the role of an obedient wife by suppressing her true feelings. Eventually, her shadow tries to break free when she tears the yellow wallpaper.

Self

Jung says that we should focus on selfhood. He claims that modern life has disconnected people from their instincts (as the Buddha could connect with his instincts and self). That is why the entire Buddhist philosophy also depends on the self. However, recently, with the rise of the younger generation and the new era, people are becoming more disconnected from their instincts and drifting further from their inner selves. Jung

also mentioned that humans have the potential for both masculine and feminine sides. He says that the feminine side is the anima in men, and the masculine side is the animus in women. All of this comes from a long evolutionary history. However, the balance between the masculine and feminine sides has not been equally distributed in recent times. People now live according to societal norms, which have prevented them from growing and reaching their full potential. "But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!" (Gilman 651) shows that she is very well aware of her true self. She knows her capability of feeling and thinking is different from his, but still again, her self is restricted here again.

"There is one end of the room where it is almost intact, and there, when the cross lights fade and the low sun shines directly upon it, I can almost fancy radiation after all..." (Gilman 651) explains how the wallpaper is making her realize something that had been repressed for a long time and initially the wallpaper represents herself, i.e., her freedom from societal norms of being the perfect wife. Now, she is slowly understanding how to break free from it. "Dear John! He loves me very dearly and hates to have me sick" (Gilman 651). This line reflects how she still seeks validation from her husband and is in the process of figuring out how to express herself fully. At this point, she remains repressed by the persona she presents to him.

The *self* is symbolized by the way her wallpaper makes her realize something she has long repressed, which is now trying to break free. She is fully aware of her true feelings, yet she keeps them to herself, conforming to societal expectations by suppressing them.

Anima/Animus

The anima and animus play significant roles in both men and women. The unconscious feminine side in men and the masculine side in women, which the anima and animus strongly influence, strongly influence how the genders relate to one another and how they become aware of the emotions they face. The anima in men is revealed through personal interactions with women. If a man has repressed his anima, he will tend to act more masculine in his approach to everything. However, if a man embraces his anima, he will show more empathy and psychological balance. On the other hand, if a woman suppresses her animus, it can lead to insecurity, lack of confidence, and uncertainty. However, when embraced, it can help her gain confidence in life.

The woman's struggle, as seen in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, illustrates how she has suppressed her animus. Her outburst is portrayed as the result of being caged in a room for a long time. The woman has suppressed her animus as her husband exerts excessive control over her, dominating her. She does not have the freedom to speak out. Even when she does voice her concerns, he dismisses them as invalid and mocks her. "I see her in that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape arbors, creeping all around the garden." (Gilman 654). According to Carl Jung, the animus in women represents their masculine expression. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator's voice has been silenced by her husband for a long time. The dark grapes symbolize her unconscious, which has been repressed for years. When she says that she can see the

women creeping out of the garden, it signifies that her animus is beginning to emerge, allowing her to voice her true identity. "I really have discovered something at last" (Gilman 654)

Through a psychoanalytic lens, one can interpret that she is referring not only to the wallpaper and the woman creeping out of it, but also to her inner self, which has been trapped for so long. The woman in the yellow wallpaper symbolizes her own image, which she is now discovering. "I don't want to go out, and I do not want anybody to come in till John comes. I want to astonish him" (Gilman 655). At this point, she has realized her animus and is finally able to express her problems. After this realization, she wants to astonish John, who once held power over her. She has now confronted the resentment she had been ignoring for so long. She realizes who she truly is, and no one can control her anymore.

Individuation

Carl Jung discusses the process of individuation, which involves becoming aware of the self and achieving unity with oneself. It is a journey of self-realization and understanding. Individuation is about breaking down barriers and discovering one's unique potential. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the woman is deeply struggling because of societal norms. Rather than finding peace, she loses herself entirely, and her repressed self completely takes over. The part of her that had been silenced for so long because of gender issues could be seen as the feminine aspect, which has been caged for all this time.

"I tried to lift and push it until I was lame, and then I got so angry I bit off a little piece at one corner - but it hurt my teeth" (Gilman 655). This explains how she is trying to tear it down, which also represents everything that has been controlling her. The pain in her teeth represents how determined she is to fight back now. Through a psychofeminist view, it tells us about how long she was kept silent. Her madness here is not weakness but the result of years of silence.

"I pulled, and she shook; I shook, and she pulled, and before morning, we had peeled off yards of that paper" (Gilman 655). It explains that, initially, when she pulls back from the societal constraints her husband had forced upon her as a perfect wife, she also says she no longer sees herself as separate from the wallpaper-trapped women. It becomes clear that she has been breaking free. "I have locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path" (Gilman 655). Her locking the door represents that she no longer wants to be controlled by anyone. However, here, when she tears down the wallpaper, it means she is finally free. However, a question arises. Is she free from her fragmented state of mind, which she realizes after being silenced for a long time? "If that woman does get out and tries to get away, I can tie her!" (Gilman 655). She thinks that the woman in the wallpaper is someone whom she can decide whether to let out or not. However, in reality, it is not the woman in the wallpaper who is trapped but herself, who has lost her grip on reality. She no longer sees a difference between her conscious and subconscious selves.

"I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?" (Gilman 656) She thinks that she is not the only woman who has been trapped like this, but there are many more like her. Women who were resurrected due to social constraints in the 19th century. She sees herself as one who was able to break free. "It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!" (Gilman 656). Here, the narrator thinks she is free from her societal constraints, but also says she has been kept in silence for too long. However, instead of being able to come out of the house with confidence, she has been crawling, which speaks volumes about the fact that she has been damaged. She feels free, but it is not the freedom from her mind anymore. "I have gotten out at last," said I, "despite you and Jane? And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you cannot put me back!" (Gilman 656) When she says "despite you and Jane," it means that, finally, she has been free from the people who silenced her. She feels free, but she has completely lost her mind.

Through the processes of individuation and psychoanalytic feminism, we can see how societal constraints gradually strip women of their identities. Her breakdown occurs slowly, as she is initially unable to express herself. Over time, she begins to believe that the woman in the wallpaper is herself. She loses her sanity, starting to crawl and creep. No longer behaving like an adult, she eventually believes she is not living in the real world but has become the woman in the wallpaper. Through the lens of psychoanalytic feminism, we see how societal constraints can shape a woman's mind. Instead of walking with confidence and freedom, she crawls and locks herself in. This reflects the mental damage she has endured. She did not go mad because she was weak; she went mad because no one listened to her.

Conclusion

The actual sentiments and emotions of women in the 19th century can be comprehended through the symbolism of the wallpaper in the story. It reflects the difficulties women faced at the time, offering insight into the protagonist's repressed feminist nature stemming from social pressures. The psychoanalytic-archetypal lens offers an understanding of the female psyche through the frameworks of psychoanalytic feminism and Jungian theory. Jung classified numerous archetypes, including persona, shadow, self, anima-animus, and individuation. Based on a close reading of the story, the archetypes 'shadow' and 'persona' dominated the protagonist's psyche, playing a significant role throughout the story. The shadow and persona archetypes highlight the internal conflict that deeply affects the woman's psyche. The self and animus reflect moments when the narrator reflected on her own identity, particularly when examining the yellow wallpaper. Finally, individuation marks the gradual progression of the narrator's psyche toward self-realization, culminating in her act of tearing down the wallpaper. However, the suppressed archetype's shadow in the protagonist's psyche is reflected in the yellow wallpaper. As the story progresses, glimpses of her personality begin to emerge from her psychological captivity. Her persona gradually collapses as the narrative moves toward her encounter with individuation. When she tears down the wallpaper, it serves as a metaphor for both her anima and shadow, symbolizing her liberation from social constraints. However, she is not entirely freed from her mind.

This act leads her towards psychological and feminist recognition through the process of individuation.

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