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The Female Gothic Subtext: Gender Politics in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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Abstract

This essay examines how Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* found, in the conventions of the Gothic genre, a forum in which to address the universality of female suffering, as well as introduce progressive notions for the modification of female conduct. Gothic literature, while allowing the reader to live vicariously through the heroine's ordeals in a world of danger and mystery, also provided women authors with the ideal medium in which to conceal radical critiques of the gender politics of their age. Socialist and humanist values are prevalent in both texts, and while *Jane Eyre* is an educational novel, aiming to show the reader what happens when the protagonist has integrity, and fights for her rights, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a cautionary tale, warning readers of the result when the protagonist does not fight back against those who would oppress her.

Popularized in the nineteenth century by an increasingly literate middle

class, the Female Gothic is a horror genre comprised of texts written by women authors about a female protagonist. Distinguishing conventions include, in addition to the stereotypical ominous mansion or castle, a combination of uninhibited elements such as romance, abduction, insanity, murder, doppelgangers, and supernatural apparitions. Though the genre's immediate purpose was to allow the reader to live vicariously through the heroine's ordeals in a world of danger and mystery, many women authors utilized these Gothic conventions to conceal a radical subtext critiquing the gender politics of their age. Charlotte Bronte's novel, *Jane Eyre*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, are quintessential examples of this subversive maneuver.

Given that this was a time when literature was highly censored, women, as Katherine Quinsey asserts in an article entitled "Eighteenth-Century Women Writers," had to proceed cautiously when publishing their work, for, those

who attempted to compete on equal terms with men in the [...] literary marketplace, or who wrote about "male" subjects such as politics, tended to take their knocks; they were openly abused in print, their personal lives were subject to salacious commentary and speculation, [...] and their writing was seen as correspondingly "loose" both morally and artistically.

While neither Bronte nor Gilman may have been consciously attempting to evade public scrutiny, they nevertheless found, within the conventions of Gothic literature, a relatively safe medium in which to address the universality of female suffering, as well as introduce progressive notions for the modification of female conduct. At times the subtext served to caution women not to be naïve, and at other times to advise the appropriate reaction in certain predicaments, but always, it served to unite and provide a support system for women. This was an important step in the women's movement, for, as Michelle Mock Murton argues in her essay, "Behind the 'barred windows': The Imprisonment of Women's Bodies and Minds in Nineteenth-Century America," although a great number of individuals "in the mid-to-late nineteenth century brought suffrage to the forefront of society as a means to equal rights...political enfranchisement alone [could] not bring women to an equitable socioeconomic footing with men." Author Helene Meyers proclaims in *Femicidal Fears: Narrative of the Female Gothic Experience*, that, as one effective alternative, "women writers have used the Gothic romance to meditate upon the connection between gender norms and female victimization." This particular genre provides a ready forum in which to address these issues, for, as critical theorist Maggie Berg explains in *Jane Eyre: Portrait of a Life*, it is an "appropriately evolving and ambiguous literary mode."

It is clear that in writing *Jane Eyre*, Bronte had a much larger goal in mind than to simply create an interesting tale to read: it is an educational novel, geared at providing women readers with a new philosophy of life, and a radically different set of etiquette to contemplate. In an age when books on

etiquette, specifically targeted at women, were quite prevalent, Bronte took a revolutionary, opposing stance. As Shirley Foster states in an essay entitled, "Charlotte Bronte: A Vision of Duality," "the striking originalities of [this novel are] not so much in the nature of [Bronte's] subject-matter as in her treatment of it." The plot introduces the profound notion – quite controversial to a nineteenth century audience – that Jane, a *woman*, could ambitiously achieve "education, financial independence, and social status; [and that,] through her own effort and will...transforms her life" (Berg 1).

Jane Eyre, if a real person, would today be considered both a human rights and an equal rights advocate. The way she behaves and speaks with boldness and honesty are consistently indicative of her core values. According to Meyers, "In Bronte's hands, the Gothic heroine becomes not just adventurous and curious, but also defiant and independent – in other words, a prototypical feminist." Through Jane's character – an orphan, with no wealth, status, or future prospects, and also, a plain woman who, by the standards of the day was not particularly desirable as a wife, Bronte builds a case for society's underlings. Via the protagonist's mouth, the author presses her opinion that as rational, civilized beings we should cease abhorrent practices such as social stratification, religious hypocrisy, the ill treatment of the working class, and of living solely to fulfill our base desires.

Throughout the novel Bronte reaches out to her female audience, understanding that a good portion of them are silently suffering in oppressive, unfulfilling roles assigned by gender. When Jane feels dissatisfied with her stagnant life on several occasions, Bronte is communicating to the reader that it is natural – and justified – if she feels stifled by her circumstances.

The first occurrence in Jane's adult life when she longs for a change is during her teaching career at Lowood, when she comes to the conclusion that she needs "a new place, in a new house, amongst new faces, under new circumstances" (87). This desire leads her to apply for a governess position, and in a bold display of autonomy she alters her entire life to suit her needs. The second occurrence is after Jane has been in her new position as a governess for a few months, before Mr. Rochester has returned from his world travels. She takes to gazing out the attic window of her new residence, imagining and pining for "the busy world, towns, [and] regions full of life I had heard of but never seen" (111). She is of the opinion that "it is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it" (111).

In 1847, when *Jane Eyre* was published, middle and upper class women were generally expected to be static. To acknowledge that they might yearn for more, or something entirely different than the prescribed lifestyle is to necessarily acknowledge that they are men's equals. There can be no doubt that much of the literary censorship to which women were subjected in this time period was due to patriarchal fear. Men were acutely aware that if women were

exposed to these radical notions, the status quo would eventually be challenged.

A prime illustration of how Bronte uses her novel as an educational forum is evidenced by Jane's habit of sharing her progressive ideals – whether solicited or not – with others, in hope of positively influencing their decisions. For example, the protagonist advises St. John to propose to Rosamond Oliver, since he is clearly in love with her, and the latter likewise thinks highly of him. In her innocence, Jane oversteps a boundary, the audacity of which would have shocked or angered some men, for at this time she and St. John do not yet know they are cousins, and have a very formal relationship. Further, St. John has never discussed his affections for Rosamond with anyone; it is simply a fact Jane has observed. In this particular time period, it would be considered extremely rash for her to broach this subject with him, and in fact, at the end of Jane's monologue St. John looks surprised, for “[h]e had not imagined that a woman would dare to speak so to a man” (381).

Likewise, there were critics who had not imagined that a woman would write a novel such as this: “Some...found [Bronte's] unconventionality too much to swallow, accusing her of coarseness and unfeminine outspokenness” (Foster 107). However, “when reviewers criticized Jane's morality, they did so because they feared her; and while they attacked *Jane Eyre*, the Victorian public continued to read it avidly” (Berg 6). Thus, despite any negative critical reviews the text received, Bronte's reputation was far from ruined; on the contrary, the author gained fame as the novel achieved immediate success in sales. In addition to having a huge impact on the world of literature, Foster argues that

feminist critics in particular have taken [Bronte] as a paradigm for the many Victorian women novelists who, they claim, express their sense of dualities through ‘devious’ or ‘covert’ strategies. These critics argue that because the writers were unable to [...] directly [...] spell out their anger and unease, they were forced to find oblique methods of articulation; we must therefore look below the overtly ‘angelic’ dogma and the explicit commentary to discover the real implications of the narrative. Bronte, they suggest, provides an admirable instance of the tactics of subversion, because the archetypal patterns and structural dualities of her work formulate, while at the same time disguising, her protest. There are two ‘levels’ in her fiction, the one conscious capitulation to convention, the other dissent concealed by overt orthodoxy. This approach is innovative

and illuminating, but because it stresses the unsaid in Bronte's fiction it marks the subterranean elements as the most significant [...]. In this way, we can reconcile a [true] reading of the text with the notion of its dissenting voice. (78-79)

While Bronte's novel does conform to certain traditional conventions, such as the theme of romantic courtship between a man and a woman, culminating in marriage, according to Foster, she

exploits these orthodoxies in order to express her reservations about her age's ideologies regarding women. [Fervently] she seeks to re-define feminine selfhood, freed from restricting images and assumptions [...]. Her novels not only demand that sexual ideologies be re-examined, they themselves enact that re-examination, thematically and structurally. (71)

Jane chooses to marry Mr. Rochester only when she is recognized as his equal, and the final stage of courtship leading to marriage is entirely on her own terms. Thus, "rather than confirm conservative sexual politics, Bronte imaginatively reforms the heterosexual couple, but suggests that such a new and improved unit has, as yet, no place in society" (Meyers 33). The moral of this story is clearly directed at a female audience: through sheer determination and effort, the heroine is eventually able to achieve exactly what she knew she needed in order to feel fulfilled in life. It is in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's tale we are provided an example of what happens to women who do not fight back against those who would oppress them.

The Yellow Wallpaper, while dramatically enhanced with elements of horror, is a roman à clef, having been confirmed by Gilman to be semi-autobiographical. This lends further gravity to the narrator's intensely realistic and disturbing symptoms. According to Ann J. Lane, in the biography *To Herland and Beyond: The Life & Works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, as an author, Gilman felt compelled "to express [her] private thoughts and feelings through public discourse, [in an age] when it was difficult to do so directly." That this story is formatted as a series of journal entries, maintained in secret by the narrator, speaks volumes about how women have commonly been forced to suppress their complaints and desires.

The opening setting describes how the unnamed narrator, her husband, John, and their baby have recently moved into a rented mansion, which she finds eerie. When she communicates her thoughts on the matter to her spouse, he laughs at her; she reminds herself that "one expects that in marriage" (4).

This is the first of many unhappy sentiments expressed by the narrator, conveying how severely dissatisfied she is with the expectations imposed upon her by society, and more importantly, by her husband.

John, a physician, has taken control of his wife's life, diagnosing her with a "temporary nervous depression [and] a slight hysterical tendency" (4). As part of the treatment plan he has devised, including a tranquil environment and undisturbed rest for a few months, John has the audacity to draw up a daily schedule for his wife, to which she is fully expected to adhere. He consistently addresses her in a condescending manner, never calling her by her name, but rather by ridiculous terms such as "blessed little goose" and "little girl." He is less like the partner – and equal – she longs for, and more like a father.

In addition to feeling bored, unchallenged, and disillusioned, the narrator is clearly suffering from post-partum depression. This is evidenced by her physiological and psychological symptoms, and in her journal writing when she states that though she has a fondness for her baby, she has little tolerance for his presence. In an age when women's depression was rarely openly acknowledged, Gilman makes it the focal point of her story. The narrator mentions that she cries "at nothing," and often. She also notes that she is "alone a good deal of the time [as] John is kept in town very often by serious cases" (4). This statement conveys a sense of irony, for the distraught woman's greatest need is for John to spend less time away from home, and more time listening to her, so that she can make him understand it is freedom she needs.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of this story is that the narrator instinctively knows her condition would improve if only she "had less opposition and more society and stimulus," and further, if she could engage in "congenial work" (4). However, John will not allow it, for he thinks that any kind of stimulation will be harmful to his wife in her fragile state, and he remains steadfast to his notion that a "rest cure" is best. He thereby worsens his wife's condition by keeping her isolated, and making her feel completely worthless, especially since she is not expected to care for their house or their child. As Gilman clarifies in an article entitled "Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*," "work [is] the most important activity in defining a sense of self, because what we do is greater than what is done to us." In order to flourish, a person must feel wanted and needed.

When the narrator becomes aware that she is caught in a downward spiral towards madness, she attempts to have a serious conversation about her condition with her husband. His condescending response makes light of the situation: "Bless her little heart...she shall be as sick as she pleases" (12). This transfers the blame to her for bringing about her own sorry state, and at the same time places the responsibility on her to make herself better. John, in his misguided attempt to help his wife, becomes, rather, the biggest hindrance to her recovery.

Gilman herself was only too painfully aware that women in her time were often erroneously diagnosed with “hysteria,” and that a rest cure was commonly prescribed for this female condition. The author went through a similar situation in her own life, but with an outcome far different. In “Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*,” Gilman informs the world that she herself “suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown,” upon the third year of which she sought the aid of “a noted specialist in nervous diseases.” He, of course, prescribed the rest cure. The esteemed doctor then sent Gilman home with the stern suggestion that she “live as domestic a life as far as possible,” and further, to “never...touch pen, brush, or pencil again.” As Gilman was a writer by profession, and writing was her greatest passion, her doctor's orders are entirely unacceptable. Though today this would be considered astoundingly sexist advice, it was commonly reflected in the literature of this time period that men assumed any stress in a woman's life was the direct result of her having acted outside of her domestic sphere. If a woman tried to partake in “male” activities, such as writing, it was sure to have an ill effect on her, because she was designed to act solely as mother, wife, and home-maker.

Gilman, in her fight for equality, has proclaimed that “one sex has monopolized virtually all human activities, and then called them male,” and further, that “what we think of as ‘masculine’ traits...are [in truth] human traits that men have usurped as their own and to which women have been denied access” (Lane 5). This message resonates throughout *The Yellow Wallpaper*, especially when the narrator laments of her circumstances twice in the opening paragraphs, “What is one to do?”

That Gilman does not give her story a happy ending is far more effective, in terms of having a strong impact on the reader. Though in her own life she gained back her autonomy by ceasing to seek the counsel of her doctor and divorcing her husband, she strategically chose not to include those actions in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. By having the protagonist lose her sanity profoundly illustrates the peril of not fighting for one's rights as a human being, and effectively leaves it to the reader to take from the story what he or she may. *The Yellow Wallpaper* poignantly teaches women that though they may feel isolated and abnormal, their experience is not singular. This realization alone can be liberating. Gilman knew that her intent would speak loud and clear to the unsatisfied women in the world who so desperately needed to receive a message of hope. However, as Gilman's views were ahead of her time, the appreciation of her fans was not reflected in the literary criticism this story initially received. It was not until “the first decades of this century, [that] Gilman was [finally given the credit she was due, and] recognized internationally as a major theorist and social commentator” (Lane 3).

Had either Charlotte Bronte or Charlotte Perkins Gilman chosen to publish essays blatantly criticizing gender politics, rather than filtering their progressive messages through these fictional narratives, the backlash would have been far more severe, to the point of being detrimental to their reputations and careers.

Instead, by disguising the true intention in the subtext, both *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* were able to achieve the authors' desired effect. In this way, though the women's movement was not begun in earnest until many decades after these works were published, Bronte and Gilman played their parts in initiating the movement by covertly providing readers with a new form of conduct and code of ethics to contemplate, and eventually manifest.

About the Author

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Her area of specialization is 19th c. British literature, and her favorite authors are John Keats, Charlotte Bronte, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, and Iris Murdoch.

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