

## A Holistic Reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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### Abstract

*Hysteria is, according to nineteenth and mid-twentieth century medical discourse, a female malady resulting from her vulnerable body and wandering uterus. On the contrary, males are regarded all but exempt against neurosis due to their so-called rationality. Such a claim has been backed up by the fact that hysterical women outnumber their male counterparts. Contra this reductionist perception, the present article, following a reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story entitled "The Yellow Wallpaper" through a holistic paradigm, posits that psychic pathology is the by-product of a medical and social gendered heteroglossia. What sounds, at face value, personal schizophrenia echoes the hysteria of the political arena. This premise is backed up by the ideas of T. S. Eliot, Freudian theories along with the Russian philosopher Michael Bakhtin, and feminist critics, whose common thread resides in embracing a holistic vision to concepts rather than basing their interpretations upon a reductionist prototype. The article under scrutiny elucidates the concept of holism. Then, it moves on to delve into hysteria as a social product, a belief juxtaposed with the taxonomy of nineteenth-century medical discourse. This paves the ground to the ultimate part dwelling upon Gilman's protagonist hysteria as related to the social environment. Focus then will be shed on the cult of domesticity, i.e. marriage, motherhood, and male-female power struggle, within the context of the present text.*

**Keywords:** hysteria, heteroglossia, gender, holism.

Unlike the belief of patriarchal belief centered on what Michel Foucault calls “hysterization of woman” (qtd. in Redmann 205), the purpose of reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” through a holistic paradigm is to demonstrate that important differences between men and women in succumbing to hysteria are not based on “biological sex differences”, but related to “social gender differences” (Williams 800). Henceforth, before delving into hysteria in Gilman’s text, it would be judicious to clarify, first, the concept of

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holism and the different scholarly debates revolving around this theory. Holism is coined by the South African Jan Christian Smuts in his book *Holism and Evolution*, which he published in 1926. Smut postulates that the entire phenomena of any system are interdependent. A system, in his line of thought, is “an integrated whole” and cannot be understood by “reducing it to the sum of its parts” (Olshansky 59). Unlike the enlightenment interpretation of the world which views it as an assemblage of “neat” and “discrete categories”, the holistic perception swims against this belief and underscores that everything is closely relational and interconnected. The holistic vision espouses “connectedness rather than separation, interdependence rather than independence” (Ife 95). It is grounded in a sustainable and mutually dependent and interactive world calling attention to bonds and liaisons between the “micro” and “macro” elements of any given system. Holism “deals with self-determined wholes, parts, their relationships, and their context”. Context replicates “the social and cultural aspects of one’s life that influence how a person experiences feelings and events” (Olshansky59). Smut’s examination highlights linkages and continuities, which is well elaborated by T. S. Eliot whose core principles of holism represent “a tie to our past” (Shannon 25).

In his well-known essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, T. S. Eliot (1921) builds a basic cornerstone that deciphers the controverting debates concerning the so-called holistic vision through tying present artistic productions to past artistic ones. Hence, he focuses on the necessity of probing and scrutinizing the works of both the past as well as the present in the process of literary criticism. He advocates that “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone” (44). In this regard, in addition to acknowledging the inevitability of the originality and inventiveness of the author, he alludes to the linkage of any given literary work to what he labels “dead poets and artists.” Eliot argues:

No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him; for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this is a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing

monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. (qtd. in Diamond 7-8)

It follows, then, that Eliot denies separation and isolation and, instead, embraces Smut's idea of connections and intersections. Any artist, in his frame of thought, cannot be judged alone given that his work is amalgamated with that of the dead's texts. Thus, any given aesthetic production is enmeshed in a social context shaped by the attitudes and ideologies of other mechanisms. Such a belief rings true in Michal Bakhtin's notion of dialogism which he elaborates while talking about discourse to hint at the role of the intersections of social voices, be it political, social, and cultural in the production of any given text. He argues that "there is no "monologic" discourse: "[N]o voice can resist the other voices which influence it; no voice can be purely monologic" (qtd. in Schwartz 348). Far from being a closed system of linguistic signs, any given literary text is a meeting point between a multiplicity of voices, social, political and historical. According to Bakhtin, "the semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse can reveal ever newer ways to mean" (346). He points out that the discourse which sounds persuasive cannot be fixed and finite given that it carries the seeds of its social arena, and it is "half ours and half someone' else" (345).

Speaking about the novel, he argues that it is a "hybrid construction", which orchestrates an intersection between a set of social voices. Its author, according to him, is unable to distance himself from his epoch. Within his aesthetic work, he parrots the language of authorities, the language of his fellow artists, the dialects of different regions and sayings of different generations and age groups (Bakhtin 262-63). Such social voices converge to form and sculpt what is called the novel. Instead of being a closed system of linguistic signs, it is the fruit of what he labels "social heteroglossia" (263). This latter is a theory designating "other or different voices" (Sandel et al. 734). These voices revolve around competing languages, discourses, and voices, which are equally found within texts and "hors-text". Such a philosophy brings up the multifarious, interwoven practices that function in a particular society at a given moment, whereby "different classes, ethnicities, genders, generations, occupations, and communities" (734) strive for superiority. The amalgamation and intersection between these diverse voices may give rise to clash and antagonism in terms of their messages and styles (737). There are forces called "centripetal" within language that strive for unification and centralization through standardizing and joining multiple languages or voices of a community

into one. Male hegemonic voices may try, for instance, to fix the meaning of “woman” as naturally (Sandel et al 738) liable to hysterical fits to carry on their gender prestige and ensnare the females in the cult of the domestic realm, but the process of social heteroglossia attests that there is a space to challenge domineering interests (738). Such a heteroglossia counterbalances this heterogeneity with a review of the effects of power within a culture or any social community.

All of the above mentioned-theorists give a significant elucidation of holism through giving great prominence to social interactions and interdependence within any given context. We lose a critical façade of information and it would be entirely indiscreet, in their perception, while studying “living organisms out of their systems’ context or their individual wholeness” (Shannon 26). Henceforth, taking into account a systematic approach to understanding, a holistic perspective must include all relationships when it comes to understanding the individual’s psychology and his well -being. The holistic analysis veers from a “static, isolated concept about our identity toward a more fluid dynamic view of our self” (33). The self, in the holistic hypothesis, is shaped by multi-layered voices including family, social network, cultural perceptions and political agendas. Subsequently, holism is “an ontological and not merely an epistemological thesis” (Malpas 52) taking into consideration that a person’ beliefs, desires, and attitudes are dialogized with his relations with the attitudes and behaviors of people surrounding him. Bakhtin highlights the leading role of this social heteroglossia in shaping one’s personality stating, “one must always consider the psychological importance in our lives of what others say about us, and the importance, for us, of understanding and interpreting these words of others” (338). Being submerged in a relationship with people within a social context, the individual’s view about himself arises out of “socio-ideological consciousness around [him]” (Bakhtin 276-77) “transmit[ting], recall[ing], weigh[ing], and pass[ing] judgment” (338) on others’ words. His self-esteem and self-confidence are built by this dialectical relation and interaction that he hints at. The kernel of Bakhtin’s treatise is that holism is a paramount factor in the world and is constructed around the idea of wholeness; i.e. “Matter, life and mind are not disparate phenomena but manifestations of the cardinal principle of wholeness” (Diamond 9). This “holistic paradigm”, based on influence and interaction, owes, as well, a debt to “the discoveries of Freud” (24). While talking about women who succumb to hysteria, Sigmund Freud accentuates the significance of the social heteroglossia that Bakhtin dwells upon by relating their psychic anxieties to the interior and ferocious antagonism within their psyche’s tripartite structure between the demands of the id ( the voice of the inner self) and that of the

super-ego (the voice of the social context). He states that such an opposition is the basic factor in the production of neurosis declaring, “the more strictly a woman has been brought up and the more sternly she has been submitted to the demands of civilization, the more she is afraid of taking her way out; and in the conflict between her desires and her sense of duty she once more seeks refuge in a neurosis” (47). In Freud’s perception, women yield to neurosis because their desire for self-autonomy and self-realization is made unallowable by their patriarchal universe. He grounds his idea on a “relational theory” (Olshansky 59) which offers a plausible premise that many of them succumb to depressive episodes as a result of “suppressing their authentic selves” (61) occurring “in response to efforts to maintain relationships by neglecting their own needs and sense of self” (61) in favor of hegemonic voices.

Feminists echo the chief tenets of this “symbolic interaction theory” (Olshansky 58) by linking women’s hysteria to what they call “gender heteroglossia”, which “foregrounds the clash of antagonistic social forces”, (Schwartz 362) marked by gender differences, and unravel its impact on woman’s psyche. The utility of this concept, throughout the present article is to endorse the holistic theory perceiving the female hysteric self as “enmeshed and regulated by the voice of the other” (Sandel et al. 740). This belief center stages that women build meaning founded on the interpretation of communications they have with one another and with themselves within a patriarchal context marked by gender differences. Their psychological development happens within the “context of relationships”, and it may be halted by sexed attitudes devoid of empathy. A study conducted by Jack (1991) of women and depression backs this idea of the influence of relationships on a woman’s sense of self. She validates, in her survey, that women who are in unwholesome relationships with men (in which woman’s needs are not met despite her paramount and extreme endeavor to relentlessly meet those of her partner) undergo melancholy as a result (Olshansky 59). In the spirit of holism, hysterical disorders and psychic problems have roots, not in women’s inner selves and biology, but in their social and cultural contexts, as “they are influenced by and influence” (58) this context.

The female psychic trauma, correspondingly, is the byproduct of the reigning politics of phallogocentric cultures. Woman’s hysteria puts forward the invidious impact of sexed social beliefs, ideology, and tradition. All of these aspects together, occurring in a synchronized and interconnected manner, are vital to women’s sense of self (Olshansky 57). Their self-image is based “largely upon societal norms or, more accurately, their perception of societal norms” (61). The disparagements women encounter, for instance, everyday “through personal contacts,” the “impressions gathered from the images and media about them, and the

discrimination in matters of behavior, employment, and education” which they daily undergo “should make it not very special cause for surprise that women develop group characteristics common to those suffer minority status and a marginal existence” (Rigney 6). By and large, feminist writers embrace “a dualistic vision which counterposes a conception of a holistic, harmonious, and organic femininity against an alienated, rationalist, and aggressive masculinity” (Bouson 39). Charlotte Perkins Gilman is among the ardent feminists who furiously run counter the reductionist beliefs which center stage that “effective understanding of a real, complex system can be achieved by investigating the properties of its isolated parts. . . .” (Melton 2), and embraces a holistic attitude by hinting at the role of the patriarchal environment in the production of hysteria. This belief is neglected by John Mitchell, the famous neurologist of Gilman’s era, whom she consults following a “postpartum disorder” (Golden 10) she suffered from after giving birth to her child Catherine.

Examined by Mitchell, Gilman is told she “[is] suffering from neurasthenia or exhaustion of the nerves” (Lane 43). This disease is considered as “a neurosis<sup>1</sup> without organic basis” (43) and is derived, according to doctors of Gilman’ period, from “the Greek word for uterus, hystera” (Newman 84). The woman as “womb idea was very influential in the early and mid-nineteenth century” (Theriot 7) and affected the writing and thinking of the medical canon and community. Doctors, especially gynecologists, singled the uterus as a “highly perilous possession” (5) and a problematic issue bringing on nervous collapse and psychological breakdowns. W. H. Henry, a professor in gynecology, affirmed that “a large majority of women of all insane behavior have some pelvic disturbances as an important, if not a chief causative factor” (qtd. in Theriot 5). The relationship between a woman’s genitals and her mental life was believed to be one of cause and effect. In 1900, the president of the gynecological society stated:

Many a young life is battered and forever crippled in the breakers of puberty; If it crosses these unharmed and is not dashed to pieces on the rock of childbirth, it may still ground on the ever-recurring shallows of menstruation and lastly, upon the final bar of the menopause ere protection is found in the unruffled waters of the harbor beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> Neurosis a disease springing from disorders of the nervous system which, in the century of “emergent neurophysiology, embraced a wide range of disturbances. . . . The ‘neurosis’ included comas, the adynamias (including hypochondrias<sup>1</sup>), the spasms (including hysteria) and the vesanias (madness)” (Shepherd and Zangwill 40). The symptoms of this nervous disease are as follows:” moodiness, fixed ideas, unpleasant and disturbing feelings and behavior, manifold disturbances of digestion and circulation, flatulence, eructation, uneven pulse, palpitations”(41). Neurotics exhibit exaggerated outburst of emotions, sense of loneliness and of not belonging, and loss of appetite for social and public activities.

reach of sexual storms. (qtd. in Rosenberg 33)

Perceived as the scapegoat of her vulnerable body, Gilman has prescribed the rest cure. This treatment is Mitchel's therapy for treating hysterical women consisting in absolute isolation and removal of the invalid woman from the web of communications, which means the exclusion of family and friends as well as "no communication with the outside world" (Preston 268). The woman, according to him, who taxes her intellectual faculties risks spoiling her nervous system. She is allowed neither to read, nor write or even to urinate (Wood, "The Fashionable" 31). Subsequently, he advises his hysterical female patients to "never touch pen, brush, or pencil and to live as domestic a life as possible" (Gilman, "The Living" 96). Far from restoring back her health and vivacity, such a cure further exacerbates Gilman's psychosis, by growing more depressed and sick (Hill, "From" 63). Such a mode of healing is in stark contrast to the way of treating invalid men whom he calls neurasthenic, changing even the label of the illness. Mitchell's prescription for curing male nervousness, on the other hand, endorses willfulness, struggle, and work.

On account of her traumatic experience, Gilman blows the whistle on her descent into neurosis so fully and exposes to the world the cruelty inflicted upon her by medical and patriarchal practices in her mythologized story "The Yellow Wallpaper", which turns out to be "a case study of the physical consequences of the [male] refusal to listen to a woman's words" (Thraikill 526). This dismal masterpiece turns out to be "a sensitive barometer" of the writer's discomfort with the circumstances governing the world of the psychiatric field, a field whereby science and gender converge turning out the patient into a "reflex machine" (Weisz and Lawrence 29). Gilman writes "constantly about herself, so that everyone could see her there, fighting and conquering an outside world that would forever threaten her frail being" (qtd. in Bawer 11). Her goal behind the reenactment of her ordeal is to develop an "understanding of the brain as a holistic, dynamic organ capable of adapting and reorganizing in the face of trauma" (Weisz and Lawrence 28). The reorganization of the brain can be maintained only through holistically taking into account the paramount role of the "host environment" in "understanding the incidence of a disease" (16), a belief thoroughly absent in Gilman's life and in "The Yellow Wallpaper". This story is an autobiographical<sup>2</sup> account serving as "the

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<sup>2</sup> *In Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Smith argues that, in Greek, "autos" means "self, bios life and graphe writing" (Smith and Watson 1). The three word summed up together formulate self life writing. Autobiography, then, designates the story of a person's life written by himself. Philippe Lejeune, a French theorist, further clarifies it as "the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality"(qtd. in Smith and Watson 1).



hidden subtext” (Gough and Rudd 4) of the writer’s malaise. Drawn from sorrow and deep psychic pain, it exposes to the world the cruelty inflicted upon Gilman by medical practices. Linda Schug maintains that such a story is:

The touchstone text for virtually all her ideas. Here she touches on all the themes that dominated her work, including male-female relationships childcare, housework, domestic relationships and male domination of the economy, politics, religion and social life. (5)

This story underwent much criticism before publication and was even banned from publication for its frightening and nerve-racking qualities. Horace Scudder, the editor of the Atlantic Monthly, explained the reasons to Gilman for not publishing it as follows: “Dear Madam, Mr Howells has handed me this story. I could not forgive myself if I made others as I made myself” (qtd. in Shumaker 588). In 1892, the story was first published in *The New England Magazine* and later in William Dean Howells’s collection, where he hailed and praised it as “terrible and too wholly dire” and “too terribly good to be printed”(588). Being the target of much criticism is a good indicator to the complexity and importance of this story, which necessitates careful scrutiny to fathom its purpose and hidden plot. What adds to its distinctiveness is that it is Gilman’s only work accompanied by an essay meant to highlight the author’s purpose behind writing it. “Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper” is introduced by Gilman herself to equip her readers with the personal statements and intentions of such a harrowing work.

Armed as it were with her words, Gilman ventures to unearth the familial cruelties and injustices she suffered from manifested in the incarceration of a fictionalized persona<sup>3</sup> in a story tinged with “scratches” of life (Sexton and Ames 105). Horrible and sore events bulk large in her text, where the persona experiences antagonistic wilderness, familial frustrations, medical unfairness, and political challenges. For the sake of healing his wife who is suffering from postpartum depression, John, the “physician of high standing in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, (Gilman, “The Yellow” 13) ensnares her in a home with barred windows and “rings and things in the walls” (15); a “Kafkaesque detail suggesting a dudgeon torture” (De Koven 28-29). Despite their numerous attempts to flee the physical confinement thrust upon her, she finds no refuge enabling her to disengage herself from the imprisonment of the iron-walled chambers in which she is put. From the very onset of the story, Gilman makes us perceive the enormous repression and torture under which the narrator is put. Her husband acts as her jailer and

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<sup>3</sup> Persona is attributed to Gilman’s protagonist in her story who is anonymous throughout the text, a strategy deliberately adopted by the writer to stress her vulnerability and non-existence.

victimizer, which is noticeably revealed through the author's description of the gothic-like room ensnaring the sick wife. The "floor is scratched and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed, which all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars" ("The Yellow" 17). The husband applies Mitchell's rest cure and "deprivation strategies" (Madsen 90), whereby the sick wife is required to lead as "domestic a life as possible for better convalescence. The heroine introduces the home as reminiscent of "English places that [one] read[s] about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people" (Gilman, "The Yellow" 14). In this regard, Jane Thraillkill compares such a setting to a "war zone" (Hayes 542) and the wife to a "domestic warrior whose strained nerves [are] identical to those Mitchell encounters on the field of battle" (542). This domestic environment bitterly haunts and makes up her body as well as her mind. Like in a war region, to borrow Gilman's words, this atmosphere "slaps [her] in the face, knocks [her] down, and tramples upon [her]" ("The Yellow" 21). Through a vivid depiction of the room's furniture, the author makes us in a constant touch with the invalid mother's tormented soul. The ugly picture that she paints and the pessimistic tone that invades her text shed light on the vicious impact of the rest cure and articulate her abhorrence of women's marginalization and absolute subordination by medical treatments. This finds corroborating evidence in the following quotes by the persona in the story:

John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage. 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 think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. (Gilman, "The Yellow" 29)

As a result of lack of validation and support for her feelings, this woman experiences "a shrinking self, a self that is defined by being in a relationship" (Olshansky 63) contoured by atrocity and negative judgment. The husband's atrocious behavior weighs so heavily upon her psyche feeling entirely belittled and morally demeaned. This feeling of rejection that torments the sick narrator goes hand in hand with Gilman's fear of being ostracized and rejected by her nerve doctor. She pleads with him not to laugh at her and to pay serious attention to her mental agony and physical prostration by saying: "I beg of you not to laugh at me as everyone else does, not to say it is almost as bad as a disease as one of my friends, not to turn me off" (qtd. in Knight 273). The fact that the persona refers to her husband by name and to herself as "one" (13), which the linguist Otto Jespersen calls "a kind of disguised I" (qtd. in Golden 57), echoes a great yearning to camouflage her inner self which is indicative of her deep discomfort and self-consciousness of being an invalid woman in a man's world. Golden states that the continued usage of "one" is an indicative of "a poor self-perception, of her place in society at large" (57). Throughout the text, the nameless narrator is eager to translate her woes and anxieties to her husband. Yet, her voice is continuously denied, neglected, and smothered by

him. Her point of view, if allowed to speak, must be summed up in few words. Her unique response is silence: “said no more.” She has no words to utter in front of a physician of “high standing” (13).

In addition to his neglect of her wishes, he conceives of her mental unrest as a “slight hysterical tendency” (13). Viewing her body as a good indicator of her health and disease, he conceives of his invalid wife as a “conceptually inert bundle of physiological processes” (Thrailkill 552). With no apparent organic disease, John ignores his wife’s speech and is indifferent to “the semantic content of [her] verbal expression” (525). The major flaw of the husband-doctor’s behavior is that he maintains a “reductionist”, “organicist” (Weisz and Lawrence 13) treatment towards his wife’s hysteria and is heedless of “the interconnectedness” of the environment and his wife’s well-being. Yet, the “understanding of the organism cannot be separated from that of environment” (13). His mode of treatment contrasts what is called a “holistic healing”. Such a cure is founded on the premise that “a true understanding of a patient is an understanding of his or her total universe” (Diamond 7), and upon a recognition of the patient's individuality in addition to appreciating the numerous interrelationships in that person's sphere (7). In *Holism and Beyond*, Dr. Diamond presents an insightful elucidation of his healing process, which exemplifies the very core of holism (7) regarding “matter, life and mind” as deeply interwoven and not disparate phenomena. They are the fundamental code of “wholeness in a successive order extending from organic beginnings to the highest levels of spiritual activity, which is, holistically bound to give rise to each other in a series in the stages of evolution (9). The wholeness of the individual can only be reached through a harmonious convergence between his mind and that of his social arena.

The invalid persona believed that she can disentangle herself from the long-reigning traditional female roles of the patriarchal sphere by producing “good writing” and “becoming good woman.” Nevertheless, such a thrust is dwarfed by the system of values that defines goodness and greatness, being under the taut constraint of the male. In his illuminating book *Gender and the Politics of Excess*, Karen Jackson Ford dovetails that “far from liberating her from the demands of conventional femininity,” writing is “monstrously in the service of the very ideal that makes writing such a difficult career for a woman to pursue.” (120). Instead of being “only architectural, the confinement foisted upon this woman is “textual as well” (Chi 82). Under such a treatment, her “power to originate signs is monitored; and, once produced, no legitimating social apparatus is available to give those signs substance in the real

world”(Treichler 94). The physician's husband thinks that her nervous system is exhausted by “her clear and prolonged self-study,” (Gilman, “The Yellow” 17). Thick books, in his perception, disturb her nervous system “leaving her prey to neurasthenia and hysterical traumas” (Rosenberg 340). For this reason, any attempt to jot down unbearable feelings to a “dead paper” (Gilman, “The Yellow” 10) is “[met] with heavy opposition” (14). The wife is underprivileged “linguistically based interpretative strategies” (Kolodny 457) which are writing and reading. Her husband maneuvers both activities according to “the sexual politics” (457) of his society. Like other male doctors, he cannot distance himself from the sexual categorization governing his epoch and sticks very firmly to his sexed perception of the world. According to him, because she is female, she is “from the first alienated from the processes of symbolic representation. Within this symbolic order, a phallogocentric order, she is frozen, confined, curtailed, limited, and represented as lack, as other” (Hover 90). Her femininity entails inadequacy to enter the symbolic level of language in the perception of John and his fellow doctors. Instead of being related to a fixed and stable reality, this sexual difference is culturally produced. According to Lacan, just as the symbolic is associated with the relationship between the signifier and signified, which he views as arbitrary and randomly established, so “the I”, in Lacanian perception, “can only be a signifier, since it relates to a symbolic realm; it is not tied to a stable reality” (qtd. in Cuddon 334-35). Henceforth, this woman’s inability to enter the symbolic realm of language is not a fixed truth, but it is, as previously clarified, a social construction (qtd. Pilcher 26) propagated by hegemonic discourses of a gendered heteroglossia. The medical dialogizes with the patriarchal to produce a “monologic” closure of women’s inability and vulnerability.

In addition to unraveling the atrocities governing the medical discourse of her era, Gilman carries on to unabashedly destabilize the domestic tranquility of the home to holistically interrelate the wife’s psychic anguish and that of the domestic realm. Writing from “within the home about the home, [this author] not only changed literary decorum, [she] also transformed a central political metaphor, legitimizing the discussion of what went on inside the home and making that discussion a reasonable concern of public discourse” (Nelson 77). Instead of chafing under the yoke of patriarchal hegemony, this author gets rid of her muffled voice and unravels the “poverty of the ideology of the family that dominated postwar culture” and “the actual pain given and taken in the context of family life” (Middlebrook 648). Gilman makes the home a perquisite element in her text and a protest against gender politics which took a heavy toll on women’s domestic and private lives. The narrator finds herself, to borrow

Barbara Walter's terms, "hostage to [the domestic sphere]" (qtd. in Lane, "From" 37) and disillusioned by marriage. Based upon sexual division labor, which is due primarily to "artificial gender distinctions and culturally defined sex roles" (Madsen 89), marriage haunts her whole being further exacerbating her aloofness and estrangement. While her husband goes off and participates in public life, she "stay[s] behind" (Lane, "From" 37) and performs the duties of the home. These duties are based upon a sexual division of labor caused by "artificial gender distinctions and culturally defined sex roles" (Madsen 89). E. H. Van Deusen sums up the persona's claustrophobic incarceration as follows:

Transferred to an isolated farmhouse, very frequently from a home in which she had enjoyed a requisite measure of social and intellectual recreation, she is subjected to a daily routine of very monotonous household labor. Her new home, if it deserves the name, is deprived of everything which can suggest a pleasant thought: not a flower blooms in the garden; books she has, perhaps, but no time to read them. Remote from neighbors [. . .] she sees only her husband and the generally uneducated man who shares his toil. Her daily life, and especially if she have also the unaided care of one or two ailing little children, is exhausting and depressing to a degree of which but few are likely to form any correct conception. (qtd in Theriot 9)

Instead of being separated from this environment, "every aspect of" the invalid woman and "all [her] functions within [her] are a "whole" dialogized with this larger "whole which is [herself] within "the new wholeness of [her] existence" (Diamond 10). She is part and parcel of a larger social group marked by the absence of both intellectual and social activities inspiring neither rebirth nor regeneration. Subsequently, she turns out to be "an active participant" with "definite relation with" only grinding boredom of household labor coupled with the totalitarianism of her husband and men sharing his narrow visions. She finds herself ensnared in a vicious circle of being "influenced by them and again influencing them". "This continuous interaction" impacts her "organism" (10) by giving rise to a sick mind. Diamond dovetails that what he means by seeing a sufferer "holistically" is seeing every aspect of him as a "whole" arguing:

He is a whole, and all his functions within him  
are little wholes summing to this whole which  
is him within the new wholeness of his existence.  
And in order to be able to help him, you have to help  
him to see himself within the wholeness of his existence  
in the wholeness of existence. (11)

Lacking individual wholeness, the protagonist of the story, no wonder, feels alienated from her environment, an alienation further intensified by motherhood duties preventing her from pursuing her artistic talents. Left alone to take care of her baby, the narrator states: “[I]am alone a good deal right now. John is kept in town very often by serious cases” (18). Motherhood becomes a burden (Hill 6) too heavy for her to carry amid such psychological unease. The miasma and stinking polluted smell that impregnate the narrator’s room maybe, in Lane’s frame of reference, the outcome of “a child’s feces” and “the yellow wallpaper embodies fear of babies” (Lane, “From” 53). This latter also contends that the visual pattern occupying the woman’s mind is evocative of unruly babies, whose cries and demands represent a real torment to their mothers. It is suggestive of “inanimate, sleeping babies, who sleep like the dead, and then instantly are awake crying, demanding, and asserting their wants” (54). They are suggestive of “babies strangulating” and “devouring their mothers” (Lane, “From” 54). Being astonished by the great “ravages” “the children have made”, the narrator wonders: “How these children did tear about here! This bedstead is fairly gnawed.” In this particular context, Lane affirms that infants are compared to “dangerous animals that tear and destroy” their mothers’ abilities to sustain and uphold their aspirations. Maternity becomes a real threat to this woman’s sense of self, “a challenge to the boundaries of [her] bod[y] ego (me / not me in relation to [her] blood and milk, to m[an] who penetrates [her], to [a] child once part of [her] bod[y]” (Hill, “From” 61). She finds it extremely difficult to accept “the disappointments of being a wife, [a] mother,” (62) and an artist. Instead of feeling psychologically comfortable, household labor along with motherhood and her nervous sickness kill her individuality and creation and bring her only anger and disenchantment. The Neurotic disease she suffers from is deeply intertwined with the trivial and monotonous existence to which she is coerced to lead and accept.

Engaging in a “second shift of work, consisting of routine housekeeping roles normally designed to women within this cultural context” (Olshansky 60) is “cramping, dwarfing, blinding, choking, keeping down the higher human instincts” (qtd. in Davis 170). Was her husband discriminated against and confined, he would “develop [her brain] (170) and she would develop his. The feelings of aggravation, disturbance, and depression germinating inside her soul are reverberated in the following statement: “I don’t feel as if it was worthwhile to turn my head over for anything, and I’m getting dreadfully fretful and querulous. I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time” (Gilman, “The Yellow” 18). What drives her to feel too lethargic to do the slightest activity emanates from her overwhelming need for “plenitude, or authenticity”

within a larger entity- nation, race, religious community, nature” (Weisz and Lawrence 7). Being an adherer to related ideological struggles pervasive in the larger society” (9), her husband ignores that her illness is “inextricably embedded in the complex relations between [his wife] and the environment” (12). To use Gilman’s terminology, The neurotic heroine is unable to “crack the confining walls about [her], burst out in all directions [and rise] under the enormous pressure that keeps [her] down like mushrooms under a stone” (*The Home* 267). Detached and disconnected from the social milieu in which she is trapped, Gilman’s neurotic character oscillates between antagonistic poles: assertion and retreat. The narrator finds herself viciously caught between her id (wishes and desires) and her superego (her conception of how she should behave following her society’s standards). Lane affirms that this latter fights “the warring elements within [herself]-feminine domestic instincts fighting masculine ambitious ones” (*The Charlotte* 62). While her superego “wish[es] at all costs to retain [its] adaptability to the external world” (Freud 304), her id finds it very difficult to adjust to the viciousness and callousness of the outside world. Being unable to “sacrifice [her] personal interest to the collective interest” (101), this woman fails to live up and conform to her husband and her societal expectations and “be the angel in the house” (Carruth 150). The frustration that society inflicts on “[her] in the service of [her] cultural ideals” (Freud 275) is the main breeding ground behind her neurasthenia. In “a stimulus deprived environment”(Treichler 8) marked by oppression and suppression, the invalid woman strives to fathom and understand the physical, emotional, and social condition that surrounds her, finding no feasible “outstretched arm to prevent [her] . . . from falling into her internal abyss” (Kolodny 456). Her husband’s “anti-female laws” (De Koven 34) drive her to chase death, which is noticeably divulged in her description of the yellow wallpaper suggesting death by strangulation. She notices that “there is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare upside down” (Gilman, “The Yellow” 31). Her excruciating frustration culminates in a great glutton for self-cancellation; she affirms: “I’ve got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find . . . but I forget I could not reach for without anything to stand on” (Gilman, “The Yellow” 26). With no option left in front of her even of committing suicide, she opts for insanity rather than living a life that masks her true self where she is reduced to “no entity in the most radical sense of the word” (Mackpike 288) and defined as subhuman and subclass. Finding herself fighting a losing battle, the narrator chooses hysteria as a “mock escape by self-mutilation” (Thraillkill 527). The narrator slips into madness not because she fails to play her socially approved role of wife and mother; rather because she smothers her own needs which are thwarted by an artificial

gender system, a system “squeeze[ing] her into the little cell of her own mind” (Macpikie 286). She rejects this system in favor “of the only alternative available to her- a private world of madness” (Madsen 86). A holistic interpretation of the text based on a relational interaction foregrounds that “environmental forces” (Davis 170) have an extreme impact upon the protagonist’s psyche.

Her illness is a social construct attributed to gender differentiation, which is “not so much of biology as of domesticity” (170). In “Doctoring The Yellow Wallpaper”, Thraikill ascertains Gilman’s idea and accentuates that “one’s environment physically shaped one’s state of mind” (540). The heroine’s mind is highly influenced and severely molded by the exterior patriarchal environment by becoming “smaller and softer” (541). This brain atrophy and dwarfism reverberates contradictory values and concepts within the society in which she is trapped. The narrator’s descent into hysteria is manifested through the visual pattern she perceives. Reading the chaotic pattern of the wallpaper, she perceives a woman “stooping down and creeping about” (20). She states: “I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had pulled off yards of that paper” (“The Yellow” 25). The shift of the personal pronoun from “she” to “I” indicates that the narrator’s self is divided and the “other self come [s] out from behind the wallpaper” (Russ 351); she not only identifies with the creeping woman’s lot, but she is also that woman trapped behind iron gates, whom Herndl perceives as the narrator’s double (72). This sick mother asserts:

I think that woman gets out in the day time! And I will tell you why- privately-I’ve seen her! I can see her out of every one of my windows! It is the same woman, I know, for this is always creeping, most women do not creep by daylight [. . .]  
I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. (“The Yellow” 21)

Even the act of crawling is made in daylight because it is subject to great surveillance being under the taut control of the male’s gaze. This justifies the narrator’s engulfing fear throughout the narrative from being watched by “absurd, unblinking eyes” (Gilman, “The Yellow”) while creeping. In this regard, Gilman insinuates that a woman’s destiny is to remain forever banned, ostracized, and mainly creeping behind iron gates. In acknowledging her position as an object whose function is to “creep by moonlight,” (23) Diane Herndl postulates that the heroine “does not join with other women in a collective, but becomes Woman, in the hereditary estate of all women” (73). Her plight is that of many women, which is revealed in the narrator’s saying: “sometimes I think there are a great many women” (Gilman, “The Yellow” 23). Joyce Carol Oates in discussing the works of authors like Gilman, Sexton, Plath,



and John Berryman elucidates that these artists deal, in their texts, “in excruciating detail with collective (and not merely individual) pathologies of [their] time” (171). Far from being unique and personal, her situation echoes the state of millions of “women since “they alone share not only her context . . . but, as a result, the conceptual patterns which make up her world” (Kolodny 462).

Above and beyond, the ordeal of the narrator and the women sharing her context reverberate that of the author herself. Mary Mason avers that “it was the merging of her private consciousness with her collective consciousness that freed her to achieve her own unique identity as a [writer]”. This autobiographical account veers from a private illustration of the writer’s agony to uncover repressions that women personally and collectively have undergone. Their shared quandary is the gist of the holistic paradigm “deal[ing] with self-determined wholes, parts, their relationships, and their context” by being a suppressed and oppressed “part” of a “whole” subaltern and marginalized group of women incarcerated by a gendered heteroglossia in a whole patriarchal context. Gilman explores this gender heteroglossia marked by the intersections of multiplicities of social voices within her protagonists’ context only to make noticeable the “non-official viewpoint, the marginalized, the silenced, and the oppressed from other, more dominant viewpoints” (Sandel et al. 739). It “act[s] as a disrupting dynamism “offering spaces for resistant voices, discourses, and languages” (740) to emerge. In this particular context, it is the hysteric voice that rises from the ashes as a different mode of uttering untold atrocities and agonies thrust upon women. Juliet Mitchell affirms that “the hysteric’s voice” is “the woman’s [male] language talking about feminine experience (qtd.in Herndl 54). Neurosis testifies the neurotic psychotic personality of the invalid’s era. According to R. D. Laing, madness is a “creative response to an untenable world. It is the family (or perhaps even society) which is destructively mad; those whom society labels as mad are only reflecting the craziness by which they find themselves surrounded” (Gilman, “The Mad” 575).

Gilman’s aim behind retelling her trauma within this story is to satirize medical approaches that are “excessively narrow or reductionist in focus” (Weisz and Lawrence 2) and to develop, on the other hand, “a holistic embryology” (13) vis-à-vis sickness. This holistic embryology is the cornerstone of “medical holism”, which ponders on the influence of the external environment on the organism, like unhealthy behaviors and political gendered agendas impregnating the codes of every system in Western civilization. Medical holism represents, as well, “a proposed “solution” –or at least a complex response –to the problems of modernity”

(25) offering an alternative to the “therapeutic pessimism of the late nineteenth century” (29), through viewing the brain holistically with a broader view of the context in which illness occurs. To put it a nutshell, the present article has traced the narrator’s voyage into insanity. This descent into hysteria is shaped by a convergence of medical and patriarchal beliefs marked by a gendered heteroglossia. The heroine of the story is holistically enmeshed within a social context marked by sexism rather than living in isolation (Olshansky 64). Respectively, she undergoes this context as influencing her health by becoming hysterical. Reading Gilman’s text through a holistic paradigm by taking into consideration the “fundamental interconnection among the diverse aspects of reality” (Weisz and Lawrence 3) unravels the dehumanization of medicine and modern life” (3), and calls attention to the necessity of focusing on the entire person or group within a larger environment. The etiology of hysteria is complex and not entirely fathomed by medical discourse, but relying on a relational approach offers a very plausible and valuable way of conceptualizing this psychic problem. Instead of hysterisizing women’s bodies, therefore, and reducing hysteria into “reductionist taxonomic schemes” (Weisz and Lawrence 3), it would be judicious and more insightful to focus on women as a large suppressed group within a sexist patriarchal context. It is only through having a feeling of “wholeness” (7) that women can combat piercing psychic fragmentation and alienation.

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