

CRITICAL STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE SHORT STORY *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER*

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ABSTRACT

This research utilizes Critical Stylistic Analysis (CSA) by Lesley Jeffries to investigate the theme of gender oppression, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "*The Yellow Wallpaper*." The story depicts a woman descent into madness as a result of her confinement and lack of activity providing a commentary on the systems that shape and confine female identity and independence. Through Critical Stylistic Analysis, the study dissects the elements of the text such as naming, presenting actions/events/states and modality to uncover how the protagonist's mental decline is not an individual tragedy but a product of systemic gender oppression. The analysis emphasizes the language used by characters particularly the protagonist's husband, whose medical dominance and condescending speech exemplify social norms that oppress women. Additionally, it shows how the wallpaper symbolizes women's surveillance presented in the text mirror the protagonist's quest for autonomy and self-expression. The results show that Gilman effectively critiques the social norms where women were controlled and silenced through narrative techniques and symbolic imagery.

Keywords: Critical Stylistic Analysis, Gender oppression, The Yellow Wallpaper, Mental decline, Social norms and Symbolic imagery

INTRODUCTION

Despite published in 1892, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is one of the significant works of literature in America due to its criticism of social and medical practices that oppressed women during the 19th century. It has been narrated in the first person, where a wife goes through a rest cure prescribed by her doctor husband. Her condition rapidly declines as she is forced into idleness and isolation, which make her preoccupied with her bedroom wallpaper that she views as a symbol of her detention. In this respect, the story provides a strong condemnation of the patriarchal structures that define and restrict female identity and independence.

This paper uses Critical Stylistic Analysis (CSA) by Lesley Jeffries to dissect the linguistic aspects of "*The Yellow Wallpaper*." CSA provides an effective methodology for investigating how language constructs social realities and maintains power relations. Looking at issues such as naming,

representing actions/events/states and modality, this study seeks to reveal how the text reflects and criticizes gender oppression within systems.

In "*The Yellow Wallpaper*," Gilman constructs a sophisticated fabric of linguistic and symbolic elements that express the protagonist's struggle against oppressive patriarchal discourse. The intimidating modes of discourse that the man characters—mainly her husband—are trying to impose on her mirrors societal norms that bind women. The husband's language, full of medical patronage, pays homage to such norms and shows how the degeneration of the psychological health of the protagonist is actually determined by systematic oppression and not because of some failure in personal behavior.

The wallpaper itself also becomes invested with the symbolic meaning of the struggles in the story. As the obsession with the wallpaper surges in, the protagonist progresses to a very strong metaphor for

the entrapment of women, especially their surveillance. The wallpaper patterns were symbolic of the complex and insidious nature of the oppression that entrapped her, showing social dynamics of the 19th century.

It will, therefore, try to offer an insight into how literature might reflect and challenge discursive practices that sustain gender inequality. The study applies CSA in an attempt to show the continuing relevance of "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" as a critique of ongoing gender oppression and as a call to increased awareness and change.

Literature

Gender oppression in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" has been subjected to a good deal of scholarly attention, especially within the frameworks of feminist literary criticism and Critical Stylistic Analysis. In this regard, this literature review summarizes recent research examining the intersection between language, power, and gender in the story, with an added emphasis on how this contributes to knowledge through the lens of CSA.

Feminist Literary Criticism

"*The Yellow Wallpaper*" has been a foundational text in feminist criticism of literature, where it has been examined for its representations of medical and social practices which hold women in subordination. Gilbert and Gubar (200) argue that Gilman's work exposes the "madwoman in the attic" trope as a reflection of patriarchal control over the body and mind of women. This view is further confirmed by Golden (2010), who points out how the "rest cure" that is prescribed to the protagonist of the story follows real practices in history that curtailed the freedom of women in the name of medical intervention.

Johnson (2004) considers the wallpaper to be a symbol of the confining situation that the protagonist is experiencing, while he states that the complicated patterns in the wallpaper are allegoric to the incurred oppressive situation of the protagonist. On the same note, Lanser (1989) is of the opinion that the obsession of the protagonist with the wallpaper is indicative of the struggles of the protagonist to find her voice amidst stipulations of the role ordained for her.

Hattenhauer (2014) discusses the changes in the protagonist's language throughout the story as she progressively empowers herself despite being in

prison. This reading is further enhanced by Kuhl (2016), who works through the role of silence and voice in the narrative to show how the internalized voice acts as resistance to her situation of oppression. Mitchell (2002) is of the view that "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" in a social context of 19th-century shows medical practice, indicating how women's mental illness tended to be misconceived and mishandled. It is in this historical framing that the institutional dimensions of the protagonist's oppression are expounded, a point so compellingly made by Showalter: the story critiques not just individual acts of patriarchal repression but institutional arrangements undergirding such acts of control.

Critical Stylistics

Lesley Jeffries' (2010) Critical Stylistics Analysis proposes a very vigorous methodological framework to investigate how language accomplishes the construct of social realities and perpetuates power dynamics. To deconstruct discourses reinforcing gendered oppression in "*The Yellow Wallpaper*," Jeffries proposes major linguistic features, including naming, representing actions/events/ states, and modality.

It is this focus on the relationship between language and power that makes CSA, according to Lazar (2007), a useful tool for feminist analysis in revealing discursive practices that sustain patriarchal structures. Besides, as Fairclough (2010) has noted, language has been the chief means by which social inequalities have been reproduced, demonstrating that critical discourse analysis may lay open the ways in which texts support or question master ideologies. A number of studies have applied CSA to "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" in order to further reveal the linguistic mechanisms of oppression. For example, Hamad (2015) applies Jeffries' framework to the examination of the narrative voice of the protagonist, illustrating ways in which her marginalization is encoded in the language used by her husband and other authority figures. Similarly, Mills (2008) explores how the narrative structure of the story shows a power dynamic between the protagonist and her husband, especially how language builds social reality.

Symbolic Imagery

Attention has also been paid to the symbolic significance of the wallpaper itself. Johnson (2004) perceives it as a metaphor for entrapment, wherein

the intricacy of its patterns represents the complexity and insidiousness of the oppression that holds the protagonist captive. This is corroborated by Lanser (1989), who sees in the obsession with the wallpaper the struggle of the protagonist to find her voice within the severe limitations imposed on her by her preordained role.

In addition to these symbolic readings, studies take up the broader social context of the story. Showalter (1999) puts "The Yellow Wallpaper" in the historical context of 19th-century medical practice and gives insight into how the mental health of women was misunderstood and often mismanaged. This historical perspective becomes important in fathoming the systemic nature of the oppression the protagonist is facing. According to Mitchell (2002), the story does not only condemn individual instances of patriarchal control but also those much institutionalized practices that nurture and sustain it. More recent scholarship has continued this work with foundational analyses. Hattenhauer (2014) performs a close speech act analysis to show how the protagonist's language changes throughout the story, where she is becoming more empowered despite the fact that she is confined. This is matched in Kuhl's (2016) work, which deals with issues of silence and voice in the narrative, highlighting how the inner life of the protagonist acts as a form of resistance against the oppression she faces.

The current study has adopted the Critical Stylistics Analysis proposed by Lesley Jeffries to analyze linguistic and symbolic features in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper." The methodological framework mainly aimed at revealing how language works to construct social realities and perpetuate power dynamics.

Data Collection

Critical Stylistic Analysis has been used for the analysis and interpretation of the text of the "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which was published in the year 1892. In this text, the linguistic and symbolic elements will be analyzed using the tools provided in the CSA.

Analytical Framework

Jeffries (2010) has provided the following linguistic features in her methodological approach of CSA and these tools will be used for the analysis in the present study.

1. Naming and Describing: This refers to the way naming and description identify the characters, objects, and concepts with power.
2. Representing Actions/Events/States: An examination of the verbs and structures that are used to represent actions, events, and states, and how agency and power are distributed among characters.
3. Equating and Contrasting: An investigation into how identification and contrast are used in the text to construct meaning and reinforce or problematize power relations.
4. Exemplifying and Enumerating: How examples and lists are used to emphasize certain aspects of the narrative, and what this means within the context of gender oppression.
5. Prioritizing: How the text prioritizes particular themes or perspectives to construct meaning for the reader about the experience of the protagonist
6. Implying and Assuming: How implicit assumptions and implications in the narrative are intended to reflect current norms and values
7. Negating: Examining negation events for the exploration of oppositions as built in the text and voices or perspectives silenced.

Analysis

Naming and Describing

In the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman has carefully used naming and describing to show the power relationship between characters. The protagonist is never named; this means that she lost her identity or has no independence at all. In contrast to the protagonist, her husband, John, is frequently named and described by authoritative terms, which emphasizes his dominating role. John is labeled a "physician of high standing," which is meant to evoke feelings and ideas that reflect his social and professional authority. Naming works to create an explicit power structure wherein John becomes the rational, authoritative figure and where the protagonist is subordinate, dependent.

Representing Actions/Events/States

Gilman's choice of verbs and structures in representing actions, events, and states also further explain the established power relationship. It is often John who is described as doing things, like "forbade," "insists," and "says," are verbs that show his authority and something he is doing to the protagonist. In contrast, every act of the protagonist

seems passive or circumscribed by the decisions John makes: she "creeps" and "lies down"—showing a lack of agency, how she is forced into passiveness. The difference in the portrayal of actions serves to delineate the gender oppression that she faces.

Equating and Contrasting

The text frequently equates the protagonist's mental state with her physical environment, and especially the wallpaper. The intricate and oppressive patterns of the wallpaper stand in direct contrast to the straightforward and rational nature of John. This contrast, thus, reflects the tension that lies between the internal turmoil of the protagonist and the rationale imposed from without by her husband. In this respect, the wallpaper symbolizes the entrapment of the protagonist; it "equates her mental deterioration with physical entrapment by her environment".

Exemplifying and Enumerating

Exemplification and enumeration are used by Gilman to underline the intensity of the oppression the protagonist faces. For example, John's dismissing attitude toward the protagonist's concerns is presented regarding the great number of instances where he belittles her feelings as "fancies" or "silly." In this way, the effect brought about by the repetition significantly increases the effect that her experiences and feelings are rendered null and void. By enumerating the adjectives the protagonist uses to describe the pattern of the wallpaper—"sprawling flamboyant patterns," "sickly sulphur tint," "unheard-of contradictions"—the effect of overwhelming and inescapable oppression is highly enhanced.

Prioritizing

The text prioritizes John's opinions and decisions. This makes the reader experience the plight of the protagonist through John's point of view. His medical opinions dominate the text in a way that it sidelines the protagonist's voice. This further shows the fact that, culturally, more importance is given to the male voice than to female independence. The thoughts and feelings of the protagonist are portrayed as afterthoughts to stress the imbalance in power and her inability to do anything.

Implying and Assuming

There are also implicit assumptions about gender roles to be located within the text that are indicative of the time period in which it was written. John referring to the protagonist as "little girl" and "blessed little goose" shows an attitude toward female inferiority and infantilization of the protagonist. This assumption reinforces that women are fragile creatures who need men to direct them through life. That is, as the text says, the mental deterioration of the protagonist is the result of such oppressive assumptions and shows how the use of language maintains gender inequality.

Negation

In negation, an effective device is used in the narrative to structure oppositions and silent voices. Several perceptions and desires of the protagonist are frequently negated by John, insisting on what she "must not" do. Statements such as "You must not let any silly fancies run away with you" deny her lived experience and assert his domination over her reality. The negations that originate from the protagonist herself, "I don't like our room a bit" and "I am not getting any better, dissent against his version of events and serve to underscore the dissonance between her real experiences and John's narration over her reality.

Possibly the wallpaper itself is a dominant symbol in the story, with its contradictory and intricate patterns that are illustrative of entrapment of the mind, which shows itself in the growing obsession with it shown by the protagonist. The "unheard-of contradictions" in the wallpaper and "grotesque" patterns represent symbols for the complex and insidious nature of oppression she faces. She feels trapped and starts seeing figures entrapped within the patterns of wallpaper as her mental state worsens. This symbolism brings out how the struggle of the protagonist is not only personal but indicative of the broader societal constraint on women.

Conclusion

The Critical Stylistic Analysis, Gilman's "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" highlights the various ways through which the discourse has criticized patriarchal structures of the 19th century. The systemic nature of gender oppression is highlighted by the mental decline of the protagonist, imposed by the oppressive discourse of patriarchal power. The symbolic imagery of the wallpaper further intensifies this

critique, representing the struggle of the protagonist to achieve autonomy and self-expression within the restricting and surveilled atmosphere. This analysis represents how literature may stand as a mirror reflecting and challenging discursive practices that sustain gender inequality and offer timeless insight into dynamics of power and resistance.

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