

Beside My Self: The Abject in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'

Melissa Ann Crowder (North Carolina State University)

One of the conventions of Female Gothic literature is a fear that is indescribable, unimaginable, impossible – yet weirdly compelling. Claire Kahane says that ‘the female Gothic depends as much on longing and desire as on fear and antagonism’ (1985, p.342). This ambiguous description of the Female Gothic is also a description of Julia Kristeva’s abjection. In her essay ‘Approaching Abjection,’ Kristeva says the horror is ‘as tempting as it is condemned . . . a vortex of summons and repulsion’ (1982, p.1). Carol Margaret Davidson focuses on a particular subject, saying that the Female Gothic is

a form that [...] centers its lens on a young woman’s rite of passage into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially the joint institutions of marriage and motherhood. As such, the Female Gothic deploys the supernatural for political ends. (2004, p.48)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, an example of the Female Gothic form, offers a stunning examination of the abject through a young woman’s transformation from writer to wife to mother to invalid to lunatic, a process that is partially inferred by the reader (the story begins after the birth of her child.) The trauma of birth and the resulting postpartum depression, coupled with the infantilisation and the intellectual stifling of the narrator by her husband make this woman an instance of the abject to her self (selves) – unable to distinguish between herself and the original abject (the woman in the wallpaper.) These in turn cause her descent into insanity, where the boundaries disintegrate between her self and her delusion, between sanity and insanity, and she is brought to a frightening state of indistinction. The abjection of the narrator functions within ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ to demonstrate the abjection of women at the time, and the

process by which their intellectual selves were separated from their physical selves in a horrifying creation of alterity within their own minds.

‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ is a first-person account of a young woman struggling to align herself with her role as wife and mother, and yet unable to relinquish her intellectual self. Eventually, her intellectual self becomes a delusion, a projection of the narrator’s mind as the woman behind the wallpaper. This delusion manifests as a speaking, corporeal, ‘I’ – one who can leave the house, who is free. In contrast, the narrator cannot leave the nursery, where she (and not the infant) is staying. By setting the confined narrator in opposition to the woman behind the wallpaper who is free to walk around, Gilman invokes yet another classic Gothic convention – an imprisoned woman. Eugenia DeLamotte identifies this convention as of great significance, saying, ‘most of these books are about women who just can’t seem to get out of the house’ (1990, p.10). The narrator cannot leave the house, but her intellectual being is still free to roam; however, it is no longer a part of her self that she can identify as such. Though the woman behind the wallpaper originated as part of the narrator (her intellectual self), the narrator’s madness, as well as the internalisation of her socially proscribed maternal role, make the inevitable reconnection of the body and the mind a horror so profound that it renders her abject.

The abject is both a manner of identifying and defining the self and of debasing the self to the point of un-selfing – the self is fragmented and unrecognisable. Juliann Fleenor identifies this phenomenon as central to the Female Gothic, though she does not identify it as ‘abject’. Instead, she calls this one of the conventions of the Female Gothic, the ‘self-divided heroine’:

In the Female Gothic the ambivalence toward the female (good and evil) has been internalized (sic). The ambivalence toward the female self leads to feelings of self-disgust and self-fear rather than fear and disgust at something outside of her. (1983, p.11)

In Gilman’s text, the internalised disgust and fear are then focused outside of the narrator onto the wallpaper. With this projection, Gilman shows the abjection of self through the Female Gothic convention of the dichotomy within the single self of the narrator: the narrator becomes two selves, which

then attempt to merge, resulting in the narrator's insanity. Gilman shows an instance in which a woman's body (maternity) is separated from her intellectual self. This separation of self and Other fulfills Kristeva's formula for abjection:

It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself [...] Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (1982, p.4)

For the narrator, the resulting confusion results only in madness. As Kristeva might say, the confusion erupts from the instability of the speaker: is 'I' the thinking being or is 'I' the body, for 'I' cannot be both.

The narrator sees her own intellect as Other, as the woman in the wallpaper, and in this way identifies and defines that self as outside of herself. This intellectual self is rendered unrecognisable, unfamiliar, and foreign because of the narrator's assimilation of her prescribed maternal role. Gilman debases the narrator to the point of total fragmentation of self, because the woman behind the wallpaper is a delusion, a manifestation of her encroaching madness. This fragmentation is what Kristeva identifies as the epitome of the abjection of self:

When that subject [the narrator], weary of fruitless attempts to deal with something on the outside [the woman in the wallpaper], finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than the abject. (1982, p.5, italics in original; brackets are mine)

Gilman manifests the abject in the woman's anxiety and paranoia, which are focused first on the wallpaper and then on the woman she sees behind the wallpaper. Eventually, Gilman couples the anxiety and paranoia with the woman's revulsion toward both the wallpaper and the woman behind the wallpaper to dramatise the narrator's insanity. In Gilman's text, the splitting of self fails, and the woman behind the wallpaper, the intellectual self denied because of the impossibility of the survival of the intellectual woman, is discovered within the narrator – the outsider is discovered inside. Intellectually stifled, she maintains a separate, intellectual identity which is at odds with her prescribed maternal and feminine role. The narrator's

husband, a physician, is very clear about what she is and is not to do for her 'health', and yet her boredom is a major part of the problem:

[I] am absolutely forbidden to 'work' until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. (1998, p.488)

Under the guise of caring for her, John has stymied the imaginative prowess of the narrator, leaving her with no intellectual stimulus and no intellectual freedom. Instead, the narrator must create a secret life as a writer, hidden from everyone else, because the other characters blame her illness on the work of her mind, 'the writing which made [her] sick' (1998, p.491). Gilman's creation of this secret self in the narrator is the first split of the narrator into two selves – her body and another secret, intellectual self (mind). This is a creation of which the narrator is not only aware but is also complicit. She seems to almost enjoy the subterfuge, and the secrecy with which she continues to write, saying with a certain glee that she 'can write when she [John's sister] is out, and see her a long way off from these windows' (1998, p.491). Her Other self is clearly precious to her, as precious as the writing which keeps her intellectually satisfied; however, Gilman's construction of this alterity will prove the first step toward abjection – the split of self becomes the manner in which the narrator goes mad.

Gilman splits her narrator into two beings – a mind and a body; and places one of these beings seemingly outside the narrator. This split begins to manifest itself in the delusions of the creeping woman. The split between the narrator's body and her mind creates a paradigm in which she sees herself as two, yet both are her – and this duality of self is confusing and destructive. The narrator has nothing else to do but to look at her walls, which are covered with a horrible wallpaper. The narrator says, 'I never saw a worse paper in my life [...] I should hate it if I had to live in this room long' (Gilman, 1998, p.489). She begins to follow the pattern out of boredom, and then to see things:

And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder – I begin to

think – I wish John would take me away from here! (1998, p.493)

The ambivalence between self and Other, between what is internal and external, is essentially the split of self that Kristeva identified. This is the place at which the horror begins – between what the conscious knows and what the subconscious knows, where what is internalised forces its way out. The externalisation of a part of the self, taking it out of the body, turns it into the Other. Gilman uses the narrator's frustration and confusion with the forced creation of alterity within herself (albeit with her tacit approval and agency), and manifests this internal alterity as the creation of another woman. This woman behind the wallpaper is a delusion of the narrator's; however, with the creation and identification of the woman behind the wallpaper as abject Other, and likewise the woman behind the wallpaper's identification of the narrator as abject Other, the abjection of both is absolute.

Because abjection is very personal, the narrator's reaction to the Other is the only reaction that matters, as the woman that is Other is abject to her – indeed, is visible only to her. However, Gilman makes this example of the abject personal to all readers with her careful descriptions of the narrator's disgust and strange fascination with the wallpaper. At the same time, Gilman tantalises by not giving an outright description of the wallpaper; instead, she provides the reader with just enough detail that the reader's imagination has to produce this wallpaper that might drive a person insane. It is an interesting dynamic in which Gilman forces the reader to experience a sort of abjection, albeit removed from the actuality and immediacy of abjection. Gilman describes the wallpaper with great detail in regards to the reaction the paper creates in the viewer. The paper is

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.

The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others. (1998, p.489)

Gilman uses negative imagery within this passage to create a feeling of disgust, revulsion, and horror within Kristeva's ideas regarding abjection in relation to the sacred and to the body. The paper creates a profane area in what ought to be a safe and sacred place for children; the paper is self-destructive, and unclean. (Kristeva, 1982, p.17; pp.2-4). It is compelling, confusingly so, and in a negative sense: She says the paper 'irritates,' and 'provokes' (Gilman, 1998, p.489). In this passage, the paper becomes a fascination for both the reader and the narrator. Kristeva emphasizes the role of the imagination in the creation of abjection by asserting that

There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded [...]. But if one imagines, (and imagine one must, for it is the working of imagination whose foundations are being laid here) the experience of *want* itself as logically preliminary to being and object – to the being of the object – then one understands that abjection, and even more so abjection of self, is its only signified. Its signifier, then, is none but literature. (1982, p.5)

In short, by challenging the reader's imagination to create the wallpaper, Gilman is forcing her readers to take the first step toward the abjection of self. The reader aligns with the narrator, and this creates a false relationship between the narrator and the reader based upon the perception of this shared horror.

There is an undercurrent in the text – the *jouissance* that Kristeva identifies as that aspect of the abject which makes it so compelling and at the same time horrific. All along, the wallpaper has been that which is both viscerally disgusting and weirdly fascinating for the narrator. Davidson calls the paper uncanny, saying that it is 'foreign yet familiar'; however this analysis ignores the incredible and incomprehensible pull the paper has on the narrator (which Davidson addresses, again without addressing the abject, on page 60), all the while claiming a familiarity with the paper which is simply not there – it is disgusting and yet compelling, but always Other (2004, p.64). The wallpaper is definitely hard to look at, yet one **must**; it is frustrating to view and yet soothing because it is just so compelling – it

seems that one has to look at it, or else. The paper draws the narrator's attention, distracts her at every chance, until the end of the story, when its (and the narrator's) abjection, and the *jouissance*, the power the paper holds over the narrator, are evident in its destruction:

Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All the strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision! (1998, p.498)

The narrator seems manic during this episode – manic and absolutely compelled to tear at the paper with wild animal (and sexual) frenzy. Kristeva says that

jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [...] Violently and painfully. A passion. (1982, p.9)

Kristeva's contradictory statement regarding that which one does not want yet finds incredibly pleasurable aligns with Gilman's contradictory description of the disgusting wallpaper and the narrator's overwhelming compulsion to touch it, tear it, destroy it. She seems to find great satisfaction in the destruction of the paper, her prison, telling John, 'I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!' (1998, p.499) Kristeva's ideas about *jouissance* in regards to 'The Yellow Wallpaper' dovetail with her ideas of sublimation when taken in regard to Gilman's story: Both are ways of identifying the Other and yet identifying **with** the Other. Kristeva says in regards to the abject that:

It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that 'I' does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a *jouissance* in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones. (1982, p.9, italics in original)

In Gilman's text, this is an interesting dynamic in which the two selves, the woman in the wallpaper and the narrator, define each other's existence and maintain each other's importance. Furthermore, this symbiosis creates a dual dynamic with a sense of parasitism in that one must destroy the other in order to survive. This kind of ambiguity is again seen in the disgusting yet

overwhelmingly pleasurable act of destroying the wallpaper, destroying the boundary between selves. Regardless of the pleasure, the paper remains disgusting and irritating to the extreme. Her pleasure at destroying the boundary is undercut by the disgust she feels in its destruction, as well as the horror she feels when confronted with and combined with her abject Other.

As the narrator's madness progresses, the alterity begins to break down, and the woman behind the wallpaper, representative of the split between the narrator-as-body and the narrator-as-mind, begins to try to come back to the narrator: 'The faint figure behind the wallpaper seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out' (Gilman, 1998, p.493). As Gilman has differentiated between the two halves of the narrator's self, they must come back together. This is particularly frightening for the narrator as she has internalised her husband's attitudes regarding the intellectual woman – the woman in the wallpaper who represents her intellect is the abject Other, though it used to be the part of herself that she loved and cherished. Now the narrator no longer recognises this part of herself – 'nothing [about it] is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory' (Kristeva, 1982, p.5). Gilman has made the woman behind the wallpaper strange and Other; indeed, the woman behind the wallpaper seems for quite a while to have her own body. For Gilman's narrator, the thought of reconnecting (or 'connecting', as she would see it) with this abject self is now horrifying.

The last section (IX) of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is the space where Gilman merges the two selves back into the narrator as the narrator's delusions manifest into her reality. The two selves (the narrator-as-body and the woman in the wallpaper) each struggle for control of the 'I' that is the narrator in this mad space Kristeva would identify as the chora. As Gilman shifts the 'I' of the speaker between selves, the battleground becomes the husband, John, and the focus is the battle over who controls the body of the narrator.¹ Each of the selves in turn addresses John as 'I'; each of the two identifies herself as the body 'creeping' around the yellow room. The

¹ Interestingly, the 'battleground' (John) has all along been engaged in the battle for control of this woman's body, yet he becomes a pawn in the struggle between these two selves as they try to take control.

narrator as obedient wife and mother speaks to John (who is trying to beat down her locked door) as he is accustomed to being addressed by her:

‘John dear!’ said I in the gentlest voice, ‘the key is down by the front steps, under a plaintain leaf!’ (Gilman, 1998, p.499)

Gilman uses the narrator’s ‘gentle’ voice, her helpful manner, and the way she says ‘dear’, to indicate the sweet little wife, devoid of intellect, that she had nearly become. A few lines later, Gilman changes the speaker of the ‘I’:

‘I’ve got out at last,’ said I, ‘in spite of you and Jane?^[sic] And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!’ (1998, p.499)

The speaking ‘I’ in this instance is harsh with John, defying him and his wishes, as well as asserting an intellectual being that cannot be repressed.

At this point, Gilman has split the narrator into two selves, and as the two merge into one within her body, the narrator goes insane. The Other seen in the wallpaper becomes the Other that was the narrator’s mind, and as she becomes mad (and Other), the narrator creeps around the room, free from an intellectual prison yet confined in insanity, which can be seen from the instability of the speaking ‘I’ at the end of the story – it remains unclear whether the speaking ‘I’ is the woman behind the wallpaper or the narrator herself, or a combination of the two. Gilman uses this as an act of sublimation as Kristeva defines it:

Sublimation, on the contrary, is nothing more than the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal, which are only in fact trans-nominal, trans-objectal [...]. As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers – it has always already triggered – a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from where ‘I’ am – delight and loss. Not at all short of but always with and through perception and words, the sublime is a *something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparking. A divergence, an impossible bounding. (1982, pp.11-12)

In ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, this joining is an act of naming the unfamiliar (‘I’) so as to make it familiar and not abject – however, in this case the unfamiliar is that part of the narrator’s mind which has been denied. The narrator is both here and there, both deject and other. In ‘The Gothic

Mirror', Claire Kahane identifies this un-separation as a merging of self and un-self, woman-as-mother and woman-as-mind, saying:

The Gothic fear is revealed as fear of femaleness itself, perceived as threatening to one's wholeness, obliterating the very boundaries of self. (1985, p.347)

Gilman's narrator as 'mother' becomes an amorphous being who absorbs and ultimately destroys the Other self with a monstrous act of joining that is at the same time an act of sublimation. The naming becomes an identification of a monster that is herself, the abject Other is within the narrator, and so not Other; however, this Other remains foreign and unfamiliar and frightening and now *internalised*. In this act of sublimation, Gilman has the narrator identify yet another Other, or Others, more instances of the abject – in this case, more delusions, or more trapped, intellectually disenfranchised women:

There are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did? (1998, p.498)

Thus the act of sublimation in this instance leads not only to the destruction of the narrator (insanity) but also to the creation and identification of many more instances of the abject, which suggests that the abject is a phenomenon that spreads exponentially. Gilman uses this example of the exponential abject to again reinforce the abject status and position of women in Victorian society – the Others are always there, as there are always more women being placed in a position of abjection.

Eventually, Gilman makes this reconnection a battle as the narrator struggles to reconnect and yet to deny the reconnection, to keep the abject from becoming part of herself. Indeed, the case could be made that 'reconnection' is completely the wrong word to use here, because the narrator cannot recognise the woman in the wallpaper as part of herself because her madness has rendered the familiar completely foreign and her own self totally changed. Gilman shows a complete inversion of the original struggle – the narrator originally resisted having her body separated from her mind, and now she is resisting the reconnection, as the reconnection results only in madness. There is a struggle for control within Gilman's narrator – is

the 'I' we have come to know as the narrator, who became the narrator-as-body, going to be the 'I' who finishes the story, or will the woman behind the wallpaper be the 'I' who ends the narrative? Gilman changes the self of the 'I' often and quickly over the course of the last page, as the narrator spirals down into madness and the narrator-as-body and the woman behind the wallpaper struggle for control of the narration and of the self. The woman behind the wallpaper, the woman imprisoned in a house, a structure, a mind, has been freed. The woman behind the wallpaper, as she merges with the narrator-as-body, recognises her freedom as unusual and taboo. This Other becomes the 'I' in the narration, and recognises that her status as speaker is equally as unusual and taboo as her freedom: 'I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!' (1998, p.499). The intellectual woman has to go back to her prison; she must not be allowed to go free. It is interesting that intellect must be put away at night, when the moon comes out and lunacy reigns. By suggesting that at the time female intelligence was viewed as madness, Gilman again reinforces and yet undercuts the patriarchal notions of female intelligence by asserting female intellect yet refusing it free license during the night, a time typically associated with madness. Gilman forces female intellect to be free during the day, when it cannot be ignored nor easily attributed to hysteria. Despite the statement regarding what she sees as her inevitable return to her nursery-prison, she remains free – and the social and familial pressures that would have restrained her in such a manner merely impede her progress slightly, as a minor annoyance. At the end of the story, the narrator remarks:

Now why should that man [John] have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so I had to creep over him every time? (1998, p.499)

John represents the social and familial pressures that would have placed her back in her prison, but now is only a 'speed bump' as she continues on her way. Gilman implies that madness may await the Victorian woman who breaks out from behind the paper prison, but the freedom remains – indeed, the madness makes the freedom easier to have when the pressures of society and family are reduced to a slight irritation.

The abject narrator of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' serves as the literary example of the abjection of self within the context of Female Gothic conventions. Furthermore, the horror of the narrator's madness in turn serves the reader outside the text to create the Other, to limn the abject for the reader, making Gilman's text reflective outside the narrow confines of literature into the greater social and cultural context. Gilman presents a horrifying reality for Victorian women – that the denial of self expected of them will result in the creation of the abject and then ultimately in the destruction of the mind and sanity as the woman confronts the abject. This confrontation is inevitable, for

discourse will seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confront (sic) that otherness, a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject. (Kristeva, 1982, p.6)

For Gilman's narrator, the confrontation of the Other is the only action that will create a discourse; however, the discourse is always between the 'I' (narrator or wallpaper-woman) and the reader. This action is, as Kristeva says, 'Both repellent and repelled' – both horrifying and untouchable, yet inevitable. She cannot escape her mind, no matter how she attempts to force it outside of herself – and the end result of the creation of the abject in herself is her own insanity. This insanity is her only path to an intellectual freedom, because it is the only way in which the social and cultural pressures will matter so little that the intellectual freedom she desires will be hers. However, she gains this freedom through the creation of an Other self, an insane Other, which will afford her a measure of freedom, but only through her loss. Through the combination of intellectual freedom, insanity, and the abject, Gilman demonstrates through the tragedy of her narrator that abjection and madness are the only results of a repressive society for women.

Bibliography

- Davidson, C., 2004. 'Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in "The Yellow Wallpaper,"' in *Women's Studies*, 33(1), pp.47-75.
- DeLamotte, E., 1990. *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fleenor, J., 1983. 'Introduction', in J. Fleenor (ed), *The Female Gothic*. Montréal: Eden Press, pp.3-28.
- Gilman, C., 1998. 'The Yellow Wallpaper' in J.H. Pickering (ed.) *Fiction 100: An Anthology of Short Stories*, 8th edn. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 488-499.
- Kahane, C., 1985. 'The Gothic Mirror' in S.N. Garner, C. Kahane and M. Sprengnether (eds.) *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp.334-351.
- Kristeva, J., 1982. 'Approaching Abjection' in J. Kristeva *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon Roudiez. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, pp.1-31.