

**“I’ve Got Out at Last”: The Subversion of Hegemonic Masculinity in
Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”**

"لقد خرجتُ أخيراً": تقويض الذكورية المهيمنة في قصة جارلوت بيركنز جيلمان "الخلفية
الصفراء"

Ahmad Qabaha* & Bilal Hamamra

أحمد قباها، وبلال حمامرة

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Human
Sciences, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine

قسم اللغة الانجليزية وآدابها، كلية العلوم الانسانية، جامعة النجاح الوطنية، نابلس، فلسطين

*Corresponding author: aqabaha@najah.edu

Received: (22/1/2021), Accepted: (28/7/2021)

Abstract

Drawing on Raewyn Connell’s concept “hegemonic masculinity” and engaging the critical line of feminism, this article argues that Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” unearths the institutional dynamics that sustain the masculine hegemonic discourse. This article reads this short story as counter-hegemony, the narrator of which critiques what Gramsci called “manufacture of consent”, wherein ideas and beliefs are shaped, and hegemony is reproduced, through culture. We argue that Gilman accounts for the ways in which gender hierarchy is maintained through consent rather than force, and she endorses a struggle over ideas and beliefs to create counter-hegemony that contests socially-constructed dominant ideas and beliefs. This article therefore demonstrates the narrator’s counter-hegemonic practices that allow for self-representation and positional autonomy. The article further illustrates ways in which these practices shape coherent female community that aims to subvert patriarchal power and undermine gendered binary structures. It concludes that the story anticipates the transformation of women from the periphery

to the centre; it instructs the counter – mechanisms that women need to use to subvert authority and invent their own world.

Keywords: Autonomy, Counter-Hegemony, Culture, Hegemonic Masculinity, Subversion.

ملخص

بالإعتماد على مفهوم ريوين كونيل "الذكورية المهيمنة" وإشراك الخط النقدي للنسوية، تجادل هذه المقالة في أن القصة القصيرة لجيلمان "الخلفية الصفراء" تكشف عن الديناميكيات المؤسسية التي تدعم الخطاب الذكوري المهيمن. يركز هذا المقال على قراءة هذه القصة القصيرة على أنها هيمنة مضادة ، تنتقد روايتها "صنع الموافقة"، التي تتشكل من خلالها الأفكار والمعتقدات، ويعاد فيها إنتاج الهيمنة من خلال الثقافة. ويبين هذا المقال أن جيلمان تفسر الطرق التي تحفظ التسلسل الهرمي بين الجنسين من خلال الموافقة بدلاً من القوة، وتؤيد الصراع على الأفكار والمعتقدات لخلق هيمنة مضادة تتعارض مع الأفكار والمعتقدات المهيمنة التي تتشكل اجتماعياً. وتوضح هذه المقالة ممارسات الروائية المضادة للهيمنة التي تسمح بتمثيل الذات والاستقلالية الموضوعية. توضح المقالة كذلك الطرق التي تشكل بها هذه الممارسات مجتمعاً نسائياً متماسكاً يهدف إلى تقويض السلطة الأبوية فيه وتقويض الهياكل الثنائية الجنسية. ويخلص المقال إلى أن القصة تتوقع انتقال المرأة من الهامش إلى المركز. وتوجه الآليات المضادة التي تحتاج النساء إلى استخدامها لتقويض السلطة، وابتكار عالمهن الخاص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستقلال، الهيمنة المضادة، الثقافة، الذكورية المهيمنة، تقويض.

Introduction

Drawing on Raewyn Connell’s concept “hegemonic masculinity” and the critical line of feminism, this article argues that Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”, originally published in 1892, unearths the institutional dynamics that sustain the masculine hegemonic discourse. This article presses upon reading this short story as counter-hegemony, the narrator of which critiques what Gramsci (1971) called “manufacture of consent”, wherein ideas and beliefs are shaped, and hegemony is reproduced through culture. In other words, Gilman accounts for the ways in which gender hierarchy is maintained through consent rather than force, and she endorses a struggle over ideas and beliefs to create counter-hegemony that contests socially-constructed dominant ideas and beliefs. This article therefore reads this story as counter-hegemonic practices that allow for

self-representation and positional autonomy. The article further illustrates ways in which these practices shape coherent female community that aims to subvert patriarchal power and undermine gendered binary structures. It concludes that the story anticipates the transformation of women from the periphery to the centre; it instructs the counter – mechanisms that women need to use to subvert authority and invent their own world.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860 – 1935), writer, philosopher and socialist, is one of the 19th-century feminist authors who employed female protagonists who are able to turn women's incarceration into a subjective space for self-discovery and empowerment. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a short story that features a female protagonist who suffers from sickness and depression. Her husband, John, a physician of high standing, uses his medical power to subject her to the patriarchal conventions, claiming that his mechanisms are therapeutic. The story shows that oppressive patriarchal authority seeks to maintain its hegemony through exposing women to maddening and captivating masculine instructions and regulations. However, the narrator, in defiance of her husband's dictates, resorts to identification with another oppressed woman, her double, whom she imagines as imprisoned behind the hideous and uncanny wallpaper. Furthermore, the narrator embarks on writing, appropriating the domestic sphere as a subjective space of creating her authorial identity.

Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" has traditionally been analyzed from a feminist perspective. The story is, after all, "an American feminist classic" (Lanser, 1989, p. 415). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar portray "The Yellow Wallpaper" as symbolizing the "oppressive structures of the society in which [the protagonist/narrator] finds herself" (1979, p. 90). The story represents Victorian society's confinement of women within the masculine construction of the feminine ideals of submission and obedience. Generally speaking, feminist critics have shared similar thoughts, but as Jeannette King and Pam Morris explain, feminist critics who followed in the footsteps of Gilbert and Gubar endorsed the "tendency to enclose the heroine's problems within her own abnormal psychological state" (1989, p. 24). Most contemporary critics have therefore chosen more

specific approaches to analyze the feminist concerns in this story, focusing on genre (Davison, 2004), linguistic and stylistic analysis (Betjemann, 2008), psychoanalysis (Suess, 2003), and pedagogy (Nolan, 2004). Barbara A. Suess advises critics to make their readings of this short story as specific as possible to address its themes pertinently and meticulously; she recommends examining specific notions and linking them to the narrator’s responses to the “oppressive structures of the society” (Suess, 2003, p. 81)

In its utilization of Connell’s concept hegemonic masculinity, our article seeks to examine the female tactic of subversion in “The Yellow-Wall Paper” from a new angle that suggests a new contribution to feminist studies of this short story. Our analysis does not fall in line with those of early critics who “enclose the heroine’s problems within her own abnormal psychological state” (King and Morris, 1989, p. 24). Nor does it support the claims of more recent critics who blame the protagonist for her own abnormality. To the best of our knowledge, none of the researchers have used Connell’s concept to address the issues under discussion; however, the use of this concept adds a new understanding to the feminist concerns in this short story.

The sociological concept of hegemonic masculinity originates from the theory of cultural hegemony proposed by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, and it examines power relations that dominate social classes. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci proposed two widely influential notions “hegemony” and “manufacture of consent” (Gramsci 1971), using the later concept to suggest that the State can rule its civil society through consent, a society wherein ideas and beliefs are shaped, and hegemony is reproduced through culture. Gramsci initiated a struggle over ideas and beliefs to create counter-hegemony (Gramsci 1971) that contests dominant ideas and beliefs that are socially constructed. Gramsci’s thoughts about how power is shaped in the realm of knowledge, and can be maintained through consent rather than force, have inspired many approaches and theories in various domains.

By building on Gramsci’s concept, Connell utilizes the concept of hegemonic masculinity as an instrument of critical analysis to identify the

masculine practices that aim to maintain gender inequality. The adjective hegemonic entails cultural dynamics through which a social class claims and sustains its dominating and superior position. Hence, hegemonic masculinity connotes the culturally idealized masculine figure that positions himself at the top of social hierarchy, associating manhood with power, knowledge and public domain. This concept has widely been debated and redefined (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 831). The basic idea, however, remains that hegemonic masculinity is “a culturally idealized form” and “is both a personal and collective project” (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645-646). Male-centered culture has positioned men superior to women; it has empowered them socially and financially and made public practices exclusively masculine, whereas women have been relegated to unfortunate and inferior status. In “What is Hegemonic Masculinity?” (1993), Mike Donaldson explains that while there are men who might not practice this hegemony, they benefit from the culture that enforces male dominance. This concept therefore shows power politics that underpin the construction of hierarchal gender-based relations.

Hegemonic masculinity suggests that there are certain ideals espoused exclusively by the masculine figure based on certain characteristics that are exclusively masculine, which, in turn, encourage men to internalize codes that form the basis of their treatment of women. These characteristics include: physical strength, aggression, toughness and success, to name a few (Donaldson, 1993). Therefore, hegemonic masculinity exists in relation to the subordinate other (Connell, 1987). According to this logic, hegemonic masculinity imposes a set of characteristics if not achieved a man cannot be fully unfeminine.

The notion of hegemonic masculinity in literary studies suggests “the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Hegemonic masculinity positions men in power and women in complete, oppressive, submission to patriarchal figures of authority. Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt maintain that “hegemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendancy achieved through

readings she imbibed: “A colonial mansion, a hereditary state, I would say a haunted house and reach the height of romantic felicity” (Gilman, 1980, p. 647). The house is based on a gothic setting. The narrator remarks that “there is something strange about the house – I can feel it” (Gilman, 1980, p. 684). This apparent irrationality of the narrator / wife is in contrast to her husband’s rationality and reason: “John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (Gilman, 1980, p. 647). The irrationality of the wife is illuminated in her repetitive use of the anonymous pronoun “one”, which highlights her self-negation and her dependence on her husband who controls her bodily movement and mind. While the narrator’s voice is associated with “fantasy” and “hysterical tendencies”, she sarcastically represents doctors – her husband, her brother and Weir Mitchell – as the voices of reason and rational discourse. The narrator is torn between her personal feelings and the society’s view of what is proper for women. Since she has internalized her husband’s demands, the narrator tells readers that “so I take phosphates or phosphites – whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to ‘work’ until I am well again” (Gilman, p. 648). While these lines show the wife’s disbelief in the male-dominated institution of medicine, she also highlights her exclusion from this discourse of reason. In Lacanian terms, the wife inhabits the imaginary order of fantasy and irrationality while the husband figures out the symbolic order of reason and law. Suess’s Lacanian reading of this short story represents the oppressive and arrogant abuse of patriarchal authority “as the primary source of the protagonist’s ultimately incomplete inability to separate fantasy from reality” (2003, p. 81). This Lacanian reading reveals that the “abnormality” of the narrator is an inevitable consequence of the Victorian Society’s oppressive patriarchal order⁽¹⁾.

(1) For a comprehensive Lacanian reading of this short story, see Barbara A. Suess. (2003). The writings on the wall: Symbolic orders in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. *Women's Studies: An inter-disciplinary journal* 32 (1), 79-97, DOI: 10.1080/00497870310086.

children” (Gilman, 1980, p. 648); “she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard” (Gilman, 1980, p. 654). The barred windows and “gates that lock” signify the wife’s imposed physical and mental confinement. The wife’s imprisonment connects her with the madwoman in the attic as she is confined in “the nursery at the top of the house” (Gilman, 1980, p. 648). The confinement of the wife in the house where she imagines that she is crawling behind the yellow wallpaper shows that, in a male-dominated society, men suppress women and any anticipatory dissent.

John’s hegemonic and panopticon practice reflects the gender-based delimitations of 19th century society; in other words, John represents “law and order and reality” (Suess, 2003, p. 86). He is the representative of the patriarch in the story who imposes his own order and constructs and observes the reality of the protagonist. The wife’s description of her husband as rational rather than emotional (Gilman, 1980, p. 647) emphasizes his position as a “ensorious and paternalistic physician” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 71). His treatment of his wife’s mental sickness by isolation and prevention of any intellectual stimulation is “a cure worse than the disease” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 89). John acts as an oppressive ruler who suppresses his wife in all domains: personal, professional and social. He orders “a schedule prescription for each hour in the day” and imposes his instructions on the narrator (Gilman, 1980, p. 648). John enforces his wife’s inactivity which deepens her despair and desolation (Gilman, 1980, p. 648-84). Rest is what her husband says is right so “he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal” (Gilman, 1980, p. 653). The narrator learns to “never mention” what John does not want to hear or when she tries, John gives her “such a stern reproachful look” which silences her (Gilman, 1980, p. 652). John seeks to maintain his patriarchal control grip through creating his own definition of how a sick woman should be, wherein he calls her into conformity and suspends any imaginative tendencies that would impel any disorder or disruption. John’s use of his medical power goes beyond a loving care; he uses it to officially institutionalize his hegemonic masculinity. King and Morris (1989) contend that the narrator “accepts the terms that are used to define her”, and they see her complicity as self-acknowledgment of her

expects that in marriage”, she notes (Gilman, 1980, p. 647). This parodies the Victorian man’s belief in domination over women and their status as ‘Angel in the House’, which is a phrase, or a longstanding cliché coming from Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House” (1854), a poem he dedicated to his wife whom he considers perfect in the eyes of the patriarchal society.

Gilman’s story forms a counter- hegemony (Gramsci 1971) that contests dominant ideas and beliefs that are socially constructed, deconstructing the Victorian construction of gender. Gilman writes back against hegemonic masculinity that suggests that there are certain ideals espoused exclusively by the masculine figure based on certain characteristics that are exclusively masculine, which, in turn, encourage men to internalize codes that form the basis of their treatment of women. As noted by Rula Quawas (2006), Gilman “calls for a literature that presents women with complexity and in a realistic variety of ways, rather than merely as innocent ingénues, angelic wives and mothers, or shameful fallen women” (p. 38). Her female protagonist in “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a madwoman, schizoid whose adoption of her husband’s construction of her turns out to be a complex form of subversion. Throughout the story, the protagonist demonstrates a repulsive attitude and disagreeable practices that precede but anticipate her identification with mysterious and grotesque nature of the wallpaper which ultimately animated her and precluded resolution. This story ostracizes the representation of women within a simplified framework of representation that would condemn their behaviors and manners, or at least call them abnormal. This story, therefore, functions as an instructional piece of work that aims to teach what it means and how complex it is to be a woman in the Victorian time.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” should be understood as a warning call to the patriarch not to hegemonically repress women’s physical and intellectual vigor. The narrator says that she “tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him [her husband] the other day” to ask for his permission to let her “go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia” (Gilman, 1980, p. 651). John’s denial of this wish aims to instruct his wife not to think about her conditions and wishes independently, and to thwart her attempt to think

trying to interpret her situation in feminine terms. The narrator's obsession with the mysterious wallpaper reflects her endeavor to interpret her mysterious presence and grotesque nature under the hegemonic masculinity so as to break free from the masculine construction of social reality in the 19th century. The narrator's writing and her obsession with the wallpaper mark her vulnerability to insanity which turns out to be a defensive strategy – what Gramsci called “counter-hegemony” – against the roles and prescriptions imposed upon her by her husband. In other words, she is subversively complicit with the patriarchal order in the sense that her apparent submission is a subjective space of contemplation and subversive plots. There are many instances in the short story that illustrate the narrator's fighting spirit against John's condescending power. This is revealed through her contradictory discourse which eventually leads to her revolution: “Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?” (Gilman, p. 648). Here the wife asserts her need for a life beyond the duties of being a submissive, obedient and dutiful wife. The repetitive use of the adverb “personally” and the first pronoun (of subjectivity) “I” show that, in spite of her adherence to the dictates of male figures of authority, she has her own voice and emerging authentic selfhood lurking behind the false “self” created by her husband's pressure and, oxymoronically, “kind” oppression. As an act of subversive complicity, she adopts the oppressive position of self-abnegation via her use of the anonymous, impersonal pronoun “one”. However, the narrator's subversive views should be kept secret and beyond the control and appropriation of her husband or they will be met with “heavy opposition” as is her writing which she perceives as therapeutically relieving, and intellectually empowering (Gilman, 1980, p. 648). Quawas (2006) argues that:

[i]n *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman presents the narrator's insanity as a form of rebellion against the medical practices and the political policies that have kept women out of the professions, denied them their political rights, and kept them under male control in the family and the state (p. 41)

reason and his wife to irrationality that he disregards, his defensive repudiation of irrationality shows that his power is based upon illusions. He becomes a text to be read by his wife who is, in turn, beyond his reasoning.

The narrator's physical and intellectual practices inside the house suggest a revolutionary attempt, counter-hegemony, to subvert this hegemonic masculinity. Writing, in particular, is described by the narrator as an imaginary release from the restrictions imposed on her. Some critics, as stated above, have read the following words as a sign of complicity: "am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again". However, these words signify the narrator's critique of the patriarchal mechanism that aims to prolong her illness, and thus passivity (Gilman, 1980, p. 648). While John's treatment aims at stripping her of any potential that could challenge his hegemony, she gains power and autonomy, imagining and inventing a world of her own.

The narrator seeks to create a new self-identity and sense of communality through her connection with and ultimately her release of the women/woman in the wallpaper. At the end of the story, the narrator is no longer imprisoned and locked by her husband/the patriarch; she instead locks him outside the door and the text that she inhabits and writes. She says to John, "I've got out at last, [. . .] in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the wallpaper, so you can't put me back" (Gilman, 1980, p. 656). These lines signify the wife's assertion of her personal identity and subjectivity as she transcends her former, oppressed self, Jane, who is defined in relation to John and to the male-dominated institution of medicine. Elaine R. Hedges (1973) points out that:

There has been no previous reference to a 'Jane' in the story, and no one must speculate as to reference. It could conceivably be a printer's error, since there are both a Julia and a Jennine in the story (Jennie is the housekeeper [and the narrator's sister-in law] and functions as a guardian / prisoner for the heroine, and Julia is an infernal female relative). On the other hand, it could be that Gilman is referring here to the narrator herself, to the narrator's sense that she has gotten free of both her husband

that entails lack of voice and power, in the present John – the physician of high standing – is voiceless and powerless. The excision of John in the end of the text is a type of oral revenge in that the wife pushes her husband to her previously oppressed and spoken about self. The narrator is powerful enough in her new sense of collective identity to “creep over him every time” (Gilman, 1980, p. 656). She overturns the masculine hegemony that John represents and declares a “feminine counter-hegemony”. Creeping women ascend to power, and they relegate men into the margin at the end of the spectrum. While she is treated like “blessed little goose” (Gilman, 1980, p. 649) and “little girl” (Gilman, 1980, p. 652) by her husband, she, once she sets the woman behind the wall paper free, refers to her husband using terms of address that emphasize her subversion of patriarchal authority. The narrator uses the words “that man” instead of John to emphasize that John represents masculine power in general and “that” suggests his lack of immediate presence in the present, or the physical distance between both. By referring to her husband as “that man”, she suppresses his proper name, John, and the multifaceted power he used to represent; she dehumanizes him and pushes him to the sphere of monstrosity the way he tries to objectify and deprive her of identity. Respectively, the narrator represents women who are able in the present to claim central power and move freely, whereas the man is locked out, and he even lost consciousness, remained “fainted” and spoken about rather than speaking. In other words, the narrator claims authority and control over the spatial and in extension the textual space that she creates in secret.

The ending of this story, therefore, marks the triumph of women at many levels, even at the medical one. Within the context of the new historicist paradigm of resistance, subversion and containment, the story ends with the containment of the dominant patriarchal ideology represented by John. Gilman calls the reader to rethink the patriarchal fallacy that the narrator lives in a state of psychosis and her intensified mental illness leads her to suffer more at the hands of the patriarchal establishment. The author suggests that this establishment purposely (mis)diagnosed the woman with mental illness to formalize/legalize their oppression of her. In this sense, Gilman calls the reader, once more, to

- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Gilman, Perkins. C. (1980). *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader: The Yellow Wallpaper, and Other Fiction*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gilbert, S. & S. Gubar (1979). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from a prison notebook*. London: Lawrence & Wishart;
- Hedges, R. E. (1973). Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Virago: Virago Modern Classics.
- Heiland, D. (2004). *Gothic & gender: An introduction*. Maiden: Blackwell.
- Jewkes, R. & R. Morrell. (2012). Sexuality and the limits of agency among South African teenage women: Theorising femininities and their connections to HIV risk practices. *Social Science & Medicine* 74 (11), 1729 – 1737. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.05.020.
- King, Jeannette. & Pam Morris. (1989). On not reading between the lines: Models of reading in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” *Studies in Short Fiction* 26 (1), 23–32.
- Klein, M. (1946). Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. Klein, M. (1946). *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 27, 99-110.
- Lanser, S.S. (1989). Feminist criticism, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and the politics of color in America. *Feminist Studies* 15, (3), 415-441.
- Nolan, E. (2004). Review. *Journal of American Studies* 38 (1), 175-6.
- Quawas, R. (2006). A new woman's journey into insanity: Descent and return in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. *Journal of the Australasian*

Universities Language and Literature Association 105, 35-53, DOI: [10.1179/000127906805260310](https://doi.org/10.1179/000127906805260310).

- Suess, A. B. (2003). The writings on the wall: Symbolic orders in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. *Women's Studies: An inter-disciplinary journal* 32 (1), 79-97. DOI: 10.1080/00497870310086.
- Treichler, A. P. (1984). Escaping the sentence: Diagnosis and discourse in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3 (1/2), 61-77.