

# Interpreting "The Yellow Wallpaper" from the Perspective of Female Psychoanalysis

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**Abstract:** *In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper", elements of horror and suspense are deeply connected to the anxiety and resistance of women under gender oppression. This paper interprets "The Yellow Wallpaper" from the perspective of female psychoanalysis in the socio-historical context and argues that the elements of "uncanny" in the short story, such as "confined space", "recurrence of the repressed" and the "double", have the significance of reflecting the crisis of female identity, exposing the shortcomings of patriarchal society and constructing the image of "new woman".*

**Keywords:** "The Yellow Wallpaper"; Female psychoanalysis; Gothic art; Uncanny; Recurrence of the repressed; Double.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of Western humanities scholarship, many significant research subjects have undergone a process of "being forgotten" and then "rediscovered", and one typical example is Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an American novelist and feminist activist [1]. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is an excellent short story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It describes the story of a woman who suffers from mild mental depression and is forced to accept a "rest cure" in a nursery with yellow wallpaper by her husband, resulting in a mental breakdown. In the 1970s, The feminist reappraisal of "The Yellow Wallpaper" helped establish the previously obscure Gilman within the canon of American literature. The reissue of "The Yellow Wallpaper" by The Feminist Press in New York in 1973 marked a seminal event in the rise of Western feminist literary criticism.

At present, scholars mainly analyze "The Yellow Wallpaper" from the perspectives of feminism, realism, and post-colonialism. This paper will analyze this work from the perspective of female psychoanalysis in the socio-historical context, aiming at exploring the elements of "uncanny" and the gothic effect achieved, to deeply grasp the purpose and meaning of Gilman's exposing the shortcomings of patriarchal society and the crisis of female identity, as well as her efforts to construct the image of "new woman".

## 2. THE NEGATIVE AESTHETICS OF FEMALE GOTHIC ART IN A PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

Freud pointed out that traditional aesthetics ignored the importance of negative emotions, and thus new aesthetic research should incorporate psychoanalysis [2]. From the psychoanalytic perspective, negative aesthetics is not depraved and reactionary but represents a positive capacity for reflection.

As a special genre of Romanticism, Gothic fiction has been called "dark romanticism" by critics. Xiao Minghan believes that its darkness is mainly manifested in two aspects: first, in terms of plot, Gothic fiction often highlights violence and terror; second, in terms of theme, unlike the general romance which directly depicts the ideal social state, Gothic fiction takes the theme of revealing evil, especially portraying the darkness of human nature [3]. However, what Gothic fiction really wants to express through the "darkness" is a desire to escape from difficulties, and positive reflections on problems, which are precisely the values of its negative aesthetics.

Contemporary feminist critics have studied the gothic works of women writers as a separate literary genre. The term "female gothic" was first coined by Ellen Moers in her book *Literary Women* [4]. In the decades since, the study of the female Gothic has been refined. Feminist critic Showalter considers "female gothic" to be "a literary genre that expresses the hidden struggles, fantasies, and fears of women" [5]. Compared with traditional gothic, which depicts gory scenes of dead bodies, murder, rape, and incest, female gothic focuses more on the psychological feelings of the characters and realistic features.

Based on these views and inspired by Freudian doctrines, many feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s tried to interpret female Gothic texts from a psychoanalytic perspective, explaining the social roots of women's psychological trauma and personality suppression. According to Lin Bin, in female Gothic fiction, the "haunting agency" that brings anxiety and fear to women is often not a supernatural mystical force, but the physical and psychological constraints of reality, especially the oppression by the patriarchal society [6].

From the perspective of female psychoanalysis, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is full of "uncanny" elements and reflects obvious female Gothic characteristics. Based on these, it is enabled to reveal the cruel reality of women's situation and lead people to reflect on the shortcomings of patriarchal society, thus showing an outstanding negative aesthetic value.

### **3. THE "UNCANNY" IN CONFINED SPACE**

The setting is an indispensable element of Gothic fiction. Gothic fiction often takes place in ancient castles or abandoned monasteries, which not only create horror and mystery, but also reflect degradation.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" takes place in a hereditary estate. This is the place where the heroine convalesces after childbirth, which should make her feel warm and comfortable, but we can feel the underlying fear and anxiety in her description. Such panic is known in psychoanalysis as "uncanny". The "uncanny" is a Freudian concept of something that can be both familiar and alien at the same time, resulting in a sense of uncomfortably strange.

We can find such "uncanny" in the heroine's description of the house, which has both a warm sense of home and a strange sense of non-home. On the one hand, she describes the house as "the most beautiful place" [7] and has a big garden that is "DELICIOUS" [7]. But on the other hand, the heroine's description implies her subconscious fear and resistance towards the house. She exclaims the house as "a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, and a haunted house" [7]. Besides, she describes the garden as "shady", "full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them", which makes her think of "English places for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock" [7].

In these examples, Gilman particularly highlights the age-old, secluded, enclosed, and eccentric features of the environment, shaping the typical Gothic confined space. Such a kind of space is closely related to the social reality of the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the Industrial Revolution developed rapidly, women participated in the labor force and began to emerge with "self-awareness". They no longer wanted to be angels in houses and initiated the first wave of the American feminist movement with the main purpose of demanding the right to vote. However, the United States was still a patriarchal, male-centered society, where women were domesticated and restricted by powerful traditional forces. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the confined space reflects the context of that time, not only as a metaphor for the imprisoned women in a patriarchal society, but also as a metaphor for the oppressive living space from which women could not escape. In this enclosed environment, the woman's fear of the house reflects her subconscious resistance to the "rest cure" and her discomfort of being isolated and repressed, suggesting the loneliness and helplessness of women in the patriarchal society.

### **4. RECURRENCE OF THE REPRESSED IN THE NURSERY**

Freud pointed out that the "recurrence of the repressed" is one of the characteristics of the "uncanny". According to literary critic Tong Ming, what recurs is not the totality of repression, but certain traces of it. The forms of repression recurrence are often different, but interrelated, which is called "transference" in psychoanalysis [8].

Given that "The Yellow Wallpaper" adopts the first-person point of view, it is important to realize that the presentation of the environment is not completely objective but is the result of the heroine's subjective selection. In the short story, the heroine spends most of her time in the nursery. Therefore, analyzing the environmental characteristics of the nursery can help us understand the heroine's psychological state.

From the woman's perspective, she never saw a worse wallpaper in her life, whose color is "repellent, almost revolting" [7] and is "a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others" [7]. She uses "hideous enough, unreliable enough, and infuriating enough" [7] to describe the wallpaper, and complains that "I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long" [7]. Besides the yellow wallpaper, the heroine notices a great heavy bed that is "nailed down" and "immovable", as if "it had been through the wars" [7]. She needs to lie on this great

immovable bed and follow the rest cure, for which she exclaims that "I determine for the thousandth time that I WILL follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion" [7].

In these examples, we can feel the heroine's pain of her subordinate position in the patriarchal marriage through the extensive use of negative words, the emphatic tone through capitalized words, and direct expressions of disgust. In that sense, the distasteful wallpaper and the immovable bed though in different forms, are all recurrences of the repressed of the heroine.

## 5. THE HEROINE'S "DOUBLE": THE WOMAN IMPRISONED BEHIND THE WALLPAPER

In *The Uncanny*, Freud pointed out that the "double" is a manifestation of the ego, which takes various forms, such as shadow, reflection, portrait, and so on. The "double" expresses the opposition between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, reason and intuition [2]. Zivkovic thought that the double reflects the sense of externalization of the divided self [8].

In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the imprisoned woman behind the wallpaper appearing in a gothic style is in line with the concept of "the double" in Freud's "the uncanny theory". She is the heroine's "double", reflecting the heroine's suffering situation and gradually awakening self-awareness.

Firstly, as the illusion of the heroine's inner self, the two share a similar situation. In the short story, the outside pattern of the paper becomes "bars" at night, and "the woman behind shakes it, just as if she wanted to get out". Although "she is all the time trying to climb through", "nobody could climb through that pattern". Because "the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down and makes their eyes white!" [7] Here, the situation of the woman behind the wallpaper as "double" reflects both the situation of the heroine and the reality of women in the 19th century. Imprisoned by the patriarchal society, the women who want to escape would end up in tragedy.

Secondly, through the "double", the heroine explores her new identity. In this sense, the woman behind the wallpaper embodies the heroine's awakening of self-awareness, her rebellion against patriarchal society, and her desire for freedom.

The heroine does not want to become a self-sacrificing angel in the house but desires to build a new self. However, due to patriarchal oppression, her sense of rebellion is repressed in reality but is embodied by the "double". It is through tearing down the wallpaper and freeing the imprisoned woman that the heroine establishes her "new self" and attains freedom. As she exclaims, "I've got out at last" and "I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" [7], she becomes a rebel against the hegemonic male culture, posing a great challenge and a powerful threat to the patriarchal society.

The creation of the woman imprisoned behind the wallpaper is related to the development of the American feminist movement in the late 19th century. At that time, women writers not only represented women's issues in their works, but also focused on defining or depicting "new women" with self-awareness. Gilman has constructed a series of "new women" in her works, and the crazy woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the most typical one.

## 6. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of female psychoanalysis, "The Yellow Wallpaper" contains the elements of "uncanny", such as "confined space", "recurrence of the repressed" and the "double", reflecting the distinctive female gothic characteristics. It shows the oppression of women in the patriarchal society of the 19th century, reveals the shortcomings of the patriarchal culture, as well as demonstrates women's awakening self-consciousness in the first American feminist movement and their quest to build a new female identity.

The creation of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not an accident, but a necessity of its time and a reflection of its culture, which not only contributes to the emerging women's movement at the time, but also has profound relevance nowadays.

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