

A SEMIOTIC INTERPRETATION OF GILMANS THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

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Abstract

Semiotics studies any text social or literary human or non-human as systems of signs, controlled by the hidden forces operating within these systems. By revealing the working of the signs to generate meanings, semiotics makes transparent the various factors that influence the construction of signs and their meanings. Male cultural institutions have encoded women as signs of certain negative attributes and these images of women have trapped them in textual representations through language. Semiotic competence can help women readers to extricate themselves from the codes that have trapped them as objects and can also help women authors to encode new signs of women in order to liberate women from misogynistic representations. These new feminist representations can influence society, by shifting the perspective of reality from male to female and change society's attribute to women.

Semiotics is well equipped to bring about this change for the following reasons:

Semiotics questions established systems of meaning “showing that what appears to be unchangeable is humanly created and can be recreated in certain directions, “and therefore, opens up possibilities of changing the meaning of ‘women’ as established by conventions.

By questioning the authenticity of 'reality', revealing it to be a mere semiotic construction of codes, it allows the changing of social reality, with regard to women.

Through the concept that '*truth*' can also be a '*semiotic lie*' presented as cultural truth, semiotics questions the truthfulness of the truth of 'women' as encoded in society, opening up the possibility to encode new female truths.

A Semiotic analysis of the creation of myths which hide the ideology of the dominant group, questions the validity of the myths surrounding women, and helps one to see the partiality of the vision inherent in these myths.

As culture, itself is a semiotic construct consisting of many signs operated by certain hidden forces, the cultural implications of women as signs can be changed by changing the cultural context in which it is encoded.

Offering the possibility to change signification by restructuring the codes, semiotics allows women literary authors to manipulate textual codes to encode new signs and the readers to find new interpretations.

In this background, this paper attempts to interpret and evaluate the semiotic significance in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*...

KEY TERMS: Semiotics, Signs, Significations

In two different parts this chapter discusses the research framework and analyzes the function of Semiotics in creating a textual resolution.

It was Saussure's dream of a general science of signs, that has given birth to semiotics as an interdisciplinary subject. In his *Course in General Linguistics* (1915) he says,

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology; I shall call it semiology. Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology (62). This prophecy has triggered further research in semiotics and today semiotics encompasses all possible fields.

As the only “science” explicitly concerned with elaborating a theory of representation, asserts Kristeva (1969), semiotics becomes self-reflexively critical as well as critical of the representational models of other “sciences.”

Saussure--the founder of semiology--was the first to elaborate the tripartite relationship.

Signifier + Signified = Sign

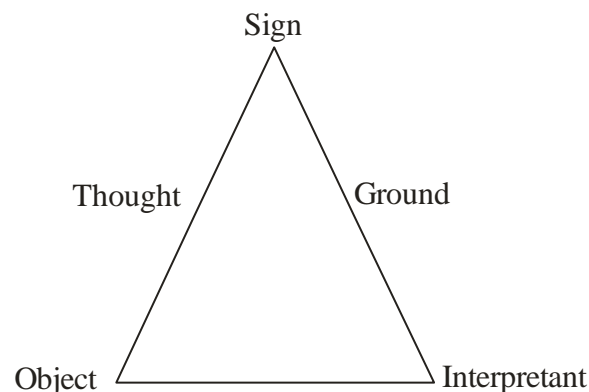
According to Saussure, the linguistic sign unites a sound-image and a concept. The relationship between Signifier and Signified is arbitrary. It should be remembered that neither of these entities exist outside the construct called a sign.

The **signifier**--which has a physical existence--carries the meaning. This is the sign as we perceive it: the marks on the paper or the sounds in the air.

- The **signified** is a mental concept that is the meaning. It is common to all members of the same culture who share the same language.
- The **sign** is the associative total of the two: we speak of it as a signifying construct.

Only when there is a fusion of these two elements a sign can be created, as one cannot exist without the other within the confines of the sign. These signs are not studied in isolation but as a system within which they are arbitrary in nature and differential in quality.

A sign is a representamen with a mental interpretant, and thought is the chief mode of interpretation, which constitutes the ground. The ground also takes into account the context in which the sign is encoded.



"Semiotics then is not concerned with the study of a particular kind of objects, but with ordinary objects insofar as they participate in semiosis"

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is an American socialist, feminist and primarily is a non-fiction writer, writing about the socio - economic status of women. She has also written a Utopian Novel *Moving the Mountains*. The *Yellow Wallpaper*, a short fiction first published in 1892, is not recognized as a powerful portrayal of the sexual politics involved in the husband and wife relationship, which deprives the woman of her 'voice'. The problem of the woman - author, especially in the nineteenth century, who can only be a sign and not be an encoder of signs, is analysed drawing explanations from Gilbert and Gubar's *Mad Woman in the Attic*. It also focuses on the 'male misreading' of female text, signified by the doctor - husband's 'misreading' of his writer - wife. Hence this fiction exemplifies the idea of 'gendered reading', the central idea of the thesis.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) fictionalizes the concept of gendered writing and reading, which is the central premise of this study. Gilman has chosen a semiotic voice to express her feminist protest against patriarchal suppression of the female voice. A feminist-semiotic reading of this short fiction decodes the silenced 'female voice' that is encoded in the wallpapers' semiotic space.

The Yellow Wallpaper (hereafter *The YWP*) though published in 1892, is celebrated as a powerful feminist fiction by contemporary feminists. Besides being a sign of the suppressed female voice, it has become a sign of gendered reading as well, because of the feminist critics' preoccupation with the different issues that the text raises with regard to feminist reading. Gilbert and Gubar in *The Mad Woman in the Attic* treat it as a depiction of the woes of a woman writer. Annette Kolodny in "A Map for Rereading" cites it as an example of male misreading of women's texts. Susan S. Lanser in "Strategies of Coding in Women's Culture" (1987) hails wallpaper as a female metaphor, a special feminist strategy of 'indirection' employed by women to secretly encode their message.

As a leading feminist and social activist during the late 19th century, Gilman argued that women's secondary status in society, and especially their economic dependence on men, was not the result of biological inferiority but rather of culturally enforced behavior. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," which was, in part, a reaction to the oppression of women prevalent during this time, Gilman emphasized these beliefs. In 1926 she stated, regarding her work in general,

“One girl reads this, and takes fire! Her life is changed. She becomes a power -a mover of others -I write for her.”

The Yellow Wallpaper narrates the story of a young married woman who is not allowed the freedom to put her creative writing skills to use and this restraint results in the loss of her mental equilibrium. With its strong feminist overtones conveyed implicitly through sings, it can be studied as a feminist-semiotic text. The patriarchal literary tradition that does not allow free direct expression to women writers, has impelled them to camouflage their experiences using sings and images. Gilman being a nineteenth century woman writer has experienced the constraints imposed on her to its fullest intensity, and hence has encoded her experiences in a fiction that is highly autobiographical, though the subjective experiences are hidden behind a very impersonalized third person narrative.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" critiques only the life of wealthy white women and excludes the plight of low-income and women of colour. The yellow wallpaper, a sickly visual representation of her state of mind illustrates the boundary of this woman's limitation, and thus, a feminine struggle for freedom of expression and self-worth. Nearly all of these critics acknowledge the story as a feminist text written in protest of the negligent treatment of women by a patriarchal society. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is symbolic in the sense that it represents constraints women are held to, like the home and family. In the case of Charlotte Gilman, women were constricted to the set parameters that were determined by men. Women were expected to accept these boundaries and remain in place.

Gilman struggles to throw off the constraints of patriarchal society in order to be able to write. Getting beyond the yellow wallpaper, women defied the power that men held over women, escaped their confinement, and created for themselves a new ideological role. Despite the relatively recent exploration of this story's feminist roots, it was the story's gothic roots that made this story a classic and relevant in its day. It was

“regarded primarily as a supernatural tale of horror and insanity in the tradition of Edgar Allen Poe” (Witalec Vol. 62).

It was this distinction that allowed the story to become a classic and to be studied later in a broad range of perspectives such as biographical, historical, psychological, feminist, semiotic, and socio-cultural (Witaltec Vol. 62).

“The Yellow Wallpaper” lies precisely in its role as a feminine text about feminine textuality; it is in its truest and most politically salient form the woman writer’s text and story. In “An Unnecessary Maze of Sign-Reading” Mary Jacobus alerts us to a particular problematic of feminist readings of the “The Yellow Wallpaper.” She claims that, “the ‘feminist’ reading contradicts the tendency to see women as basically unstable or hysterical, simultaneously (and contradictorily) claiming that women are not mad and that their madness is not their fault” (233). The liberating effect of writing and of fantastic visions of the ‘mad woman’ in “The Yellow Wallpaper” will be contrasted with the stultifying effect of the fantastic visions of the male protagonist.

In the “Afterword” to *The YWP* Elaine R. Hedges records the story of Gilman, the author, who felt trapped “by the role assigned the wife within the conventional nineteenth century marriage” (46). Endowed with artistic potential that could not reach its artistic culmination, Gilman suffered nervous breakdown. The YWP is “an indictment of the incompetent medical advice she received” from the most pre-eminent nerve specialist of her time Dr. S. Weir Mitchell of Philadelphia to whom there is a direct reference in the text.

If *The YWP* as a whole constitutes a semiotic sign, it has as its constituents several other signs. The text, with its struggle to establish itself as a feminist organ, the author who represents any woman writer with her constant fight for survival, the narrator as the protagonist who stands for an enslaved woman, the male characters who embody the patriarchal domination, the few minor female characters who are ‘token women’ deluded by the patriarchal culture, the yellow wallpaper with its myriad patterns and figures that becomes the cage that confines a woman, the female figure that lurks behind the wallpaper who signifies any woman who lives without freedom, and the final madness that also can be a sign of internalized anger or escape from confinement—all these signs go into the creation of highly semiotic text. Besides this, it also becomes a meta - semiotic fiction, because the author encodes the text *The YWP* as a sign of a woman writer’s entrapment, through the protagonist’s encoding of the yellow wallpaper as a sign of entrapment. It is semiotic activity about a semiotic activity.

The YWP as a text thus becomes a sign of male misreading and this sign is inscribed in the internal structure of the text itself, as a sign within a sign. Thus the same act of misreading occurs twice, once within the text, when the doctor-husband ‘misreads’ his wife as sign, and also his wife’s sign, the wallpaper. It happens against externally when readers ‘misread’ *The YWP* only as a meticulous portrayal of madness.

Kolodny in “A Map for Rereading” cites *The YWP* as a typical example of male misreading of women’s texts. Borrowing Harold Bloom’s concept of ‘misreading’, she infers that the reader might judge *The YWP* to be “a purposeful misprision of “*The Pit and the Pendulum*”, reading it as “a continuation of a genre popularized by Poe” (50). She also comments that *The YWP* emphasizes the inaccessibility of female meaning to male interpretation (58). Moreover, she thinks it challenges “the male authority who has traditionally wielded the power to determine what may be written and how it shall be read” (59). *The YWP* thus becomes a sign of gendered writing and reading and also of the conflict between male and female critical canon.

To present herself as a sign of a nineteenth century woman writer, the author becomes the protagonist of *The YWP*. Hence, the author stands as a sign of the character and the character functions as a sign of the author.

In the absence of pen, paper and tongue, the narrator of *The YWP* strives to choose a medium of expression. The search for a language is carried out in desperation within the four walls of the room, that only has a heavy bedstead, windows, a ruined floor and a peeling yellow wallpaper. The other objects not being pliable enough to her imagination, she inevitably chooses the yellow wallpaper that is plastic and can be used as a medium of expression.

Deprived of a language, not because she does not know any language but because she is not allowed one, she finds a medium of expression other than language. Now that the wallpaper is her choice of language - semiotic language to encode her message, she struggles to learn this unfamiliar, tough, complex code that evades her initially:

This paper looks to me as if it knew what vicious influence it had... two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down... those absurd unblinking eyes are everywhere. (16)

The Yellow Wallpaper constantly attracts her and repulses her. It seems to have a life of its own. For this reason, it becomes her code. Slowly, through a process of undercoding, stage by stage she understands the signification emitted by it:

I am getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper.
Perhaps because of the wallpaper. It dwells in my mind so! (19)

The voice that is silenced, the suppressed urge to write, at one point breaks away through the boundary. In a two way process, she becomes an encoder and also a

decoder of the wallpaper; because she encodes the wallpaper as a sign of herself, simultaneously decoding it as a sign, signifying her and other women's entrapment. Thus she gains her right to 'write' and to 'read'.

The sign, the wallpaper, unravels itself to her and eventually through the wallpaper as a medium of expression, she unravels herself - her unconscious self. At this moment of self-realization, when she finds an imprisoned women in herself, both the signs - the narrator and the figure behind the wallpaper merge together and become one sign. This confusion of codes is the cause of her madness. As Radner and Lanser point out

"The yellow wallpaper is a metaphor. The madness indeed is the madness of mistaking the metaphor for the real".

Gilman, succeeds in communicating her message to the readers. The readers are given a glimpse into the working of the sign - system, and the author Gilman controls the signification process from the outside. Inside the text, there is one reader, the narrator, 'reading' *The Yellow Wallpaper*. External to the text, there are two kinds of readers, one group of feminist readers who 'read' the narrator's sign and also 'read' the narrator herself as sign. There is another kind of reader to whom *The YWP* is nothing but a story of a mad woman.

The YWP is also seen as a sign of feminist 'over-interpretation'. Lanser comments that the feminists are repeating the gesture of the narrator, "who will read until she finds what she is looking for" (420). Lanser attempts yet another reading of *The YWP*, placing it "within the discourse of racial anxiety." She thinks that the recurrence of the colour yellow signifies the 'aliens' in America,

"the Asians and Jews, the Italians and Poles... whom the narrator (and perhaps Gilman herself) might want at once to rescue and to flee?" (429).

In "An unnecessary maze of Sign-Reading", Mary Jacobus comments on the reading of *The YWP*:

"Here is a case of hysterical (over-) reading" (231).

She likens the narrator's "obsessive quest for meaning" to that of the feminist critic. She accuses the feminist critics of suppressing other possible readings, for example "the Gothic reading (the narrator is driven mad by the wallpaper)" (234). All these conflicting readings lead to this conclusion:

"*The Yellow Wallpaper*' becomes, not the basis for theory but the model on which it is constructed" (232).

The YWP thus becomes a rich feminist-semiotic text. It also proves the semiotic concept, the meaning of the text can be changed without changing the 'content', by changing only the 'context' of the sign.

But the actual success of *The YWP* is its successful attempt in changing the social attitude to female madness by causing a disturbance in the established male consciousness. Gilman sent a copy of *The YWP* to Dr. Weir Mitchell, the psychiatrist who prevented Gilman from attempting the pen. She was delighted to learn later that

"*he had changed his treatment of nervous prostration since reading her story*" (Gilbert & Gubar 92).

This is the success of feminist semiotics because through a sign *The YWP*, which consists of many internal signs, and by offering herself as a sign encoded in the textual space, Gilman has changed social attitudes. She has caused a change, however slight it may be, in the power / knowledge structure of patriarchal society.

The YWP is from nineteenth century United States, though the narrator's problem as a writer is common to any culture of the nineteenth century. Her 'silenced voice' can also be a problem of any woman of that age.

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