Enclosed Women: On the Use of Enclosure Imagery by 19th-Century Female Authors to Expose Societal Oppression

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The theme of enclosure is not uncommon in the literary writings of nineteenth-century female authors. Scholars have suggested that it was used as a way to portray the figurative imprisonment these women felt in their own lives. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their groundbreaking work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, comment on the use of “obsessive imagery of confinement” and how it “reveals the ways in which female artists feel trapped and sickened both by suffocating alternatives and the culture that created them” (64). The dominating force of patriarchy and the societal restrictions of the time prevented women from being free to fully express their opinions. Instead, women used their talents as writers to create scenes in their works that evoked images of enclosure.

These images are manifested through the depictions of the female protagonist in a physically and mentally enclosed space, specifically through descriptions of the home where she is centrally located. Writing that expresses the author’s feelings can be seen as therapeutic for the individual as well as a statement about society. It can be argued that due to the consistent repetition of the theme of enclosure in its various forms, women writers consciously included images of confinement in their works as an accessible way to express how they felt about the world around them to the general public. This hypothesis is supported by their personal fight for the equality of women in their civic roles. They were fighting to be heard and regarded as independent thinkers. It is important to recognize this phenomenon as it gives a personal and realistic glimpse into an important era in women’s social history.

The nineteenth century is a significant literary period for examining literature written by female authors, if only because of the significant changes occurring in societies. Women still fulfilled their traditional roles as domestic wives and mothers, but early feminist ideals had already begun to surface. Female authors such as Jane Austen and Charlotte Perkins Gilman lived chronologically and geographically distant lives, but both included in their work similar themes of enclosure, indicating that the enclosure motif is not merely coincidental. This motif can also be seen in works by Elizabeth Stoddard, Charlotte Bronte, Kate Chopin, and many others. Though the means of expressing themes of enclosure are different across authors, it is possible to see an underlying theme of oppression in all their works. Women writers felt the need to expose the problems in the dominating patriarchal society and did so through the imagery, themes, and diction in their depiction of physical, spatial, metaphorical, and mental enclosure.

Works such as “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman are especially interesting to focus on because of the popularity that they and their authors have achieved both in their own time and in the present day. Gilman was born in 1860 in Connecticut and wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” in 1890. By critically analyzing Gilman’s works, as well as biographical information about her, it is possible to understand the society that she lived in and her experience of it. Gilman’s short story has become known for its representation of nineteenth-century women’s feelings of oppression as well as its revelations of nineteenth-century misunderstandings about women’s health. This work is an example of how literature gives a firsthand and intimate
look into the minds of people living through an historical period: through a better understanding of women’s history, it is possible to achieve greater gains in women’s lives in the present.

While some earlier female authors were subtle in their depiction of a confined woman within the home, Gilman was more blatant in her portrayal of enclosure themes. She shows her female protagonist’s descent into a seemingly state of madness as a direct result of physical and emotional confinement. By using such an obvious metaphor, she makes a bold statement with one compact short story, evoking different versions of enclosure throughout. The story begins with the female protagonist writing in a journal about the house her husband John has rented for the summer. John, a physician, has diagnosed his wife with a nervous disorder and prescribes rest and relaxation in solace to cure her. She comments on the style of the old house, saying that it is “a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate” and would even venture to call it “a haunted house,” which foreshadows unusual occurrences that happen later on in the story (372). The house and bedroom where the protagonist stays is an example of spatial enclosure as it is isolated from other people and she is literally enclosed within both. The image of the house is an important element for it symbolizes the ownership males had over females. “For not only did a nineteenth-century woman writer have to inhabit ancestral mansions (or cottages) owned and built by men, she was also constricted and restricted by the Palaces of Art and Houses of Fiction male writers authored” (Gilbert and Gubar xi). The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” moved in consequence to her husband’s orders to a home that was built by men and which had been owned, and was now rented, by a man. A second layer of male ownership of females is exemplified in this story when John tries to restrict his wife from writing. The literary canon included primarily male-authored texts, and although John is not an author, he represents these men as he becomes a barrier to the protagonist’s freedom to write.

As a physician, John not only embodies the dominating patriarchal role of the husband, he also takes on the role of the superior intellectual. The story is told through secret journal entries by the female protagonist who can only write in private because writing has been forbidden by her husband. She suffers from mental enclosure in that she must hide her feelings and desires from her husband. Throughout the journal entries about the house and her own feelings, there are recurrent comments about what John would say to each of her opinions. For example, she wanted to stay in a room downstairs, “[b]ut John would not hear of it” so instead they took “a big, airy room” upstairs, which she does not like (373). The protagonist’s constant evocation of her husband’s opinion shows that she listens to his advice and assumes that he must be right, even when her mind tells her something different. His choice of bedrooms has constrained her into one specific room in the house where the bed is described as being “nailed down” (376). Though at times she walks in the gardens outside, for the most part she stays in bed because he has told her to rest, which represents a type of physical enclosure. Through his power as a man and as a doctor, he has confined the protagonist into an isolated room by herself without allowing her the freedom to exercise her own choices. It is only when she gives herself a purpose and starts making her own decisions that she begins to show physical signs of improvement. She must break away from the restrictions of her husband in order to be physically and mentally free.

As the entries progress, the woman begins to describe different elements to the room. One element in particular is the peculiar wallpaper that she describes as “one of those
sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin” (373). She also describes it as “repellent, almost revolting” and “horrid” (374). She repeatedly attempts to discuss repapering the walls but John disagrees, telling her she “was letting it get the better of [her], and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies” (374). The narrator relents, against her better judgment saying, “I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim” (374). She puts his needs above hers and gives in even though she knows the paper bothers her. Before long, she begins to see something within the crazy pattern of the yellow wallpaper; she sees “a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design” (376). The figure that the protagonist is beginning to discern is her own self. On some level, she realizes that the person she really is has to “skulk” around with the façade of a passive and domestic woman. She continues to watch the paper and follow the designs until the figure becomes “a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern” (378). The placement of the figure is important to note as she is ‘behind’ the pattern, as in ‘enclosed behind.’ At night, “[t]he faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out” (378). The woman figure that is stuck behind the pattern and trying to escape can be seen as a metaphor for a woman who feels trapped in her way of life and oppressed by the dominating patriarchal society. Gilbert and Gubar write that “[d]efining themselves as prisoners of their own gender … women frequently create characters who attempt to escape” (85-86). The woman in the paper would fit the criteria of a woman trying to escape as the pattern which she is stuck behind soon becomes bars. This image of the wallpaper as bars is parallel to the “barred windows” of the bedroom (374). This jail-like enclosure imagery clearly links the real to the imagined woman.

The elements of light and dark within the imagery of the barred women symbolize how being in the public view can affect a woman’s reactions to enclosure. The narrator describes the wallpaper woman by saying that “by daylight she is subdued, quiet” (379). Later, when describing the movements of the woman, the protagonist writes that “in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard” (381). Lightness can be paralleled with the outward appearance of a middle-class, nineteenth-century woman, while darkness reflects her inward feelings. In the two descriptions above, the woman does not move in the light: she stays in one place, within her domestic role, in the house. It is her inner self in the darkness that is trying to break free from the bars of oppression. Later, the wallpaper woman is seen creeping outside. This shift from the ‘subdued’ indoor woman to the ‘creeping’ outside woman could be explained by the actions of the protagonist herself. She has decided to begin writing against her husband’s orders. Her thoughts of oppression are no longer held within her alone. By writing them down and sharing them, she has begun to ‘creep’ into the daylight.

As the woman continues to watch the wallpaper, her thoughts become more in tune with the wallpaper woman until there is an ambiguity in the text about whether the two are separate women or just one woman. The story ends with the protagonist ripping off the wallpaper and becoming the woman in the wallpaper who creeps among the patterns. At the end she says “I’ve got out at last … in spite of [John] and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (384). This statement is intriguing because the character of Jane is never mentioned until this line. Since the wallpaper woman is in essence the narrator’s double, it is possible that she has now taken over the narrative and is
calling the façade of herself, the outside version, Jane. Despite Jane’s effort to remain a passive, domestic housewife, her inner rebellious self has broken through and is now in control. Jane Thrailkill agrees with this interpretation: “The narrator recognizes the woman in the paper as herself, and suddenly sees her embodied, observing, recording self as the enemy, referring to her in the third person as ‘Jane’” (551). The idea of the outside woman as an enemy, however, is debatable. Carol Davison writes that “she ‘frees’ the woman in the wallpaper whom she now recognizes—in a positive moment of union as opposed to fragmentation—as herself” (66). Each version of the woman, the outside and the inside, combine to make one person. Jane cannot be ignored as she is half of the double. By referencing both a male and female character in the last sentence of the story, these final words of the wallpaper woman show the many difficulties of trying to evade the oppressions of society. In order for the wallpaper woman to emerge out of Jane, she had to overcome male dominated restrictions as well as other females who would argue that making a feminist statement would be unladylike. The woman’s last line implies that the inner woman can no longer be hidden now that she has been released from her enclosure, yet there is a contradiction with the final sentence.

The ending of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is ambiguous and is left up to interpretation. The question remains of what will become of this new woman who is part Jane and part woman in the wallpaper. She says that she cannot be put back into the wallpaper, yet in the final sentence, she writes that her husband fainted in the doorway and she now had to “creep over him every time” (15). This insinuates that even though she thinks she is free, she is still trapped within the room. It is arguable that Gilman is implying that even when a woman has realized the entrapment which she is within, she cannot escape. Her mind may be free, but she is still held to the same societal standards and must remain within her physical space. Others may view it as madness, but for the individual, perhaps she feels as though she, at least her mind, is finally free. This unhopeful ending was perhaps written to inspire change.

Writing fiction became a way that women could speak out about their feelings because they could project them onto their female protagonists and view them objectively. There was a “common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society” (Gilbert and Gubar xii). The protagonist broke from her social confinement by recognizing the caged women that existed within her. She had to confront her own double, the woman who represented her entrapped feelings, and she had to let her free. Gilman’s protagonist broke from her literary confinement by disobeying John’s orders to give up writing. Though in the beginning she knew writing could help her, saying that “congenial work … would do me good,” it is not until she sees the woman in the paper that she fully grasps the power of writing (372). She writes, “And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!” (377). The time between each entry decreases as the story progresses. Since there is no indication of actual dates, the timeline is not completely clear, but Gilman gives clues as to the frequency of the writings. Between the first two entries there is a gap of two weeks and the third one does not take place until after the Fourth of July, presumably weeks later. In contrast, the last two entries are described as being consecutive. As the narrator becomes more connected with the caged woman in the wallpaper, her obedience to John, as well as to the dominating patriarchal structure as a whole, diminishes. She breaks away from society’s demands on her as well as from the literary confinement she suffered as a woman.
From an early age, Gilman wanted to be in the public role to effect change in society. She watched her mother, who is described as having a “slavish commitment to her children and narrow circle of domestic life,” suffer through the disownment of their neighbors that arose from her decision to divorce her husband (Berkin 21). Gilman used her “stern self-discipline” to take on a role of social reform to try and change “the dire vision of a woman’s lot in the world.” Though women’s independence was only an emerging idea in the 1880s, “the general contours of [Gilman’s] society reinforced both her notion of women’s segregated sphere and the heretical quality of her career aspirations” (25). Her dedicated efforts to influence societal change, however, were put aside with her decision to marry. Soon after, she experienced an emotionally hard pregnancy that ended in what would now be diagnosed as post-partum depression, but, as in the case of her protagonist, was at the time diagnosed as a nervous disorder. Her husband sent her to visit Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, who was the leading doctor in woman’s health. He prescribed to her a completely domestic life, filled with constant interaction with her child and without writing. When this did not work, she separated from her husband and, though he remained close, “she identified with the despair of vulnerable and abused women” (Berkin 28). She soon moved to California and, in order to support herself, her child, and her mother, she began giving lectures on reform and writing essays and articles on labor issues for women. Gilman’s earlier dreams of activism in a public role advocating for social reform became real.

Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” with the intention of helping other women who were suffering in similar situations to that of her protagonist, as well as herself. She deliberately sent her story to Dr. Weir Mitchell in the hopes that he would read it and begin to understand that his prescribed treatments were not helping women. A fellow writer and friend of Gilman, Alexander Black, quotes her as saying, “I wrote it to preach. If it is literature, that just happened” (63). She wanted her message to be heard; women’s needs needed to be met in a better fashion. Gilman later heard that Weir had indeed changed his method of treating “nervous prostration” in his female patients after having read her story. Her comment to this was “If that is a fact I have not lived in vain” (Gilbert and Gubar 92). By writing her story, Gilman reached not only the women who read it and could identify with it, but she was able to help the women who may not have read her story, but were later patients of Dr. Weir’s.

Gilman is often credited with being a feminist because she spoke about the inequality of women both through her writing and in her speeches; however, this is not what she intended. She publicly declared: “I abominate being called a feminist,” (Allen 163) and instead preferred the term “humanist” as she felt she was trying to further the human race as a whole and move away from the “dualism of the sexually segregated world into which she had been born” (Berkin 38). “Advancing humanity as a whole,” Judith Allen writes, “required a temporary focus on making womanhood equal, fit, and independent” (165). It was not that Gilman was against men, she simply understood that in order to make society better, women’s issues needed to be addressed. Allen continues by saying that “women needed attention simply because their social, economic, and cultural retardation obstructed human progress,” which is the reasoning Gilman gave for her involvement with furthering the equality of women.

It is important to ask why Gilman was so adamant about not being called a feminist. One possible reason is the newness of the term “feminist” and its associations with radicalism. Although she openly spoke out
against the disadvantages of women, by labeling herself as a “humanist,” one who only desires the development of the entire human race, she was allowing herself to still be an accepted woman in society. By being called a feminist, Gilman would be distancing herself from the approval of society. Black, wrote: “I have avoided calling her a ‘feminist’ not merely because the word is foolish, but because her emphasis on women has been the stressing of an outstanding imperative in a scheme as wide as life rather than either a class complaint or a specialist infatuation” (66). He implies that the term ‘feminist’ does not do justice to the progress that Gilman was attempting to create. She was not complaining about a triviality of life, instead she was trying to set right a wrong that had been established many years before. As Gilman herself argued, she was a ‘humanist’ who was working towards the progression of the human race as a whole.

Gilman is quoted as having said: “It is not that women are really smaller-minded, more timid and vacillating; but that whosoever, man or woman, lives always in a small dark place, is always guarded, protected, directed and restrained, will become inevitably narrowed and weakened by it” (Lane 270). Women are not innately weaker than men: it is the enclosure within the home and its metaphorical parallels that causes women to be subordinate. Gilman, as well as many other female authors throughout time, created physically enclosed spaces for her female protagonists to show how her sex was confined. By writing great works of fiction, she showed that women are not “smaller-minded,” and by including critical comments on the structure of society, she showed that they are not “timid” either. It is important to recognize this recurrent theme in literature, as it was written in order to invoke change. Berkin writes that Gilman “…sought the integrated self, and even at those moments when she felt it impossible for herself in her own lifetime, she was determined to secure it for future generations of women and men” (38). Gilman hoped to not only better society for herself and women in the nineteenth century, but for her daughter and all other women to come.

Works Cited


