

Changing Janes:

“The Yellow Wallpaper” as a Case of Dual
Consciousness

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman originally wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) to criticize a medical treatment known as the “rest cure,” which was commonly prescribed for women suffering from “neurasthenia” or a lack of nervous energy. Gilman had personally experienced the “rest cure” as a period of intense suffering, and she was pleased to learn that her story had successfully convinced physicians to alter their treatment methods. As neurologists stopped diagnosing “neurasthenia” in the early twentieth century, however, Gilman’s story gradually fell into obscurity. It was not rediscovered until the early 1970s, when it was recognized as a landmark of feminist literature. It has since been the topic of countless essays that have struggled to explain how the apparent madness of the protagonist can also be interpreted as a form of feminist emancipation. Helen Pinsent’s paper covers much of the same territory, although she does two things that are highly original and innovative: 1) she discusses Gilman’s story not in terms of “neurasthenia” but rather in terms of non-unitary theories of the mind and 2) she shows how this new scientific context potentially resolves the ambiguity of the story’s conclusion by suggesting that “losing one’s mind” and “finding oneself” are not necessarily contradictory possibilities. Pinsent thus implies that Gilman appropriated the scientific concept of “double consciousness” to describe the experience of patriarchal oppression and resistance.

—Dr. Anthony Enns

“I’ve got out at last,” said I, “in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!”

(Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper”)

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Amongst the final lines of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” we see the name Jane for the first time. Who is she? It is unlikely that Gilman would have introduced a new character so late in the story and with no further comment. The only other unnamed figure at this point is the first-person narrator herself. The most logical conclusion, then, is that this troubled woman has suffered some sort of alteration in her consciousness. This split is often studied as a generic sort of madness or psychosis¹ brought on by patriarchal oppression and physical confinement. But is this approach enough? Can we call Jane crazy and walk away, or is there something fruitful in looking more closely at her condition? Theorists who oversimplify Jane’s disorder, and search only for meaning in its possible causes, often note inconsistencies or contradictions in the story’s ostensibly feminist message; these readings fail because they overlook the possibility that the illness itself reveals an important element of Gilman’s thesis. Jane’s condition at the close is

¹ Beverly A. Hume argues that the narrator’s “madness” (477) spirals out of her obsession with assigning meaning to the hideousness of her wallpaper, and views the anti-patriarchal elements as peripheral. Paula A. Treichler is more interested in the diegetic diagnosis of the narrator’s condition, and treats Jane’s end state as merely an intensification of her “nervous depression” (1, qtd in Treichler 61). Treichler does, however, use the term “madness” (67) to describe Jane’s final condition, and calls her liberation “compromised” (67) because of it. Jürgen Wolter uses the term “insanity” (207), and worries that her “physically weak and psychologically fragile” nature “may corroborate the patriarchal argument Gilman set out to disprove” (207).

immediately distinguishable from the straight-jacket, rubber-room kind of madness we often imagine, because she finds enough composure to write the end of her story down; still, she maintains the new personality that has taken over her body. I propose we consider Jane's illness as a case of what nineteenth-century physicians called "dual consciousness" (Proctor 86)—the phenomenon of two distinct personalities occupying the same body. Jane's transformation mirrors certain elements of the cases of Felida X, published in 1877, and of Mary Reynolds, published in 1889.² When Jane is compared to other cases of dual consciousness and her madness is read as a permanent switch to a second rational state, her actions no longer contradict the anti-patriarchal message of the story: instead, Jane is a woman who successfully escapes patriarchal oppression by shifting to a second personality devoid of the hierarchical ties that patriarchy reinforces.

In 1877, Richard Proctor described the phenomenon of dual consciousness as the theory that "we have two brains, each perfectly sufficient for the performance of mental functions" (86), calling into question the ultimate essence of individuality, and the natural unity of the soul. Under this theory, each body would be host to "two mental lives" (86), often opposite in nature, with distinct memories, and capable of very different personal choices and habits. For most, only one brain would ever manifest itself; for a few,

² From a talk given by Gilman's own physician, Weir Mitchell, and published just three years before the publication of "The Yellow Wallpaper".

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the brains would take turns operating the body (though not necessarily in so polite a manner as the term implies). The cases of Felida X and Mary Reynolds detail each girl's transitions from a reticent, often anxious, personality to someone more vivacious and fearless. We see a similar transformation in "The Yellow Wallpaper," as Jane, over the course of her confinement, undergoes sudden changes in personality, in speech and writing style, in sleep patterns, and in her connection to her environment. Each of Jane's changes has some correlation to Felida's and Mary's, and the process as a whole reveals a new woman, free from the bonds and bondage that have kept her "sick" (1).

Well before Jane's shift, the story gives it both a medical and a literary foundation. Jane and her husband have rented a house in the country as part of her treatment for a "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" (1). This disorder fits into a category Proctor describes as a theoretical precursor to episodes of dual consciousness, "some disorder either of the nervous system or of the circulation," claiming that "one can hardly imagine it possible that a disorder of the sort should be localised so far as the brain is concerned, while in other respects affecting the body generally" (89). In the case of Mary Reynolds, her nephew John reports that she suffered from "fits" that he describes as "certainly hysterical" (3). The primary symptom of Jane's "nervous depression" is fatigue, which manifests when she "write[s] [. . .] in spite of [her family]" (2), and when she "take[s] pains to control" her irritation with her husband (2); but she also gets "nervous"

(4) when she is around her infant son. These symptoms suggest Gilman is describing neurasthenia, a nervous illness commonly diagnosed in the nineteenth century, and which Gilman argued stemmed from women attempting to adhere to the oppressive and often ill-suited roles that patriarchal society assigned to them (Breakdown 204). This diagnosis, then, serves as both a warning of and a motive for Jane's eventual change of consciousness.

In literary terms, Gilman lays groundwork for the shift by demonstrating the narrator's flight from conflict. The most obvious sign is Jane's habit of "tak[ing] pains to control [her]self" (2), as mentioned above: she suppresses her suffering (3), her "whim[s]" (4), and even her tears (6) before her husband and sister-in-law. The one time she does admit crying in front of John is when she attempts "a real earnest reasonable talk with" him (7) to propose taking a short trip. Jane tries as much as possible to avoid confrontation, and when it needs to happen, she crumbles in the face of it. She cannot manage to reconcile herself completely to John's diagnosis and treatment, however, which maintains a conflict that she cannot ultimately escape as her first self.

Close reading provides yet further evidence of Jane's persistent inner division. Her description of the house is peppered with the rhetoric of isolation and conflict: from the rigidly designed grounds with their "hedges and walls and gates that lock" (2), to the house's history of "legal trouble, [. . .] something about the heirs and co-heirs" (2), to the wallpaper itself, whose "uncertain curves [. . .] destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions" (3), Jane's double-

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meanings suggest that, despite her efforts to “let it alone and talk about the house” (2), she is unable to separate herself from her feelings of oppression.

Interestingly, Paula Treichler notes that this “first journal entry consists of 39 separate paragraphs” (62), demonstrating Jane’s inability to rest on a single subject. Jane maintains this pattern throughout the story, and among these topic changes are eight noteworthy moments when she turns from discussing either her keepers or her illness to talking about the wallpaper itself. This habit suggests that, despite his condescension and general awfulness, John is right: if they change the wallpaper, Jane will fixate on “the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs” (4), because the paper is really just a focus for her own “unheard of contradictions.” Well before she shows any switch to another consciousness, she proves herself physically and mentally susceptible to a split.

Once Jane does begin shifting, her two selves are marked by differences in language patterns, sleep patterns, and in how she relates to her surroundings; these changes resemble descriptions of differences in the respective states of Felida X and Mary Reynolds. While the two case studies make no explicit mention of speech styles, Felida’s case does specify that before her condition presented itself, “she differed in no respect from other girls” (90). Similarly, Treichler notes that early Jane’s writing shows stereotypically feminine markers: “not only are its topics limited, it is marked formally by exclamation marks, italics,

intensifiers, and repetition of the impotent refrain, 'What is one to do?'" (66). At first, Jane's language is deferential and often passive, as when she notes, "It is an airy and comfortable room as any one need wish, and, of course, I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim" (4), which matches John Reynolds' description of Mary as "sedate and reserved" (3).

Jane makes her first journal entry as her second self a few entries before the end of the story, beginning with the line "Life is much more exciting now than it used to be" (10). Immediately, this new Jane distinguishes herself from the former, speaking with more vivacity and eagerness. Jürgen Wolter cites Catherine Golden, who notes "the narrator's increased use of nominative-case pronouns" (206); says Golden: "force and boldness [. . .] punctuate the writing in the final lines of the once timid narrator" (qtd in Wolter 206). Second-Jane resembles Second-Mary, who is "buoyant and social" (8), and Second Felida, who "smil[es] gaily, speak[s] briskly, and trill[s] [. . .] over her work" (90). Felida notably ceases complaining of pain in her second state, which matches Jane's behaviour as well: Jane describes her change as an actual physical recovery, and attributes it to the wallpaper, when only two pages earlier she is begging John to "take [her] away" from it (8). In general, she is "more quiet than [she] was" (10), but when she says, "I turned [John's comment] off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was *because* of the wallpaper" (11), she reveals it as the silence of dismissal and deceit rather than deference. Like Mary Reynolds and Felida X, Jane's second

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self exhibits all the animation and confidence that her first self lacks.

Jane's newfound fascination with the paper corresponds with her change in sleep habits. The story links the two thematically in the entry that describes the change in the wallpaper's pattern from day to night: "by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind" (9); "[a]t night in any kind of light, [. . .] it becomes bars" (10). In other words, by day, her first self recognizes it as symbolic of the spark in her that resists John's patriarchal dominance—a revolutionary itch she cannot scratch – and at night, her second self sees it as the prison holding her in. After this section, the narrator's state is inseparable from her account of the time of day; so when Jane announces her switch to largely nocturnal habits two entries later ("I don't sleep much at night, for it is so interesting to watch developments; but I sleep a good deal in the daytime" (11)), it signals a shift to her trapped second self.

From this point, what could charitably be called a fixation degenerates into an outright obsession. The woman she imagines behind the pattern soon "gets out in the daytime" (12), when Jane "can see her out of every one of [her] windows" (12), meaning she can never escape the paper, even if she can avoid looking at it. The wallpaper dominates not only her vision but her sense of smell: "not bad – at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met" (11). Lastly, the paper infiltrates her sense of touch in two ways: first as she rattles the bars that hold the

woman in (or out), thereby tearing off sections of the paper (13), second as she “creep[s] smoothly on the floor, and [her] shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall” (15). By the end of the story, she has shifted so completely into her new consciousness that she thinks she has “come out of that wallpaper” (14), thereby claiming the paper as home and birthplace.

Appropriately, Jane greets her new world as a child might – curious about her immediate surroundings, but apprehensive about going beyond them:

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room to
creep around as I please!
I don't want to go outside. I won't even if Jennie
asks me to.
For outside you have to creep on the ground, and
everything is green instead of yellow. (14-5)

Wolter expresses concern that Jane's late rejection of the outside indicates that she “learns to accept [John's] confinement, but he fails to consider that a new consciousness means new boundaries: this Jane has not been fighting to leave the room, she has been fighting to leave the wall – she has been successful, and is now committed to assessing the new outside frontier (that is also marked with bars) before engaging with it. Thus, Jane's hesitation at the end is not a regression (Hume 481), merely a plateau of learning: her new language style, sleep routine, and habitat will need getting used to before she can move on. Mary Reynolds' second consciousness began in a

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similarly child-like state: during her first major episode, “[a]ll of the past that remained to her was the faculty of pronouncing a few words, and this seems to have been as purely instinctive as the wailings of an infant” (4). Like Mary, Jane becomes like “a new being, for the first time ushered into this world” (Mitchell 4), and behaves accordingly.

More significant than her speech loss (which reversed with teaching) was Mary’s severed emotional connection to her friends and family. Her memory loss had robbed her of any knowledge of these connections. Although Jane’s memory of her first self is intact, her ties to John and Jennie are not. As her shift becomes more complete, she refers to John in less intimate terms: “dear John” (7) becomes “John” (8-14), and then “young man” (15), and finally “that man” in the last paragraph of the story. Although Jane remembers who John is, as Felida X does, she, like Mary Reynolds, views her relations “as for the most part strangers and enemies, among whom she [is], by some remarkable and unaccountable means, transplanted” (Mitchell 4-5).

One might be inclined to read such an ending as inauspicious, even tragic – but given that “[t]he first lesson in [Mary’s] education was to teach her by what ties she was bound to those by whom she was surrounded, and the duties devolving upon her accordingly” (4), can we really be sad that Jane has lost this opportunity? Jane’s permanent severance from emotional ties to John and Jennie is immediately followed by increased energy and an improved mood—her break has finally cured her

neurasthenia, allowing her “nervous serenity” (Breakdown 203) as a single, fully dedicated self. While Mary Reynolds’ second self relearned her former intellectual and vocational skills, she regained “no recollection of the feelings” (12) of her former relationships. Should the same thing happen to Jane, she would be able to leave behind the conflict and repression that plagues her at the story’s outset.

Mary Reynolds made a switch that left her “permanently in her second state” (Mitchell 11, italics removed). What would a permanent change for Jane say about the story’s ending? Second-Jane’s grip on reality at the end of the story is tenuous; but, since she is able to write her own story, she does seem fully functional, as Felida X was in her second state, with “moral and intellectual faculties, though different, [. . .] incontestably sound” (Proctor 90). Should Jane remain shifted into her second consciousness, it seems likely she would, like Mary, eventually relearn her former faculties and assimilate into society as a new identity. What she would not regain, though, is her attachment to her overbearing husband and abuse-enabling sister-in-law. This prospect offers a hope in the story’s ending absent from any other reading. What theorists have been studying for years as a tragic descent into madness can be seen rather as a freeing split from an oppressive and even abusive relationship.

Thus, when “The Yellow Wallpaper” is read in the context of dual consciousness and with Gilman’s own socio-medical theories in mind, it becomes a positive, though harrowing, story of liberation. Second-Jane is an

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exaggerated model – not necessarily an idealized pattern to follow; but she does have a much greater hope of eventual happiness than First-Jane ever did. In fact, Jane’s struggle presents one notable departure in Jane’s story from those of Felida X and Mary Reynolds: a possible trigger. Given Gilman’s position on the adverse effects of “interference with natural physical habits” (Breakdown 203), she may, without realizing it, be telling the story of a forced split, an early conception of Dissociative Identity Disorder, in Jane’s attempt to free herself from abuse. Whatever the cause, Jane’s new consciousness, rather than madness, can be viewed as a new sanity – a fresh start. With her conflict resolved, her energy restored, and her creativity reclaimed, she can now be happy: she has “got out at last [. . .] in spite of” (15) her first self, and destroyed the physical manifestation of her original captivity.

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