New Criticism, New Historicism and Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper is a story that lends itself well to layered analysis. Two major literary theories—New Criticism and New Historicism—offer distinct but complementary ways of understanding its meaning. While New Criticism focuses on the text itself, New Historicism adds crucial depth by situating the story within its historical and cultural context.

Through close reading, the reader can gain an intimate understanding of the story and the circumstances therein. But New Historicism, through its scholarly research, can take these insights and inform society through literature. This paper will explore how each theory interprets key moments in the text—and how, together, they reveal not only what the story means, but why it matters.

New Criticism emerged in the early 20th century as a way of analyzing texts by focusing solely on their structure, form, and language—what was on the page. Writers like T.S. Eliot, one of its foundational figures, believed that the meaning of a work should be found within the work itself. If the author wanted readers to know their biographical background, Eliot suggested, they would have written it into the text. The goal of New Criticism was not to dismiss context, but to make literary analysis more democratic by giving readers the tools to interpret literature through close reading—without requiring insider knowledge or classical education.

This approach treats the text like a carefully crafted artifact. In The Yellow Wallpaper, New Criticism encourages us to examine the structure of the story and the language of the narrator. For example, when the narrator repeats phrases like “John says,” we can see the pattern of her obedience through language itself. The syntax is passive, the subject is always her husband, and the story is filled with symbolic cues that reflect her internal state—particularly the wallpaper, which becomes a metaphor for psychological confinement and fragmentation. These insights emerge through close reading, without any need to look beyond the text itself.

While no doubt using many of the tenets of close reading, New Historicism is able to expound even greater meaning for society by employing the cultural, historical, and biographical information it has at its fingertips.

The scholarly work of New Historicists builds upon the findings of New Criticism’s close reading by placing them in the broader context of the time—its culture, medical practices, and the lived experience of women during that era. In doing so, it brings to light many social and systemic issues.

New Criticism is a method of literary analysis that emerged in the early 20th century as an alternative to previous approaches that focused heavily on an author’s biography or historical context. Instead, New Criticism emphasizes close reading and treats the text as a self-contained work of art. Literary devices such as imagery, symbolism, irony, and structure are examined for how they function within the text itself to create meaning.

In The Yellow Wallpaper, Charlotte Perkins Gilman primarily uses symbolism and irony to highlight both the reasons for and the unfolding of the narrator’s mental deterioration.

Symbolism is a literary device in which an element of the story represents a deeper or alternative meaning beyond its literal one. Gilman uses the wallpaper in her short story as a symbol of the narrator's mental decline, allowing the reader to track her psychological unraveling through her growing obsession with it. Her journal entries, which increasingly focus on the wallpaper, illustrate how it functions as a symbolic extension of her disturbed inner world. Firstly, she recognizes that something is not right about the wallpaper, which mirrors her early awareness that something is also not right within herself. She struggles to find order or pattern in the chaotic design of the wallpaper, just as she struggles to make sense of her own mental state. The wallpaper's putrid yellow color is also sickly and off-putting, symbolizing the way she may feel about her condition—trapped, ill, and emotionally stagnant. Eventually, she begins to see a woman behind the wallpaper, which is a clear symbol of how she feels trapped in her own mind, separated from the world by layers she cannot tear away. In an article by MacPike, she discusses how the narrator's room and its furnishings symbolize the oppressive forces that contribute to her mental deterioration. She notes, "The furnishings of the narrator's room become a microcosm of the world that squeezes her into the little cell of her own mind…"

From here, Gilman begins to use situational irony to further shape the story and deepen the reader's understanding of the narrator's descent. Situational irony is when the outcome is different than expected. Her husband, John—who is also her physician—insists on this getaway as a means to improve her condition. The situational irony lies in the fact that the very conditions meant to heal her actually exacerbate her mental decline. Although the narrator expresses her discomfort with the room and even asks to be moved, John refuses. He insists the nursery is best for her recovery, despite her protests: "I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window… but John would not hear of it" (Gilman 648). The very room she wants to escape becomes the space in which her breakdown occurs—adding to the symbolic power of the wallpaper and the ironic tragedy of her situation. "The irony in this situation is that despite John's certainty that he's doing the right

thing by confining Jane to her bedroom and isolating her from other people, this treatment plan actually worsens her condition, pushing her to have a full-on mental breakdown at the end of the story." (LitCharts)

Dramatic irony plays a central role, as John continues to believe she is getting better, while the reader—through her journal—sees unmistakable signs of decline. The narrator even tries to convince herself that she is improving, just as she tries to find something likable in the wallpaper. These efforts reflect her inner conflict and growing instability. Ultimately, the greatest irony is that the rest cure, designed to restore her health, instead isolates her to the point that she becomes unrecognizable—even to her husband, who faints at the sight of what she has become.

Gilman's use of the literary devices of symbolism and irony clearly illustrates the narrator's mental decline over the course of the short story. Through close reading, it becomes evident how these techniques shape the reader's understanding of the protagonist's unraveling mind. While this analysis has focused on the text itself, it also lays the groundwork for exploring the broader social conditions of the early 20th century—an angle that can be examined further through the lens of New Historicism.

While no doubt using many of the tenets of close reading, New Historicism is able to expound even greater meaning for society by employing the knowledge it has, by employing the cultural, historical, and biographical information within its focus. Stephen Greenblatt, often credited with pioneering New Historicism, describes the approach as "a method concerned with the social energies that circulate through literary texts" (Greenblatt 5). In other words, New Historicism examines literature not in isolation, but as deeply connected to the historical and cultural conditions of its time. Through the lens of New Historicism, we can see that the protagonist of

The Yellow Wallpaper is not only a victim of her illness, but also a victim of the historical and cultural expectations placed upon women during the late nineteenth century.

During this time, a woman's primary role was as wife and mother within the domestic sphere. New Historicism allows us to see that the narrator's suffering is not only personal but deeply rooted in cultural and historical forces. Gilman's story serves as both personal narrative and social critique — a product of its time but still hauntingly relevant. We can see that the protagonist in the story follows these cultural norms almost instinctively. In her journal entries, she repeats again and again: "John says,", because John is not only her husband, but also her physician. And, importantly in this historical context, he is a man.

She does attempt to take an active role in her own recovery by suggesting to John that she be moved to a different room — one she feels would be better for her health and state of mind. However, John immediately disagrees, dismissing her concerns, and as a result, she remains stranded in the nursery with the yellow wallpaper, despite how detrimental it clearly is to her mental health. Once again, John's authority as husband, doctor, and man overrides her own voice.

In addition to following her husband's authority, the narrator of The Yellow Wallpaper is also subjected to the popular medical treatment of the time known as the "rest cure". Developed by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell in the late nineteenth century, the rest cure was specifically designed for women diagnosed with "hysteria" or nervous disorders. It required absolute bed rest, isolation, and the complete avoidance of creative or intellectual stimulation — exactly the things that might have brought the narrator comfort or healing. Instead of listening to her instincts or allowing her to write freely, John insists that rest is the only answer because that is what Dr. Mitchell recommends. Scholar Elaine Showalter notes that the rest cure often "produced the

very symptoms it was supposed to cure," particularly in women whose depression or anxiety was worsened by enforced isolation (Showalter 135).

In this way, the rest cure not only failed to help the narrator — it actively contributed to her deterioration, both physically and mentally. Once again, the medical practices of the time prioritized control over care, obedience over healing. As the narrator explains, "If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—**what is one to do?**" She later continues, "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." She is trapped by the obedience to her husband and physicians.

A comprehensive review by Leamy et al. (2011) in the journal Psychiatric Services discusses the evolution of mental health recovery models. They emphasize the importance of personal agency and social inclusion in recovery, contrasting sharply with the passive, isolating nature of the rest cure. The study underscores that recovery is not solely about symptom remission but also about reclaiming one's identity and place in society. (Leamy et al. 1128). This perspective aligns with the experiences of Gilman's narrator, who is subjected to enforced inactivity and isolation, leading to a deterioration of her mental state. By highlighting such scholarly critiques, you can effectively argue that the rest cure, rather than being a benign treatment, often exacerbated the very conditions it aimed to alleviate. However, it would be too simple to blame the rest cure itself for the narrator's suffering. After all, medical practices evolve with time, and doctors like Weir Mitchell were products of their own cultural moment. The true danger lay not in the

treatment, but in the refusal to listen — to hear and believe the patient's own experience, and in this instance, specifically a woman.

Ultimately, Gilman's story and New Historicism reflect a larger truth that reaches far beyond its own historical moment: isolation, division, and the silencing of voices are tools long used to oppress — not just within homes or marriages, but within entire cultures. Gilman's story reminds us that keeping women subordinate is not just a personal tragedy, but a cultural strategy — one that divides not only homes, but the world itself. New Historicism helps to highlight the historical, medical and cultural issues at the forefront of Gilman's narrative.

Perhaps the most important intersection between New Criticism and New Historicism occurs when the narrator asks, "…what is one to do?" From a New Critical perspective, the line expresses despair—rhetorical, unresolved, echoing the narrator's descent into madness. But from a New Historicist point of view, this question is not merely personal—it is the cry of a woman trapped by the medical, cultural, and patriarchal systems of her time. New Historicism shines here, identifying this moment as the very heart of the problem—a system that offers no answer, no escape, and no voice. The question is not posed just to the reader but also to society as a whole.

It is important to note that some stories carry more weight than others. Not to diminish any other work of art, but The Yellow Wallpaper addresses some very serious issues in society, particularly for women. Through the lens of New Criticism, we can appreciate the careful structure and symbolism that reflect the narrator's psychological descent. But New Historicism takes that reading further, showing us how that descent was shaped by historical gender roles,

medical practices, and cultural silencing. Together, the two theories allow us to not only understand the text, but to see why it continues to resonate today. New Criticism lets us hear the story. New Historicism amplifies it so society can listen. New Historicism uses the tenets of New Criticism by placing them in the broader context of the time—its culture, medical practices, and the lived experience of women during that era. In doing so, it brings to light many of the social and systemic issues that might otherwise remain hidden or widely unheard. These issues remain deeply relevant today, especially in light of recent Supreme Court decisions, and the legislation introduced by Project 2025, both of which continue to impact women's lives.

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