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## Queerness, Affect Theory, and Cruel Optimism in "The Yellow Wall-paper"

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QUEERNESS, AFFECT THEORY, AND CRUEL OPTIMISM  
IN “THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER”

by

Lauren Stengel

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2021

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts

Department of English  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
August 2023

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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

QUEERNESS, AFFECT THEORY, AND CRUEL OPTIMISM  
IN “THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER”

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the field of English

Approved by:

Dr. Joe Shapiro

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
May 29, 2023

## **AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF**

Lauren Stengel, for the Master of Arts degree in English literature, presented on May 29, 2023 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

**TITLE: QUEERNESS, AFFECT THEORY, AND CRUEL OPTIMISM IN “THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER”**

**MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Joe Shapiro**

The way in which the resolution of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper” seems both enabling and disabling when it comes to the possibility of resistance to structures of power has been the subject of much criticism. Challenging Walter Benn Michael’s claim that “The Yellow Wall-paper” critiques only women’s exclusion from capitalist labor and not capitalist labor itself, I argue that while the narrator’s freedom/unfreedom at the end of the story attests to her own attachment to these structures, the story itself does not. Further I argue that Gilman, in fact, is working through her own cultural critique similar to Lauren Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism.

## **DEDICATION**

To my mom, my dad, my sisters, and my grandma, the pillars of my life. Mom, you are my guiding light and my unwavering support. From the very beginning of this adventure, you have embraced me with love, nurtured my dreams, and encouraged my growth. Your own strength, resilience, and optimism inspire me daily, reminding me of the incredible woman I strive to become. Thank you for always believing in me, reminding me of my potential, and for never giving up on me. To my grandma, without whose love and support I wouldn't be here today. Thank you for always being my biggest fan. To my sisters who love me unconditionally. You have been my cheerleaders for so many years, and I am so blessed to have you both. And finally, to my dad. The world lost you too soon. I hope that I am making you proud.

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## HEADING 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Still I will proudly declare that  
there is something queer about it.*

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wall-paper”

Many critics of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper” have pointed to the parallel between the wallpaper and the paper of the narrator’s diary. The woman our narrator discovers behind the wallpaper is trapped behind the confusing, self-destructive, even ugly, pattern and can’t “escape” except through the destruction of the paper, i.e., the incremental peeling away. The narrator is similarly trapped. She is alone, alienated, has no friends, no companionship whatsoever, and is forced to—secretly—express herself in the only way she can, writing in her diary. The narrator’s selfhood is contained within the paper of the journal just as the woman is contained behind the “outside pattern” of the wallpaper. At the end of the short story, the woman behind the wallpaper is freed(?)/not freed(?) through the destruction of the paper and the narrator is freed(?)/not freed(?) from her journal (more on this freedom/unfreedom paradox later).

For Walter Benn Michaels, the pattern on the wallpaper, along with the “smooches” the narrator leaves on the wall as she “creeps” around the room, are themselves types of writing. This, to me, seems right. The narrator attempts to read the wallpaper and fails, so then, with nothing left to do, she attempts to mark on it herself through the “smooches” she leaves behind, through peeling away the paper, doing what she can to find some meaning in the meaningless. For Benn Michaels, however, the parallel between the types of writing, or “marking,” that the narrator takes part in leads him to conclude that:

writing in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the work of something like self-generation and that, far from being a story about a woman driven crazy by Weir Mitchell's refusal to allow her to produce, it is about a woman driven crazy (if she is crazy) by a commitment to production so complete that it requires her to begin by producing herself. (*The Gold Standard 5*)

For Benn Michaels,

Her own body...takes its place in the chain of writing surfaces, and she herself comes to seem an animated effect of writing; for not only does her body bear the trace of writing ["smooches"] but also it is described as having literally emerged from the wallpaper, so that she can end by wondering if those other "creeping women" "come out of the wallpaper as I did" (18). It is as if she has written herself into existence. (*The Gold Standard 5*)

Benn Michaels' close reading of "The Yellow Wall-paper" and his identification of the importance of the role of production, both self-production and market production, in the text, I think, is convincing. The conclusions he draws from this, however, that "Gilman rewrites the autonomy of self-sufficiency as the autonomy of free trade" (17), I think is a bit inaccurate. To show why, we must turn to Lauren Berlant and her theory of cruel optimism.

Lauren Berlant, an esteemed scholar, literary, and cultural theorist and major figure in affect theory, was interested in notions of identity, belonging, meaning, and what is often called "felt experience"--in how the study of affective experiences could inform our relationships, not only with others, but with things, ideas, objects, and even the larger systems and structures in which we are a part. This interest led Berlant to "Cruel Optimism," an essay, and later, a book, in which

they describe what is very much like a narcissistic relationship or trauma bond between an individual or group and an object of desire<sup>1</sup>. “When we talk about an object of desire,” they write, “we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us” (33). Thus, attachments are really attachments to ideas that, by being in close proximity to the objects that represent these ideas<sup>2</sup>, we are provided with a feeling of continuity, a feeling of safety, a feeling of stability—whatever you might want to call it—that provides us with hope. Desire, in other words, is wish-fulfilment.

Cruel optimism is the process of hanging on to our attachments even when we realize that the promise these attachments provide is “*impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic*” (33). According to Berlant, we do this because we fear that “the loss of the object/scene of promising itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything” (33). Essentially, when we lose our attachment to such an object, we fear we might also lose our sense of self, our sense of being, our sense of belonging, and when this happens, our very sense of meaning crumbles beneath our feet. “One makes affective bargains,” Berlant writes, “about the costliness of one’s attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition” (34).<sup>3</sup> Berlant notes that because of this tendency to unconsciously make these affective bargains, “poetics of attachment always involves some splitting off of the *story*” one tells oneself about that attachment from the “*activity of the emotional habitus*” constructed by one’s relationship to that attachment which is both *enabling* and *disabling*. To

---

<sup>1</sup> Cruel optimism is not anti-attachment but highlights a specific kind of self-destructive attachment that we can’t seem to let go of. For Berlant, this is inherently a result of a tendency to feel bound to capitalist ideals—e.g., success, wealth, social status—and keep one invested in the system.

<sup>2</sup> People, places, things, objects, beliefs, etc.

<sup>3</sup> This, Berlant suggests, is how continued investment in these simultaneously enabling and disabling attachments propagates itself.

understand how this concept functions within a particular situation, Berlant suggests an “analysis of rhetorical indirection” (34). This essay takes on such a project.

I attempt, here, a Berlantian reading of “The Yellow Wall-paper,” one that, as Berlant suggests, calls attention to moments of rhetorical indirection—for example, discrepancies of what is said versus what is done or moments of faulty logic, calls attention to the ways in which cruel optimism is at play in the world of the text. This reading also attempts to merge affect theory with formalist aesthetics, and in this way, encourages exploration of how the text creates and uses space, time, and sensory phenomena to achieve these rhetorical effects and also touches on how these phenomena are encountered by the reader. I propose a way of reading Gilman that focuses on affective experience *within* (character’s relationships and attachments within the text) and, at times, *without* (writer-reader relationship, the act of reading) the text. While this approach does read out of the text notions of repressed desire in various forms, it does not aim to take on a hermeneutics of suspicion nor does it claim a hermeneutics of faith, but instead attempts mediation, challenging Hans-Georg Gadamer’s claim that, when reading, one *must* choose between the two<sup>4</sup>. The goal for such projects as this is not to deconstruct, but to build, to acknowledge both the real and the surreal, to highlight the building blocks that create the affective experience of the text and of the experience of reading it.

Here, I also attempt to build upon Jonathan Crewe’s work in queering “The Yellow Wall-paper” and blend queer theory and formalist aesthetics with Berlantian affect theory<sup>5</sup>. This essay also makes the claim that Crewe would not make directly—that the work of “queering” Gilman

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<sup>4</sup> The possibility of autonomous choice when it comes to the act of reading and interpretation is another essay all together. One such essay is Walter Benn Michael’s *Is there a Politics of Interpretation?* in which he highlights the problem of choice in interpretation.

<sup>5</sup> Though, perhaps Berlant’s approach is already a version of queer theory.

*should* certainly be attempted, and perhaps should even be the dominant way to read the text. Further, my queer reading of “The Yellow Wall-paper aims to highlight the ways in which the text is not, as Walter Benn Michaels suggests, *attached* to capitalist labor (though the narrator may certainly be), nor does the text claim women’s inclusion in capitalist labor as its utopian ideal,<sup>6</sup> nor is it, in effect, “guilty” of such attachments as I’ve described, but rather in “The Yellow Wall-paper,” Gilman is attempting to navigate, understand, theorize, and critique the very thing that Berlant calls cruel optimism as a reaction to the oppressive structures of capitalism and restrictive, impossible patriarchal ideals.

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<sup>6</sup> From the introductory chapter of *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*.

## HEADING 2

### QUEERNESS, MADNESS, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

In a way, or maybe in every way, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" is about felt experience—that is, *feeling* is all over this text, specifically *queer* feeling. The narrator, according to her "loving" and "caring" husband, John, "a physician of high standing," is suffering from a "temporary nervous depression" (648), though we know from later context and from Gilman's own testimony that the narrator suffers from *postpartum* depression<sup>7</sup>, depression itself being one of several affective disorders. Further, not only is the narrator suffering from *disordered* feeling but the summer estate in which they are staying for her treatment of "rest," "air," and "exercise," also has its own quite specific affective atmosphere. Immediately, we discover the narrator feels very keenly something "queer" about the place itself, though she can't seem to identify what constitutes the queerness.<sup>8</sup> It's queerness, however, is *attractive* to the narrator: "I would say a haunted house and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate!" She continues, "Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it" (647). This pride in and romantic attachment to the, perhaps, "queer energies" of the space, to conflate Crewe's phrase with Gilman's use of queer here, is something worth analyzing further for better or for worse.

Graham Robb in his book *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* notes that we have evidence that by 1894, *queer* had already taken on its modern connotation (262).

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Crewe finds fault in feminist criticism's move to assume the narrator has postpartum depression, claiming it "drastically reduces the story's field of implication," but I would argue we can know this is the case without falling into intentional fallacy.

<sup>8</sup> Crewe plays around with determining exactly what it is that was queer about it, and Benn Michaels also has a theory which I briefly touch on later.

“The Yellow Wall-paper” was published in 1892, only two years earlier, and it is highly probable that Gilman was aware of this new sense of the word, a meaning that was still in the process of becoming. Crewe argues, after a quite interesting reading of the scene in which the narrator refuses to let Jennie sleep with her, that:

[b]oth the heavy loading of "queer" (strange, peculiar) in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and its conjunction with a forestalled same-sex scenario seems, as I have already suggested, to anticipate the semantic shifts through which "queer" first becomes a pejorative colloquialism for the male homosexual and is subsequently extended to cover the entire same-sex field. No doubt *The Yellow Wallpaper* seems to anticipate partly because we can now read back a repressed homoerotic scenario into a text formally innocent of any such thing. Yet it is also reasonable to suppose that broad cognitive and categorical shifts, already being manifested in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, may have been preconditions for the semantic shift that connected "queer" to "homosexual" ... Whatever the historical case may be, however, *The Yellow Wallpaper* produces its own etiology of the queer, for which purpose the initially “naïve” narrator serves as a powerful heuristic device. (282)

Further, there is some suggestion that queerness in the modern sense may be biographically relevant in Gilman studies. Though this essay does not aim to be necessarily biographical, I feel this does provide some important context and further justification for the “queering” of Gilman’s works.

Ann J. Lane, in her biography on Gilman, *To Herland and Beyond*, cites a handful of close friendships between Gilman and other women, and one particularly that borders on romantic—a quite intimate friendship with Martha Luther that first blossomed in their teenage years. Gilman’s letters imply attraction to and an intense love for Martha, and Gilman describes



their time together as some of the happiest moments of her life. Gilman admits on several occasions that she loved Martha more than she ever loved anyone else. There is, however, some suggestion in Gilman's letters that Martha didn't return the same intensity of affection Gilman showed to her, and that Martha's "rejection" in this sense did quite hurt Gilman. This hurt turned to heartbreak when Martha married. Though Gilman would never admit or recognize her love for Martha as anything more than pure and true friendship, there is suggestion from her letters that others (Martha included) felt the love she had for Martha was bordering on inappropriate. Lane reminds us that women of this period were very much conditioned to believe they did not possess anything like sexual desire, so it is (doubly) not surprising that Gilman would describe her love for Martha as "love, but not sex" (78). Still, even this, is telling. Gilman certainly seemed to be struggling with her sexuality despite never admitting it publicly or even privately. Like the narrator of "The Yellow Wall-paper," Gilman herself felt utterly alone, alienated from any possibility of what she felt was genuine human intimacy. This alienation plays an important role in the text itself, which I will touch on more later.

On top of the new connotation of *queer* as it refers to homosexuality—specifically, same-sex erotic and/or romantic relationships between men (again, women during this period were thought to be asexual)—and the word's traditional sense of "strange," "odd," or "peculiar", *queer* has older connotations in terms of both morality and market economy. As early as the late 16<sup>th</sup> century *queer* was used as a synonym for bad, contemptible, or untrustworthy. It was also used as a noun to describe forged or counterfeit money—the phrase *shove the queer* being used to refer to the act of passing illegal tender. Further, someone with financial difficulties, living a questionable life, or being somehow dishonorably employed might have been said to live *on the*

*queer* or on *Queer Street*.<sup>9</sup> Queerness, thus, also represents *anything* that could possibly be construed as immoral, subversive, or dangerous to the status quo, and further, queerness, interestingly (but not surprisingly) enough, has always been inextricably linked to the market economy.

It is easy to imagine that perhaps the “hereditary estate” in which the narrator finds herself spending the summer is located right off Queer Street itself. “There was some legal trouble, I believe” the narrator writes, “something about the heirs and co-heirs; anyhow, the place has been empty for years” (648). This, for the narrator somehow “spoils the ghostliness,” but as Benn Michaels argues, “title disputes don’t spoil the ghostliness, they constitute it: the house is ‘haunted’ by the ghosts of competing claimants” (*The Gold Standard* 9). This haunting, Benn Michaels suggests, is paralleled in the competing claimants of the narrator’s selfhood. With such a fractured sense of identity stemming from internal conflicts of desire—over such things like domesticity, public service, intimacy, sexuality, etc.—it is of no wonder, then, why the narrator feels attached to the “queer” atmosphere of the estate. Its queerness echoes the queer affects of her own mind, and her romantic attachment to the estate, an attachment that, under capitalism, walks the fine line between attraction and repulsion is but a cruel optimism. In the end, the narrator is forced to make—though unconsciously, so not autonomously, not freely—an affective bargain, one that ends up being quite expensive, perhaps more than she unconsciously realized. In fact, the problem of free choice is one that is highly significant when thinking through this text, and desire/romantic attachment plays a major role in perpetuating the narrator’s imprisonment.

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<sup>9</sup> "queer, adj.2 and n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2023, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/156237](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156237).

As much as the narrator *feels*, she does not—at least, consciously—feel trapped (except, perhaps, toward the end and only in retrospect) or that she lacks freedom of choice. We as readers, of course, feel it, but the narrator (somehow) does not. Thinking about cruel optimism, as I suggested earlier, through the lens of a narcissistic relationship or trauma bond helps us make a little more sense of this. Those trapped within the trauma bond cannot see the abuse (at least consciously) the attachment commits. There is, however, always a small voice inside that tells them something is wrong, but the gaslighting effect of the empty promise keeps one trapped within the cycle of abuse—much like perpetual cycle of cruel optimism. To see how this works in the text, let us consider the (il)logical leaps our narrator makes while convincing herself she is not trapped.

Many of the examples of the narrators (il)logic may come across as naivety, yet, at the same time, they also feel a bit *too naïve*. We encounter an example of this rhetorical effect when the narrator first describes the room that will become her prison. The bars on the windows, the “rings and things in the walls,” and the stripped away, peeling wallpaper lead her to conclude that the room was first a nursery, then a playroom, and then a gymnasium. Are we to believe that our intelligent and educated narrator really believes a room with iron bars on the windows, rings in the walls, and a bed secured to the floor was a nursery, a playroom, a gymnasium? Is she messing with us? Or rather, is she messing with herself? How anyone with the free will to deduce otherwise can come to this conclusion with the evidence presented, especially someone educated and educated particularly in things like “the principle of design,” is hard to imagine. One might consider what sort of preconditions can provide her with the (il)logical pathways to make this deduction make sense. Whatever those preconditions might be, we can see the work of Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism at play—yet another affective bargain. The narrator’s desire

to hang on to hope, despite the ignored “red flags,” is perhaps all that she needs to make these leaps of faith.

Gates that lock are attractive to our narrator; they represent safety, not imprisonment, even when they are located at the top of the stairs, right outside her bedroom door. John planning her every move, providing a “prescription for each hour in the day,” is not controlling but caring. We might remember that John is ready to “repair” the room, that is, until she expresses her anxieties about it. “He said that after the wall-paper was changed” she writes, “it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and the gate at the head of the stairs, and so on” (649). She continues, “But he is right enough about the beds and windows and things” (649), and of course he is---they’re symbols of what she is at once acknowledging and not acknowledging—her lack of freedom. Are her anxieties about these things really just silly “fancies” as John would have her believe? For John, allowing “such fancies” to get the best of her is reason enough to allow her to continue to suffer them. One might question if he wants her to get better at all. And he, of course, both does and doesn’t. They have different ideas of what “better” means just as they have different ideas of what “sick” means. Further, anytime the narrator speaks of her “Dear” John—so loving, so caring, so reasonable that he blatantly ignores any attempt she makes at expressing her anxieties, desires, wishes—she speaks of him with such a (almost sickening) loving reverence that it simultaneously feels honest *and* insincere. We must remember that the queerness of the estate, of the house, of the nursery, of the wallpaper, that attracts the narrator is also one that distorts and confuses, and the ideals of “order” and “reason” that John symbolizes, or what he promises to provide but does not provide, is one that she *must* unconsciously choose—the unfortunate effect of cruel optimistic affective bargaining. We see this happen over and over again throughout the text, the oppressive yet simultaneously grounding

force of orthodox ideology. John and the narrator's ideological grounds are not compatible to the point that meaning is lost. And our narrator is desperate to hang on to anything that provides her relief from what Milan Kundera might call the unbearable lightness of being.

Many spaces within the text on which the narrator focuses her reflections radiate this same *feeling* of oppression (e.g., the estate, the garden, the wharf, the arbors, the shaded lane) but, perhaps, none so much as the space in which the narrator spends much (if not all) of her time—the “nursery,” and no element within that space as much as the wallpaper. The wallpaper consumes the narrator, puzzles her, confuses her, tortures her, but strangely (or maybe, by now, not so strangely) enough, it also gives her a sense of purpose. The “improvement” John sees in her overall demeanor she tells her diary is “because of the wall-paper” (653). Her determination to follow that pattern until she is able to make sense of it keeps her engaged, gives her some sense of meaning. Yet, despite the countless hours she spends attempting to figure it out, the pattern is, ultimately, impossible to follow no matter how hard she tries. Of the paper she writes:

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions. (648)

She admits later, after she discovers the woman behind the pattern shaking it to get free, that escape is impossible: “...nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so (654). Her description of the pattern of the wallpaper, in fact, always suggests its utter oppressiveness. She writes, “You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream” (653). If this sounds familiar, it should. Not only is the

narrator's attachment to the wallpaper a cruel optimism, but the pattern of the wallpaper itself feels a lot like life under capitalism and the narrator's madness a lot like the mind trying to make sense of it. Further, the narrator's description of the pattern of the wallpaper being like a "bad dream" elicits notions of the empty promises of the American Dream.

The strangest and queerest (and I also mean this in the modern sense, here) aspect of "The Yellow Wall-paper" is perhaps the "creeping." Let us, momentarily, return to Crewe's queer analysis of the text. Crewe argues that there are suggestions of repressed lesbian desire all throughout the story, specifically in the relationship between the narrator, Jennie, and the woman behind the wallpaper. In one moment, which I just briefly mentioned in passing, Crewe draws our attention to the narrator's refusal to allow Jennie to "sleep with" her only to spend the night with "the other woman"—the woman behind the wallpaper. He also points out other moments of seemingly "innocent" situations that have lesbian implications, and according to Crewe, the narrator is simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by this queer desire. With all of this in mind, the creeping becomes a bit more promiscuous, the yellow color and smell leaving its traces all over her body, her hair, her clothes, and as Benn Michaels points out, the narrator, too, leaving her "smooches" (kisses?) on the wallpaper. Further, after the final escape/not escape by the narrator/other woman, she writes<sup>10</sup>:

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and 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.

---

<sup>10</sup> Or is she speaking? The form breaks once the woman has escaped the wallpaper. More on this breaking of form later.

But here I can creep smoothy on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way. (656)

While the narrator/woman behind the wallpaper (now one) believes she has freed herself, she has not. She believes herself to be free, believing she may creep about as she pleases, yet her creeping is circumscribed by the placement of her shoulder in the smooch on the wall, thus, still very much connected to the place from which she escaped. She has no desire for the outside and its “green things” (paper money, perhaps?) and only desire for the inside and its yellow things (writing paper?). But perhaps they are the same, the inside and outside? While she is not creeping on the “ground” she is creeping on the “floor,” and maybe desire for the green things and desire for the yellow things lead to the same end. Whatever the case, the pattern has proven impossible to escape, proving the narrator’s earlier prediction true, and though she doesn’t know it, the reader does. This elicits an affect of freedom/unfreedom.

As I mentioned earlier, queerness and the market have nearly always been connected, so what does this add to what we already know about the text’s relationship to capitalist labor? Desire, same-sex desire, self-desire, *queer* desire, that is, desire in the form of cruel optimism, in this text is embodied by the narrator’s relationship to the wallpaper and to the woman behind it. If, as I am suggesting, the wallpaper represents both labor (i.e., paper, writing) and capitalism (i.e., some inescapable, unknowable pattern/not pattern—patterns typically repeat in a predictable manner) and the woman behind the wallpaper is both the narrator and some other woman, then we have a text that is grappling with an incredibly dynamic theory of the intersection between capitalism, a particular/sex gender system, and the concept of the self, and further, the self’s attachment to these systems.

Not only does the content of the text suggest that Gilman was thinking through and theorizing something similar to Berlant, the very form of “The Yellow Wall-paper” itself is animated by cruel optimism. Broadly speaking, the text has many Gothic elements—a strange, or as the protagonist might say, “queer” atmosphere, a large estate, peeling wallpaper, bars on the windows, ghostly specters, gates that lock, etc. that, on one level, as I’ve suggested, not only reflect the narrator’s loss of autonomy and crumbling sense of self but also her unconscious desire to hang on to the promise her objects of desire—specifically, the wallpaper, her writing, and less specifically, domesticity, productive work in the market, self-production, intimacy, freedom, etc.—provide. Further, the text is essentially epistolary, though more specifically, self-epistolary which gives it a strange sort of distance both in time and in emotional space. We cannot forget we are reading the *very* secret diary entries of a woman not allowed to write while at the same time slowly, over the course of the thirteen separate entries, “going mad.” We are in a very personal space—a space of loss, loss of both self and meaning. Along with the descent into madness, however, comes an increased *sense* of freedom (different than *actual* freedom) in the narrator. And like the narrator, the form itself, while somewhat contained within structures of the old (realism), meshes in structures of the new (supernatural)—the gothic does this intrinsically—and, as such, simultaneously contains and moves beyond conceptions of the orthodox.

The alienation the protagonist feels is apparent in the architecture and structures within the world of the text—this “otherness,” even architectural otherness, being another inherent aspect of the Gothic form; the Gothic itself was inspired by the Gothic architecture from which it drew its name. There are plenty of architectural design choices of interest that we’ve touched on



throughout this essay—the house/prison, the “nursery”/prison, the garden/prison<sup>11</sup>—you get the idea. The house itself, as I’ve mentioned, is alienated, set away from the road, yet does have elements of connection to the outside world, or at least, there are remnants that can be hauntingly *felt* through the presence of the “private wharf” and the shady lanes in which the narrator often sees apparitions of perhaps prior inhabitants, servants, slaves, of the estate. And further, as I’ve briefly mentioned, the narrator operates in a space apart, not only physically but mentally. She is left physically alone, and when she is not alone she is under tight surveillance, and this takes a toll on her mentally. She has no one with which to share her thoughts, her ideas, her concerns—John certainly doesn’t listen. Being both alone (both physically and mentally) and never alone, speaks to the text’s sense of alienation or displacement. Again, our narrator is in a very vulnerable space.

Because of this, too, the experience of reading does at times feel almost voyeuristic. “This is dead paper” (647), she writes. That we, the audience, are reading this is unintentional. Come to think of it, how do we, the audience, now acting *within* and *without*<sup>12</sup> the world of the text, come about this diary? But I digress (sort of). The unsettling, voyeuristic feeling elicited not just by the text but through the encounter between reader and text, like the narrator’s relationship with the queer, elicits notions of repressed desire and, thus, should draw our attention to what is not here (another example of the text’s use of rhetorical indirection). What is not presented in the space of the narrative is true intimacy, sex, close bonds, friendship, etc., and as such, the

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<sup>11</sup> Lee Schweniger does some interesting work on this topic in “Reading the Garden in Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*.

<sup>12</sup> Experiencing the text as both real, found-writings and a fictional element of form meant to evoke a specific feeling in a reader, and a feeling that is, essentially, a bit gimmicky. In fact, Sianne Ngai’s theory of the gimmick falls close in line with Berlant’s cruel optimism. The gimmick is a specific object of desire that produces a reaction of both pleasure and discomfort in the subject, or as Ngai writes, “repulsive if also strangely attractive” (53).

protagonist is left feeling as lonely as the house itself, set back a distance from the road and from society. She is isolated, lacking a sense of belonging and, thus, a sense of meaning. The narrator has no fulfilling relationships with anyone, not her husband, and not even her own baby. I do not say this to shame women who have postpartum depression; I merely bring this up to highlight the real extent of her alienation. The form itself, then, reflects the narrator's alienation, in a Marxian sense, from her expected labor—marriage and motherhood. The narrator throughout the text feels an intense amount of guilt for not being able to do her wifely and motherly duties, the role in which she is supposed to inhabit, the labor in which she is supposed to take part, the only mode of production appropriate for a woman. However, she also finds herself alienated from the labor in which she desires to take part, i.e. writing. "I think sometimes," she writes, "that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me." "But I find I get pretty tired when I try" (649). The companionship she truly longs for is "companionship in [her] work" (649), and that, too, is denied her.

Further, the text breaks the form toward the end of the story when we are taken from reflections on the recent past to a play-by-play of the present. That is, once the narrator has taken on the identity of the woman behind the wallpaper, she has broken free of the journal's pages (but she has not—we're still reading), and she has somewhat, on one level, "achieved" freedom, her object of desire (but she has not—she's gone mad). But she *has* both done so and simultaneously *not* done so in the only way she could, "accepting" her objects of desire as if they weren't the only options presented to her.<sup>13</sup> But of course, this *promise* of freedom, of belonging, of balance, as long as one focuses on the right values, i.e., being a good wife and

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<sup>13</sup> John while discouraging his wife from obsessing about the wallpaper, also refuses to remove it from her sight while leaving her absolutely alone in the room for hours and even days on end. Where was he by the way? Was he really just working?

mother, is merely a cruel optimism. While the narrator does present a revolutionary spirit, it is, like the text's form and aesthetics somewhat contained. Is this pessimistic? Is it redeemable? Is this useful? I think so.

Does the text's resolution, that at once empowers and contains the possibility of resistance to oppressive structures, suggest complicity or approval of capitalist production? Certainly not. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" is not sympathetic to capitalism or even the idea of productive work in the market—far from it. It may be true that Gilman valued work, but as Benn Michaels admits, she is unclear about what productive work looks like. It may also be true that the narrator of "The Yellow Wall-paper" eventually betrays herself into "radical acceptance of a logic of consumption" (Benn Michaels 17). But this betrayal does not equate complicity or even contained resistance within the system. Gilman, in fact, is being quite radical, here, though still trying to work out how to move beyond a system that is so good at containment. Gilman, with a bit of a queer feminist twist, was theorizing something quite like Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism and ultimately succeeds in writing a text that is pro-women, anti-capitalism, and anti-patriarchy despite not being able to imagine a way to move beyond those systems. Affect theory, aesthetics, and formalism provide us with some productive lenses through which to view Gilman, helping to highlight the ways in which the text suggests that the oppression of women (their work, their heart, their mind, their sexuality) was ultimately tied to capitalist production and reproduction and this reproduction was perpetuated through something like cruel optimism. Gilman leaves her reader with a problem to be solved. But how does one solve it? Or perhaps, as maybe Gilman suggests, this problem is impossible for any one person to solve—the narrator lacks authentic human/human attachment, and perhaps this is her Achilles heel. The solution, it seems, requires doing what the protagonist could not—figuring out the

pattern. Sound too pessimistic? We should not forget that Gilman's narrator was not *wholly* unsuccessful in her attempts to crack the code; she had her moments of constructive, enlightening breakthroughs. For better or for worse, like her, we must keep stripping away the wallpaper.

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