

# The New Versus True Woman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Ellen Glasgow's *Dare's Gift*

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**Abstract**—Given their opposition to Victorian conceptions of womanhood and domesticity, the literary works of Gilman and Glasgow have been a rallying point for women's emancipation and empowerment. Though the article touches upon several works by Gilman and Glasgow, it focuses particularly on the feminist viewpoints underpinning the transformation of female characters in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Glasgow's *Dare's Gift* from true to new women. The purpose of both tales, the article contends, is to question and deconstruct the dominant Victorian patriarchal cult of true womanhood, which has confined women to the domestic sphere and constrained their freedoms and liberties. The theoretical foundation for the examination of the two stories is laid out in the Introduction, which contrastively explores the conflicting paradigms of new and true womanhoods. The Discussion delves into the many reactions to the characters' defiant behavior, as well as the phallogocentric interpretation of it.

**Index Terms**—Gilman, Glasgow, new woman, transformation, true woman

## I. INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Ellen Glasgow, according to this article, were the first American women writers to break ties with Victorian conceptions of womanhood and domesticity. Their writings urge women to defy patriarchal society's restraints and to promote new woman values, such as self-fulfillment and independence. In their literature, marriage is seen as a tool for maintaining gender hierarchies and inequities. *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Dare's Gift* are examples of new woman fiction because they include female characters that defy gender conventions and build defiant identities. The works and views of early new woman writers, including Gilman and Glasgow, inform character analysis and critique of tsocial milieus. The characteristics, contexts and functions of new woman fiction are key research issues to be addressed. The main research questions the article poses are how new or true the female protagonists in both stories are, what prompts them to rebel against social milieus, and how male characters react to this rebellion.

### A. True Victorian Woman

Gender roles in Victorian Britain were both rigorous and ill-defined at the same time. Wives stayed at home and cared for the children while husbands worked and made money. This was the model that most Victorian families followed. Women were the weaker sex, with their domain of influence being at home rather than in public. Housekeeping “was a source of strength for women, through which they could somehow mystically influence their husbands” (Flanders, 2004, p.15-16). Their sole ambition, therefore, was to be good wives and mothers.

The Victorian ideal of the silent, faithful and dutiful wife, who is unfit for life beyond the domestic sphere, was advanced by prominent women writers such as Sarah Ellis. Although Ellis recognized the inferiority of women, as mentioned in Matthews (1987), she claimed that women wield enormous power over their husbands and children as wives and mothers. She also presumed that morality is a natural attribute of femininity, and an asset that women can and should use to their advantage. On that account, the home became the epicenter of morality, and domestic life was revalued, with women performing this function exclusively, “women in their homes were the locus of moral authority in society,” (Matthews, 1987, p.6). Accordingly, true women are expected to instill moral attributes in their children and husbands in order to build a stronger and morally virtuous society.

### B. Progressive New Woman

The Victorian ideal of true womanhood could not last indefinitely. The social, economic and demographic developments, which the Victorian era witnessed, empowered women to challenge the status quo, defy gender hierarchies and establish feminist movements. The new woman has been a popular feminist movement in England and the United States since the turn of the century. It spurred female writers to vindicate a gender-blind division of realms that ensures women's education, suffrage and economic independence (Nelson, 2000). Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, and George Egerton, among other prominent new woman writers, wrote perceptive feminist works that contributed to the liberation and empowerment of women worldwide. Each new woman writer had her own take on what it meant to be a new woman. Grand was concerned with issues such as education, enfranchisement and public health while

Schreiner and Egerton were advocates for women's social and sexual liberties (Schaffer, 2002). A new woman writer wore many hats and took on a variety of roles, “she was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women’s movement” (Ledger, 1997, p.1).

## II. DISCUSSION

This section examines the feminist viewpoints of Gilman and Glasgow in their works in general, and *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Dare's Gift* in particular.

### A. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Feminist Views

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was a novelist, poet, and social theorist who immersed herself in feminist activism, suffrage and socialist campaigns. Radical feminist ideals and attitudes permeate Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *Women and Economics* and *Herland* among other works. Gilman argues for abolishing the family, which she considers a patriarchal institution engendering gender hierarchies. Domestic and mothering chores, to her, are social responsibilities to be concentrated in the hands of those best prepared and trained for them. She considered gendered association of work with men and home with women as a form of domestic slavery: “Women work longer and harder than most men, and not solely in maternal duties. The savage mother carries the burdens, and does all menial service for the tribe. The peasant mother toils in the fields, and the working-man's wife in the home” (Gilman, 2017, p.20). Gilman as well disagreed with the notion that women are mentally inferior to men. She believed anyone who lives in a small, dark place, and is constantly watched, shielded, controlled, and constrained, will inevitably become narrowed and weakened minded (Gilman, 2013).

Gender equality in Gilman's writing is forsaken for the autonomy and economic empowerment of women, and the construction of a matriarchal society that is not dominated by men. Everything in *Herland* seems to be turned upside down, including the typical roles of men and women. While radical feminists emphasize women's femininity—that is, they believe a woman should look like a woman—Gilman in her novel portrays and promotes a new type of woman, called Herlanders, with short hair and a robust and athletic body. Herlanders' lack of feminine attributes can be demonstrated in their completion of physically demanding professions that are considered men's typical jobs in a patriarchal society (Gilman, 2014). The new woman from Gilman's viewpoint is not susceptible or fragile, and does not require men's protection. Her female characters manage to escape the burden of motherhood, which is no longer a primary concern to them (Özyon, 2020).

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman uses the conventions of gothic fiction to attack women's situation within the institution of marriage, especially as practiced by the respectable classes of her time. In nineteenth-century marriages, the rigorous separation between the female's household responsibilities and the male's active work secured women's subjugation and acquiescence. The story shows how gender difference holds women in a state of infantile ignorance, preventing them from properly growing. The unnamed narrator, who has recently married a physician, John, and given birth to a child, is only permitted to undertake domestic duties. She is forbidden from working or writing, and she, as a true woman, is expected to live a life that has no purpose other than to please her husband. She is supposed to blindly obey his directions and trust the judgments and choices he makes for her. Even her simplest wishes, such as switching bedrooms and repapering walls which he mistakes as symptoms of her fancy, are turned down. She is also not allowed to discuss the neurotic depression therapy plan with her physician husband and brother, “personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?” (Gilman, 2012, p.792) She, however, has to go through the therapy that is prescribed for her: “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” (Gilman, 2012, p.792).

In addition, the narrator is subjected to omniscient control and surveillance as the recurring use of the word “eyes” in the following excerpt suggests,

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down. ... Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where the two breadths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other (Gilman, 2012, p.792).

The eyeballs most probably belong to her brother and husband. They could also be the property of Jennie, John's sister, who nurses and looks after her during the cure rest. The thought of eyeballs all around the room is reminiscent of the concept of “the male gaze”, (Bray, 2004, 8) which foreshadows patriarchal control. Those who observe will gain influence and authority while those who are observed will be reduced to mere objects. The use of yellow wallpaper also becomes a metaphor of surveillance; the narrator is in a prison cell, the nursery room, which has firm evidence of imprisonment, such as barred windows, and is being monitored by her physician husband to check if she behaves properly. The eyeballs staring at her through the wall render her powerless and vulnerable (Ghandeharion & Mazari, 2016).

Writing and fantasy, the narrator realizes, are the only ways available to her to break away from surveillance, dominance and true womanhood restrictions. She, for instance, relies on fantasy rather than reasoning to study the

wallpaper and record her findings in the journal that she keeps hidden from John. The narrator metaphorically perceives the wallpaper as a narrative that she must interpret. At first glance, it appears to be terrible: “the color is repellent, almost revolting; a smoldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight” (Gilman, 2012, p.793). She notices a ghostly sub-pattern behind the primary pattern, viewable only under particular light. The sub-pattern eventually takes the form of a desperate woman crawling and stooping in search of a way out from behind the main pattern, which has taken on the appearance of a cage's bars. The narrator imagines that this cage is ornamented with the heads of several women, who were strangled while they were trying to escape. At first, she fights the thought that the woman behind the wallpaper is a metaphor for herself, pledging to “tie her” (Gilman, 2012, p.802) with a rope if she attempts to run away. When the narrator recognizes herself as the woman trapped in the wallpaper, she realizes that she is not alone in hiding and creeping behind the domestic patterns of her life, and that she is the one who needs to be rescued. She imagines that by ripping off most of the paper, she rescues herself and all other women as well.

The journal, which the narrator secretly writes, can be considered a statement of women's liberation from phallogocentric norms of language and writing. The narrator in her journal uses feminist writing norms, known as gynocriticism (Showalter, 1981). Hélène Cixous in (Bray, 2004) encourages women to investigate their hidden identities and write in a non-phallogocentric. The journal, upon which Gilman's tale is based, does not follow a linear manner of thought in keeping with the conventions of gynocriticism. Its style is rambling to a degree, and it constantly switches from one topic to another, which is a clear break from phallogocentrism. It is based on inconsistencies and internal tensions; at one point, the narrator says that writing exhausts her, and then she says that she wishes she were in better shape so that she could write, as if writing could help her. The journal also features some significant gaps or “unheard of contradictions” (Gilman, 2012, p.793) that are left unfilled, like when the narrator thinks of rebelling against her husband but she lacks the exact words needed to do so. The wallpaper itself can be conceived as an embodiment of the gynocritic discourse since it appears “repellent,” “revolting,” and “...committing every artistic sin” (Gilman, 2012, 793) at first glance; however, when delving deep into its fascinating world, just as the narrator peels it off the wall, “the hidden corners and patterns, which patriarchy tends to overlook, oppress, or fails to recognize all together, are unveiled” (Ghandeharion & Mazari, 2016).

### B. *Ellen Glasgow's Feminist Views*

The turn of the century witnessed active women participation in protest movements against gender inequalities in the United States of America. Glasgow herself was a suffragette, and campaigned for women's right to vote. Her feminist views permeate her writing, “I was always a feminist, for I liked intellectual revolt as much as I disliked physical violence. On the whole, I think women have lost something precious, but have gained immeasurably by the passing of the old order (Glasgow, 2004, p.163-64). She had an unresolved inner conflict considering her brief involvement in the women's suffrage movement, her advocacy for Victorian manners with a firm belief in Darwinism, her attacks on conservative social mores, and her quest for self-fulfillment outside of the typical feminine realm (Catapano, 1989). The feminist movement, to her, was “a revolt against pretense of being... a struggle for the liberation of personality” (Glasgow, 1913, p.656).

Glasgow committed herself and devoted her writing for the emancipation and enfranchisement of women rather than for political reform. Her fiction provides insight into the concerns of women everywhere by defying the constraints and demands placed on the lives of female characters in patriarchal societies. But, as she witnessed the old order crumble and a new woman ideal emerge, free of tradition, Glasgow recognized that religion, society, and education are the flaws that make women victims. The new woman, as depicted in her works, possesses traits like independent thinking, self-fulfillment and liberation from the patriarchal shackles of domesticity, femininity, marriage and motherhood.

In *The Dare's Gift*, Glasgow realistically recounts the progression of two women, Mildred and Lucy, from conservative true women to progressive new women. Mildred, a Northern woman, moves with her attorney husband, Harold Beckwith, from Washington to Dare's Gift, a Southern colonial plantation in Virginia, for a rest cure. At the outset of the story, Mildred is portrayed as a silent and naive woman who fully depends on her upper middle-class husband. Harold's definition of perfect harmony in marriage attests to her total submission to him. Her wifely perfection is thus defined by her silence; the attribute best characterizing a true wife is her incapacity to speak for herself (Matthews, 1994).

Mildred appears to have no control over personal matters, such as health, medication and rehabilitation among others. Though she never complains of depression, she is diagnosed with a nervous breakdown by Dr. Drayton. Harold later would not ask her where she likes to go for rehabilitation. At the end of the story, Dr. Lakeby informs her neither about her illness nor about the affectivity and side effects of the “bromide” (Glasgow, 1923, 75), the medication given to put her to sleep.

Mildred is also commented for her childlike naivety, which her husband puts his trust and faith in. He, for instance, tells her about the Atlantic and Eastern Railroad's illegal transactions not only because he trusts her but also to go over his legal case and defense. He wants Mildred to listen to the cases she is given and remain silent because she is uneducated and has no grasp of the law, “I always talked over my cases with Mildred because it helped to clarify my opinions” (Glasgow, 1923, p.64).

Mildred's feminine attributes, particularly silence and naivety, render her a true and perfect wife according to Mr. Harrison, Harold's close friend, who believes wives fall into two groups: “the group of those who talked and knew

nothing about their husbands' affairs, and the group of those who knew everything and kept silent" (Glasgow, 1923, p.57) Mildred, he thinks, belongs to the latter type, so he responds sarcastically to Harold's ironic assertion that Mildred must have the last say in renting Dare's Gift, "Mildred's final word would be anything but a repetition of yours" (Glasgow, 1923, 57).

Mildred's travel from Washington to Virginia figuratively foreshadows her transformation that does not happen overnight; it takes months to complete. As soon as she arrives at Dare's Gift, she shows several signs of change. Harold notices for the first time that she is "pale and tired" (Glasgow, 1923, p.60), presuming she is exhausted from the journey. Mildred feels dizziness, which she thinks would quickly pass. Her senses are enchanted by the first glimpse of the house to the point she feels as if she "had stepped into another world" (Glasgow, 1923, p.62). She soon begins mocking and dismissing her husband's concerns about "her pallor and the darkened circles under her eyes" (Glasgow, 1923, p.64). As the days pass, she no longer confines herself to the house or responds to her husband's questions with a toneless voice. Her voice takes on a threatening tone instead. It changes to one of rage and defiance as evidenced by her irritation when he asks why "she was breathing quickly, as from a hurried walk" (Glasgow, 1923, p.67). That is the first time in ten years, Harold admits, she has been seen irritated, believing she must have evolved into a different kind of woman.

The spark of Mildred's rebellion and resistance grows stronger, culminating in an act of divulging the secrets of the Atlantic and Eastern Corporation corruption case to the press. This act of betrayal allows her to break out from the confines of her private world of femininity, and venture into the public domain as a humanist or philanthropist. The various reactions the act elicits reflect the ongoing controversy surrounding her recent behaviors and actions. While Harold views it as a sort of madness, Dr Lakeby connects it with the sense of treachery pervading the house. Mildred, however, considers it an outlet for the long repressed rage and terror, a revenge for ten years of silence and oppression, and a declaration of awakening and independence. Hence, she peculiarly feels rejoiced and conquered at the realization that she betrayed her husband, "I couldn't keep it back any longer. No, don't touch me. You must not touch me. I had to do it. I would do it again" (Glasgow, 1923, p.73).

Lucy Dare, who resides in Dare's Gift with her father, a retired Southern colonel, near the conclusion of the Civil War, years before Mildred, is the second female character in Glasgow's story. She goes through a comparable transformation in her feminine identity to Mildred. Lucy is brought up in a conventional Southern household to be a typical Southern woman, i.e. humble, feminine, and domestic, with a strong passion for children. She acknowledges gender hierarchies and surrenders to patriarchal authority. She, therefore, dedicates herself to household responsibilities like knitting, cleaning, laundry, dishwashing, tending to her small garden, and caring for the children, among other things. Of course, she, like everyone else in the South, is charmed with and enthralled by the idea of confederacy, "to understand it all, you must remember that the South was dominated, was possessed by an idea—the idea of the Confederacy. It was an exalted idea—supremely vivid, supremely romantic" (Glasgow, 1923, p.80). During the American Civil War, Lucy goes to great lengths to support the Confederate Army, "the Dares—there were only two of them, father and daughter—were as poor as the rest of us. They had given their last coin to the government—had poured their last bushel of meal into the sacks of the army" (Glasgow, 1923, p.81).

Several incidents prompt Lucy's transformation into a new woman, the first of which is the unexpected appearance of her Northern fiancé. She refuses to marry him because of his support for the Northern cause, which resulted in famine and misery in the South. She maintains that her first and foremost responsibility is to her country, and that she has no other obligations. Her voice, therefore, becomes outraged in tone, "even if peace comes I can never feel the same again—I can never forget that he has been a part of all we have suffered—of the thing that has made us suffer. I could never forget—I can never forgive" (Glasgow, 1923, p.90). These phrases have a tone that conveys not only blame but also threats. Physical changes accompany the shifts in her tone and attitudes as the male narrator, Dr. Lakeby, observes,

Her face, usually so pale, glowed now with a wan illumination, like ivory before the flame of a lamp. In this illumination her eyes ... looked unnaturally large and brilliant, and so deeply, so angelically blue that they made me think of the Biblical heaven of my childhood. Her beauty, which had never struck me sharply before, pierced through me (Glasgow, 1923, p.89).

Lucy's defiance grows stronger as she goes against more and more Southern values. In Virginia, personal and family bonds take precedence over impersonal ties. A typical Virginian woman should be more loyal to her family than to any other notion. Lucy, however, gives precedence to the confederacy when betraying her father and husband near the end of the story. She fools her father by not telling him she was sheltering her fiancé a fugitive prisoner, in the house; and she fools her fiancé by betraying him to the Confederate soldiers who shoot him dead. The latter act, which is intended to save the South by preventing the fall of Richmond, elicits a variety of reactions from the public. What she has done, the narrator says, "was alien to the temperament of the people among whom she lived" (Glasgow, 1923, p.79). Lucy's sacrifice, for that reason, fails to pique the public's interest at the time. The general public is bewildered, as is her fiancé who "wore a look of mingled surprise, disbelief, terror, and indignation" (Glasgow, 1923, p.98).

The unpopularity of her act, nonetheless, helps her evolve into a public figure for the first time in her life. Before committing the act of treachery, she is confined to the domestic sphere and only a few people know who she is. Then, because of the audacity of her act, she becomes the topic of most people's talks. Some think she is a hero, while others think she is a devil. The narrator, however, believes her act would be more dignified and respectable if she lived in a different time and place, "in Europe a thousand years ago such an act committed for the sake of religion would have

made her a saint; in New England, a few centuries past, it would have entitled her to a respectable position in history” (Glasgow, 1923, p.78). Its audacity also liberates her from the shackles of patriarchal and Confederate authority. Thus, she is able to say and do things that have not been uttered or done before, as evidenced by her recurring assertion “I had to do it ... I would do it again” (Glasgow, 1923, p.99).

### III. CONCLUSIONS

The article compares the progression of three women, Lucy and Mildred in Glasgow’s *The Dare’s Gift* and the narrator in Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, from true women into new women. The female characters defy Victorian conceptions of womanhood and domesticity, which have long stifled their liberties, denied them equality, and reduced them to maids or sexual objects. In Glasgow’s narrative, the female protagonists resort to betrayal, whereas in Gilman’s story, the narrator uses writing and fantasy to oppose patriarchy and proclaim independence and emancipation from man’s coercive authority. They eventually evolve into autonomous women capable of managing their lives while pursuing their own interests and desires, as defined by new woman ideals. The male antagonists, however, view women’s defiance as a form of insanity, mental or psychological illness, or the influence of demonic spirits. The justifications given unveil a sense of doubt and bewilderment over the evolution of the female protagonists into defiant women. They as well reveal, as in Gilman’s *Herland*, a repressed fear of the fall of patriarchy and rise of matriarchy.

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