

The Internal Empowerment: A Comparative Analysis
Of Charlotte Perkins-Gilman and Sylvia Plath

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In a male dominated patriarchal society men and women are separated through an age old tradition of superior and inferior roles. Specific personifications, images, ideals, and characteristics are the pressures that create the standards for the “perfect wife” in the “American dream.” In the 19th century 1899, when Charlotte Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wall Paper” and in 1963 when Sylvia Plath committed suicide, the majority of all positions of power and authority were occupied by men. Over the centuries women have risen into powerful positions, yet nevertheless there are still gaps in the equality of status, pay, treatment, and opportunity. While women are clearly becoming more independent of their former restraints their rise into power merely occupies a set in the patriarchy rather than creating new standards.

Hysteria was one of the classic diseases of the nineteenth century. Under the broad regulation of hysteria, nineteenth century physicians gathered cases that would today be classified as neurasthenia, hypochondriacs, depression, conversion reaction, and ambulatory schizophrenia. The one consistency in this fluctuating history has been the existence in western culture of some clinical actuality called hysteria; a reality which has always been seen as peculiarly valid to the female experience, and one which has almost always carried with it a belittling implication.¹

¹ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, “The Yellow Wall Paper” (Women Writers: Texts and Contents, Rutgers University Press, 109 Church Street New Brunswick, New Jersey).

Charlotte Perkins-Gilman's "The Yellow Wall Paper,"² the story of a female's "imposing" descent into madness, analyzes, with great ingenuity, the state of women's discourse and choice in 1899. While, Sylvia Plath's poem "The Applicant,"³ a female's poetic account of a generally over oppressive society, raises deep question and insight into the traditional roles that women played in 1963. All of which reflect the oppression women faced in their time, furthering the assertion that the oppression and limitation women have experienced has and continues to be a long and drawn out battle that continues today. An interesting aspect of these women's stories is the representation of an opposition in choice that woman are faced with in a patriarchy that seeks to perpetuate an ideological prison that subjects and silences women. Even after Plath committed suicide psychologists quickly perpetuated the "Sylvia Plath Effect" that suggests that creative people particularly poetic women are susceptible to mental illnesses. This not only silences the message of Plath's death and poetry, but preoccupies women's awareness of the causes and influences of Plath's break down (e.i., over bearing control, forced domesticity, objectification, victimization), and transforms her into a paranoid health consumer. The Cult of Domesticity legitimized the victimization of women by stating that a women, like Sylvia Plath, by virtue of her nature is sickened. Gilman, on the other hand, found a way to distance herself from the cult of domesticity and suffered a nervous breakdown in the process. This liberation and empowerment that these two women yarned to grasp begins inside the self. In a society with ideological expectations for women that suggest very specific "qualifications" to become accepted by the self and the

² Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, "The Yellow Wall Paper," Small and Maynard, Boston, MA. 1899.

³ Sylvia Plath. "The Applicant," Ariel. Daddy and Other Poems. Forward by Frieda Hughes. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. NY, London, Toronto, Sydney

norm women must face the difficulties of overcoming the neglected state of women, and women's discourse to advance their own cause. Scrutinizing Gilman and Plath's experiences we can reflect the current power struggle between men and women and set the foundation for future generations of women to be treated less patronizingly than Gilman and Plath.

The American way of life is undoubtedly one in which categorizes people into predetermined social roles. This trend was particularly evident during the late 19th century Victorian era and early 20th century progressive era where women were expected to exist solely in the private sphere of the home and behave in a pure, pious, submissive and domestic manner. While on the other hand, men were encouraged to exist in the public sphere and to behave in an overly dominate masculine manner associated to adventure and risk.

In "The Yellow Wall Paper" Gilman illuminates marriage in a patriarchal society where women are subordinate and submissive to men, which in turns highlights the gender inequality in 1899. Gilman's experience with patriarchal authority is symbolic of the nugatory plight of women trapped in a cultural context, both then and now, of patriarchal control and domesticity. Dr. Weir Mitchell, a leading physician who diagnosed Gilman in 1899, shared his ideas with many physicians who sought to reduce their female patients to the docility and dependency of childhood. Mitchell, outspoken in his anti- feminism, was convinced that higher education was debilitating to the female, while determined to associate her unused potential to a diseased imagination he

victimizes her.⁴ While adhering to these prohibitions almost drove Gilman mad, she decided to disregard the “good doctors” orders and went to work; “work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite,”⁵ ultimately recovering self control and empowerment.

“John is a physician, and perhaps—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind) – perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster. You see he does not believe I am sick! My brother is also a physician, and he says the same thing. Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change would do me some good. Sometimes I fancy that in my condition if I had a little less opposition and a little more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. I get unreasonably angry with John... I think it’s due to this nervous condition. But John says if I feel so I shall neglect proper self control. So I take pains to control myself”⁶

John is representative of the overall physician patient relationship in 1899 wherein the medical industry used gender specific diagnosis to control women’s bodies and hence their minds. While, melancholic depression is characterized by the inability to find pleasure in positive things combined with physical agitation, insomnia, or decreased appetite women are still twice as likely as men to experience a major depressive episode.”⁷ Gilman has at the same time just experienced a pregnancy which can lead to postpartum, and although the baby is “well and happy”⁸ there is much causality to a women experiencing depression after giving birth; Postpartum depression can occur after

⁴ The Captive imagination: A Casebook on The Yellow Wall Paper, Edited by Catherine Golden, (The Feminist Press at The City University of New York New York).

⁵ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, “The Yellow Wall Paper,” Small and Maynard, Boston, MA. 1899.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ⁴ U.S Food and Drug Administration., “What every Woman should know. About Depression. And Women’s role in society.” Copywrite 1999-2003; Available www.hhs.gov.

⁸ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, “The Yellow Wall Paper,” Small and Maynard, Boston, MA. 1899.

pregnancy, in where hormonal changes trigger symptoms of depression that are usually associated to the “detachment” of the child. These changes are primarily due to the chemical fluctuations of the hormones estrogen and proestrogen in a women’s body. In addition to the hormonal changes, thyroid levels that control metabolism (how your body stores and uses energy) drop after giving birth.⁹

John seemingly prescribes all the proper remedies that perpetuate the symptoms Gilman is experiencing by subduing her creativity and ability, therefore she becomes worse. Over eating with a slower metabolism caused by lethargic habits can make one feel sluggish and out of energy. “Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able”⁷¹⁰ complained Gilman. Meanwhile, constant bed rest, especially after meals can condition one into a constant state of hebetudinous exhaustion. “I lie down ever so much. John says it’s good for me, and to sleep all I can. Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal,”¹⁰ explains Gilman. Furthermore, John who is representative of Mitchell, orders to have but one hour of intellectual capacity a day and “to live as domestic a life as possible,” which are a large contribution to her continued illness. In the rising demands for domesticity, in the patriarchal regime men seek to control every aspect of women from their bodies to their minds. By trivializing her condition, John and his status invalidate Gilman’s state of mind and condition of her body, therefore in turn Gilman becomes susceptible and needy to the submissiveness toward an authoritative figure.

⁹ National Institute of Mental Health, depression during and after pregnancy, Reviewed by Catherine Roca, Chief, Women’s Programs, April 2005; Available from www.nihm.nih.gov.

¹⁰ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, “The Yellow Wall Paper,” Small and Maynard, Boston, MA. 1899.

The submissiveness of Gilman to the status of her husband is evident, for example when she admits she disagrees with John's solution to her depression she still does what he tells her; "Half of the time now I am lazy, and lie down ever so much. John says I mustn't lose my strength, and has me take cod liver and lots of tonics and things, to say nothing of ale and wine and rare meats."¹¹ Not only is this oppression and subordination apparent in John's rules and regulations but, as well in Gilman's obedience.

The development of wartime economy during world war two had given women more freedom than they had ever had before. For the first time, women were able to experience some sort of social and economic mobility. Suddenly, women were faced with choices, and by exercising these choices they were able to explore their own individuality and independence. The postwar pressures for women to return to the home grew and assumptions that the American women would just return to their homes voluntarily pressured women to give up a new found freedom in society. Moreover, people expected the American homemaker turned "industrialized soldier" would understand that her positions were as temporal as a soldier. They reasoned that millions of men were asked to leave their job to become soldiers, and when the war was over they were expected to return home to work.¹²

Sylvia Plath's, "The Applicant,"¹³ illuminates the societal pressure that women experience with marriage and gender in the American patriarchal society of the mid 1950's to the time of her suicide in 1963. Plath's "The Applicant" represents the institutionalized, consumer/product approach to marriage. Take for example, gendered

¹² Christina Giampaoli, Women and World War Two, University of San Diego 5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, Last updated May 12, 2008. Available from www.sandiego.edu.

¹³ Sylvia Plath. "The Applicant," Ariel. Daddy and Other Poems. Forward by Frieda Hughes. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. NY, London, Toronto, Sydney

commercials of pre world war two, where advertising sought to grab the female viewer's attention, appealing to her domesticity by creating gender specific commercials of household products specifically for her, while disassociating her from the "work of a man" creating commercials that appeal to only him (e.i. tools, cars). "The Applicant" evokes the metaphor of an applicant applying for a product, the product itself, and a seller of the product. The applicant is symbolic of the oppressive patriarchal male, the product is symbolic of the oppressed women, and the seller is symbolic of all the sources of influence that condition people into condoning and perpetuating the moral values of an ostentatious, hedonistic, patriarchal paradigm. This parallels Gilman in that the oppression being exerted onto Plath is merely an extension of the patriarchal society in the 17th century as well, spawning from the same male dominated influence.

In order to have a product you must have a consumer, and in order to have a consumer you must create a need. A need is created through demeaning and demoralizing people through constant and repetitive guarantees of a better life through a product. In "The Applicant," the applicant (male) has a need, a need created through the standards of a patriarchy (seller), and the product is guaranteed to fulfill those needs; after all she is just a thing, a machine, an "it."¹⁴ The need created in Gilman was to be a good wife with all the virtue expected of her, yet the product, via the patriarchy, is a malady. She is denied any form of choice so in turn is given a sickness that will demean and dehumanize her into a weakened, controllable state of mind. Especially when John has the medical industries "trust worthy" authority to assure a gender specific malady will keep Gilman in an insatiable and oppressive state of mind. .

¹⁴ Sylvia Plath. "The Applicant," *Ariel*. *Daddy and Other Poems*. Forward by Frieda Hughes. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. NY, London, Toronto, Sydney

Of course there are qualifications for everything you apply for, in this case, such as “a crutch, a handicap, something fake, or something missing,”¹⁵ and a need is created; finding something wrong that needs to or can be fixed in some way, shape or form. On the other hand Gilman’s qualifications such as; obedience, submissiveness, non-coerciveness, and complacent characteristics constitute John’s standards for a good wife that idealistically should in no way interfere with his agenda for controlling her. For example, when Gilman requests to move up to another room because of the wall paper he refuses due to costly repairs and not enough air (part of his scheduled regiment for Gilman) which he was convinced she needed. Charlotte was led to believe that what she was experiencing was a “problem or Disease” and needed something to fix it. This is yet another way that the medical industry marginalizes women, for instance commercials that advertise beauty which create a need to “fix” the outer exterior to match the patriarchal ideal.

“First, are you our sort of person?/ Do you wear/ A glass eye, false teeth
or a crutch,/ A brace or a hook,/ Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,//
Stitches to show something’s missing? No, no? How can we give
you a thing?”¹⁶

Women in 1899 were commonly diagnosed with hysteria and nervous depression caused from the back lash of rigid ideals that formed out of the Victorian femininity. While women of middle class to upper class citizens were the common “victims” of this “disorder,” the said cause, from physicians at the time such as, Dr. S Weir Mitchell whom gave Gilman’s diagnosis, was thought to be gender specific; men from over work

¹⁵ Sylvia Plath. “Ariel. Daddy and Other Poems.” Forward by Frieda Hughes. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. NY, London, Toronto, Sydney

¹⁶ Ibid

and women from too much social stimulus, sustained or severe domestic tribulations, or commonly brought on from the pursuit of higher education.⁶ This analysis evidently creates a standard of manipulation to keep women away from stimulus, higher education, or any other form of independency, as to not get severely sick. Although this implemented malady merely distracts women from playing an engaging role in society, thus becoming weak to suggestion and influence.

Women are continuously being treated like and associated with products, to appeal to the male consumer. An ideal for women is set forth and implemented through advertising, media and propaganda that suggest what beauty and acceptance constitutes to fit the American ideal and live the American dream. Take for instance the 2008 commercials for “Axe body spray” that suggest to men that women are trivial and naïve, the smell will not only attract them, but will reduce them to primitive states. Or magazines that tell women that money for tummy tucks, breast enlargement and Botox, is just the thing they need to be happy and fulfilled, using language such as “Nobody has to know,” which parallels Gilman’s enforced secrecy about what she does, for instance when she writes she hides it, or the way in which she identifies the women in the wall as “creeping”¹⁷ symbolic of secrecy.

The persona of “The Applicant” evokes the use of facades that “qualify” the applicant, “necessarily”, to attain something he needs and of course does not have. Ostentatious hedonism is imbedded into the American society, where everyone needs something and something is never enough. These, post Victorian cult of domesticity,

¹⁷ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, “The Yellow Wall Paper,” Small and Maynard, Boston, MA. 1899.

values are the corner stones that hold up a patriarchal dominated sexist society that conditions women into vanity that, in turn opens up the paradigm for materialism that will further objectify and dehumanize women. Modern feminist scholars concur that the objectification of women revolves around disregarding personal and intellectual abilities and capabilities, and reducing women to mere instruments.¹⁸ John does just that when he disregards Gilman's requests, denies her the ability to read and write, and dismisses her when she tries to talk to him. "It is so hard to talk to John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so. But I tried last night. I thought it would be a good time to talk, so I told him I wasn't gaining here."¹⁹ Yet he replies to her with "our lease will be up in three weeks, and I can't see how to leave before."¹⁹

In Gilman's "The Yellow Wall Paper," she and the rest of the women mentioned in the diary are in a position of lower status and authority. John's sister Jane is the house keeper, Mary is the wet nurse for their new born child, Gilman's name throughout the story is never actually mentioned and, "All the women that creep on the ground" are "dirty," while the men mentioned in the journal are all in a position of high status and authority. Both John and Gilman's brother are "Physicians of high standing."²⁰ This symbolically shows that women, by societal implementation are limited to these roles and do not get the opportunity to choose like their counterparts, yet another way in which

¹⁸ The Captive imagination: A Casebook on The Yellow Wall Paper, Edited by Catherine Golden, (The Feminist Press at The City University of New York New York).

¹⁹ Perkins-Gilman, Charlotte "The Yellow Wall Paper." Published in 1899 by Small & Maynard, Boston, MA

²⁰ Perkins-Gilman, Charlotte "The Yellow Wall Paper." Published in 1899 by Small & Maynard, Boston, MA

²¹ Sylvia Plath. "Ariel. Daddy and Other Poems." Forward by Frieda Hughes. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. NY, London, Toronto, Sydney

women have no control over their own lives or bodies. In addition, the way in which Gilman is sheltered from outside forces, so is Plath; both trapped in the patriarchal idealism of the presumed submissiveness of women.

Sylvia Plath's "The applicant" illustrates the product consumer enterprise, where in a need is present solely for the purpose of someone else's gain and continuance of the patriarchal structure.

"Stop crying, / Open your hand. / Empty? Empty. Here is a hand// To fill it and willing/ To bring teacups and roll away headaches/ And do whatever you tell it. Will you marry it? / ²¹

Metaphorically, the applicant is being told his hand is empty and then given a hand to, "fill it," which is referring to the women, as if she has no substance without him to fill her up. To add to the dehumanization and thus the lessening of her she is further objectified through herself; "To be willing" to do what you tell her and "roll" away headaches. The use of roll evokes images of effortless, which is a false impression of this expected work.

There is a larger force at work here; someone has given both the hand and the product, who are these influential people who seem to do such a good job at convincing everyone of what it is they need in life. Government, advertising, media, propaganda, all play a part in suggestions to the masses what women's roles should be inside the home and outside in society. For instance, women tend to feel a sense of equality through being a consumer and on the other hand they attain a sense of independent agendas when the appliances in the home and the makeup on her face are specified to her and no one else just as they have seen in their counterparts. Products that revolve around beauty, fashion, health care and household goods are aimed at women, thus advertising will attempt to

target and influence them, which will result in their preoccupation of inner self control and image and direct the focus on outer image, products and account balances instead. As Myra Macdonald observes, in *Representing women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media*, the early decades of the twentieth century the developing arts of retailing and advertising were attracting a predominantly female clientele. Marketers and advertisers became important definers of twentieth century women's desires and aspirations. The media's interest in attracting women as readers or viewers was often motivated first by their perceived commercial value as customers.²² Women are especially vulnerable to media suggestions about beauty and expectation because they are so commonly associated to material possession and money. This is yet another way in which women are objectified; to associate a women's self worth to a dollar amount is to dehumanize her. To add to this dehumanization she wants to feel needed and wanted so her only choice is to conform to the ideals and be accepted or be a "black sheep" and go against the grain.

“Will you marry it? / It is garunteed // To thumb shut your eyes at
the end/ And dissolve of sorrow. / We make new stalk from the salt./ I
notice you are stark naked. How about this suit-// Black and stiff. But not a
bad fit. / Will you marry it? / It is waterproof,⁵ shatterproof, proof, /
Against fires and bombs through the roof. / Believe me they'll bury you in
it. //”²³

²² Jennifer Baker, The Forest Institute of Professional Psychology, Springfield, Missouri.

²³ Ariel Sylvia Plath. “Ariel. Daddy and Other Poems.” Forward by Frieda Hughes. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. NY, London, Toronto, Sydney

²⁴ Jennifer Baker of the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology in Springfield, Missouri..

This stanza asks the ultimate commitment in the American society, from Gilman to Plath; will you marry me. Ironically, few people hold up the agreements established in a marriage. According to Jennifer Baker of the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology more than fifty percent of American marriage ends in divorce and exponentially grows in percentage in the second third and fourth marriages.²⁴ Guarantees that suggest the marriage will be unbreakable throughout the years and the wife will be shatterproof throughout the abuse. When the contractual marriage agreement commences it now must hold up the guarantees expected; unbreakable and shatterproof. And when death or the “End” comes, don’t worry; she will dissolve into nothing without you, into recyclable material. Yet in this stanza the connotation suggests that he is falsely constructed in the same respect with the use of the words “I notice you are stark naked” followed by “how about this suit- black and stiff...” It would seem that the persona in this poem is mocking both the male and female, in that she is a product, but the seller created in him a need that makes him the product of the seller. Although first you must empty your head before the capitalists can fill it with unnecessary materialism.

“Now your head, excuse me is empty. / I have the ticket for that. // Come here, sweetie, out of the closet. / Well, what do you think of that?/ Naked as paper to start// But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver,/ In fifty gold./A living doll, wherever you look./ It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk. //It works, there’s nothing wrong with it. /

You have a hole it's a poultice. / You have an eye, it's an image. / My boy it's your last resort. / Will you marry it, marry it, marry it. //²⁵

An empty head is just the ticket for someone to fill it with needs and wants, or perhaps when we reduce ourselves to need something fake and unnecessary we become empty. Additionally, we have yet another objectification of the female; similar to Gilman being called a “Blessed little goose”¹²⁶ Plath’s persona uses the word “sweetie,” which also connotes the use of a pet name. This not only demeans her value as an equal human being, but at the same time calls her out of the closet where she is kept until needed. This parallels Gilman being confined to the upstairs room. On the other hand, after fifty years Plath’s persona has earned her value in the form of materialism, and yet, this is another way she becomes objectified and marginalized by the patriarchal society; by associating her worth and value to material possessions she objectifies herself, while being kept away in a closet or a room marginalizes her. We can look further to see this with the use of the word “she’ll” for the first time only after she has earned her worth.

The yellow wall paper illuminates the way in which male authority trivialized female voices and regarded women more as children in adult bodies than as adult themselves. Take for example, when Gilman suggests to John they go upstairs to the nicer rooms to stay, she is trivialized and spoken to like a child; “Then do let us go upstairs, there are much prettier rooms up there. Then he took me in his arms and called

²⁵ Sylvia Plath. “Ariel. Daddy and Other Poems.” Forward by Frieda Hughes. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. NY, London, Toronto, Sydney

²⁶ Perkins-Gilman, Charlotte “The Yellow Wall Paper.” Published in 1899 by Small & Maynard, Boston, MA

me a blessed little goose.”²⁷ Objectification of women through the use of “pet names” is another way in which the patriarchal power controls women and identifies them with children. Pet names such as honey, sweetie, sugar, hottie, angel, little girl, and baby just to name a few are another way for men to regard women as being associated with a child and thus are in need of control.

In addition to this element, Gilman's article also introduces the way in which the medical professional interacted with women, supporting the cultural paradigm that marginalized women and added the authority of the male doctor to the social boundaries that keep women from having any sense of adult autonomy. Take for example when John refers to Charlotte as a “little girl” or when she tries to have a conversation with him and he “picked me up carried me upstairs and read to me until I fell asleep.”²⁸ This is a stark example of how women were reduced to children giving the impression that they needed guidance and control from an authoritative figure.

While “The Applicant” emphasizes the roles in marriage and its institutionalization, “The Yellow Wall Paper” illuminates or emphasizes the gender role and oppression of the American patriarchal dominance. Nevertheless, both first hand experiences help to get a broad analysis of the social influences and the male oppression toward women and how they are shaped; in the home, where the most subtle of disturbances can be lying in wait to manifest a deeply imbedded tradition of inferior and superior roles implemented into society. Both women and men are being controlled by a

²⁷ Perkins-Gilman, Charlotte “The Yellow Wall Paper.” Published in 1899 by Small & Maynard, Boston, MA

²⁸ Perkins-Gilman, Charlotte “The Yellow Wall Paper.” Published in 1899 by Small & Maynard, Boston, MA

norm of capitalists with their products, but the men and women together are the ones that perpetuate the ideals and values of the capitalists. The path of enlightenment and thus revolution to true equal rights begins inside the individual. Charlotte Perkins-Gilman never had delusion of women in the wall paper, yet that was her metaphorical symbolism of self liberation and empowerment.

Unlike Sylvia Plath whose mental disturbances took her to the edge of insanity where she committed suicide, the pressures of patriarchal dominance drove her mad; confined, oppressed, and longing to be free. Nonetheless, these two accounts parallel to create an image of two extremely opposite decisions to liberate and empower the self to ultimately find a state of tranquility. The consciousness and awareness that women choice, to gain self control, is a major contribution of what women can and can not do. Charlotte Perkins-Gilman began to understand what it meant to take control of her own life. Her article about why she wrote *The Yellow Wall Paper* explains that she never had delusions to that magnitude and yet she wrote *The Yellow Wall Paper* to help others being oppressed to make the point that healing and overcoming oppression starts from the inside of the self not the end result of a product or the obsessive dominance of a patriarchy controlling medicine. Whether or not Sylvia Plath's decision to commit suicide was symbolically her freedom is all interpretation, but I would say that under heavy oppression and control taking her own life, to Plath, might have been the only way for her to take back her self control. Whatever the case, whether extreme or subtle, you have control we must recognize first how we come to be oppressed and within that identification we can come to understand how to create new standards and ideals that represent equality and seek to control no one.