

Deconstruction of *The Yellow Wall Paper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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Abstract: *Knowing the limits of human mind is the first and last of all knowledge. Every act of reading is necessarily incomplete because literary criticism is not a science. However, the use of particular critical methods is fundamental to literary criticism because the use of method in the act of reading provides the text with discipline. It removes the problem of absolute subjectivism by limiting the number of readings to relatively permissible extent. Thanks to help of genetic criticism, it is known that Charlotte Perkins Gilman, also known as Charlotte Perkins Stetson by her first married name, buried her ideology and political tendencies within the text. When the text is scrutinized in light of the author's life, her references to the discussions in the 19th century psychology and politics become more meaningful for the reader. However, the focus of this paper is not the analysis of this famous short story in light of the feminist literary theory. In fact, it is one of the most preferred ways but this paper targets to bring a new perspective, a less travelled road, in analysis of this significant literary work. The central aim of this paper is to deconstruct *The Yellow Wall Paper* through the reversal of the binaries by following deconstruction as a literary criticism method while making explicit references to the short story and giving concrete examples in order to make the reader aware of the binary oppositions constructing the text on the structural level.*

Keywords: the yellow wallpaper, deconstruction, literary criticism, Derrida

1. Introduction

Literature mostly mirrors life. Literary works are closely in touch with the society in which they are written because of mutual interaction between extra-textual and intra-textual material in the act of literary production. In this sense, it is a useful way to read the plays, novels, poems or short stories of a certain time of period in order to understand the discussions on some specific topics totally or partly related to the problems or upheavals of the society in question. Instead of scrutinizing the literary works in isolation, the cultivated readers should contextualize the text in order to see the reflections of the socio-cultural environment within the text on thematic and structural levels because, as a human being, the author is not independent of time and space. No author is able to escape historicity of meaning. His social background determines his intellectual formation, ideology and character development. He necessarily draws his material from his own life either by rejecting or approving the social surroundings throughout his life. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wall Paper* is a widely known short story which is a representative sample of its own genre in the context of the feminist literary tradition. In this sense, the readers who are familiar with the feminist terminology can decode the symbolic language of the story because it represents the feminist standpoint successfully.

It reflects the philosophical discussions on women's rights and the condition of women within the years it was written. Thanks to help of genetic criticism, it is known that Gilman buried her ideology and political tendencies within the text. When the text is scrutinized in light of the author's life, her references to the discussions in the 19th century psychology and politics become more meaningful for the reader. However, the focus of this paper is not the analysis of this famous short story in light of the feminist literary theory. In fact, it is one of the most preferred ways but this paper targets to bring a new perspective, a less travelled road, in analysis of this significant literary work. The central aim of

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Deconstruction is a philosophical term coined and developed by Jacques Derrida after publication of his *Of Grammatology* in 1967. Indeed, Derrida does not give a specific definition of deconstruction as a term in his works. He does not define it theoretically but he presents this new method of criticism practically. He gives a lot of examples throughout the Western history to concretize his way of analysis. The focus of Derrida's analysis is that all Western thought is based on the idea of a transcendental signified. Charles E. Bressler (2007) directs his attention to this point, Derrida's most important claim:

Believing that signification is both arbitrary and conventional, Derrida now begins his process of turning Western philosophy on its head: he boldly asserts that the entire history of Western metaphysics from Plato to the present is founded on a classic, fundamental error. (p.120)

Derrida asserts that this error is the search of a centre as a basis. In Derridean terminology, each postulate in western philosophy is a transcendental signified: "The great error is in searching for what Derrida calls a transcendental signified, an external point of reference upon which one may build a concept or philosophy" (Bressler, 2007, p.120). In fact, Derrida borrows this philosophical term, transcendental signified, from Ferdinand De Saussure who declared arbitrariness of the relationship between the signifier and the signified by studying linguistics not diachronically but synchronically for the first time. In this respect, Derrida (2005) thinks that all Western thought from Plato to present

has grounded its basis on a meaning, “presence” or “existence” (p.353). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1997) calls this powerful desire for a centre “logocentrism” or “phonocentrism” (p. 11). This desire for a centre determines the direction of the entire Western thought because it constructs a hierarchy between two opposing centres by making the first one of the pairs more significant:

Derrida asserts that the binary oppositions on which Western thought has been constructed since the time of Plato are structured so that one element will always be privileged (be in a superior position) and the other unprivileged (in an inferior position). In this way of thinking, the first or top elements of the pairs in the following list of binary oppositions are privileged: man/woman, human/animal, soul/body, good/bad. (Bressler, 2007, p. 121)

Hence the reversal of these binary oppositions takes a central position in deconstruction. Jonathan Culler makes emphasis upon the place of binary oppositions in the deconstructive method. Culler (2000) states that “Deconstruction is most simply defined as a critique of the hierarchical oppositions that have structured Western thought: inside/outside, mind/body, literal/metaphorical, speech/writing, presence/absence, nature/culture, form/meaning” (p. 120). The hierarchy between these opposing centres are vital to understand Derrida’s point because he thinks that the binary opposition of presence/absence results in a certain hierarchy between speech and writing. Speech means presence and writing means absence. In speech, the meaning intended by the speaker can be examined thanks to presence of the speaker but the written text lacks in validation and verification owing to absence of the intender:

According to Derrida, one of the most “violent hierarchies” derived from Platonic and Aristotelian thought is speech/writing, with speech being privileged. Consequently, speech is awarded presence, and writing is equated with absence. Because it is inferior of the two, writing becomes simply the symbols of speech, a second hand representation of ideas. (Bressler, 2007, p. 122)

In this respect, the priority of speech to writing springs from the presence or absence of the speaker. The absence of the intender in writing makes it inferior. In writing, authorial intention becomes indeterminate. Indeed, meaning is inaccessible in both speech and writing because of the fact that nobody can step inside the speaker’s or the author’s mind fully to compare the meaning intended and the meaning inferred but traditionally intention of the author has been considered as the finest foundation of objective criticism. The author has been considered as the determiner of the meaning in his own work. In this respect, the possibility of checking validity of the meaning by depending upon the speaker’s confirmation or objection makes it

superior to writing. In this respect, M.H. Abrams (1999) steps forward in his analysis on Derrida’s thought:

Derrida’s reiterated claim is that not only all Western philosophies and theories of language, but Western uses of language, hence all Western culture, are logocentric; that is, they are centered or grounded on a ‘logos’ (which in Greek signified both ‘word’ and ‘rationality’) or, as stated in a phrase he adopts from Heidegger, they rely on ‘the metaphysics of presence’. (p. 56)

In Abrams’ view, Derrida benefits from Heideggerian metaphysics of presence in his analysis based on the meaningful relationship between logos and nature of language. Indeed, logocentrism of all Western intellectual culture springs from logocentrism of language. Abram’s claim is that Derrida observes a close relationship between the logocentrism in all Western uses of language and binary opposition of speech/writing: “They are logocentric, according to Derrida, in part because they are phonocentric; that is, they grant, implicitly or explicitly, logical “priority,” or “privilege,” to speech over writing as the model for analyzing all discourse” (Abram, 1999, p. 56). So, the priority of speech over writing takes the primary position in Derrida’s analysis on Western thought. Interestingly, he thinks that this logocentric way of thinking is natural because it is impossible to get rid of it completely. He adds that it originates from Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction. Aristotle’s either/or logic leads man to think in this way and it causes some serious problems on the conscious level. Thus, the finest way is to be well aware of this habit of human mind not to have these problems because of the fact that human mind automatically works in this way.

Deconstruction of *The Yellow Wall Paper* through reversal of the binary oppositions such as man/woman, self/other, sanity/insanity, subject/object, mind/body, society/individual, and life/death provides the reader with a close analysis of the opposing pairs which constructs the text structurally. Closely observed, the whole story is based on these opposing pairs. The story is narrated from the first point of view by a female narrator whose powerful faculty of imagination drives her to isolation and alienation in her social life. She tries to suppress her strong desire of writing not to make her husband, a physician of high standing, unhappy. She is informed by her husband John that she suffers from “temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency” (Stetson, 1899, p. 2). Her brother is also “a physician of high standing” (Stetson, 1899, p. 2) like her husband and he agrees with John about the mental disease of his own sister. Thus, she is an obscure female protagonist who feels alone with these two male scientists. In the context of the self/other binary opposition, the woman is *the other* whereas John represents *the self* as a man. She must remain passive because of their scientific authority deriving from superiority of reason to imagination in the context of hierarchical order of faculties of human mind in philosophical sense. She dislikes their patronizing ways but she cannot fight with them intellectually: “If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and

relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression-a slight hysterical tendency-what is one to do?" (Stetson, 1899, p. 2). Scientific authority of these rational men leads her to hide her journal because she is forbidden from writing and working by her husband for the sake of rest cure which was thought to be the best way to struggle with hysteria during those years. In this regard, she represents the feminine artistic intuition against the masculine scientific rationality and the power of reason drives her to remain silent and submissive although she is dissatisfied with the present situation: "There comes John, and I must put this away-he hates to have me write a word" (Stetson, 1899, p. 9). She does not want to be recognized by her husband while writing. She confesses that she sometimes gets angry with John for no reason: "I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes" (Stetson, 1899, 5). Indeed, it results from John's insistence on his claim that she suffers from a kind of mental disease; however, she is not aware of the real source of the problem. She internalises the discourse frequently repeated by John, the representative of scientific rationality of modern science, and she always tries to give up her instinctive tendency for writing:

He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try. (Stetson, 1899, pp. 13-14)

In this sense, John sees writing or literature as the crux of problem and he wants to direct his wife from *womanhood* to *motherhood*. Throughout the story, he does not encourage her wife for writing and working. Instead, he and her sister Jenny always observe her closely and she, the narrator, always tries to write without being noticed. In her mind, Jenny is an ideal woman who acts selflessly to help others. She does not have specific personal objectives in life and she is satisfied with the life style determined by the society. She is happy with the social norms of her own society: "She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better professions. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick" (Stetson, 1899, pp. 17-18). So, Jenny does not deviate from the existing social norms and standards and she does not tend to express herself individually by writing. For this reason, the men around her do not conflict with her. She obeys and fits into society.

From the feminist point of view, traditionally, the woman wishing to write has been seen abnormal according to the standards set by the patriarchal authorities. Thus, the narrator is supposed to fight against her inner desire to be a normal woman because society always aims to restrict individuality by means of the social institutions and moral values. In a way, society chops down the wings of imagination to keep down the marginal as much as possible. So, the narrator tries to limit her powerful imagination from beginning to end. However, her repression of her own imaginative power drives her to insanity by the end of the story. She loses her touch with the external reality and she begins to see some women creeping around in her room covered with yellow wallpaper. In other words, she is

the victim of her highly imaginative character but it is necessary to realize that the implied binary opposition of sanity/insanity takes their origin from the socially constructed standards defined by scientific rationality. The rationalist cannot understand the importance of this womanly desire to express her individuality by way of art. From this point view, it is possible to say that John is innocent to some extent because he is shaped by the male dominant culture in which he lives. He believes in the objectivity of scientific knowledge and he defines her wife as hysterical. The existence of the opposing components of objectivity and subjectivity in his mind leads him to glorify objectivity. Accordingly, John's belief in objectivity of scientific knowledge leads him to ignore her wife's desire for writing. He is unable to empathize with a woman who wants to follow her inner desire for writing:

Of course, if you were in any danger, I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you. (Stetson, 1899, p. 30)

John declares his authority resulting from his profession to persuade her wife that she is getting better physically day by day and he thinks that it is an indicator of her psychological betterment. He is so self-confident that he sees the literary images in his wife's mind as dangerous and fictive:

I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so? (Stetson, 1899, p. 32)

It clearly shows that John acts in good faith but his controlling ways force her wife to insanity although he wants to help her wife to have a more balanced mind. In a way, John's belief in objective and masculine scientific thought deprives him of subjective and feminine artistic thought. So, he cannot understand her wife who always tends to make stories out of her surroundings in usual life. Moreover, John uses a fatherly language towards her wife and calls her "little girl" (Stetson, 1899, p. 30). He is always the privileged subject who defines and prescribes the woman, the object. He says that "Don't go walking about like that-you'll get cold" (Stetson, 1899, p. 30) to warn her like a little girl who cannot stand on her own feet and who needs parental control and advice. It shows that his assumption dependent on his own superior rationalism directs him to rule a woman whose highly imaginative and feminine personality drives her to a kind of downfall. By the end of the story, the narrator locks the door and she does not allow John to come into the room. Metaphorically, she wants to protect her privacy by keeping him out but John breaks in to save her mentally sick wife. Eventually, John faints and his wife creeps over him from then on. Closely

observed, John's mind is dominated by the binary opposition of life/death and he wants to save her because life is superior to death in his mind. He does his best to keep her alive although he does not respect her privacy and individual expectations. Her physical health takes the primary position and her mental health takes the secondary one when it is necessary to make a choice between them. More importantly, the binary opposition of man/woman motivates John to take action to save her wife, the passive woman in need of external help. In fact, the narrator always takes the secondary position throughout the story when compared to the other characters because she represents the unprivileged component of all the binaries within the text. More clearly, she is hierarchically always the secondary component as clearly seen in the above-mentioned examples from the story.

To conclude, every reading is a necessarily incomplete. Knowing the limits of human mind is the first and last of all knowledge. Nevertheless, every literary text can be analysed in light of different methods because every method brings new perspectives to the text. Literary criticism is not a science but the use of particular critical methods is fundamental to literary criticism because the use of method in the act of reading provides the text with discipline. It removes the problem of absolute subjectivism by limiting the number of readings to relatively permissible extent. Deconstruction of a text means to reverse the binary oppositions in order to decode the constructive mind behind the text. This method of criticism reveals the hierarchical order between the opposing couples such as man/woman, self/other, sanity/insanity, objectivity/subjectivity, mind/body, society/individual and life/death. The first components of the pairs always dominate the second ones respectively. As asserted by Derrida, this hierarchy springs from the nature of all Western uses of language. In his opinion, the logocentric way of thinking has been a kind of basis to the Western mindset since Plato's time manifesting itself in theoretical and practical uses of language. In this sense, *The Yellow Wall Paper* deserves to be analysed in light of different critical approaches in literary criticism for fresh perspectives. More particularly, textually it is highly favourable for deconstructive readings because it is abundant in good examples of binary oppositions providing the text with structural integrity.

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