The Fall of the Yellow Wallpaper

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Critics have consistently pointed out the gothic influence of Edgar Allan Poe's, "The Fall of the House of Usher" on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," but few have envisioned this influence as multi-directional. In Poe, "The House of Usher," and the American Gothic, Dennis Perry and Carl Sederholm delineate the ways in which past critics have not only read Gilman's story as either a feminist move or a gothic tale, but also viewed these distinctions as oppositional to each other (Perry 24). On the contrary, Carol Margaret Davison deconstructs this notion of the two genres as at odds with each other by situating Gilman's story in the genre of the Female Gothic which "centers its lens on a young woman's rite of passage into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially the joint institutions of marriage and motherhood" (48). I agree with Davison's appraisal of Gilman's text, but wish to push the argument even farther along the line of Perry and Sederholm's reasoning. They argue that Gilman's variation of the Female Gothic involves "criticizing oppressive patriarchies, centering on the struggle between men and women and their societal roles, and championing female independence" (Perry 25). I find the key to my argument in their contention that these stories offer a striking example of intertextuality which demands "The Yellow Wallpaper" to be read as an interpretation of Poe's tale (Perry 20).

While I agree with Perry and Sederholm's argument, my own focuses more specifically on the way Gilman's narrator gives Madeline the voice that Poe's male characters repress in "The Fall of the House of Usher." In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the nameless narrator's voice goes unheeded by her male doctor and
husband, but finds power in the story itself since Gilman writes it as a type of first-person diary. A close look at the way Madeline is treated (and literally not treated for her illness) by her brother and his friend in Poe’s story offers many parallels to the narrator’s position in Gilman’s story. In this way, both short stories feature an oppressive patriarchal system which silences its female subjects, but “The Yellow Wallpaper” suggests that a woman may escape such oppression through the creative act of rewriting. I intend to show how a careful treatment of Madeline’s actions in “The Fall of the House of Usher” reveals that she also uses creative rewriting to unleash her own power in Poe’s story. My argument also goes farther than those of other critics by using Clive’s 1989 film The Yellow Wallpaper and Corman’s 1960 film The Fall of the House of Usher to manifest the ways in which subsequent interpretations of the texts make even more radical arguments regarding the forced silence of women than the originals. Overall, I intend to show how The Yellow Wallpaper runs with Gilman’s argument that imaginative writing benefits women far more than imposed silence, but goes beyond Gilman’s text by empowering its heroine, aptly named Charlotte in the film to suggest the autobiographical relationship between Gilman’s story’s narrator and Gilman, to finally escape the oppressive men through the power of her rebellious rewriting. Having established Charlotte’s triumph, I will reread the climax of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” as rewritten from the perspective of Madeline, who finally triumphs by gaining the power to communicate.

First, it is important to note that Poe’s, “Fall of the House of Usher,” can certainly be read as a tale in which male forces repress Madeline’s voice. While Poe’s narrator and Roderick both speak throughout the course of the story, Poe does not give Madeline a single word in the narrative. In fact, the most that we hear from her is a “low moaning cry” before she falls upon her brother (Poe 216). Her oral absence from the narrative signifies the insignificant amount of space her perspective occupies in the mind of the male characters. Roderick proceeds to diagnose Madeline’s condition in much the same way that John and the doctor in The Yellow Wallpaper film decide Charlotte’s malady and the best way to treat her—without considering her own opinion (Poe 205). The description of Madeline’s tomb, however, moves the male characters’ actions from repressive to oppressive as they place her in a vault that is “small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light” with an “oppressive atmosphere” and in the lowermost reaches of the House of Usher (Poe 211). Possibly even more frightening, the narrator informs us that this long-forsaken vault was formerly used “for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep” (211), which we can infer may have had something to do with torture and suffering. Choosing to put Madeline in a place
such as this suggests the repressive and oppressive actions the male characters perform against our Female Gothic heroine.

Interestingly, Corman's film, The Fall of the House of Usher, goes even further to demonstrate the male oppression of Madeline than the original text, and even highlights a sexual oppression that Poe's text perhaps only hints at. Adding Philip's character to the film most significantly highlights Madeline's role as an object of male desire, for we come to see her as simply the object that both Roderick and Philip aim to possess. In fighting over her, neither Philip nor Roderick really appeal for Madeline's opinion without dictating to her what they think it should be. This is particularly apparent in the scene where Philip's hand covers Madeline's mouth in order to stifle her scream. The shot of this dark male hand clasped over her mouth offers an obvious symbol of the way both men attempt to silence Madeline's voice, for we are not sure which of the men the arm belongs to until the next cut. The setting of Madeline's bedroom colors the scene with a sexual tension which becomes almost unbearable when the camera reveals Roderick's presence in her room while she and Philip are kissing. In this sense, Roderick not only silences Madeline's voice, but any sexual desires she may have as he stops her from manifesting her physical attraction for Philip with his presence. Roderick does repeatedly silence Madeline's voice at dinner, though, and when he abruptly dismisses her to bed so she cannot have a meaningful conversation with Philip. Thus, while the film offers Madeline more time and words, it emphasizes the repressive nature of the male characters so that she still possesses no real space to express herself.

While both men repress Madeline's voice in the film, Roderick reveals himself as actively oppressing Madeline when he locks her alive within the tomb. The film poignantly illustrates what is left ambiguous in the story, when the camera shows Roderick's face focused on the movements of Madeline within her coffin. He then does everything in his power to close the lid to her coffin and bury her in the depths of the house before Philip can see that she is alive. Ultimately, this scene offers a striking representation of Roderick's maniacally deliberate, oppressive repression of Madeline. He oppresses her by confining her to very limited physical space in her coffin, effectively eliminating her ability to secure any sexual space with Philip, and extinguishing her oral space by placing her too deep for anyone but Roderick to hear her cries. Thus the film, The Fall of the House of Usher, reveals both the oral repression and the sexual oppression of Madeline.

Similarly, the men in "The Yellow Wallpaper" repress the narrator's voice by restricting her expression. Instead of validating the narrator's opinions regarding
her own health, John patronizes her by calling her “little girl” or “blessed little goose” and saying, “Bless her little heart!” . . . “she shall be as sick as she pleases!” (Gilman 19, 11, 20). Thus, no matter how she tries to verbally express herself, John represses her voice. Furthermore, John represses the narrator’s voice by forbidding her writing, which the narrator intimates to us by noting how she must frequently quit her writing in order to avoid being caught (Gilman 14). The narrator relates that she writes “in spite of [her husband and her brother]” but that it “exhaust[s]” her since she has “to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (Gilman 6). Additionally, her husband refuses to validate her interest in writing or activity of any imaginative sort since “He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (Gilman 5). Hence, he ignores the narrator’s feelings, ideas, and attempts to communicate with him—thereby tyrannically repressing her attempts at expression.

Women only seem to escape oppressive patriarchy, then, by rewriting themselves into gothic monsters. Clive’s film, The Yellow Wallpaper, however, highlights the text’s forms of repression through morally repulsive depictions of the male interactions with Charlotte which emphasize the way in which she is sexually oppressed and unheard by the men around her. The bedroom scene between John and Charlotte offers a particularly gruesome illustration of John’s repression of Charlotte’s voice as well as his oppression of her body and will. Charlotte attempts to make him understand her point of view when she tells him, “It’s the wallpaper that’s making me so nervous.” The film shows John’s complete disregard for her opinion and feelings when the camera cuts to a close-up of his face as he says, “It’s not the wallpaper,” without even trying to understand her point of view. Later, he refers to it as “stupid wallpaper,” further undermining the validity of Charlotte’s opinions. Next, Charlotte tries another form of communication: tears. Unfortunately, John reacts as unfeelingly to Charlotte’s crying as he does to her words when he says, “You know, when I’m away from you, it’s such a joy to know exactly what you’re doing” Clearly, John’s “joy” at regimenting what Charlotte does each day so that he can control her even when he’s away from her, shows how much he relishes the opportunity to restrict Charlotte’s voice, actions, and abilities. The highest act of violation comes, however, when John proceeds to climb on top of Charlotte, practically suffocating her, and completely drowning her out of the scene. Thus, John treats Charlotte as no more than an object to be used for the satisfaction of his sex drive, the condition that Davison warns against when she says, “until men regard women as vocal desiring subjects as opposed to silenced objects of desire, America—and more specifically, its domestic sphere—will remain
a Gothic locale for women” (67). The nails keeping the bed in its place symbolize what Greg Johnson calls “a sexual crucifixion” (526) and what I would add amounts to Charlotte having to suffer her role as sexual object in this male-dominated society. In this world, Charlotte is forced to sacrifice her own desires for what the men desire of her, only she has no savior outside of her own mind.

In addition to suffering a sexual violation of her body in the bedroom scene, the doctor scene also shows Charlotte as a victim of what amounts to a rape of her mind. The scene begins with a close-up of the black back of the doctor completely filling the screen with a darkness signifying the lack of understanding he has for Charlotte’s condition. The camera moves around to show his hand around Charlotte’s neck, checking her pulse, but still alluding to a method of choking her voice. When the doctor then takes Charlotte’s journal from within her pocket, she vehemently asserts herself: “You do not have my permission to read a word of it!” He verbally responds that he wouldn’t dream of it, but proceeds to rummage through its contents and then tear her writing straight out. Charlotte looks utterly crestfallen at such a blatant violation of her desires, her mind, and inasmuch as writing can constitute her, her very self. His subsequent contact with Charlotte’s body associates his violation of her mind with a sexual violation of her body. He places his stethoscope on her chest slightly beneath the folds of her dress hinting at sexual intent, and moreover, returns to compliment her on the charming nature of her earrings as he reaches out to touch his hand to them. Failing to see the value of Charlotte’s opinions, writing, or mind, he can only see the stereotypical value of physical beauty. Charlotte’s flinching at his touch suggests that he has raped and pillaged her mind and body to an extent she cannot tolerate, but she is still caught in what Alison Milbank calls “female domestic powerlessness” (158).

The final cross-cut of the film, however, reveals just how much Charlotte’s writing allows her to escape the male attempts to force her into a social role she cannot exist in. Greg Johnson describes this as “an allegory of literary imagination unbinding the social, domestic, and psychological confinements of a nineteenth-century woman writer” (522), and Charlotte’s final actions exemplify this exact rewriting of her roles in all of these dimensions. The sequence begins with Charlotte physically rejecting male attempts to penetrate her via tonic as she vomits into the sink. The aerial shot following her slow ascent of the stairs connotes that she is rising to an occasion, albeit an eerie one with dramatic music emphasizing this fact, while the low angle shot of John descending the stairs reveals his inferior purpose. Charlotte shuts out the patriarchal eyes of the world by closing the window shades, and then proceeds to remove the nails keeping the bed in place.
This important departure from the text signifies not only Charlotte’s dissatisfaction with her assigned role, but her rewriting of it. By simply moving the position of the bed to bar the entrance of man instead of welcoming it, she shows the new power she has gained to creatively rewrite man’s dictations. If, as previously mentioned, the nails represent “a sexual crucifixion” (Johnson 526), her removal of them invokes a powerful image of her self-constructed resurrection from the deadly societal role she previously fulfilled. Ergo, this act effectively rewrites her role in society.

The rest of the sequence goes even further to emphasize the connection between writing and Charlotte’s ability to triumph over the men who would silence and oppress her. The camera cross-cuts between John’s ironic speech about the “restorative power of pleasure” and Charlotte ripping strips of paper off the wall. The paralleled sounds of John turning the pages of his speech regarding the medical institutional control of women and Charlotte’s ripping paper off the wall are so like one another, we cannot help but see Charlotte’s action as a reaction to John’s. With each tear of the wallpaper, she seems to be destroying what he is saying about controlling women and, instead, rewriting a new and creative interpretation of herself. Because the camera sits behind the wallpaper, as Charlotte rips it off we see more and more of her. This effectively illustrates the constitutive power of writing which offers Charlotte an opportunity to create a new self. Finally, the comparison of the blank wall with John’s closed speech-book would suggest that they are both finished, but the following tilt shot from Charlotte’s feet to her head suggests that we need to size her up differently. As in the text, Charlotte then creeps around the room, finally communicating the gravity of her condition effectively to John and reversing their roles—for it is his turn to be silent and weakly faint, as females are expected to (Gilman 32). Still, the film shows Charlotte going further than just finding her voice in a male-dominated society. The final scene reveals her creeping not just around the room—and role—that John has assigned her to, but outside where there are no walls to enclose her. So, as Anne Williams argues women in Female Gothic fiction can, Charlotte “does not merely protest the conditions and assumptions of patriarchal culture,” she “spontaneously rewrites them” (138). In doing so, she rewrites herself out of the oppressive patriarchal system into a space she created for herself—even if only in her mind—where she can enjoy a free range of expression.

Similarly, if we reread Poe’s tale in context of a female triumphing over the men who would repress and oppress her, we find that her final act not only gets their attention, but destroys their efforts to confine her to this world. Through death, she is able to communicate a desire for and achieve a space for expression. Instead
of being buried in the basement of the house, she ascends to the height of her existence. Instead of being controlled by Roderick, she can, for once, exact an influence of her own by causing his death in addition to her own. Further, Perry and Sederholtz argue that Madeline’s move toward death may actually “signal the end of the old regime and the potential for a new social construction” (29), suggesting that the fall of the House of Usher can actually be viewed in a positive context—especially from Madeline’s perspective.

Importantly, though, we must remember that it is the reading of a gothic tale that brings about Madeline’s escape. She, too, is influenced by hysterical writing—gothic fiction. Like Charlotte who “overlays her Gothic reading onto her own experiences” (Perry 27) when she imagines that the “ancestral halls” she occupies for the summer truly make up “a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity” (Gilman 5), Madeline is called forth by the power of a gothic tale. She echoes “the very crackling and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described,” the “screaming or grating sound” of “the dragon’s unnatural shriek,” and the “distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled reverberation” (Poe 214–15), but in a different context. In this way, Madeline rewrites the story by enacting her own version of its events. Her power comes from words written on “dead paper” (Gilman 6), which only she can transform into her own narrative. Through her rewriting of this male dictated story, Madeline is finally able to force Roderick’s ironically super-hearing ears to acknowledge her perspective. He finally recognizes “the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault” as demonstrations of her refusal to be oppressively repressed (Poe 215). She finds power over Roderick only through the use of a literary gothic spectacle, for surely her “enshrouded figure” with “blood upon her white robes” amounts to as much (215). Like Charlotte, it is only through creative rewriting that Madeline finds her power to escape the oppressive patriarchal structure that formerly confined her.

Thus, both women are able to exact their triumphs of making a space for their own expression through the power of writing. Charlotte rewrites her social role as she rips away all that John dictates to her and finally escapes his world, but only through her own madness. Similarly, Madeline finds her escape by becoming the gothic specter that so frightened her brother, rewriting her role in his life, as well. Still, even she can escape his world only through death. Thus, though these women find power to unbind the oppressive patriarchal cords around them, they can only do so through gothic means. They depict the type of women Kelly Hurley argues reign in gothic fiction when she says, “Remove the mask of feminine
innocence and you find beneath it a raging animal, a monster, a 'creature with . . .
the face of a devil'” (202). Women only seem to escape the oppressive patriarchy,
then, by rewriting themselves into gothic monsters.
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