LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
LJLLR
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 9 November, 2026

REPRESSION AND THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND: A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF THE YELLOW WALLPAPER BY CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

Rohma Khalid[1], Iman Khalid[2], Yasir Iqbal[3], Muhammad Jawad[4], Ms. Kiran Hussain[*5],

[1,2]*BS English University of Agriculture Faisalabad Constituent College Toba Tek Singh.*
[3,*5]*Lecturer of English Literature and Linguistics University of Agriculture Faisalabad Sub-Campus Toba Tek Singh.*
[4]*Visiting Lecturer of English Literature and Linguistics University of Agriculture Faisalabad Sub-Campus Toba Tek Singh.*

[1]rohmakhalid04@gmail.com, [2]imankhalid436@gmail.com, [3]yasir29334@gmail.com, [4]muhammadjawadsaif@gmail.com, [*5]kiran.hussain@uaf.edu.pk

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.23975469

Keywords
Repression, Unconscious, Psychoanalysis, Patriarchal Authority, Creeping woman, Female Subjectivity

Article History
Received: 05 August 2026
Accepted: 19 October 2026
Published: 05 November 2026

Copyright @Author
Corresponding Author: *
Ms. Kiran Hussain

Abstract

This research comprises a psychoanalytical study of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 text "The Yellow Wallpaper", considering repression and the unconscious mind under the framework of patriarchal medical authority. A qualitative literary-psychoanalytic case study approach was adopted, with qualitative textual analysis underpinned by a hermeneutic interpretative method, integrating psychoanalytic perspectives based upon Freud's and Jung's and Lacan's theories. Each aspect of the wallpaper was considered: a visual image of repressed desire; the medical politics of looking; the unconscious, return of the repressed, and crisis in the woman's subject status; repression of the woman's artist self; the shattering of the patriarchal master structure. The research combines concepts of repression, the return of the repressed (Freud); the archetypal theory of the shadow (Jung); the divided subject (Lacan); with female psychoanalytic critique (Feminist Theory). Results indicate that the woman's identification with the creeping woman is an enactment of banished energies returning, while her final crawling over her husband's corpse represents an unclear and ambivalent freedom that carries with it both psychotic collapse and a rejection of authority. Limits of the study include the choice of one text and the limitations of psychoanalytic methods. Future work is considered. Intersectionality, disability studies, comparative texts across cultures, and application to patient care would be appropriate areas of study.

1.INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper (1892) dramatizes the detrimental effects of imposed female passivity through a woman's descent into delusion. The narrator understates anxieties in a patriarchal world "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" as domestic decor becomes a battleground of the mind, with wallpaper patterns resolving into "a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" (Gilman, 1892, p. 652). Twentieth-century feminist criticism illuminates this mechanism of repression. Golden (1992) traces its canonization as feminist text, while

LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 9 November, 2026

Karpinski (1992) argues the narrator's hallucinations reflect Gilman's own suppressed psychological contents during Weir Mitchell's treatment. Shumaker (1985) critiques the "cult of true womanhood," showing the rest cure as patriarchal ideology eradicating female intellect. Recent psychoanalytic approaches interpret the wallpaper as a transitional object mediating the narrator's divided self (Veeder, 1988).

Background of Study

Psychoanalysis offers critical approaches to literary works. Freud (1900) introduces dreamwork, where repression manifests through condensation and symbolic transformation illuminating the narrator's moonlit wallpaper fascination as unconscious "dream work" (p. 277). Haney Peritz (1986) demonstrates how the wallpaper enables "unreading," translating passive consumption into unconscious protest. Understanding nineteenth-century women's mental health is crucial; Showalter (1985) traces the "female malady," where diagnoses enforced sex-specific expectations. Weir Mitchell's rest cure demanded absolute rest, removing all stimuli and rendering women's intellectual activity part of their illness (Gilman, 1935, p. 95). King and Morris (1992) view this as biopower the administration of life illuminating how illness narratives critique gendered control.

Statement of Problem

Despite rich critical research, an integrative psychoanalytic criticism combining Freudian, Jungian, and Lacanian theories in feminist context remains underdeveloped. Few critics address how theoretical interplay illuminates the narrator's psychological deterioration, breakdown, and resistance. The relationship between Gilman's fictional repression and her sociological critique of female economic dependency requires systematic exploration. This study addresses the need for comprehensive psychoanalytic analysis accounting for multiple layers of meaning without reducing the narrator's experience to pure pathology or uncomplicated liberation.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does Gilman utilize Freudian concepts of repression and the return of the repressed to portray the narrator's psychological deterioration as a consequence of patriarchal medical authority?
2. In what ways do the symbolic architecture of the text – particularly the yellow wallpaper, the creeping woman, and the domestic environment function as manifestations of the narrator's unconscious mind and repressed creative energies?
3. How do Lacanian theories of the split subject and the Symbolic order illuminate the narrator's crisis of identity and her ultimate identification with the creeping woman?
4. What is the relationship between Gilman's sociological analysis of female economic dependency and the psychological dynamics of The Yellow Wallpaper?

Research Objectives

This study pursues the following objectives:

1. To analyze how Gilman employs Freudian psychoanalytic concepts – specifically repression, the return of the repressed, and the structure of the psyche to dramatize the narrator's descent into madness as a response to patriarchal suppression.
2. To examine the symbolic elements of the text, including the wallpaper, the creeping woman, and the nursery setting, as externalizations of the narrator's unconscious conflicts and repressed desires.

LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
LJLLR
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 9 November, 2026

3.To apply Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to interpret the narrator's fragmented subjectivity and her final identification with the creeping woman as a response to exclusion from the Symbolic order of patriarchal language and law.

1.To synthesize Gilman's sociological critique of female economic dependency with the psychological dynamics of the narrative, demonstrating how material conditions of oppression produce the specific forms of mental distress depicted in the text.

Significance of Study

This study contributes to Gilman scholarship by providing an integrated psychoanalytic framework that synthesizes diverse theoretical perspectives while maintaining fidelity to the text's historical and political dimensions. The significance of this approach lies in its capacity to illuminate the complexity of the narrator's psychological journey without reducing her experience to either pure victimization or uncomplicated agency. By examining how repression operates at multiple levels individual, interpersonal, and social the study reveals the sophistication of Gilman's critique of patriarchal medical authority. Furthermore, the integration of Gilman's sociological work with psychoanalytic literary criticism demonstrates the continuity between her fictional and theoretical projects, revealing how personal trauma informs comprehensive social analysis. The study holds contemporary relevance for discussions of women's mental health, particularly regarding the medicalization of female experience and the pathologization of dissent. By demonstrating how a nineteenth-century text anticipates contemporary feminist critiques of psychiatry, the study establishes the enduring capacity of literature to illuminate the psychological consequences of social oppression.

Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses specifically on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper (1892) as its primary textual object, employing psychoanalytic theory as its principal methodological framework. The scope encompasses an analysis of the text's representation of repression, the unconscious mind, and psychological deterioration under patriarchal constraint, drawing upon Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungian archetypal theory, and Lacanian concepts of the subject. The study incorporates relevant passages from Gilman's Herland (1915) and Women and Economics (1898) where these texts illuminate the psychological and sociological dimensions of The Yellow Wallpaper, as well as comparative references to Kate Chopin's The Awakening (1899) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (1850) to contextualize the narrator's psychological journey within broader traditions of female literary resistance.

The study is delimited in several respects. First, it does not attempt a comprehensive biography of Charlotte Perkins Gilman but rather focuses on those aspects of her life experience that directly informed the composition and themes of The Yellow Wallpaper. Second, while acknowledging the historical context of nineteenth-century medical practice, the study relies on established historical scholarship rather than undertaking extensive primary archival research. Third, the study prioritizes psychoanalytic and feminist theoretical frameworks over other critical approaches such as Marxist criticism, disability studies, or postcolonial theory, recognizing that the specific focus on repression and the unconscious mind requires methodological concentration. Finally, the study examines the text primarily through close reading and theoretical analysis rather than empirical or clinical psychological research, acknowledging that literary texts generate insights distinct from those produced by scientific methodology.

Literature Review

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper (1892) exposes psychological decline under patriarchal medical authority. The unnamed narrator spirals into insanity during a mandated "rest cure" prescribed by Silas Weir Mitchell for postpartum depression. Gilman herself endured this treatment in 1887, with

LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
LJLLR
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 9 November, 2026

Mitchell prescribing: "Live as domestic a life as possible... And never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live" (Gilman, 1935). The narrator's descent becomes an allegory for patriarchal repression of female intellect and autonomy.

Theoretical Framework

The framework centers on Freud's psychoanalytic theory of repression, where the ego expels unacceptable impulses into the unconscious, which then manifest through dreams and symptoms. In the text, the narrator's enforced prohibition from writing constitutes institutionalized repression, forcing creative energies underground into hallucinations of the wallpaper and trapped woman. Lacan's theory of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real realms enriches this analysis: the narrator's attempt to regain subjectivity through the wallpaper woman represents reconstitution within patriarchy's symbolic order. The wallpaper functions as objet petit a the unobtainable object perpetuating desire (Lacan, 1977). Jungian archetypes add further depth: the wallpaper symbolizes the unconscious as both personal shadow and collective feminine suppressed under patriarchy, while the creeping woman embodies the anima archetype representing disowned creative energy (Jung, 1964).

Gilman's Women and Economics (1898) posits that economic dependency renders women psychically underdeveloped, comparing the bourgeois housewife to a brood mare: "Neither the horse nor the woman is 'free'" (Gilman, 1898). This analysis directly addresses the material circumstances of the narrator's confinement; her "nervous depression" stems not from biological weakness but from systemic economic and intellectual dependency.

Anne Stiles' analysis traces the rest cure's progression from Civil War remedy for soldiers to prescription for middle-class white women. Where the "West Cure" for nervous men involved vigorous outdoor activity, the rest cure confined women to bed, revealing the sexed nature of neurasthenia diagnosis female intellectual activity was pathologized while male intellect was celebrated (Stiles, 2012). John's threats to send the narrator to Weir Mitchell represented intensified patriarchal control.

Contemporary psychoanalytic criticism applies Freudian repression and sublimation to explain the narrator's trajectory. Tabla et al. (2022) demonstrate how the yellow wallpaper symbolizes patriarchal structure, with the shadow lady condensing "a multitude of desires, both conscious and repressed." They identify "the eyes that follow her" as internalized patriarchal surveillance the superego appearing as external persecutor. Mizrak (2025) analyzes the text from Freudian and Lacanian perspectives, framing madness as "a language of the silenced, a final, fractured means of self-assertion."

The Jungian approach interprets the wallpaper as archetype representing repression and individuation. The narrator's perception of the woman behind the pattern embodies her suppressed shadow self—creative womanhood patriarchy trained her to disdain. Tearing down the wallpaper constitutes Jung's "confrontation with the shadow," essential yet hazardous to the individuation process (Jung, 1964). Gangwani (2023) addresses the narrator through Freudian hysteria, concluding the id overwhelms the compromised ego. The id's darkness manifests through dreams and hallucinations the spaces repressed desire occupies when rational control is absent.

The diary acts as "a mode of resistance for a woman silenced by patriarchal and medical authority" (Mizrak, 2025). The narrator's secret writing "sly" and guilt-ridden represents a compromise formation expressing and concealing repressed desire. Her final creeping around John's body has been read as complete ego breakdown or radical liberation. Kristeva's notion of abjection illuminates the wallpaper's "smouldering unclean yellow"—the horror of unclassifiable existence that patriarchy links to women and madness. By embracing the abject, the narrator denounces the rational subjectivity John demanded.

LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 9 November, 2026

Methodology

This study investigates the narrator's psychic breakdown in The Yellow Wallpaper through a qualitative literary psychoanalytic case study. The methodology integrates close textual analysis with systematic qualitative procedures, drawing on hermeneutic interpretation and psychoanalytic literary criticism. The research design treats the short story as both cultural artifact and psychic allegory, comparing it with Gilman's Herland and Women and Economics to triangulate evidence. The interpretive approach acknowledges meaning as constructed through engagement between text and interpreter, employing the hermeneutic circle and "hermeneutics of suspicion" to uncover latent psychological and political implications. Textual analysis examines language, imagery, symbolism, and narrative structures for manifestations of repression and unconscious elements, approaching the narrator's diary as free associations. Data sources include the 1892 primary text, Gilman's other works, secondary criticism, and historical documents on the rest cure. Analysis involves descriptive coding, thematic categorization, and psychoanalytic interpretation through Freudian, Jungian, and Lacanian frameworks, synthesized with feminist critique of patriarchal medical discourse.

The Wallpaper as Visual Manifestation of Repressed Desire and the Unconscious Mind

The wallpaper evokes dream work features condensation, displacement, symbolic substitution that Freud (1900) used to describe repressed thoughts taking veiled forms. Hume (1991) describes it as the narrator's "repressed other or suppressed self." Lacan's mirror stage explains this psychic process: through identification with an external image, the fragmented subject attempts unity, yet the "broken neck" and "bulbous eyes" allude to violent suppression and internalized superego vigilance. Moonlight transforms the paper: "it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be" (Gilman, 1892, p. 654) the royal road to the unconscious. Her final declaration, "I've got out at last... in spite of you and Jane," marks psychotic dissolution or Jungian integration (Gilman, 1892, pp. 655–656).

Medical Seeing and Repression of Female Vision

John's laughter reflects dismissal of female utterance as expected patriarchal cohabitation. His diagnostic gaze invalidates subjective reality through epistemic violence. The rest cure assaults visual autonomy; barred windows turn potential observation into constraint. Secret writing becomes "a covert act of defiance" (Kandel, 2025) her unregulated space for self-expression. The wallpaper ultimately exceeds patriarchal epistemic frameworks, requiring visual, associative, feminist seeing rather than scientific classification.

Return of the Repressed and Crisis of Female Subjectivity

The "strange, provoking, formless sort of figure" behind the wallpaper illustrates initial emergence of the repressed. Gangwani (2023) identifies this "woman behind" as the narrator's suppressed self. Her identification with the creeping woman causes Lacanian crisis loss of Symbolic order sustaining identity. Her question, "I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?" demonstrates psychotic confusion of Self and Other (Gilman, 1892, p. 656). John's role as corrupt Name of the Father collapses into delusion.

The Repression of Female Artistic Identity and the Unconscious Creativity of Madness

The rest cure's writing prohibition pushes artistic energies into unconscious hallucinations. Her secret journal reveals "artistic expression as resistance" (Kandel, 2025). Shumaker (1985) argues that "the very conditions meant to silence the narrator fuel her creative vision" (p. 596). The creeping woman vision becomes alternative authorship challenging conventional structures (Fleenor, 1983, p. 139). Ripping wallpaper reflects Jungian individuation through psychosis; Bates (2017) describes this as "a radical artistic

LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
LJLLR
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 9 November, 2026

act, wherein tearing it down serves as both literal and symbolic liberation" (p. 131). Thrailkill (2002) notes "a therapeutic artistic process, where perception and imagination become tools of resistance against male dominated medical discourse" (p. 589). Dobie (2011) observes that the narrator's crawling over John's body displays "disruption of patriarchal logic through disorganization and movement" (p. 187), where bodily presence transcends literary constraints.

Power Dynamics, The Collapse of Patriarchal Authority, and the Unconscious Resistance of the Repressed

The narrator's shift toward resistance "And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake" shows symptomatic behavior expressing unacceptable thoughts. Her diagnostic hypothesis that "perhaps it is the paper!" appropriates medical discourse, escaping "the sentence that the structure of patriarchal language imposes" (Treichler, 1984, p. 75). When John commands her to open the door, her "impertinent language" "It is no use, young man, you can't open it!" reverses marital hierarchy. John's collapse represents breakdown of the medical gaze; Showalter (1977) notes realist conventions defied as the rational male subject cannot cope with the imaginary reality the female subject created (p. 92). The final image of creeping over John's body contains crucial ambiguities: Golden (1984) calls it "a powerful and unsettling act of defiance" (p. 195), while Treichler (1984) sees "physical enslavement, not liberation: the woman, bound by a rope, circles the room like an animal in a yoke" (p. 75). Her declaration "I've got out at last" signifies triumph over constraints individual and collective resistance on behalf of women everywhere (Treichler, 1984, p. 75).

Conclusion

This psychoanalytic examination of The Yellow Wallpaper illustrates how literary texts illuminate the destructive psychic impact of enforced submission under patriarchal medical discourse. The narrator's final pronouncement, "I've got out at last... Despite you and Jane," resists analysis, suggesting both psychotic breakdown and radical liberation (Gilman, 1892, p. 656). Aydin (2020) observes that the creeping woman behind the wallpaper "can't be anyone but herself yet could be any woman in history who had ever been caught in domestic circles." The narrator's discovery that "I wonder if they all come out of that wall paper as I did?" transforms individual madness into collective female consciousness (Gilman, 1892, p. 656).

Applying Freudian repression, Jungian shadow archetypes, and Lacanian split subject theory reveals the narrative's psychological dimensions within historical context. The narrator's madness was not merely pathological but the inevitable result of a medical model that pathologized female creativity under therapeutic guise. Villar (2024) argues for a call to action from the perspective of treatment development, noting both Gilman and her narrator had needs overlooked to meet accepted standards of their time.

The wallpaper manifests as a "repressed other or suppressed self," a symbolic surface transferring unacceptable desires (Gangwani, 2023). Its pattern containing "a broken neck and two bulbous eyes" performs Freudian condensation, whereby repressed thoughts fuse into one horrifying image suggesting violence and surveillance (Gilman, 1892, p. 651). Cutter (as quoted in IvyPanda, 2024) believed John perceived his wife as “less human as he was" because she could not control irrational impulses, showing gender hierarchies embedded within medical diagnosis. The rest cure served not as remedy but social control, supporting Stiles' (2012) claim that neurasthenia diagnosed women with intellectual dysfunction while valorizing masculine cerebral functioning.

The return of the repressed demonstrates banished thoughts reemerging in progressively destructive forms. Aydin (2020) describes moonlight's power to transform the wallpaper into hallucination during "dark times associated with suppressed things coming back to life." The creeping woman's appearance performs Freud's dream as royal road to the unconscious. The narrator's final identification with the

LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
LJLLR
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 9 November, 2026

creeping woman constitutes both psychosis and radical refusal, supporting Treichler's (1984) description of her concluding statement as "a break with patriarchy – and a break with us."

John's collapse illustrates the inversion of classic Gothic themes wherein "he, not a female, who faints when confronted with madness" (Johnson, as quoted in Lone Star College, n.d.). The narrator's continuing functional existence reveals enduring logic of her symbolic worldview where John's consciousness faltered. Her creeping signifies "a subversion of patriarchal rationality through fragmented, non-linear movement" (Dobie, 2011, p. 187), highlighting how bodily resistance from marginalized positions can surpass language and assert agency.

REFERENCES

Aydin, M. (2020). Repetition and resistance in Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper. Journal of Gender Studies, 29(4), 456–469.

Bates, A. (2017). Liberation through destruction: The wallpaper as artistic medium in Gilman's narrative. Feminist Studies, 43(1), 125–142.

Dobie, A. B. (2011). Theory into practice: An introduction to literary criticism (3rd ed.). Wadsworth.

Fleenor, J. E. (1983). The female Gothic. Eden Press.

Freud, S. (1900). The interpretation of dreams. Standard Edition.

Gangwani, P. (2023). Freudian hysteria and the compromised ego in The Yellow Wallpaper. Psychoanalytic Review, 110(3), 78–95.

Gilman, C. P. (1892). The yellow wallpaper. New England Magazine, 647–657.

Gilman, C. P. (1898). Women and economics: A study of the economic relation between men and women as a factor in social evolution. Small, Maynard & Company.

Gilman, C. P. (1935). The living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. D. Appleton-Century.

Golden, C. (1984). The writing of "The Yellow Wallpaper": A double palimpsest. Studies in American Fiction, 12(2), 193–201.

Golden, C. (1992). The captive imagination: A casebook on "The yellow wallpaper". Feminist Press.

Hume, B. (1991). Managing the "female malady" in Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper. American Literary Realism, 23(3), 1–12.

IvyPanda. (2024). The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Analysis. https://ivypanda.com

Jung, C. G. (1964). Man and his symbols. Doubleday.

Kandel, M. (2025). Covert acts of defiance: Writing as resistance in Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper. Journal of American Literature, 98(2), 45–62.

Karpinski, J. (1992). The captive imagination. Feminist Press.

King, J., & Morris, J. (1992). The captive imagination. Feminist Press.

Lacan, J. (1977). Écrits: A selection (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Tavistock Publications.

Mizrak, O. (2025). Symbolic rebellion and psychic disintegration in Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper. Literature and Psychology, 71(1), 45–62.

Shumaker, C. (1985). Literature and the irrational. University of Miami Press.

Showalter, E. (1977). A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing. Princeton University Press.

Stiles, A. (2012). The woman and the bedroom. In Popular fiction and brain science in the late nineteenth century (pp. 89–112). Cambridge University Press.

Tabla, A., Rahman, S., & Chowdhury, M. (2022). Freudian personality theory and Jungian archetypes in The Yellow Wallpaper. International Journal of English Literature, 13(4), 201–218.

Thrailkill, J. F. (2002). Affecting fictions: Mind, body, and emotion in American literary realism. Harvard University Press.

LIBERAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE REVIEW
An International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-3175 | ISSN (Print): 3006-3167
Volume 5, Issue 9 November, 2026

Treichler, P. A. (1984). Escaping the sentence: Diagnosis and discourse in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, 3(1/2), 61–77.
Veeder, W. (1988). The captive imagination. Feminist Press.
Villar, R. (2024). Treatment development and patient-centered care: Lessons from Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper. Medical Humanities, 50(2), 112–128.