"Something maternal." Powers of the grotesque body in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

by Cristina Di Maio*

"Something Maternal." Powers of the Grotesque Body in "The Yellow Wallpaper"
This article focuses on the representation of the grotesque body and the potential unleashed by it in "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892). I look at the depiction of the narrator's and the woman in the wallpaper's bodies in this novella, and I investigate the interaction between them, analyzing the quality of the power the protagonist gains as she gradually embraces abnormality and fuses with the woman she detects in the decorative pattern. My central argument is that the grotesque depictions of both the wallpaper and the woman who 'inhabits' it possess an inherent subversive quality, by virtue of their belonging to the realm of the Carnival, and that such subversiveness constitutes a compelling message to the reader, rather than a purely satiric one. My reading is informed by Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, which I see as entrapping the narrator in suffocating and disempowering life conditions, as well as by Julia Kristeva's and Mikhail Bakhtin's studies on the carnivalesque, which I connect to the excessive aspect of the woman in the wallpaper and the revolutionary potential it generates.

Keywords: body, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, grotesque, Bakhtin, Kristeva.

> Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance.
>
> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*

* University of Macerata; c.dimaio2@studenti.unimc.it.

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1. Introduction

In "The Yellow Wallpaper", a novella Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote after recovering from a mental breakdown in 1892, the protagonist is suffering from a postpartum depression and her physician, who happens to be her husband John, prescribes her a rest cure, in an attempt to let her recover physical strength and thus be able to fulfill her duties as a mother and wife. As a result of this treatment, the protagonist is basically held captive in a nursery and forced to inactivity; the story is comprised of the journal entries she stealthily manages to write. Her body, hardly ever described in detail, seems to absorb societal demands and pressures, offering distorted images of extreme affliction and distress; it stands in inverse proportion to the body of the woman the narrator detects in the bizarre pattern of the wallpaper that decorates the room with barred windows in which she is secluded: that woman and her body appear disturbingly abnormal, in a grotesque symbolical display of energy. I intend to consider the depiction of the two bodies in this novella, and the interaction between them, analyzing the quality of the power the protagonist gains as she gradually embraces abnormality and fuses with the woman in the wallpaper. I investigate the nature of the narrator's illness, and I argue that her self-assertion is deeply intertwined with the deformed, grotesque portrayal of her (and the woman in the wallpaper's) body, resting on the assumption that distortion in bodily image, far from being a counterproductive and hopeless expression of protest, may actually empower the protagonist and the reader, through its cathartic message.

In her 1991 article, Beverly Hume has famously connected the nature of the narrator's narrative in "The Yellow Wallpaper" to the grotesque, highlighting how she eventually defines her position in the story as a rebellious one, and condensing it in the central grotesque image of the wallpaper; nonetheless, Hume maintains that the narrator is not "freed by this aesthetic and potentially liberating confrontation," but instead "defeated, destroyed and driven to madness," so that the author may use her story "to make a pointed, darkly satiric, comment against those conventional gender patterns that have imprisoned her" (Hume 1991: 480). Although the narrator undeniably descends into insanity at the end of the novella, I here contend that the grotesque essence of the wallpaper and of the woman who inhabits it do possess an inherent subversive quality, by virtue of their belonging to the realm of the Carnival, and that the aforementioned subversiveness constitutes

a compelling message to the reader, rather than a purely satiric one. My reading is informed by Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, which I see as entrapping the narrator in suffocating and disempowering life conditions, as well as by Julia Kristeva's and Mikhail Bakhtin's studies on the carnivalesque, which I connect to the excessive, undefeated appearance of the woman in the wallpaper and the revolutionary potential it generates.

British and American literary portrayals of women in the Victorian period did not indulge in details: physical descriptions of female characters are commonly sublimated into vague adjectives or focused on clothes; their body, when described, is frequently presented as fragmented, allowing the reader to consider only one part of it at a time (e.g. eyes, hands, hair), in a nearly scientific fashion.[1] Except for the languid – and excessive – Gothic representations of damsels in distress, women are largely denied corporeality in nineteenth-century fiction: since they are predominantly observed by the male gaze, they tend to be described in idealistic modes which objectify them and relegate them to passivity.[2] This is all the more reason to investigate the unspoken, but absolutely powerful potential hidden in these concealed but, at a closer look, outspoken female bodies. Adopting a similar perspective may also prove useful because it suggests a connection between Charlotte Perkins Gilman's lifelong dedication to physical fitness and the unprecedented number of (mostly privileged) women who, at the turn of the century, joined efforts to raise a public debate and achieve equality in the United States. As a turn-of-the-

[1] Much has been written about the intrinsically fetishistic mode of representation of the female body in the late nineteenth century society: for instance, Emily Apter offered a detailed account of it in her *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the Century France* (1991), whereas Griselda Pollock, while referring to British figurative art of the mid-nineteenth century, has observed how women were portrayed as "an abstracted (some would call it idealized) representation of faces as dissociated uninhabited spaces which function as a screen across which masculine fantasies of knowledge, power and possession can be enjoyed in a ceaseless play on the visible obviousness of woman and the puzzling enigmas reassuringly disguised behind that mask of beauty. At the same time, the face and sometimes part of a body are severed from the whole. Fetish-like they signify an underlying degree of anxiety generated by looking at this sign of difference, woman" (Pollock 1988: 123).

[2] For a detailed analysis of these modes of representation in Henry James' short fiction, see Donatella Izzo's *Portraying the Lady: Technologies of Gender in the Short Stories of Henry James* (2001).

century "New Woman," a strong-willed feminist theorist[3] and artist, Gilman firmly opposed the prevailing medical opinion that femaleness was associated to anabolism (passivity, pertaining to plants and the natural world), and maleness to katabolism (activity and energy pertaining to animals): throughout her life, she took every kind of strengthening and stretching exercise, and in her diary she rejoiced in her fitness and athleticism.[4] At the same time, the desire for personal autonomy prompted her to be an advocate for female agency in both her fiction and non-fiction writing, in an intellectual synergy with the turn-of-the-century feminist movement. Gilman's determination to promote the feminist ideal of the New Woman and her enthusiasm to achieve and promote physical fitness seem to stand in sharp contrast with the protagonist's feeble appearance and initial behavior in "The Yellow Wallpaper"; in this article, I will try to decode the nature of her physical illness and the reaction that this seemingly frail woman has, exploring the ways in which her illness is connected to the symmetrical tremendous vitality of the woman in the wallpaper.

2. "The social illness of ladyhood"

In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the first-person narrator's body seems to be no exception to the rule of a constricting ideal of Victorian femininity. The very first thing the reader learns about her is that she is sick – she is suffering from a temporary nervous condition due to which she often cries, feels extremely weak, and is unable to do any work: in short, she seems incapable of performing the role of "perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper" ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 1992: 30)[5] that, conversely, her sister-in-law Jennie joyfully fulfils. The reader is immediately told that the narrator is under the constant scrutiny of her physician-husband John, who – while dismissing her complaints and symptoms – nonetheless feels entitled to prescribe her a rest

[3] Although she never referred to herself as such, since she rather claimed to be a humanist, and despite her outspokenly racist views (Lanser 1989; De Biasio 2019), Gilman is still widely regarded as a model of radical feminist intellectual.

[4] A more detailed discussion on the relationship between physical fitness and female agency can be found in Sabrina Vellucci's article "'As Near as Flying Gets': corporeità e movimento nel pensiero di Charlotte Perkins Gilman", in vol. 134 of *Letterature d'America*, 2011.

[5] All the references to "The Yellow Wallpaper" in this article will be quoted from the 1899 version of the text, printed in Catherine Golden's edited volume *The Captive Imagination. A Casebook on The Yellow Wallpaper*.

cure, isolating her in the prison-like bedroom of an uncanny ancestral mansion.[6] This ambivalent attitude continues throughout the story, in parallel with John's infantilization of his wife: she is ridiculed for the physical distress she claims to be suffering, while at the same time she is forbidden any social, physical or intellectual activity in the name of that same condition. John occasionally agrees that his wife is only *mentally* affected, and nonetheless prescribes her a cure which uniquely addresses the body and (supposedly) treats her physical symptoms; moreover, the narrator's indications on her own physical symptoms are systematically disregarded or controverted. While the story progresses, John reassures his worried, restless wife, who is longing for freedom and action, that she is getting in fact better, paradoxically thanks to isolation and painful immobility, and ignores her suggestions, compelling her to follow his medical advice. This fluctuating caring/despotic attitude is easily explained as mirroring societal pressures on women, as a patriarchal intention to prevent them from achieving emancipation, and possibly even as a cover for John's infidelity: he is hardly ever at home, as he is often kept in town overnight by serious cases. In fact, at the end of the story, he does not even sleep in the same room with his wife, who anyway reveals her relief at not being one of his husband's serious cases – hence potentially refusing intimacy in her turn.

The nature of the narrator's condition is not mysterious: she is believed to suffer from postpartum depression. She affirms to be unable to tend to her newborn baby, whom she consequently leaves to the care of a woman, presumably a nanny, and it seems hardly a coincidence that this person's name be Mary. Despite her description being very brief, the narrator implies that Mary is acting as a surrogate mother and does not fail to mention how good she is with the baby, thus suggesting a possible interpretation of this female character as the

[6] This kind of treatment, developed by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell in the late 1800s, was not unusual at that time: it was in fact frequently and widely prescribed in the US for illnesses presenting nervous symptoms, such as anorexia nervosa, neurasthenia, hysteria. Women were prescribed the rest cure more often than men: the cure implied lying in bed for most of the day, not engaging in any physical or intellectual activity. Gilman had had first-hand experience of the cure, since she had been personally treated for post-partum depression in 1887 by Dr. Mitchell, who on that occasion advised her to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," to "have but two hours' intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again" (*The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition* 2004: 46) for as long as she lived.

epitome of a perfect ideal of maternity and womanhood. Not only is Mary presented as the diametrical opposite to the narrator's inability to perform her duties as a mother: she embodies a chimeric propriety, inasmuch as her body, just like the Virgin Mary's, has not been compromised by the obscene process that generating a new life implies. In fact, despite carrying out her pregnancy and delivering Jesus Christ, the pregnant body of the Virgin Mary is never described in the Gospels and it is always portrayed very discreetly in Christian iconography: the body of the Madonna is to be preserved as a pure shrine, to the point that in the mid-16th century, after the Council of Trent, the visual rendering of nudity was discouraged even in the portrayal of the nursing Madonna, which became more and more rare. In addition to these style precepts, Catholic doctrine establishes that Mary remained a virgin before, during, and after the birth of her son.[7] In this story, Mary the nanny thus allegorically offers a sanitized alternative to the tainted body of the natural mother which, in contrast, necessarily becomes abject, as Julia Kristeva contends in *Powers of Horror* (1980), and is inevitably jettisoned by a symbolic system that cannot accept the contamination of the maternal body through pregnancy and delivery.[8] In her study of abjection, Kristeva asserts that patriarchal society is built on the repression of the feminine, and of the maternal in particular: in order for this exclusion to be effective, confrontation with the feminine is classified as a taboo and is systematically avoided, by coding the feminine as dirty, anomalous, filthy. Kristeva's argument explores the relationship between the repression of the maternal and filth: she categorizes excrements and its equivalents, as well as menstrual blood, as polluting objects, representing two different kinds of dangers:

> Excrements and its equivalents (decay, infections, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, instead, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference (Kristeva 1982: 71).

[7] On the Immaculate Conception and, more broadly, on the cult of the Virgin Mary, see Julia Kristeva's essay "Stabat Mater" (1977).

[8] See chapter 3, "From Filth to Defilement," in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horrors*.

For Kristeva, these two kinds of defilement "stem from *the maternal* and/or the feminine" (*Powers of Horror* 1982: 71); she identifies the abject as "the 'object' of primal repression" (ivi, p. 12), and since in the process of birth the proximity of the vagina to the orifice, the secretions and the blood that leaks out of the mother inevitably defile both the mother's and the child's bodies, the maternal body itself can all the more so be considered abject. In this sense, the rest cure the narrator is forced to undergo may also be interpreted as a possible ritual of purification after such defilement: Kristeva terms these rites of purification as "shift[ing] the *border* […] that separates the body's territory from the signifying chain; they illustrate the boundary between the semiotic authority and symbolic law" (ivi, p. 73). She refers to the Bible, more specifically to Leviticus, to which she traces the origins of this practice (ivi, p. 99), which was also common in colonial America and was dismissed in the United States only in the nineteenth century; still in the early twentieth century, guidebooks and handbooks for pregnant mothers recommended a lying-in period,[9] and in Great Britain hospitals existed specifically to serve this purpose. Adopting a Kristevan perspective, I contend that the tacit objective such practice would attain, both historically and in Gilman's novella, is the purification of the maternal body from the filth associated with corporeal excess and waste characterizing pregnancy and delivery, in that filth blurs the boundaries between the semiotic and the symbolic order, and displays the latter's frailty.

3. "…What I felt was a draught*," or air as an ideological metaphor*

It can be argued that at the turn of the century, the common trait shared by medical treatments for women diagnosed with nervous or mental diseases and postpartum depression was the limitation of female agency, and a widespread tendency to blame the patients for their own illnesses. The more this happened, the more the *ante litteram* "problem that has no name" spread among women, as a physical response to patriarchal dynamics in nineteenth-century society:

[9] See chapter 11 in *The Prospective Mother: A Handbook for Women During Pregnancy* by J. Morris Slemons (1912) and Jan Nusche's account of postpartum practices as reported in *The Bride's Book – A Perpetual Guide for the Montreal Bride* (1932), in "CMAJ", 167, 6, 2002, pp. 675-676, in http://www.cmaj.ca/content/167/6/675.

women's bodies were painfully filling the gaps of a conversation about the role of women in modern society which was not taking place. They were guilty of providing evidence – through their illnesses, some of which were hastily grouped under the umbrella term of "hysteria" – of "the discrepancy between the Victorian ideology of femininity and the reality of Victorian women's lives" (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: XXXI). The internalization of the impossible roles prescribed by the current ideology, also known as the Cult of True Womanhood, produced the seemingly impossible-to-solve clash between the duty to conform to a utopian feminine perfection and one's own need for a genuine social behavior: all this resulted, in alarming numbers, in a somatization that unconsciously tried to expose, and perhaps alleviate, women's distress.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the narrator struggles on many fronts at the same time. She tries to heal and recover her strength and ability to conduct a regular life; she tries to justify her distress both her in husband's eyes and in her own; finally, she tries to detect the cause of her illness, analyzing all the elements she possesses, and finding new clues in unexpected places. Clearly, these attempts push her energies and her self in different directions, but the narrator senses that she simply cannot be reduced to an impossible, idealized allegory of perfection; this is why she declares "But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way – it is such a relief!" (1992: 32). While the story unfolds, the reader is compelled to do the same, by reading the signs that the author disseminates throughout the narration. One of these is the frequent occurrence of adjectives and comments regarding *air* in the story: repetitions of this term are recurrent to the extent that they truly become eerie. I read the "air" the narrator ceaselessly mentions through an Althusserian lens, identifying it as a metaphor and as the source of her illness, which aims to enclose her again within the boundaries of the current ideology. As all subjects, the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" conforms to the Cult of True Womanhood, and to its ideals of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. This ideology was utterly functional in nineteenth-century society, since it helped preserve men's sexual double standard, it ensured the propagation of our species and the patrilinear transmission of property, and reinforced economic relations and the capitalistic system. However, as the narrator gradually embraces her role of True Woman as a wife and a mother, she grows increasingly uneasy: although seemingly unaware of it, she somatizes and embodies a rebellious response to that same True Womanhood that has shaped her identity, but has apparently produced a glitch.

In his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970) and elsewhere in his body of work, Louis Althusser defines ideology as an all-encompassing factor, intrinsic to human society, which comprises every aspect of life. It pervades and constitutes our reality: "Human societies secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life" (*For Marx* 1969: 232), he states, in an evocative and effective comparison which identifies ideology with the air we all breathe. Ideology has no history, it is eternal and incessant, in that it always sides with the ruling power apparatuses, which are thus also ideological; individuals subject themselves to these apparatuses meekly, recognizing themselves as individuals because they are interpellated by ideology. Human beings are, in fact, constantly subject to a process of recognition that confirms them as being part of ideology: it *recruits* subjects, acting as a sort of (and within one's) unconscious. In Althusser's view, individuals are "always-already subjects:" born as such, they cannot escape the rituals of ideological recognition (like hailing or naming) that shape and transform their identities, and that are indispensable to reproduce the same social order that has equipped them to perform those rituals – in a never-ending and self-referential tautology.

While breathing the air that nurtures the current ideological and strictly codified social system, the narrator has simultaneously breathed ideology as a filthy miasma, and like many other women of her time she is sick from it,[10] but unlike any other docile subject, she has personal opinions about her own state and potential well-being that she is reluctant to suppress; she declares her irreducibility from the beginning, as in the first journal entry she states "Personally, I disagree with their ideas" (ivi, p. 25). In an attempt to cure her, her husband (himself a caring, loving, happy product – and simultaneously a minister – of ideology) exposes her to "all the air she can absorb" and forces her to get "all the air [she] could get" (ivi, p. 26) in the highest and most isolated room of the "haunted house" they move in; even the very phrase "haunted house" contains an alliteration of the letter "h" that seems to suggest panting, or rather, an attempt to breathe. Together with her obsession with the sickening yellow and the pattern of the wallpaper, references to air are ever-present in the descriptions of the room. In the first entry, for instance, the narrator complains that

[10] For the association between air and ideology through an Althusserian lens, I am indebted to Donatella Izzo's understanding of Daisy Miller's deadly disease in the foreword to the recent Italian edition of *Daisy Miller – A Study* (Marsilio, 2017).

there is something strange about the house, but her husband dismisses her anxiety affirming that her distress was merely originated by a draught, in a sort of naive confession that identifies air as a source of unsettlement. It is especially remarkable that the narrator is prescribed and encouraged to get as much air as possible, but pressured to staying in her room, resting: the air she is required to breathe, the air that supposedly has the power to heal her – in other words, to include her docilely within the prevailing ideology – is limited to the space of her room with barred windows, the claustrophobic world her husband has chosen for her. Furthermore, in entry eight, the air explicitly takes the form of a persistent "yellow smell" that fills every room in the haunted house: she describes it as "peculiar […], at first very gentle, subtle […], enduring" (ivi, p. 37), and she analyzes it to understand its origin. Mary Jacobus has offered a convincing psychoanalytical interpretation of the smell and the yellow smooch that stains the narrator's clothes: she connects them respectively to a hysterical reaction of the male threatened by the female body, and the repression of female sexuality ("An Unnecessary Maze of Sign Reading" 1992). Although in the novella the narrator does not seem to succeed in her attempt to discover the origin of the smell, and she appears entangled in the hopeless tautology of ideology, she is not defeated by its persistent ubiquity. The mere fact that, like the Creature in Frankenstein, she has no name, means that something in her escapes interpellation: she is not recruitable. She has lived her life within ideology, but is determined to follow the wallpaper's subpattern "to some sort of conclusion" (ivi, p. 31); in other words, she is trying to articulate a logical discourse from within ideology in order to break with ideology itself.

4. Abject bodies: Powers of the Grotesque

This fracture with/within ideology seems to be symbolically represented by the large patches of paper that the narrator peels off at the end of the story: once the air is cleared and the net of ideology is pierced, a new symbolic order, or rather, a new symbolic body, may invade the narrative space. As the narrator studies the wallpaper, in fact, she discovers a woman's figure, which is revealed to her in a crescendo of details that become progressively more accurate – and increasingly more grotesque. From the very first mention of the wallpaper, the reader learns two fundamental facts about it: it is utterly abnormal, and the narrator is equally repulsed by and attracted to it. Dull, revolting, repellant, unclean, lurid, vicious, irritating, silly, conspicuous:

these are only a few adjectives describing the wallpaper in the first two journal entries, in which the narrator illustrates how the paper commits "every sort of artistic sin" ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 1992: 26), irritates, provokes and confuses her. Nothing about the wallpaper reflects the prevailing decorative standard of the time, as the narrator points out: "I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of" (1992, 31). The peculiarity of the wallpaper, which is explicitly defined as "interminable grotesque" (ivi, p. 31) at the end of the third entry, is irreducible to any aesthetic norm, and it seems to be designed to hide some sort of mystery, and inspire a disturbing kind of awe. "Ancient, smoldering, 'unclean' as the oppressive structures of the society in which she finds herself, this paper surrounds the narrator like an inexplicable text" (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 90), which nonetheless the narrator ceaselessly tries to interpret.

In fact, initially revolted by the wallpaper, the narrator cannot stop staring at it, in an attempt to solve the riddle of her illness thanks to its grotesque features. This attraction/repulsion dynamics, along with the frequent references to the wallpaper's smell and to the yellow smooch, recall once more Julia Kristeva's understanding of abjection. The wallpaper constitutes for the narrator what Kristeva terms in *Powers of Horror* as "the abominable real," which is only accessible through *jouissance*: "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion" (*Powers of Horror* 1982: 9). Kristeva also connects abjection to disturbances in system and orders: abjection is caused by "what does not respect borders, positions, rules" (ivi, p. 4): the wallpaper's destabilizing arabesque, its "optic horror" ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 1992: 30), disturbs the narrator's aesthetic sense, challenges her reason, and thus questions her sense of self. In this sense, the wallpaper can be considered abject because, by breaking the borders between paper and reality, it generates an ambiguity that questions the line traced by the Lacanian Law of the Father between pure and impure, symbolic and semiotic. In order to enter the symbolic system, the child/subject needs to use its language, which shapes his/her own desires; the semiotic remains unvoiced, an incestuous, unspeakable (therefore, abject) love and desire for/stemming from the mother, for which there is no language. The prohibition to express this lack in narrative terms seems to correspond to John's prohibition to his wife to keep a diary, and the narrator's own reluctance in writing it: "I don't know why I should write this. I don't

want to. I don't feel able. And I know John would think it absurd" ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 1992: 30-31). The wallpaper is as unsettling as an open wound, which Gilman exposes to the eye of the reader. At the beginning of the story, the narrator rejects the wallpaper as an abject element alien to her; nonetheless, she is fascinated by it, in that its abnormality reflects some hidden part of her – the obscene monster implicit in every angelic woman. Her Eve-like curiosity compels her to grow disturbingly fond of the odd, obscene pattern her eyes explore and, as the figure she spots gains definition and she is able to identify a woman within it, the narrator's perspective merges with the woman's, so that her own identity becomes the object of her (and the reader's) inquiry. The two women are separated by the liminal surface of the wallpaper, which smells like ideology and strangles the woman as she incessantly tries to climb through its pattern: one step needs to be taken, namely the woman's escape from the pattern, her invasion of the narrator's patriarchal world.

The body of the woman in the wallpaper shows an indefatigable energy that stands in inverse symmetry to the narrator's chronic exhaustion. The relationship between the two bodies, and the power transmission from one to the other, is crucial to interpret the uprising that takes place at the end of the novella. Like the narrator, the woman she sees is equally entrapped in a pattern that limits her agency: only, her grotesque nature – as it is uncontained by any system of order – compels her to incessantly struggle for freedom, under the sympathetic gaze of the narrator, who decides to help her, probably as a token of admiration for her fiery temperament. The two activities that absorb the woman are mostly crawling and shaking the bars of the subpattern, in order to escape; at times the crawling alone is so violent that it is enough to shake the pattern. Not only that: the woman is multiplied,[11] she is one and many, and she dares expose herself to the potential humiliation of creeping in the garden in the daylight, while the narrator locks herself in the room when she starts doing so during the day. The woman's tremendous stamina corresponds to a controversial increase in the narrator's, and this happens approximately in the middle of the story, following a conversation she has with John. One night, in the moonlight, the narrator, who realizes she is more and more enchanted by the wallpaper's inner mystery, begs John to leave the house together,

[11] "Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one […] I think that is why it has so many heads" ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 1992: 38).

since her health is not improving there; her husband softly but firmly rejects her proposal, stating in a patronizing way that she "really [is] better, dear, whether [she] can see it or not" ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 1992: 33). The narrator protests: she provides physical evidence that she is not healthier (she has not gained weight, has trouble sleeping, her appetite is not better either), to which her husband simply ridicules her with infantilizing comments, and ends their discussion: "'Bless her little heart!' said he with a big hug, 'she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!'" (ivi, p. 33). The narrator's physical fitness is questioned on the basis of actual facts, but John – an epitome of the Father, the Norm – arrogates the right to distort her truth; he is the one who fails to see that the narrator is making one last desperate attempt to save their relationship, trusting her husband's goodwill and ability to break with ideology, as she intends to do. John's response becomes a turning point in the story: it leaves the frustrated narrator with no choice but to spend the night deciphering the wallpaper, trying to establish whether there is a pattern she may address behind the oppressive, horrid one – a pattern which may resonate with her own experience of the world and her physicality, and inspire her revolt.

5. Out of the paper and into reality

From that moment on, the narrator will direct all her physical energy towards what she has identified as her urgent goal: breaking with ideology and evading the subpattern, on her own terms. The power that propels her newly acquired vitality flows from the woman in the wallpaper (who is now visible, tirelessly active and eager to get out) to her, and it has the same grotesque source. In his studies on the carnivalesque, namely in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin uses the notion of grotesque realism to analyze the work of Rabelais: he identifies the grotesque body as a category that opposes the Classical one, in that the latter pinpoints distinctions, sets boundaries, it is closed and carefully measured. Bakhtin (1984: 26) elucidates "[…] the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits." In this novella, the female body is the site of what Dale Bauer (1991: 675) terms as "disruptive excess", which stems from abjection – the cadaverous figure of the narrator and the smelly, creeping, yellow woman entrapped in a monstrous mural decoration. In this respect, even the protagonist's failed

attempt to motherhood – which is literally made impossible to her by the ideological codes that harness motherly style in her society – may be the outcome of the frustration of a maternal "unnaturality" that rejects societal impositions and must therefore be abjected. As a matter of fact, Gilman put forward her extremely radical views on motherhood and child-rearing in her volume *Concerning Children* (1903), where she theorized the idea that children be raised by trained professionals; she was, in her turn, regarded as an unnatural mother by her contemporaries for choosing to let her nine-year-old daughter Katharine live with her father and his second wife, a choice she actually motivated by the desire to let her daughter develop a relationship with her father, as Gilman had personally experienced the pain of growing up fatherless (Lane 1990).[12] Most of her notions on motherhood are condensed in the short story "An Unnatural Mother" (1895), which, by depicting an unconventional mother who places the survival of all her fellow citizens before her own daughter's, provocatively advocates for a reconsideration of the role of women according to more modern criteria, in the hope of eradicating the current asphyxiating ideology.

A dialogic relationship exists between the two women before/behind the wallpaper: they contain and mirror each other, and ultimately merge into one. Their relationship and the power that goes from one to the other are not inscribed in ideology, as the abjection that generates this relationship and this power responds to a different order of things: the regime of the grotesque. For Bakhtin, the portrayal of grotesque bodies personifies the Carnival, and thus the rebirth and the renewal of the entire social system. Carnival, as a symbolic model of transgression, has the power to not just strengthen, but destabilize an existing social structure, creating the premises for an alternative one. During Carnival celebrations the official, hierarchical social structures are overturned, thus contesting prevailing hegemonic conceptions of the world and paving the way for an alternative system not based on hierarchy and potentially bringing about social and political change. If Bakhtin never fully developed a theory of the "female grotesque" and, as Mary Russo and other US feminist critics underline, he failed

[12] On natural/unnatural maternal styles in Charlotte Perkins Gilman, see Anna Scacchi's chapter "La madre restìa" in *Lo specchio materno. Madri e figlie tra biografia e letteratura* and Sabrina Vellucci's "'As Near as Flying Gets': corporeità e movimento nel pensiero di Charlotte Perkins Gilman." For a more specific account of Gilman's motherhood, see Michael Robertson's chapter "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Motherly Utopia" (2018).

to apply the concept of the grotesque body as a transgressive device to gender relations, feminist criticism has instead vigorously reclaimed this concept. As Dale Bauer (1991: 679-680) points out, "while the authoritative discourse demands conformity, the carnivalized discourse renders invalid any codes, conventions, or laws which govern or reduce the individual to an object of control. […] I argue that the carnival (or the masquerade) need not reinvest women in the spectacular economy or in masculine desire, but can take them out of it." The subversive power that Bauer attributes to the grotesque seems to find a correspondence in the last image of the novella: the narrator creeping over her unconscious husband graphically overturns the pre-existing power dynamics.

Ultimately, the true liberating, carnivalesque force of the novella seems to be actualized in the revolutionary extradiegetic message that it overtly aims to convey: as Kristeva asserts in *Powers of Horror*, literature exploring the abject scrutinizes a lack and facilitates a catharsis. In her view, abject literature exposes "the ultimate coding of our crisis, our most intimate and most serious apocalypse" (1982: 208) and forces us to confront it. I argue that "The Yellow Wallpaper" has the features of abject literature inasmuch as, at the end of the novella, all boundaries are blurred: the narrator and the woman in the wallpaper become one, the journal entries cease to be signaled as such, the reader questions his/her own understanding of the narration and of his/her own beliefs. The abject Real erupts into the surreal reality of a constricting, asphyxiating ideology that has driven the narrator to madness, appalling the reader as well. In this perspective, the grotesque woman escaping from the wallpaper and fusing with the narrator generates a carnivalesque, subversive force that, emerging from the story, involves and *recruits* the (woman) reader, who therefore cannot but reject the gender patterns that belittle her and make her ill. This rejection of societal pressures corresponds to an escape from the prevailing ideological interpellation, and acts as a dis-interpellating gesture, an unconventional form of hailing that raises the possibility of joining, and contributing to create, an alternative to the patriarchal system.

In her article "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper'", Gilman explains that her deliberate didactic intent in writing the novella was "to save people from being driven crazy" (*The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition* 2004: 47): after recovering from her own almost tragic experience of the rest cure *on her own terms* (namely, by returning to her writing as a source of "joy, and growth,

and service"), she felt compelled to reach out to Dr. Mitchell, in an attempt to make him reconsider his treatment of neurasthenia. The physician never acknowledged her gesture, but Gilman felt nonetheless triumphant in learning that, by addressing contemporary (women) readers who might find themselves in circumstances similar to those she had experienced herself, she had "saved one woman from a similar fate" (ivi, p. 46). Gilman's goal was to, in her own words, "carry out the ideal" (ivi, p. 47): she saw her activity as a writer as a service she was offering to *all* readers and, specifically, to all women. This is why in the first sentence of her story the protagonist describes herself and John as "mere ordinary people" ("The Yellow Wallpaper" 1992: 24): they are fictional models representing dangerous routine dynamics with which every middle-class married couple could identify, at the time the novella was published.

Women readers are lured and involved by Gilman in the narrative space as witnesses and protagonists, and the novella values women's belonging to the realm of the grotesque as entirely positive. In fact, in *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (1984: 18) underlines how the devaluation of the material bodily principle in Rabelais' work as a mere "'rehabilitation of the flesh' characteristic of the Renaissance in reaction against the ascetic Middle Ages" has been largely due to the "narrow and modified meaning that modern ideology, especially that of the nineteenth century, attributed to 'materiality' and to the 'body'" (ivi, p. 18). By ascribing the features of grotesque realism to the aesthetic tradition of folk culture, Bakhtin reclaims the positivity of its utopian and comical character:

> In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. This exaggeration has a positive, assertive character (ivi, p. 19).

Not only are bodily life and its attributes "an all people's character," but the distance between writer, protagonists, and readers is canceled because, in Bakhtin's terms, there are no boundaries between grotesque

performers and their audience: in the Carnival, there is no such thing as a distinction between actors and spectators, who are united in an endless process of evolution – in this case, the process that Gilman was trying to elicit in the reader, from True Woman to New Woman.

In the introduction to her recent book on the depiction of space in Gilman's work, Jill Bergman states that, in "The Yellow Wallpaper", "the wall, a mere surface, seems more and more like a sort of nightmare portal leading to or from who knows where" (Bergman 2017: 5). Rather than being merely the gate that allows the oscillation from/to a dreadful world of insanity, according to what Kristeva sees as the inevitably ambiguous substance of abjection, the liminal threshold that separates these women may potentially assume an empowering function: in fact, "finally, women 'on the threshold' of a social or cultural crisis become powerful in the marginal realm which constitutes the carnival world" (Bauer 1991: 679). The reader's monologic selfhood, carrying assumptions deriving from the dominant ideology, is challenged by a text that, through the distancing effect it brings about, aims to destabilize the reader's identity as unitary subject, originating a dialogic confrontation between the (now divided) reader, the text, and the author. While obsessively reading the wallpaper, the narrator feels a kind of loathing that causes her to experience *jouissance*, which makes her "I" become *heterogeneous*: the discomfort she suffers creates a space where new signs arise, and these signs can finally convey her meaning. The novella triggers the same emotional event in the reader, since, as Kristeva asserts, abject literature explores a lack and facilitates a catharsis. The surface of the threshold that separates all the actresses of this dynamics is, once again, made of paper: the paper on which the writer leaves her mark, creating this story; the yellow wallpaper the two women tear off, to reunite in a sisterly, desperate yet powerful identification; finally, the paper through which the reader receives Gilman's cathartic message, telling the story of a woman who, by tearing off a paper, may ultimately trigger the reader's awakening to an unregimented kind of freedom.

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