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# Sisters of Decadence : The Hysteric and the New Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Short Fiction

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## How to cite

MARTIN, Caroline. Sisters of Decadence : The Hysteric and the New Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Short Fiction. Master, 2018.

This publication URL: https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:174653

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UNIVERSITÉ
DE GENÈVE
FACULTÉ DES LETTRES

# Sisters of Decadence: The Hysteric and the New Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Short Fiction

Thèse de Maîtrise Universitaire
UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE
Faculté des Lettres
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August 2018

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# Acknowledgments

Writing this dissertation has been, in many respects, an enlightening process; one that I would have been unable to complete on my own. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Deborah Madsen, whose stimulating classes, helpful guidance, and high expectations have been a constant motivation during my academic journey. Coincidentally, she taught the first BA lecture I attended at university and the last MA seminar I joined as part of my academic curriculum. I am both grateful and honoured that she should be part of its conclusion.

My sincere thanks also go to the rest of the English department of the University of Geneva, who have all contributed, in one way or another, to my love for the English language and its captivating literature. I am also deeply grateful to Prof. Heather Meek, from the University of Montreal, for introducing me to the fascinating topic that is hysteria. Her engaging seminar, precious references and encouraging comments have been crucial to this project from its inception.

Finally, I would like to express my infinite gratitude to all the people who accompanied me in the day—to—day challenge of writing this dissertation: to all the members of the Writing Club, thank you for making this experience personal, enjoyable and for helping me alleviate this enormous pressure one cup of coffee at a time. To all my friends from the Association des Étudiant.e.x.s en Lettres and other faculties, whose continuous presence (whether inside or outside university walls) have turned my last academic year into an incredibly rich experience on a personal, social and intellectual level, thank you.

Many thanks to all of my other friends and to my family, who have always been a major support in my life. From you I draw all of my confidence and strength, and none of this would have been accomplished without your help.

*‘O man! man! you are a very funny fellow now we know you! But take care. The standard of your pleasure and convenience has already ceased to be our conscience.’*

Sarah Grand, 1894

# Introduction

## SCOPE AND PURPOSE

In 1892, two famous activists on each side of the Atlantic published two short stories strikingly dramatizing woman's condition during the Victorian period. In the first, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper', a physician prescribes a rest cure to his wife who, in his opinion, is affected by some kind of nervous disease. The second, Mona Caird's 'The Yellow Drawing Room', recounts the encounter between St Vincent, a conventional bachelor, and Vanora, an extravagant young woman who decided to decorate her drawing room in bold yellow. The two texts share a number of formal and thematic elements: in addition to their similar titles, they both revolve around an 'abnormal' female protagonist (that is, departing from the traditional gendered norm), have an autobiographical dimension, share a preoccupation with the colour yellow and feature an elaborate relationship between the protagonist and the space she occupies. The two heroines, however, couldn't be more different. The anonymous narrator of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is (at least at first) a submissive wife who internalises her husband's injunctions. Although she disagrees with most of what he thinks, she meekly complies with his prescriptions and keeps her expostulations for her journal. She thus progressively withdraws into herself and slowly descends into madness. Vanora, on the contrary, is bold, sarcastic, and assertive. She lives out her convictions—starting with the decoration of her drawing room—and does not hesitate to confront and criticize St Vincent's traditional principles. As such, Gilman and Caird's characters embody two contrasting if not opposite figures of the Victorian era: the infamous hysteric and the notorious New Woman. My purpose in this dissertation will be to analyse these two figures in the light of what was then called the Woman Question.[1] I will first consider Caird and Gilman's characters separately, as individual literary creations within their respective texts, to then examine their relationship as feminine archetypes in the socio-historical context of late nineteenth century. My aim will be to analyse the way in which representations of hysterics and New Women respond to each other, both in Gilman and Caird's texts and as subversive models of femininity in the Victorian collective psyche.

The texts I have selected for my corpus are short stories, a format which enjoyed unprecedented popularity at the time. The exponential development of the press in the second half of the nineteenth century had induced a proliferation of magazines, which in turn became a new medium for (militant) fiction. In Margaret Beetham's elegant terms, 'the periodical press was the sea in which all Victorian writers, men and women, big fish and literary minnows, lived and worked' (221). This transformation in print culture gave rise to a whole new literary market, that of short fiction. In addition to being a suitable format for regular publication, the short story also offered the benefits of being less formally regulated than classical genres such as plays or novels and allowed for stylistic experimentation. This resulted in a wide range of texts, exploring new territories in equally new ways, whose diversity makes them both exceptional and difficult to categorize. As Elaine Showalter outlines in the introduction to her anthology of female-authored short stories, *Daughters of Decadence,*

> The short story could vary in length and in form, from long novellas like Vernon Lee's 'Lady Tal', to brief fables like Olive Schreiner's 'Life's Gifts'. Some stories were naturalistic slice-of-life accounts of poor women in the city; others were impressionistic fragments dealing with a single epiphany or revery. (ix)

This new mode of writing, Showalter had earlier pointed out, suited particularly well the needs and aspirations of female writers seeking to break free from conventional representations of women, whether social or literary:

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[1] This contemporary phrase designated 'the ongoing Victorian discussion about woman's nature and societal role' (Thompson, 1).

> For late-nineteenth-century women writers in particular, the short story offered flexibility and freedom from the traditional plots of the three-decker Victorian novel, plots which invariably ended in the heroine's marriage or her death. In contrast to the sprawling three-decker, the short story emphasised psychological intensity and formal innovation. (viii-ix)

Although the short story was by no means the apanage of women writers, its appropriation by many female writers to explore different aspects of the Woman Question gave rise to a distinctive literary tradition at the crossroads between short fiction and political press. Indeed, short stories constitute a substantial part of New Woman fiction[2] and are—perhaps more than the traditional plays and novels which the genre also comprised—representative of its ambition to convey a moral or political message through literature.

Having briefly presented my corpus, I will now situate my research within its field. First of all, it is euphemistic to say that much has been written about hysteria and the New Woman movement. Both topics have received considerable (if not excessive) critical attention, to the point where the resulting discussions have now themselves come under scrutiny and require as careful consideration as the original thing. Hysteria in particular proves a very laborious and perplexing topic, as the subject matter itself eludes stable definition. The condition never met with consensus, especially by the end of the nineteenth century when it reached unparalleled proportions. Conflicting views on hysteria included attributing the disease to sexual or neurological dysfunction, traumatic events, or hereditary predisposition—to quote only a few. Later studies have categorized nineteenth-century theories on hysteria into two paradigms: the materialist and the proto-psychological one.[3] The former attributes physiological causes to hysteria (whether humoral, neurological, biological...) while the latter contends that the disorder is psychosomatic (i.e. that its physical manifestations are of mental origin). During the twentieth century, the debate shifted from determining the real nature and causes of hysteria to analysing the phenomenon from a sociological point of view. The influence of psychoanalytic theory—which endured well into the century—had encouraged individual readings of case studies and testimonies of hysteria, which were primarily understood through the patient's personal history and circumstances. The subsequent rejection of psychoanalysis (partly on the grounds of its patriarchal import) in conjunction with second-wave feminism brought hysteria under a whole new perspective. While first-wave feminism had mostly been concerned with the political aspects of inequality, second-wave feminism went on to include its socio-cultural dimension. Interest grew in understanding the wider mechanisms at work in the differentiation and discrimination between the sexes. As a result, hysteria became interpreted as a silent and bodily expression of female desire and manifestation against patriarchal dominion.[4] As Diane Price Herndl comments, 'some feminist scholars have seen in hysteria the roots of feminism itself' (53-54). Although the feminist implications of hysteria have been established by many critics and are now almost beyond question, more recent discussions have attempted to moderate excessively enthusiastic 'hysterization' of texts (Showalter) or the simplistic appropriation by feminist criticism of a complex issue (Micale, Mangham). As a literary study, this paper does not claim to make new contributions to the study of hysteria in itself. However, my opinion has been informed (thus necessarily influenced) by the extensive research that has been done on the topic and by related critical stances which I will review in a later part of this introduction. Suffice to say for the moment that I am particularly convinced by moderate positions that approach hysteria from a feminist angle without necessarily reducing the issue to this specific facet. I believe that there is a lot about hysteria that is not yet known (and perhaps never will be), for historical reasons mostly, but also because of the disease's inherent deceptive nature. For this reason, the following discussion will leave aside issues such as simulation, patients' reliability and all manner of questions related to the 'true nature' of hysteria. It will not attempt to answer the question most frequently asked about hysteria, that is, what it 'really' was. Rather, it will focus on its cultural representation and the social constructs on which its diagnostic relied.

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[2] I will discuss the definition and limitations of this literary 'genre' in a later part of this introduction.

[3] Terminology borrowed from Thrailkill (2002).

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[4] See the works of Showalter, Herndl, and Meek for example.

Although its definition is less polemical than hysteria, the New Woman movement is also subject to debate, for the term gathers a wide variety of political standpoints under the same label. Virtually all New Woman scholars concur in this respect and warn against the recurrent tendency modern critics have of overlooking the movement's heterogeneity.[5] As Angelique Richardson usefully summarizes:

> Endlessly debated in fiction and the media, New Women took many forms, both in fiction and in fact, and cannot be characterized by a single set of ideas. Nonetheless, [they] were united in their belief in the autonomy of women and in the need for social and political reform. (2002, xxxiii)

A first useful distinction to make is between the terms New Woman and Woman Question. The latter refers to the long-lasting debate surrounding woman's condition which had already peaked in the mid-nineteenth century and returned to the front stage in the 1890s, at approximately the same time the former was coined. The link between the two is quite intricate, for the New Woman designated a modern woman carrying out the claims of freedom and independence that were precisely being debated and that earlier activists had fought for. The Woman Question thus encompasses a much larger time period than the New Woman movement, and the issues it raises touch upon many areas of both public and private life. In this respect, nineteenth-century specialist Nicola Diane Thompson makes the following comment:

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[5] See also Richardson and Willis (2001, 12-13).

> In fact, the complexity and multifariousness of the debates about women's nature, role, and literary status, in Victorian and twentieth-century discussions, make it more appropriate to pluralize the term 'woman question', changing it to 'woman questions'. (3)

These 'woman questions'—the different aspects relative to woman's condition and addressed by contemporary thinkers—were so numerous that neither side agreed on all accounts. As Nigel Bell remarks, 'the form taken by a specific feminist issue depended on the social class of those involved' and the question of 'where one stood in the feminist debate depended, of course, not only on class but on one's view of woman's nature' (80). Thus, in addition to personal ideas about woman's role and status in society, socio-economic factors steered the discussion in one direction or another. This resulted in a complex network of moral and political positions, some of which became more closely associated with the New Woman movement than others (sexual freedom, economic independence, political rights, and the breaking of social codes). However, the situation was quite different in theory than in fact. This is where another distinction becomes necessary to avoid confusion: that between the different uses of the term.

The New Woman label may be used to refer to New Women as biographical individuals, to the movement in general or to the popular image represented in the press or literature. Though technically distinct, these categories tend to overlap and are all problematic to some extent. The New Woman movement, to begin with, broadly encompasses New Women themselves and their supporters, such as New Woman writers and scholars. As was adumbrated before, it is loosely associated with different ideas concerning woman's emancipation in relation to which individual positions varied. The discussions surrounding the Woman Question at the turn-of-the-century are often sketched as opposing two camps: the ‘New Order’ on one side (progressive, open-minded and proto-feminist) and the ‘Old Order’ on the other (conservative, moralistic and antifeminist). As an 1896 article from the *Humanitarian* states:

> The close of the nineteenth century marks an epoch of social revolutions! ... The remnants of the old order stand aghast, clinging affrightedly to their traditions; meanwhile the new order hastens forth eagerly, heralding and welcoming the fuller entrance of the New Era. (Emily Morgan-Dockrell, qtd. in Richardson, xxxii)

However, this theoretical division is far from representative of the variety of ideological stances (and combination thereof) that characterized the period. To say that the press played an important role in shaping public views on the matter is an understatement. The explosion of periodicals created a new platform for people to express their opinion and reach ever—increasing audiences. Richardson quotes H. R. Haweis’ address to the 1894 Women Writer’s Dinner in this respect:

> the press is taking the place of the pulpit, the rostrum, the judgment seat ... Journalism, the shortest form of book, is therefore on the up-grade; its importance is growing for political, educative and decorative purposes. (xlv)

Necessarily, ideologically oriented periodicals would make use of this influence to foster their political agendas and take position in relation to the issues of the day. Among these issues, the Woman Question certainly was one of the ‘hottest’ topics, as Ellen Jordan demonstrates in the case of the magazine Punch: ‘between 18th August 1894 and 27th July 1895, there are only three issues without at least one New Woman joke in them’ (21). Depending on the public, the figure of the New Woman was thus either caricatured and ridiculed or, on the contrary, favourably depicted and celebrated. In general, caricatures of New Women would concentrate on their physical traits (portrayed as excessively masculine), their socially inappropriate behaviours (smoking, cycling) or their dress (bloomers, the ‘rational dress’), while more serious discussions on both sides of the debate focused on the economic and political issues at stake (marriage laws, property rights and the vote), as well as its social and moral implications (re-or degeneration of the race, woman’s role as wife and mother, sexual freedom and its consequences, etc.). Lastly, New Women themselves often only corresponded to one of the many aspects the figure entailed. There were New Women in the streets, cycling, smoking, and expressing political views; there were New Women in the workplace (writers, editors) or founding leagues and societies; and there were also New Women whose lifestyle or opinions fitted them in this category, whether they liked it or not. However, since the figure could either be seen as positive—the New Woman as role model—or negative—the New Woman as degenerate—, the connotation of the term varied. Consequently, not all New Women enjoyed being designated as such: Irish novelist Sarah Grand, for example, one of the movement’s most iconic authors, was a fervent supporter of eugenics and ‘civic maternalism’ (Richardson, lxii). Therefore, she was rather traditional in her views on women and sexuality: she disapproved of what she perceived as masculine traits in women and felt the need to distance herself from the New Woman movement and its radical overtones. Short story writer George Egerton displayed similar ambivalence: although her writing was immensely influential and is still held representative of New Woman fiction, she resented being associated with it and dissociated herself from the political implications of her work. To sum up, the New Woman label was—and has since often been—used in reductive and simplistic ways. Although the term is contemporary to the phenomenon it describes, its controversial nature complicates any use and requires continuous attention and elucidation.

In turn, its affiliated literary genre—New Woman fiction—reflects this complexity and is less homogeneous than one might first assume, whether in terms of content or form. In addition to formal experimentation, New Woman texts explore new territories, through original female characters or inventive plots which mirror the wide spectrum of ideological positions that characterized Victorian society, along with their shortcomings and contradictions. Thompson goes a step further and very convincingly argues that it is because New Woman texts 'resist appropriation by twentieth-century critics' (2) that they are still relatively absent from the canon, since 'the ideological agendas of twentieth-century feminism are incompatible with the unstable, fluid, and fundamentally *different* positions of Victorian women writers on the Woman Question' (2). She is not alone in her critique of the recuperation early feminist writing has been subject to and other critics also comment on the selection that second-wave feminism operated during its rediscovery of New Woman fiction in the seventies. It is indeed fascinating to identify in precursory texts the roots of later schools of thought, but to approach such texts from this angle only exposes one to the risks of intentional fallacy. For this reason, I will refrain as much as possible throughout the following discussion from projecting a modern reading on the short stories I examine. By paying particular attention to the texts' specificities and basing my observations on textual analysis, I hope to do justice to their artistic and thematic individuality. I will make use of secondary material bearing Thompson's warning in mind and remain vigilant in my conclusions on the ways these specific texts relate to the larger issues they address. Although Caird and Gilman's works still resonate today in a rather vivid manner, it is not the purpose of this paper to praise their present-day relevance but instead to emphasize their revolutionary quality for the era in which they were written.

The preceding section has demonstrated that New Women and hysterics have been subject to a considerable amount of criticism, yet they are rarely discussed in relation to each other.[6] Indeed, one might easily forget that the two phenomena took place in the same decades as they seem to belong to different ages. On the one hand, the hysteric was a sick woman, unruly because incapable of controlling her body. She was characterized as lacking reason (and therefore restraint) and required male assistance and control in order to be socially fit. On the other hand, the New Woman was a daring, exuberant woman who challenged gendered roles. She defied social codes (and thereby male authority), claimed independence, and flaunted masculine behaviours such as speaking boldly, smoking, riding bicycles or wearing practical clothing. The fact that hysterics temporally coexisted with New Women may thus be difficult to apprehend, since the former represented women as helpless, out-of-control and governed by their bodies—thereby echoing centuries-old preconceptions about female nature—while the latter embodied novelty, was confident and witty with modern and progressive views looking toward the new century. Although in separate spheres, these two female stereotypes haunted contemporary press, art, and literature, as well as medical, sociological, or political treatises. Whether admired or pitied, praised, or blamed, idealised, or ridiculed, they were often instrumentalised by partisans of both sides of the debate, since both departed from the norm—one incidentally and the other intentionally—that one side was trying to maintain and the other to abolish. For this reason, rather than antithetic, it seems to me more promising to consider these two figures as two faces of the same coin. In other words, instead of regarding the coexistence of New Women and female hysterics as a historical oddity—a coincidence—I suggest we regard it as a co-incidence, as two interrelated manifestations responding to a single social phenomenon, that of modern patriarchy.

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[6] Showalter is the only critic to explicitly relate the figure of the hysteric and that of the New Woman in her chapter 'Feminism and Hysteria' in *The Female Malady* (1985). Other treatments of the topic simply mention the rhetoric of disease often used to designate feminist activists.

## THESIS

Before I present my thesis, a few theoretical comments are required. My approach in this dissertation will combine elements inherited from different critical currents. As mentioned before, I will base my observations on textual analysis and closely examine the discursive strategies at work in the texts. However, this approach alone would not do justice to the complexity of Gilman and Caird's short stories. Indeed, their militant nature requires taking into consideration extra-textual elements such as their socio-historical context and the effect they were designed to produce on their readers. As ideologically oriented productions, it is legitimate to postulate that both texts have a *purpose*, that they have been crafted so as to fulfil a certain function for which I wish to account.[7] Thus, in very broad terms, this paper stands at the intersection of New Criticism and Reader-Response theory: while I agree that it is the text itself that generates meaning, I nevertheless consider that this production of meaning is an interactive process which involves other agents—such as the author and the reader—as well as the wider cultural and historical context in which it is inscribed. I will therefore take my primary texts as 'starting point' for my research and embed my commentaries on the socio-historical aspects they tackle into close analysis.

My analysis will draw from French structuralist theory, in particular from Gérard Genette's narratology. Genette was the first to offer a complete theory of narratology in

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[7] Gilman's article 'Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper', written in response to the debate surrounding the reception of her short story, confirms the relevance of this assumption. It will be addressed in more details in the chapter devoted to the text itself.

1972 and most of his terminology is still in use. However, several notions have since been debated, expanded, or altered by other critics. For this reason, I will take as reference The Living Handbook of Narratology, which conveniently summarizes the different critical stances in relation to each term and presents the advantages of being regularly updated and in English. Most useful to my argument will be the notions of implied author and reader, in opposition to external or 'real' ones. Schematically speaking, the former designates the narrative entities as they can be inferred from the text, while the latter refer to their biographical counterparts. In the words of Wolf Schmid, the implied author designates 'the author-image evoked by a work and constituted by the stylistic, ideological, and aesthetic properties for which indexical signs can be found in the text'. Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mona Caird being prolific writers and outspoken militants, their lives and work are widely documented, making it easier for scholars to reconstruct a relatively consistent authorial persona in terms of their respective ideological, aesthetic, or literary views. This narratological persona (often indistinctively referred to in critical works by simple reference to the author's name) could be called a 'general' implied author, in opposition to a 'specific' one, for it is inferred from a body of texts instead of a single text. Naturally, the very idea of reconstructing an authorial image from the work of an author's whole lifetime is problematic in many ways. However, because the short stories I examine are intimately related to the ongoing debate in which their authors actively took part, most of my analysis relies on these intertexts. Therefore, unless specified otherwise, my use of the unspecified term 'author' will refer to the general implied author as she can be reconstructed from textual analysis and other biographical elements.[8]

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[8] My discussion of narrative unreliability (chapter 1, section 3) requires the more precise notion of implied author, in which case I systematically specify whenever I refer to the 'implied author' as recreated by the

The concept of the reader, in turn, requires bearing in mind that every external reader can respond differently to a text and that it is impossible to predict its exact reception on the sole basis of textual analysis. Yet, there is no denying that it is sometimes possible to determine the effect a text is aiming to produce, when it displays specific narrative strategies for example, especially if those can be related to an explicitly stated purpose. Particularly useful in such cases is the concept of 'implied reader', which represents the implied author's counterpart and designates the figure of the reader as the text conceptualizes it. It is best understood as a form of ideal addressee, a 'bearer of the codes and norms presumed in the readership' (Schmid). As a narratological tool, it is especially useful to discuss issues such as the kind of knowledge or ideology that is necessary to make sense of a certain literary work. Yet, although applying this concept to my corpus would certainly give rise to important questions, these would deserve a discussion of their own. For the purpose of the present discussion—which is to relate the short stories' textual specificities to their author's narrative strategies—I will therefore employ the term 'reader' (or sometimes 'readers', to be able to use the ungendered plural pronoun) to refer to the implied reader in a broad sense, as synonymous of a model recipient that reacts to the text in a way that suits the author's design. By postulating that these texts elicit (theoretically at least) specific reactions from their readership will thus allow me to define how the narrative structures of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and 'The Yellow Drawing Room' relate to their ideological purpose.

Having laid down my theoretical framework, I will now present my thesis. In this dissertation, I will argue that the figures of the hysteric and the New Woman respond to each other, as well in Gilman and Caird's fiction as within the Victorian collective

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text or to her general reconstruction ('author').

imagination, in which they are deviant heroines, ‘sisters of decadence’. As my analysis will show, the New Woman claims back subversive female traits which patriarchal discourse stigmatizes, using categories such as hysteria to repress transgressive conducts. In response to this, the New Woman movement opens up new spaces for women to inhabit, rescuing from pathology behaviours diverging from the traditional gendered norm. This correlation can be observed through a comparative analysis of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and ‘The Yellow Drawing Room’, whose symbolic female protagonists mirror each other. John’s wife represents the Victorian type of the hysteric, while Vanora embodies the New Woman. Albeit in very different situations, they behave in ways that reflect each other, the latter flaunting attributes which the former must restrain or conceal. As will be shown, their relationship with discourse, as well as space, is symptomatic of the figures they stand for and their position within social structures. I will mainly focus my analysis on the aspect of voice and address the issue of space as part of the comparative analysis. Speech is indeed essential to the short stories’ purpose, for the female characters’ emancipation depends on their ability to speak and voice their opinion. The short stories reflect this centrality both formally and in terms of content: they revolve around verbal exchange, feature complex discursive interplay while at the same time displaying discursive awareness through the complex narrative strategies that are deployed to convey their message (such as ambiguity, dialogism, internal focalization, and authorial presence). In turn, the spaces they inhabit and the way they interact with them both reflect and affect their condition as women. In different ways, these spaces become the locus where they negotiate their freedom, whether literally or symbolically. Both issues—space and voice—are addressed in the texts through the lens of gender: masculine spaces oppress women, while feminine ones unsettle men. Similarly, feminine, and masculine voices enter into conflict, for they are not granted the same authority or credit. By addressing these two aspects, Gilman and Caird's stories challenged the silencing of women which, together with domestic oppression, has been identified by modern and contemporaneous scholars alike as one of the most plausible causes of hysteria. Thus, through texts such as these, New Woman fiction managed to speak in the stead of those made unable to and thereby voiced the message hysterical women were 'silently' articulating.

## SCHOLARSHIP

### Hysteria

Recent discussions of hysteria tend to concur on one point only, which is that the disease has always eluded steady definition and explanation. To find my way in this maze of medical and cultural history, I mainly relied on Andrew Scull's recapitulative study, *Hysteria: The Disturbing History* (2009), which usefully traces the different ways in which the disease was conceptualized throughout history, from the witchcraft trials in the seventeenth century, to eighteenth—century spleen and melancholia, to nineteenth—century's panel of psychiatric conditions (anorexia nervosa, neurasthenia, hypochondria) to the apparition of the shell-shock diagnosis in the aftermath of World War I. Although hysteria had endured as a recognized medical condition for many centuries, it has now almost entirely vanished from modern-day scientific and medical discourses. Most relevant in this respect is Mark S. Micale's article 'On the "Disappearance" of Hysteria: A Study in the Clinical Deconstruction of a Diagnosis' (1993). In this lengthy study, Micale explores the evolution of the hysterical diagnosis from its Victorian golden age to the present. The disorder, he argues, did *not* disappear thanks to patriarchy's demise or the advent of psychology (as the main explanatory trends would have it), but its symptoms were progressively redistributed during the twentieth century into various, more recent psychiatric categories. Although Micale is not a literary critic but a medical historian (whose research on hysteria is authoritative), his article provides interesting nuances to the widespread tendency to regard hysteria as 'a kind of pathological by-product of the Victorian-Wilhelminian bourgeois social system with its sexual confinement, emotional oppression, and social suffocation' (499).

The critical trend Micale (quite pejoratively) refers to can be traced back to Breuer and Freud's early writings on hysteria (1895), in which they recognized the role of repressive cultural factors in hysteria epidemics. As Elaine Showalter notes,

> *Studies on Hysteria* ... seemed to lay the groundwork for a culturally aware therapy that took women's words and women's lives seriously, that respected the aspirations of New Women, and that allowed women a say in the management of hysterical symptoms. (1985, 158)

However, Freud's development of psychoanalytic theory subsequently eclipsed 'some of the openness to women's words and feelings' (158) that characterized his early writings. As the date of the preceding quotation shows, it is not until the latter part of the twentieth century that the cultural understanding of hysteria gained new momentum, through the lens of second-wave feminism's reassessment of (literary) history. American critic Elaine Showalter was one of the first to bring the issue of hysteria back to the fore of academic criticism. Her 1985 *The Female Malady* was a breakthrough in the field and laid the basis for most of the following research on the topic. Showalter also wrote on numerous issues related to woman and literature and is particularly known for her work on female writers (*A Literature of Their Own*, 1977; *Daughters of Decadence*, 1993; *Inventing Herself*, 2001). Discussion of her work, its influence and its implications would require almost as lengthy a study as this one, but such is not the purpose of this section. Suffice to say, then, that Showalter defends the idea that hysteria is a psychological disorder whose construction as a narrative must be exposed. Although she has sometimes been accused of promoting an outdated and essentialist view of woman (through her concept of gynocritics for example), she resents the widespread use of the hysterical label to refer to female literature or women's writing ('On Hysterical Narrative', 1993). Instead, she proposes to concentrate on the narrative dimension of the disorder. I agree with Showalter on this point in particular, and my chapter on 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is partly informed by her own (brief) discussion of the text.

Less directly related to hysteria but fundamental to my understanding of its scientific and intellectual background was Rachel Malane's *Sex in Mind: The Gendered Brain in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Mental Sciences*. Malane's impressive study provides precious information on the ways in which the brain and mental phenomena were perceived and defined at the time, in particular in relation to biological sex. Most interesting is her argument that 'scientific studies of the brain and fictional constructions of mental functions should be seen as mutually supportive, rather than as causal in either direction' (xii). Indeed, as her book makes clear, cultural productions were often informed by scientific findings, which in turn reinforced pre-established ideas on male and female mental traits. Freud's involvement with literature, whether in his case histories or in psychoanalytical theory, is undeniable proof thereof.

### The New Woman

Leading scholars on the topic of New Woman fiction include Ann Heilmann, Sally Ledger, Ann Ardis, Nicola Diane Thompson, Lyn Pykett and Angelique Richardson. While their works are mostly complementary and rarely at variance, each have their own area of interest: Ardis, for example, is mostly interested in relating the New Woman with other social and cultural movements of the period, such as decadence, socialism, imperialism, and emergent sexual identities. Pykett, in turn, looks at reception histories and issues of authorial self-presentation. Thompson, meanwhile, criticizes modern critics' appropriation of the New Woman and encourages readings that acknowledge the writers' contradictions, as well as the tensions and divisions among them. I will not discuss each of their work in detail, but rather outline those that relate most closely to my subject.

Richardson's collection of turn-of-the-century short stories *Women Who Did: Stories by Men and Women 1890-1914* is, to my knowledge, the latest anthological work on the topic (2002). Her introduction proves particularly comprehensive and an illuminating starting point into the field: she usefully sketches the socio-political context in which the New Woman appeared as well as the legal and moral principles that regulated public life at the turn of the century. In her overview of the main issues at stake (which includes but is not limited to marriage, separate spheres, the press, eugenics, questions of class and race) she integrates data and excerpts from contemporary material which provide instructive insights into the period's complexity. Noticeably, although her research has quite evidently benefited from previous studies, she does not engage in critical dialogue and focuses on primary material only. Her introduction remains neutral and purely informative, in contrast to Elaine Showalter's own anthology for example, *Daughters of Decadence* (1993). Hers is a more engaged work, explicitly seeking to recover New Woman short fiction from critical indifference, an approach in line with the rest of her writing on the topic (reviewed in the previous section).

Ann Heilmann is another essential voice in the critical discussion surrounding the New Woman. Her numerous books and articles on the topic serve as reference to much of what has been (and is still) written on the Woman Question, the New Woman, and the

Victorian era in general. In her comprehensive study *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (2002), she clarifies, defines and situates the New Woman within the history of feminism. Her book constitutes an extension of her 1996 essay '"New Woman" Fiction and *Fin-de-Siècle* Feminism', in which she had notably stressed 'the inadequacy of the unqualified term "New Woman fiction" as it is most commonly applied in criticism' (203). In general, Heilmann underscores the necessity of distinguishing between male and female writers and therefore redefines the genre as 'feminist fiction written by women, and deal[ing] with middle-class heroines who in some way re-enact autobiographical dilemmas faced by the writers themselves' (205). She is also interested in the similarities that can be found between first-wave and second-wave feminism, yet she remains careful in her comparison. Her other contributions to the field include an in-depth analysis of three New Woman writers (Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner and Mona Caird) in *New Woman Strategies* and a five-volume anthological work, *The Late-Victorian Marriage Question: A Collection of Key New Woman Texts* (1998), which provides extremely valuable information and sources from the period.

The fundamental role of the press in the diffusion and development of nineteenth-century ideas is both detailed and illustrated in Michelle Elizabeth Tusan's article 'Inventing the New Woman: Print Culture and Identity Politics During the Fin-de-Siecle' (1998). Her distinction between feminist and mainstream press is particularly enlightening, though it is unfortunately not echoed in other works. In addition to demonstrating that the New Woman appeared in feminist circles more than a year before it reached the mainstream press, Tusan also shows how her image necessarily evolved as she progressed from the former to the latter.

Other sources on New Woman fiction and late nineteenth-century social debates include Sally Mitchell's review of the critical literature written in the last two decades of the twentieth century, 'New Women, Old and New' (1999) and Nigel Bell's article 'The 'Woman Question', the 'New Woman', and Some Late Victorian Fiction' (2013), which provides an interesting summary, highlighting in particular the often-overlooked role of male writers in this literary 'conversation'. For broader contextual information, I also turned to *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing* (2015) whose articles on 'Sensation and Woman fiction' (Pykett), 'Life-writing' (Hanbery Mackay) and 'Periodical writing' (Beetham) were especially useful.

## Primary Texts

Unlike 'The Yellow Drawing Room', 'The Yellow Wallpaper' has received significant attention since its rediscovery in the wake of second-wave feminism's retrieval of turn-of-the-century militant literature. While almost all critics focused on the discursive nature of the revolution taking place in 'The Yellow Wallpaper', their readings diverge when it comes to identifying whose discourse the text seeks to emancipate, and how. Paula A. Treichler, for example, identifies the wallpaper as a metaphor for woman's discourse, characterized and made possible through 'linguistic innovation' (74). Karen Ford, on the contrary, argues that the short story represents a *retreat* from discourse, precisely because language is male determined. In her analysis, the wallpaper represents patriarchal oppression. Yet, she still tries to find 'women's discourse ... in the blankness behind the wallpaper' (312) although she initially acknowledged that ''women's discourse' is difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to define' (310). Diane P. Herndl, in turn, adopts a psychoanalytic stance and defines hysteria as the consequence of woman's inability to fit in the (male) symbolic order, in which she is denied subjectivity. She interprets the narrator’s final behaviour as an acceptance of her status as a non-speaking object, but specifies that such was not Gilman’s fate, for she self-cured by writing and managed to define herself as a ‘language-using subject’ (53). In spite of the interesting insights these interpretations afford, I believe they are representative of the ‘appropriation by twentieth-century critics’ that Thompson denounced.[9] Indeed, they are less related to the contemporary issues Gilman addressed (medical mishandlings, domestic oppression) than to later psychoanalytical and feminist theories. Moreover, although their conclusions differ greatly, all of these readings have one thing in common: they consider the text through the lens of gender difference, focusing on the narrator’s status as a woman, rather than as a patient.

Jane F. Thraikill’s position stands out in this respect, for she argues that ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ does not ‘document the difference between a feminine and a masculine epistemology’ but rather ‘thematized and helped to effect the move from a materialist paradigm of mental states to a proto-psychoanalytic one’ (529).[10] In other words, the story’s main objective was to get doctors to listen to their patients, not to get men to listen to women. I am more convinced by her argument for two reasons, the first being that her approach lends greater importance to contextual elements such as Gilman’s own views on the topic and contemporary medical discourse. She is careful to distance herself from ‘a certain kind of feminist reading’ that (not unlike the aforementioned authors) ‘map a psychotherapeutic approach back onto a text that marks the emergence of the very possibility of such an interpretive stance’ (549). Indeed, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ pre-dates Freud and Breuer’s *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), let alone the subsequent works in which he theorized psychoanalysis. The second reason is, her analysis allows for a more nuanced conclusion: although the short story's objective is to reform medical practices rather than society at large, this very objective entails the emancipation of the female voice and the denunciation of patriarchal social structures. Therefore, while Gilman's feminist motives are more salient in some of her other works (*Women and Economics* for example), I concur with Thraikill that in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' they are subordinated to her specific purpose 'to save people from being driven crazy' (Gilman, 1913).

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[9] See above, 13.

[10] For more detail, see *Introduction*, 5.

'The Yellow Drawing Room', in turn, is relatively unknown. It is mentioned fleetingly in one or two general critical works and briefly commented by Heilmann (2004) as part of a discussion on Mona Caird's work. Her short analysis comes up in a chapter devoted to the figure of the female artist and hastily relates Caird and Gilman's short stories by stating that the former inverts 'the torturing patterns of male aestheticism' of the latter. Heilmann concludes that 'Vanora does not repudiate but rather subverts contemporary aestheticism by reclaiming the colour of decadence as an emblem of women's liberation' (213). Though interesting, her aesthetic reading is unfortunately of no relevance to my topic and her comparison leads to no further analysis. Similarly, in the introduction to her collection of turn-of-the-century short stories *Women Who Did*, Angelique Richardson mentions the two stories in relation to each other, yet only to say that 'both ... align 'yellow' with decadence and female emancipation' (lv). Richardson's collection and Stephanie Forward's own anthology of short stories *Dreams, Visions and Realities* (2003) are the only versions of the text available in print today. Forward goes a bit further than Heilmann and Richardson in her article 'A Study in Yellow: Mona Caird's 'The Yellow Drawing Room'' (2000), which (to my knowledge) constitutes the only in-depth discussion of the story. However, although she too mentions 'The Yellow

Wallpaper' as an intertext, she operates no comparison and only does so in order to introduce Caird's 'own study in yellow' (295) and does not return to Gilman's short story for the rest of the article. Her analysis, unfortunately, consists mainly in paraphrase and superficial mentions of the themes the text touches upon, and eventually brings the rather disappointing conclusion that 'Caird captures the mood of an era, and therefore deserves wider recognition' (304). It thus seems that Forward's article merely aims at promoting the text rather than offering original insights into its construction.

In brief, only three modern critics include 'The Yellow Drawing Room' in their discussions, yet all of them do so in passing. Furthermore, even though they perceive that parallels can be drawn between Caird's short story and 'The Yellow Wallpaper', none choose to explore them. My comparative analysis of the two texts is therefore original: while I benefited from a significant amount of scholarship on the period's socio-historical context and literary history, direct criticism of the short stories turned out to be mostly unrelated to my topic, unsatisfactory or inexistent in the case of Caird. With the hope of making a humble though perhaps welcome contribution to this nascent critical dialogue, I now turn to my analysis.

# Chapter 1: The Yellow Wallpaper

## 1.1. FORM AND PURPOSE

In ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, Charlotte Perkins Gilman portrays the failure of a young woman’s rest cure. This technique, devised by American nervous specialist Silas Weir Mitchell in 1873, ‘depended upon seclusion, massage, electricity, immobility and diet’:

> For six weeks the patient was isolated from her family and friends, confined to bed, forbidden to sit up, sew, read, write, or to do any intellectual work, visited daily by the physician, and fed and massaged by the nurse. (Showalter 1985, 138)

Based on the author’s own disastrous experience of the same treatment, the short story calls into question its effectiveness and exposes its role in the narrator’s downfall. However, as attested by the debate that surrounded the text’s reception, it is safe to say that this function is not immediately apparent. The exact nature of the narrator’s condition is never fully established, and the reader is caught between the conflicting voices of two suspicious characters: the undiscerning and paternalistic husband/physician and his sick and hallucinating wife. The situation is further complicated by the first-person discourse, for the short story takes the form of a diary written by the wife when no one is watching. The reader’s knowledge and understanding of the diegesis are thus contingent upon an unreliable narrator that is herself struggling to sort out reality from fiction, truth from misjudgements. Even the narrative structure proves deceptive as the story ultimately breaks free from the realist conventions of the diary format and ends in medias res, offering no objective resolution. The indeterminacy surrounding ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ is such that more than twenty years later, Gilman published an article in order to elucidate her motives, entitled ‘Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper’. Her brief explanation was written in response to the violent censure that her work faced and to counter the prevailing opinion among publishers that ‘such a story ought not to be written ... [for] it was enough to drive anyone mad to read it’ (1913, n.pag.). To this she replies that ‘it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy’ (*ibid*). Yet, although the article answers the question ‘why’, it does not answer the main question underlying the controversy: why use this form? In other words, why did Gilman choose to voice her critique of patriarchal medical practices through equivocal literary devices (such as internal focalization, dialogism, and an unresolved ending) instead of writing an essay on the topic for example?[11] What makes this particular short story, along with its irresolvable ambiguity, a suitable medium for criticism? If the debate around ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ is due, as I suspect, to its formal arrangement and the indecisiveness it generates, this might be exactly where we need to look in order to reconcile Gilman’s end and means.

I believe that the issues the text tackles are fundamentally discursive, and that an account of the processes at work in the text (whether in its diegesis or form) will allow for a better understanding of its subversive potential. Therefore, my purpose in this section will be to analyse how the story’s complex narratological configuration both reveals the hold of patriarchal medical discourse over the narrator and challenges its authority. Indeed, through the ambiguity it creates, the text opens up interpretative spaces which readers must fill in order to make sense of the story. By doing so, I shall argue, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ seeks to provoke—rather than overtly articulate—a reflection on the different approaches to hysteria in the Victorian era.

### 1.2. NARRATIVE VOICES

‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ is written in the first person but includes voices other than the narrator’s—the most salient being her husband John’s—with which she interacts.

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[11] This question is all the more relevant considering that Gilman specialized in nonfiction and was mostly known for her essays and lectures on woman’s socio-economic conditions.

Throughout the story, her position wavers under his influence: she is at times critical of his reasoning and methods, while at other times she grants him greater insight than to herself and admits that he might be right. Her initial tone is quite assertive and she firmly states her opinion: ‘Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good’ (31-32). However, her confidence is repeatedly undermined by her husband who refuses to take her opinion seriously on any matter, whether on the house, her treatment, or her own condition. He ‘does not believe [she is] sick’ (31) and reduces her condition to ‘a temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency’ (31). When she expresses reservations about the house, he quite literally cuts short to her remarks: ‘there is something strange about the house—I can feel it. I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a *draught*, and shut the window’ (32, emphasis original). Quite tellingly, John gives a literal (physical) interpretation to his wife’s complaint and proves unable to understand the psychological aspect of her disease. This is something the narrator is aware of and she makes sure her readers realize it from the outset:

> John is a physician, and *perhaps*— (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind—) perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster. (31)

These early comments serve to characterize her as self-aware and intuitive even though she obediently complies with her cure. However, her assertive spirit is progressively tamed by the constant opposition she meets. For example, after having declared her disagreement with her husband’s restrictive measures, she tentatively develops her opinion only to check herself upon remembering his prescription:

> I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. So I will let it alone and talk about the house. (32)

Notably, the narrator stops in the middle of her sentence and changes its course to conform to her husband's advice which, ironically, redirects her attention towards the house, the very object (metonymically speaking) that will precipitate her downfall. The interruption—an anacoluthon—is made all the more abrupt by the hyphen which separates the two parts of the sentence and textually materializes the opposition she faces. This passage foreshadows a later exchange in which he tries to convince her that her state is improving:

> 'Really dear you are better!'
>
> 'Better in body perhaps—' I began, and stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word.
>
> 'My darling,' said he, 'I beg of you for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?' (40)

As soon as the narrator suggests that her disease might not be of physiological origin, her husband interrupts her and forbids her to even consider this idea. He resorts to his authority as a physician to silence her insinuations and sharply assert his views on the situation. In the light of this second exchange, then, the reason for the narrator's earlier self-censorship becomes apparent: she in fact reproduces in her own discourse patterns inherited from her husband's repressive behaviour. Although John is physically present only in their nightly discussion, his discourse *interferes* with hers even when she is writing on her own.

The two passages mirror each other, yet they are located on different narratological levels: the first takes place within the wife's first-person discourse (her narrative is interrupted by John's reported speech) while the second takes place in the diegesis, within a dialogue reported in direct speech—a structure which sets the two speakers on an equal footing so to speak. Although the husband's discourse visibly dominates the second exchange (he interrupts her and speaks more), their utterances nevertheless remain syntactically distinct and both characters voice (or try to voice) an individual point of view.

However, the use of indirect speech in the first example blurs this clear-cut division as the two voices become grammatically interwoven and create an effect of dialogism. In other words, the sentence contains two different voices which are bound together by syntax. Narratologically speaking, the narrator is the dominant voice in the process: she is the one in charge of the discourse and she quotes her husband in the indirect style, thereby assimilating his voice into hers. Yet his influence on her is such that she conforms her writing to fit his instructions, her grammatical structure thus reproducing the modalities of their relationship. As the following section will show, this is a recurring phenomenon in 'The Yellow Wallpaper': different forms of dialogism can be detected in the narrator's discourse, which reflect the influences under which she expresses herself.

### 1.2.1. Dialogism *in praesentia*

Laurent Jenny cites linguist Oswald Ducrot as the first to circumscribe dialogism to grammatical constructions in which two voices share a single utterance (2003, 5).[12] Based on this definition, there can be different degrees of dialogism, depending on the grammatical cues that distinguish the two voices. Let us first examine the case of indirect speech: a main locutor (A) relays another locutor's speech (B), thus reproducing his or her utterance in his or her own words. This form of dialogism could be referred to as dialogism *in praesentia*, for the presence of locutor B within the discourse of locutor A is made clear. Indeed, locutor A explicitly signals that he or she is quoting someone else's discourse through a reporting verb (e.g., say). In this case, while the content of the utterance is specific to locutor B, its form will—to a varying degree—be modelled after locutor A's discourse. Thus, while the use of tense and deictics will refer to locutor A, tone and vocabulary will usually derive from locutor B. Among these, vocabulary is the most ambiguous aspect, for there is no objective way of knowing to what extent locutor A rephrases locutor B’s utterance; this must be inferred from contextual elements. To determine precisely whose words are being used in dialogical utterances provides important information about the power relations between the locutors in question. In the case of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, which deals with issues such as domestic oppression and medical mishandlings, this aspect can hardly be circumvented.

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[12] This linguistic use of the term is to be distinguished from the Bakhtinian sense which describes a much broader phenomenon, that of the interrelation between each instance of discourse and language as a whole, as it has been and is being shaped by other speakers.

In the passages we have examined, and in the other instances of indirect speech in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, it remains rather clear that the narrator faithfully reproduces the content, as well as the form, of her husband’s discourse. Most of what she quotes concerns instructions or practical matters, in which case the terms chosen are neutral, and she otherwise reproduces his own vocabulary without interfering with it:

> At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies. ... Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he would go down to the cellar, if I wished, and have it whitewashed into the bargain. (34)

The expressions ‘nervous patient’, ‘fancies’ and ‘blessed little goose’ are all undoubtedly attributable to John rather than his wife, and the text presents no real ambiguity in this respect. The narrator passively transcribes her husband’s discourse and does not meddle with it, thereby displaying an attitude which suits her characterization as a compliant wife and patient. This correlation between characterization and narratological agency applies to both direct and indirect speech but it is more easily detected in instances of dialogism, the configuration of which implicitly reveals the power relationship between the two locutors involved.[13] In the case of dialogism *in praesentia*, the narrator’s place in the narratological configuration of reported speech—as mere vehicle of her husband's voice—is symptomatic of her dominated position in real-life (or rather, in the diegesis). There are, however, other instances of dialogism in the narrator's discourse which provide even more compelling evidence of this correlation, for they occur in the absence of reported speech and permeate her voice in subtler, more insidious ways. This form of dialogism, in which a locutor's discourse features elements from another locutor's voice without referring to it, I propose to call dialogism *in absentia*.

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[13] The narrator cannot really exert any form of agency when reporting her husband's discourse in the direct mode. However, as the analysis of the nightly exchange (24) made clear, their dialogues reported in direct speech also show a clear imbalance and disproportion between the two.

### 1.2.2. Dialogism *in absentia*

I have defined dialogism *in praesentia* as the form of dialogism encountered in indirect speech when two voices share a single grammatical utterance and the reported speech is explicitly referred to in the main discourse, for example through a reporting verb. Dialogism *in absentia*, in contrast, designates instances in which the main discourse shows traces of an external voice yet does not explicitly acknowledge it. This phenomenon can be observed in 'The Yellow Wallpaper', as the following examples will demonstrate.

Throughout the short story, the narrator's position regarding her situation varies greatly. She sometimes opposes her husband and expresses her disagreement, and sometimes revises her own judgment to admit that he is right. For example, after John sharply dismisses her impression that the house is strange, she makes the following comment: 'I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition' (32). Although there is no reported speech in this passage, several elements indicate that the narrator's voice contains traces of John's discourse. To begin with, she uses the phrase 'nervous condition' which refers to the way her husband defines her disease, not her. Yet in her writing she precisely refrains from labelling it and simply states that she is sick, thereby making a distinction between his (physiological) diagnosis and her (psychological) experience of the disease. This restraint also results from John's prohibition to 'think about [her] condition' (32), therefore she does not define it but uses his words instead. Moreover, the juxtaposition of her comment immediately after John's blunt reaction makes her anger seem justifiable and casts doubt on whether she can be entirely convinced by what she professes. Finally, her use of the adverb 'unreasonably' raises the question of whose judgment this is. On several occasions she complains that 'John is practical in the extreme' (31), that he does not take her condition seriously and laments: 'John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him' (34, emphasis original). As this passage makes clear, it would be more typical of John to pass judgment on the rationality of a certain behaviour. It appears, then, that the narrator's voice is impregnated with elements from her husband's discourse.

In a similar instance, after pleading to move to another room and being denied it, the narrator expresses her consent to John's decision: 'he is right about the beds and windows and things. It is as airy and comfortable room as any one need wish, and, of course, I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim' (34). The terms used in relation to the nursery are surprisingly positive and sharply contrast with her other comments on it:

> I don't like our room a bit. (32)
>
> I am sitting by the window now, up in this atrocious nursery... (33)
>
> This paper looks at me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had! (35)
>
> I don't like it a bit. I wonder—I begin to think—I wish John would take me away from here! (39)
>
> The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing. (40)

There is a clear distinction between the comments she makes on her own, and those she makes immediately after their exchange. While she expresses earnest dislike and even distress on her own, she moderates her discourse in his textual vicinity. His influence is even more flagrant in the pejorative terms she uses to qualify her own behaviour: she does not want to be ‘silly’ and reduces her unease to a ‘whim’. This infantilizing tone is, once again, characteristic of John and betrays the narrator’s internalization of his discourse.[14]

One last form of dialogism deserves investigation: in some instances, the narrator adopts a discourse that is not entirely her own, yet the influence under which she seems to be speaking cannot be traced back to a specific character in the diegesis. At times, she casts her objections aside and indulges in praise and approval of her husband’s attitude—a stance quite dissimilar to her otherwise critical position. For example, after he refuses to take one of the rooms downstairs for her comfort, she reports that ‘he is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction’ (33). Similarly, later in the narrative, she paradoxically laments: ‘it is so hard to talk with John about my case because he is so wise, and because he loves me so’ (39). The sharp contrast between John’s harsh behaviour and the terms in which his wife describes it affords two interpretations: either it serves to create irony, or it highlights the wife’s blind faith in her husband’s greater understanding. Both alternatives are problematic; the former because it would contradict the narrator’s meek characterization and the conventions underlying her diary writing (i.e. that it is a secret and thus supposedly transparent account of her reflexions) and the latter because it seems improbable that she could at the same time be aware of her husband’s lack of insight and praise his supposed devotion and abusive methods. This second interpretation can be resolved, though, if we consider that these statements, too, are dialogical. Although they cannot be traced back to another character’s voice, they do correspond to the expectations of Victorian society regarding the narrator’s status as wife and patient. This passage from an 1883 article written by renowned reactionary Eliza Lynn Linton—and aptly entitled ‘Womanliness’—exemplifies these societal injunctions:

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[14] In fact, this last sentence echoes her husband so accurately that it could be read as free indirect discourse.

> [The womanly woman] does not think it incumbent on her, as a woman of spirit, to fly out at an impatient word; to answer back a momentary irritation with defiance ... Her womanliness inclines her to loving forbearance, to patience under difficulties, to unwearied cheerfulness under such portion of the inevitable burden as may have been laid on her. (117)

Linton's statements are representative of the collective voice of traditional Victorian society which the narrator internalizes in the same way that she internalizes her husband's discourse. As a wife, and even more so as a patient, she is supposed to gladly forbear everything and not to question the legitimacy of her husband's control and decisions. He is a physician, therefore she cannot claim greater understanding of her condition, even though she is the one experiencing it. These statements, I argue, are dialogical in the sense that they are uttered by the narrator, yet they contain elements which feel alien in the light of the narrator's overall stance for they emanate from Victorian medical and patriarchal discourses which she has internalized but that enter into conflict with her initial characterization as self-aware and critical of her husband's methods.

In sum, dialogism *in absentia* is different from dialogism *in praesentia* in the sense that it does not involve reported speech. It is a passive form of dialogism, so to speak, in which there is no reporting verb, thus no textual indication that another voice is woven into the utterance in question, yet an external influence can be inferred from contextual elements. In the first set of examples, similarities can be established between John's discourse and some of the narrator's statements which exhibit characteristic traits in terms of vocabulary (medical terms), tone (rational) and mindset (repressive and minimizing). In the second set of examples, the contrast between some of her comments and her critical characterization hints at their dialogical nature, which then becomes manifest in the light of Linton's article. Indeed, the narrator's discourse implicitly echoes traditional doctrines of 'womanly' submission and forbearance that are difficult to reconcile with her general stance.

## 1.3. RELIABILITY AND INTERPRETIVE RESPONSIBILITY

As the preceding examples have shown, the narrator's discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is not consistent and shows traces of dialogism indicating that she might be expressing views which she does not genuinely endorse. However, as the narrator, she represents the 'highest-level speech position from which the ... narrative discourse as a whole originates' (Margolin, 1) and therefore occupies an authoritative position in the narratological hierarchy. The reader relies on her for factual information as well as for interpretative indications: for example, should we consider John as caring or tyrannical? The narrator of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' completes both tasks unsatisfactorily: she progressively becomes unable to distinguish facts from fiction and expresses conflicting views. This raises the question of narrative reliability: on the one hand, the narrator could be considered unreliable, for her powers of perception and understanding are quite questionable. On the other hand, she could also be considered reliable since she faithfully relates her experience, as extraordinary as it may sound. In a discussion of the different types of narrators one can encounter in fiction, literary theorist Wayne C. Booth proposes another model of reliability, one that is not dependent on notions as difficult to define as reality, plausibility, or truthfulness. He instead states that

> narrators differ markedly according to the degree and kind of distance that separates them from the author, the reader, and the other characters of the story. … For practical criticism probably the most important of these kinds of distance is that between the fallible or unreliable narrator and the implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator. (155, 158)

Quite surprisingly, it is in relation to the author that Booth defines unreliability. He decides to call 'a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), [and] *unreliable* when he does not' (158). His conceptualization of reliability allows for a particularly precise account of the narrator's case in 'The Yellow Wallpaper', whose departures from the implied author's norms manifest themselves in the form of dialogism. Indeed, perhaps more disturbing to the reader is the fact that the narrator expresses views that not only differ from her initial ones, but that enter into conflict with the implied author's stance.

To define what Booth calls the 'norms' of the implied author, we must first establish in relation to what these norms are defined and then distinguish between the ways in which the narrator and the author relate to this topic. The main question that the short story raises is that of the narrator's treatment, and as Gilman's article later made clear, her main objective was to call it into question. However, this may not have been obvious to an uninformed reader, therefore we must look for textual evidence in order to define the implied author's stance in relation to the rest cure. 'The Yellow Wallpaper', I argue, provides extensive evidence that John errs in his approach, for several of the narrator's confidences suggest that, in addition to not succeeding, the restrictive measures to which she is subject play a significant part in her mental breakdown. For example, after she self-interrupts to conform to his advice to not think about her condition, she decides to redirect her attention towards the house in order to occupy her thoughts differently (32). Ironically, it is precisely her compulsive analysis of her surroundings (the yellow wallpaper) that will precipitate her descent into madness. Her behaviour after their nightly exchange—during which he forbids her to mention her psychological distress—follows the same pattern:

> So of course I said no more on that score, and we went to sleep before long. He thought I was asleep first, but I wasn't, and lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately. (40)

Her husband's refusal to listen to her is specifically what prompts her to investigate the wallpaper. As a matter of fact, all of his prescriptions fail to produce the desired effect and instead prompt opposite reactions from the narrator. He forbids her to write, yet she starts a journal. He warns her not to engage in intellectual fancies, yet she obsessively inspects the wallpaper and analyses its patterns. Similarly, his attempts to make her rest have the very opposite effect by providing her with unsupervised periods of time:

> I lie down ever so much now. John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can. Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal. It is a very bad habit I am convinced, for you see I don't sleep. And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake—O no! (41)

The recurrent juxtaposition of John's advice with subsequent mentions of the narrator's compulsive behaviour textually relates her mental degeneration to her rest cure. In this passage, the narrator emphasizes her husband's responsibility by stating that he was the one who 'started the habit', thereby offering support to the interpretation that his strict measures have caused her to behave in increasingly erratic ways. However, it also raises the question of her own responsibility in the cure's failure, for she deliberately hides the fact that she is not sleeping, as well as her other secret activities. Are we to understand that, had she strictly observed her rest cure, she would not have experienced her breakdown? Here again, I believe the narrative supplies compelling evidence to the contrary. On two occasions, the narrator confesses what a respite writing represents for her. Early in the narrative, she suggests that she has no one else to talk to: 'I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind' (31). She later elaborates more and exclaims:

> 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. But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief! (38, emphasis original)

Her reluctance and exhaustion underscore that writing is no whim but an absolute necessity for her. Similarly, the excessive attention she devotes to the wallpaper results from her complete lack of activity: 'I lie here in this great immovable bed—it is nailed down, I believe—and follow that pattern by the hour. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you' (37). It is because she has nothing to occupy her mind and body that she obsessively engages in her observation of the wallpaper. 'Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be.

You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch.' (42). Finally, it appears that the narrator keeps her activities secret for fear of John and of potential repercussions. She confesses that she is 'getting a little afraid of John' (41) and that she has 'no intention of telling him [for] he would make fun of [her]. He might even want to take [her] away' (42). In all of these passages, psychological insight into the narrator's reflexion and motives (made possible thanks to the first-person discourse) suggests that the narrator does not act out of sheer defiance of her husband's authority, but rather in instinctive response to his restrictive measures. Lastly, the short story's outcome brings final proof of the rest cure's failure, thereby supporting the narrator's initial mistrust. These passages confirm the impression that the narrative in general—thus the implied author who is responsible for its creation—is favourable to the narrator and critical with respect to John. More precisely, the numerous textual hints that John's prescriptions not only fail to meet their purpose but in fact aggravate the very condition they were supposed to heal establish a direct correspondence between the implied author's stance and the narrator's initial criticism of her husband's methods.

The narratological situation is thus as follows: as was argued in the previous sections, the narrator is first characterized as self-aware and critical. While her husband prescribes a rest cure and forbids her to engage in any form of intellectual or physical activity, she believes on the contrary that this kind of stimulation would be salutary.[15] Because her doubts concerning the rest cure are confirmed by the narrative, the reader necessarily infers that they correspond to the implied author's norms. In other words, the narrator's and the implied author's respective stances are—at least initially—aligned. Consequently, the narrator's progressive estrangement from her original characterization as aware and critical utterly complicates the reader's interpretative task, for they perceive that the implied author endorses the narrator’s initial view but is at variance with her subsequent submissive and forbearing stance. Worth remembering here is that Booth locates unreliability in the distance perceptible between the narrator and the implied author, but this act of perception—in all due logic—has to be performed by the reader. Therefore, Booth concludes, unreliable narrators ‘make stronger demands on the reader’s powers of inference than do reliable narrators’ (159). In the absence of an omniscient figure who would determine the ‘truth’ of the situation, the ‘right’ side from the ‘wrong’ side, it indeed becomes the reader’s task and responsibility to do so, based on the interpretative guidelines that the implied author lays out in the narrative. In the case of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, these guidelines consist in the several textual elements hinting that the narrator’s doubts are (or were) founded.[16] Although the narrator herself abandons her critical stance as the story unfolds, readers have no obligation to do so. Quite the contrary, the narrative invites them to take over the narrator’s critical work and relate the failures of her rest cure to the specific requests she was denied. In her analysis, Paula Treichler makes a similar point:

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[15] Cf. 32, quoted above.

> The narrator’s language almost from the first does serve to call into question both the diagnosis of her condition and the rules established to treat it. As readers, therefore, we are not permitted wholehearted confidence in the medical assessment of the problem. It is not that we doubt the existence of her ‘condition’, for it obviously causes genuine suffering; but we come to doubt that the diagnosis names the real problem. ... For this reason, we are alert to the possibility of an alternative vision. (66)

Although Treichler operates no distinction between the narrator’s language and the implied author’s, her observations nicely encapsulate the reader’s demanding role. I propose to take Treichler’s claim even further, and argue that Gilman’s readers are not only ‘made alert’ or ‘not permitted wholehearted confidence’, they are encouraged by the implied author to retrieve the narrator’s silenced claims and actively engage in critical work in order to make sense of the story. By contrast to Booth’s example of an ‘implied author who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator' (158), by sanctioning the narrator's views through narrative elements such as textual juxtaposition, psychological insight and plot, the implied author in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' does justice to the narrator and induces the reader to infer the message she is unable to articulate.

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[16] The textual elements in question are, among others, those examined in the previous paragraph.

In sum, Gilman's narrative provides ample evidence that in addition to being unsuccessful, the rest cure in fact causes even more pernicious behaviours such as paranoia, psychosis and self-harm.[17] This conclusion constitutes the short story's central message and can only be reached through the reader's interpretative work, prompted by the implied author. Indeed, the application of Booth's model of narrative unreliability showed that unreliable narrators departing from their implied author's norms invest the reader with additional interpretative responsibility. The narratological configuration of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' thus actively calls for critical engagement on the part of the reader and grounds its critical message in this interpretative process.

## 1.4. CONCLUSION

To analyse 'The Yellow Wallpaper' through the lens of narratology has allowed us to identify the different voices involved in the narrative and to better understand their complex interplay. The examination of different instances of dialogism has thrown into relief the 'narratological power game' that takes place between the different characters but also between the narrator and the authoritative discourses of her time. It appeared that although she originally displays a rather keen awareness of her condition and of her husband's misinterpretation of it, her internalization of medical and patriarchal discourses leads her to disregard her own misgivings and comply with excessive methods which ultimately drive her insane. However, as the second part of my analysis demonstrated, her unreliability is less the result of her madness than of her progressive detachment from the implied author's norms. In other words, she becomes unreliable precisely because she abandons her critical stance. As a consequence, readers are invested with additional interpretative responsibility and must take over the narrator's initial endeavour. Directed by the implied author's textual clues, they are encouraged to unearth Gilman's message by means of critical analysis.

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[17] The narrator briefly considers 'jump[ing] out of the window' (46) at the very end of the story.

Somehow, Gilman displaces the critical dimension of her work from the level of the diegesis to the level of reception. Her use of specific narrative techniques (internal focalization, diary motif, dialogism, and the absence of an objective mediator) prompts readers to question the different characters' points of view. In other words, rather than using arguments to convince the reader that the diagnosis and treatment imposed on the narrator are inappropriate, the text opens an interpretative space in relation to which it becomes necessary to position oneself. This is in agreement with Thrailkill's conviction that Gilman wanted 'to produc[e] a text with a purpose, one that doesn't so much convey an idea as it does catalyze action' (529). Instead of merely ventriloquizing her views through the characters, Gilman places her readers in the difficult position of both witness (as the narrator's confident) and judge (since the text provides no objective solution) and induces them to reflect and take position in relation to the shortcomings of the physiological paradigm that dominated the approach to mental diseases at the turn of the century.

# Chapter 2: The Yellow Drawing Room

## 2.1. FORM AND PURPOSE

In 'The Yellow Drawing Room', Mr St Vincent, a self-avowed old-fashioned gentleman, makes the acquaintance of Vanora Haydon, an exuberant and witty young woman whose views on woman's place in society are diametrically opposed to his. While he firmly believes that true women should be 'retiring, unobtrusive, indistinguishable' (22) and that they belong in the domestic sphere, on the contrary she refuses 'to move in any particular direction because of 'her' sex' (28) and displays a whole array of unconventional traits: she is strong-willed, 'make[s] herself conspicuous' (21-22) and does not hesitate to contradict and even mock his traditional mindset. By casting her two protagonists as Victorian types—a New Woman and an old man—Mona Caird embeds her short story in the contemporary debate surrounding the Woman Question, in which she was a prominent figure. The publication of her 1888 article titled 'Marriage' in *The Westminster Review* sparked an unprecedented reaction from both the press and its readers, with the *Daily Telegraph* receiving more than 27,000 replies to the questions she boldly raised.[18] Like many other New Woman writers, Caird used both fiction and non-fiction to convey her ideas and considered the two media complementary in her fight for social reform.[19] This correlation between her activism and literary production is particularly glaring in the case of 'The Yellow Drawing Room' which not only reflects but stages the very issues she addressed in real life. I will therefore approach the short story from the perspective of Caird's position on the Woman Question in order to determine how her narrative strategies relate to her wider reforming project. As will be shown in this chapter, not only does 'The Yellow Drawing

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[18] Pykett, 135; Heilmann, 2002, vii.; Forward, 295; etc. Many New Woman critics cite this media phenomenon as one of the landmarks of the New Woman era.
[19] See Ardis (1999, 190).

Room' aim to undermine St Vincent's patriarchal discourse by comparing it to modern views, it also reveals its irrational nature and artificiality. This double purpose is achieved through St Vincent's contradictory stance both as a stout defender of traditional ideals and an enamoured suitor of Vanora. Indeed, his exchanges with her progressively unsettle him and challenge his initial characterization as reasonable, confident, and assertive, thereby deconstructing the gender binary on which his argument rests.

## 2.2. NARRATIVE PROJECT

In 'The Yellow Drawing Room', St Vincent occupies the double function of (homodiegetic) narrator and main character of the story. As such, his character is divided into two narrative personas, each corresponding to a narratological level and a specific time frame. As a narrator, he belongs to the discursive present, that is, the moment in which the narrative is produced and to which the simple present used in the prologue and epilogue refers. As a character, however, he belongs to the diegetic past and therefore differs from the narrator whose retrospective stance grants him further knowledge and experience. The opening of the story emphasizes this aspect particularly well:

> I approach this episode in my life ... with dislike, mingled with fascination. I hate the whole subject, but I can't leave it alone. Those accursed three weeks, spent under the same roof with Vanora Haydon, seem to have deprived me of myself, unhinged me, destroyed the balance of my character. I feel as if I might, perhaps, throw off this absurd spell by calmly smoothing out the ruffled memories and studying them scientifically. (21)

A distinction is drawn between his diegetic self, emotionally shaken, and experiencing a major identity crisis, and his narrating counterpart, characterized by distance and reason. However, as this preliminary comment already hints, the distinction is not as clear-cut as it seems. Although the three weeks in which the narrative is set took place (at an unspecified point) in the past, their effect on his character can still be felt in the present, as the present simple of the verb 'seem' indicates. Moreover, his narrative endeavour explicitly aims to ‘throw off this absurd spell’, thereby implying that it still has not been lifted. As the following analysis will show, the tensions already perceptible in the prologue are characteristic of St Vincent’s double inability to maintain an objective stance and to retain control of his discourse in the presence of Vanora. Yet, as the analysis of his narrative project reveals, his relentless pursuit is less the fruit of his fascination with her than a reaction to the threat she poses to his own construction of masculinity.

St Vincent’s self-analytical objective manifests itself textually through numerous digressions in which he exposes his ‘doctrines’ (23) regarding his ‘ideal woman’ (22, 24, 25). His initial comments are assertive, confident and reveal his underlying reflection:

> I hate that sort of girl. The true woman is retiring, unobtrusive, indistinguishable even until you come to know her well, and then she is very much like what every other true woman would be under the same conditions. I had pronounced views in these matters. (22)

This remark, elaborating on the previous mention that he ‘had a prejudice against Vanora’ (21) lays the basis of his set of beliefs regarding women. It is followed, a few paragraphs later, by another digression brought about by his examination of the infamous drawing room:

> It was radiant, bold, unapologetic, unabashed. It was not the room my ideal woman would have created. My ideal woman would unfailingly choose a nice tone of grey-blue ... If I was to give up my liberty, the reins should be handed over to a kind, sensible young woman like Clara, who would hate to make herself remarkable, or her drawing room yellow. (22-23)

Both comments are formulated before St Vincent’s encounter with Vanora and therefore serve to establish his individual stance before she challenges it. The combination of present and simple past makes it impossible to determine the extent to which they are attributable to his discursive or diegetic self, but their clear, elaborate phrasing reflect the narrator’s rational impetus and distance. Similarly, although Vanora’s sudden appearance deeply unsettles him, his confusion manifests itself physically (he upsets his tea) but is not reflected in the discourse:

> In the human colour-spectrum, she took the place of the yellow ray. This was all out of keeping. According to my doctrines it was even impossible. Women ought to take the place of the blue or violet rays. In my scheme of the universe, they always did so, except in the case of a distinctly unwomanly woman. But this—in spite of offending against every canon I had ever set up—Vanora certainly was not Everything was wrong and contradictory. I seemed to be taking part in some comedy of errors, wherein Vanora played Columbine, and I—the part of fool, I began grimly to suspect. (23)

Although Vanora contradicts his every conviction regarding female nature, St Vincent manages to account for it in a composed and objective manner. He acknowledges the disturbance Vanora represents in his worldview, impartially observes that she disproves his theories and even displays self-mockery. Here again, the discourse corresponds to the objectives established in the prologue to rationally and relay objectively the events that so profoundly unsettled him.

However, as the story progresses, the narrator becomes less and less able to distance himself from his diegetic self's experience. This is apparent in the digression following his first (relatively short) exchange with Vanora, in which he indulges for the first time in free indirect discourse:

> I raised my eyebrow witheringly. My ideal woman would consider it almost indelicate to play with words in this fantastic fashion. I glanced at my grey-blue goddess. How comfortably certain one felt with *her* of enjoying conversational repose! Dear Clara! With what admirable good taste she carried out one's cherished ideas; she fitted them like a glove. I completely, ardently, approved of Clara. (24)

St Vincent's gaze serves to introduce his thoughts, which are then quoted in free indirect mode by the narrator, thereby assimilating their two discourses in one.[20] While the grammar of the passage's central sentences indicates that the voice belongs to the narrator (past simple, no quotation marks or reporting verb), the enthusiastic tone (exclamations) and vocabulary ('goddess', 'dear Clara') are characteristic of St Vincent's character and his emotional state in the story. The distance between the retrospective narrator and his diegetic alter ego thus collapses as their two voices converge to express his endorsement of Clara (as opposed to Vanora). Another striking example of the narrator's inability to relate the story dispassionately occurs a few pages later after St Vincent regains hope to conquer Vanora:

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[20] Later on, the exact same phenomenon occurs after Vanora confronts him bluntly: 'I looked at her in despair. If she lived and improved for a thousand years she would never be an ideal woman!' (25)

> I watched Vanora secretly. She seemed depressed and restless. My heart bounded. Vanora was jealous; a woman after the old eternal pattern! —therefore to be won! Dear, erratic, foolish, brilliant Vanora, you shall be brought back safe and sound to your true destiny! (28)

Once again, it is the visual clue that Vanora could be, after all, a woman like all the others that triggers the narrator's excitement, illustrated by his use of free indirect (and eventually free direct) discourse. The convergence of the two voices is progressive: to begin, the syntax emulates St Vincent's emotional state through short sentences and expressive punctuation. Then, the proclamation that 'Vanora was jealous' hints at the narrator's assimilation of St Vincent's voice, for he does not explicitly report his thoughts but presents his deduction as a fact. Finally, his last exclamation abandons all marks of his retrospective narratological stance: it is uttered in the present simple and addresses Vanora directly. This inclusion of free direct discourse in the narrative gives unprecedented prominence to St Vincent's speech and highlights his almost blind enthusiasm. Furthermore, it betrays the narrator's true motives, for he only wishes to bring Vanora back to her 'true destiny' in order to fulfil his own amorous fantasies, which in turn are intricately linked with his gender identity. Indeed, he had earlier exclaimed that she 'must learn to love [him] and to be a woman in the old sweet sense, *for [his] sake*' (27, emphasis added). It is because his own sense of masculinity depends on his ability to 'win' and dominate women that St Vincent engages in such a desperate pursuit of Vanora. Worth noticing is that, in both passages, his lack of restraint results from what he interprets as a confirmation of his worldview. While he sees Clara as the embodiment of his ideal woman in the first case, in the second he interprets Vanora's behaviour as evidence of the truth of his assumptions about woman's nature. The narrator's difficulty maintaining the objective discursive posture he had established before meeting Vanora thus attests to his compulsive need of validation and—more importantly—reveals the fundamentally selfish and insecure impulses underlying his patriarchal beliefs. His exclamation in the prologue is particularly telling in this respect: 'those accursed three weeks, spent under the same roof with Vanora Haydon, seem to have deprived me of myself, unhinged me, destroyed the balance of my character' (21). As a New Woman, Vanora endangers St Vincent's gender identity, built on traditional conceptions of manhood. His obsession with her thus takes on an entirely different aspect: instead of a genuine passion, it is exposed as a frantic attempt to validate his own masculinity.

### 2.3. DISCURSIVE MOMENTS

As the preceding examples have shown, the narrator's first-person discourse is not entirely consistent with the analytical objective he sets himself in the prologue, and his enthusiastic peaks undermine his initial characterization as rational and assertive. The same observation can be made regarding his diegetic counterpart, whose discourse visibly changes throughout the story. It will thus be the purpose of this section to analyse the different instances of reported speech, whether direct or indirect, and examine how their evolution unveils aspects of St Vincent's character which undermine his patriarchal discourse.

There are three 'discursive moments', so to speak, in 'The Yellow Drawing Room', corresponding almost exactly to the three verbal exchanges taking place between St Vincent and Vanora. Their first discussion is quite formal and takes place in the socially regulated context of the drawing room. The conventional dimension of the exchange is emphasized by the presence of other visitors, Miss Thorne's polite attempts to atone 'for that unpardonable drawing room' (22) and the fact that tea is being served to the guests. In contrast to ‘the unceasing sound of Aunt Clementina’s voice’ which makes St Vincent ‘drowsy’, Vanora’s arrival in ‘an ocean of laughter’ (23) causes him to spill his tea, thereby symbolizing her unconventional character. In an attempt to restore the situation to his advantage and make conversation, he engages in an elaborate commentary on the room:

> ‘I hear, Miss Vanora,’ I said, ‘that the credit of this room is entirely yours.’ The lank admirer looked round. Vanora glanced at me alertly.
>
> ‘You have every reason to be proud,’ I continued, determined not to spare her; ‘you must have surprised more people than you could easily count—though I have no wish to impugn on your arithmetic. They will all be grateful to you for a new sensation.’ (24)

St Vincent adroitly disguises his critical intent behind flattery and neutral terms such as ‘surprise’ or ‘new sensation’. His witty tone and apparent politeness are characteristic of the norms regulating social exchanges, yet his strategy is undermined by Vanora’s refusal to play her designated part (which would be to politely accept his compliments). She expresses disagreement, refuses to accept the credit he gives her and turns his argument upside down by suggesting that people are too easily surprised for it to be considered an achievement. Her answer leaves St Vincent speechless and marks the end of the conversation. Interestingly, he then internally reflects on Vanora’s indelicacy ‘to play with words in this fantastic fashion’ (24) while this is precisely what he did to begin with. Unable to admit that he has been caught in his own trap, he then turns to Clara to praise the joys of ‘conversational repose’ although, here again, he contradicts himself for such was not his purpose since he admitted to being ‘determined not to spare [Vanora]’ (24). He fails to do so, but prefers to condemn her inappropriate behaviour rather than admit that she has outsmarted him. Indeed, Clara’s submissive behaviour comforts him in his superior position whereas Vanora’s challenging attitude unsettles him. St Vincent’s paradoxical reaction is thus symptomatic of his inability to see the world as it is when it differs from his ideals for he does not know how to define himself otherwise.

Their following discussion is initiated by Vanora, whose direct approach sets the tone of this second discursive moment: she ‘walk[s] straight up’ to St Vincent, bluntly asks the reason for his disapproval and expresses the wish that he speak frankly (25). The following dialogue proves indeed less contrived and allows St Vincent to expound his opinion of Vanora without reserve:

> ‘You seem to have many qualities and ideas that are not suited to your sex.’ (25)
>
> ‘I scarcely know how to approach a subject of which you do not seem to understand the rudiments.’ (25)
>
> ‘The sacred realms where woman is queen will soon be forbidden to you if you consistently continue to think and act in disharmony with the feminine nature and genius.’ (25)
>
> These severe admonitions, however, are of little consequence to Vanora, whose answers are characterized by cynicism, irony and detachment. To St Vincent’s allegation that she is entirely ignorant on the matter, she playfully exclaims:
>
> ‘This interests me ... I particularly desire to be awakened on this drowsy side of me; I can’t bear to be blind and stupid. I want very much to be shown at least the gates of realms that are forbidden to me.’ (25)

Vanora’s intentional exaggeration of St Vincent’s charges undermines their derogative effect. Indeed, her sarcasm unsettles the power relation he is trying to establish through his paternalist and admonishing tone. For example, she defuses his ‘threat of being excluded from the realms [where woman is queen]’ (26) by stating that she in fact has no interest in them and humorously compares her preference to that of dying people choosing recovery instead of (the illusion of) eternal life. The imbalance between the two characters is symbolized by Vanora’s intermittent feeding or a ‘haughty’ (25), ‘supercilious peacock’ (26) to which St Vincent had earlier been compared: ‘I used to pace the terrace among the peacocks (the boys impertinently insisted that they were unable on such occasions to distinguish me from those conceited birds)’ (25). His verbal defeat is finally sealed by Vanora’s mocking exclamation: ‘Oh! Mr St Vincent, you really are a little stupid sometimes’ (27). In sum, St Vincent’s discourse proves both ineffective and counterproductive for the subversion of his stern and patronizing language is precisely what allows Vanora to dominate their conversation.

The transition towards a third discursive moment is marked by the abrupt shift that occurs at the end of the conversation. As soon as St Vincent notices Vanora's interest in George Inglis, he internally exclaims: 'That filled me with unaccountable fury. My critical mood, which I had maintained with no little difficulty, fell off me, and I was swaying as a wind-tossed reed with strange, uncontrollable emotion' (27). From this moment onwards, his discourse becomes characterized by impulsivity and emotion:

> You don't know what it has cost me to speak to you thus,' I said, catching her hand. 'You interest me, you—yes, I must say it, you fascinate me, and it distresses me, maddens me to feel myself led away by qualities which ought to repel me—the attraction is morbid—unwholesome. I am angry with myself for even feeling it. (27)

St Vincent's voice is no longer measured nor rational; on the contrary, he expresses himself passionately and with unprecedented immediacy. His sentences are hesitant and fragmented while his urges are emotional rather than ideological: he 'long[s] to make her yield to [him]; to love [him] with a lowly up-looking love' and has 'a burning desire to subdue her' (27). While in the first section of the story he is able to relate his emotions to the threat Vanora poses to his worldview, his confusion increases as the story unfolds and reveals his irrational, almost animal motives:

> 'She *shall* love me, and she *shall* learn, through love, the sweet lesson of womanly submission,' I said to myself, all the dominating instincts of my manhood roused into activity by this hateful experience. I felt that she was utterly wrong ... It was for me, through the might of an overwhelming affection, to set alight the true womanly flame within her heart. (27-28)

Noticeably, St Vincent's strategy and reasoning no longer rely on reason but emotion: his determination to convert her to his ideas stems from instinct and he does not 'think' that she is wrong but rather 'feels' it. His discourse thus displays characteristically feminine traits according to the traditional dichotomy of the rational, reflective male and the emotional, impulsive female.[21]

This reversal of gender roles is further illustrated by St Vincent's progressive retreat from discourse in the course of his last exchange with Vanora. First, his lines become significantly shorter: his direct speech takes up six lines of the final dialogue, whereas Vanora's covers more than thirty. Secondly, he rather visibly struggles to express himself and is unable to formulate proper answers to Vanora's declarations:

> When I become jealous of my sisters,' said Vanora, with a quiet and scornful aloofness, 'you can come and preach me your doctrines. I shall understand them then.'
>
> 'Vanora!'
>
> 'At present they seem to me like soap-bubbles; full of emptiness.' 'But you don't understand—' (28)

St Vincent's desperate recourse to interjection and the following interruption exemplify his loss of verbal control as well as his dominated position in the exchange. His remaining attempts to defend his point of view only expose him to further criticism from Vanora:

> 'I offer you no prison but a home,' I cried excitedly. 'You would turn all homes into prisons,' she returned.
>
> 'Prisons whose bars are the golden bars of love and duty.'
>
> 'Yes, you take a woman's love and duty, and fashion out of them her prison bars. Is that generous? I fancy not, but it is most ingenious. But I don't like even *golden* bars, Mr St Vincent.'
>
> 'You have evidently not a spark of love for me,' I cried distractedly. (29)

Once again, after proving unable to rationally argue his case, St Vincent turns to emotion and appeals to Vanora's feelings. Furthermore, the adverbs qualifying his discourse all belong to the register of madness (he cries 'excitedly' and 'distractedly'). This feature had already appeared earlier in the narrative when he had for the first time 'crazily' urged Vanora to love him (27) and is made even more explicit in his last reply: 'I pleaded like a lunatic, argued, urged' (29). Hastily summarized through reporting verbs and a simile, his discourse cannot even be considered as indirect speech and is reduced to the mere allusion that he is speaking. This very last mention of St Vincent's speech epitomizes the discursive shift that has progressively taken place: his emotional turmoil has deprived him of his voice and turned him into a hysterical character, 'a lunatic'.

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[21] See Malane (28, 52) and Showalter (1985, 3-4).

In sum, as the preceding analysis has demonstrated, in the course of his exchanges with Vanora, St Vincent's voice gradually shifts from conventional and composed to emotional and disjointed. This evolution takes the form of three discursive moments—conversational, serious, then passionate—and culminates in St Vincent's loss of control over his speech as none of his verbal strategies succeed: he proves unable to outwit her, his paternalist admonitions make her laugh and his final, desperate plea only leads her to demand that he leave. On the contrary, Vanora dominates most of their exchanges and remains in control of her speech, even as she 'is quivering from head to foot' (29). Because the increasing difficulty St Vincent experiences with speech can be textually related to his emotional turmoil, his motivations are significantly undermined as impulsive and irrational. Even more detrimental to his argument is the fact that he progressively displays feminine and hysterical traits, thereby embodying himself the artificiality of the gender dichotomy on which his whole worldview and identity are built. As a result, his position towards and arguments about woman's place in society are considerably weakened, for they are exposed as instrumental to the construction of his own masculinity.

### 2.4. NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

In view of the above, it is undeniable that 'The Yellow Drawing Room' aims to promote New Woman ideas and that it does so through the character of Vanora. She is not only portrayed as witty, attractive, and complex, she also very effectively counters and undermines St Vincent's patriarchal discourse. Caird's strategy thus operates on two levels:

seduction and subversion. Both strategies were among the most typical of those employed by New Woman writers to promote their political agenda, though they were not always used together. Since the New Woman was the object of particularly vehement criticism which often attacked her 'unfeminine' nature and mocked her appearance, seduction was an efficient way to counteract.[22] As Ann Heilmann comments:

> In their fiction feminists thus responded to the conservative challenge by turning the ... war of the sexes into a 'sexy war' in which clever and determined women conquered male opposition with the combined forces of deft logic and supple flesh. (2002, 32)

Among the advocates for this approach was Sarah Grand, one of the most influential New Woman writers, though she was sometimes considered rather compliant and moderate in compared to some of her contemporaries. In an 1893 article entitled 'The Morals of Manner and Appearance', she develops in great detail the importance of bringing about one's ideas in a pleasurable way:

> It is doubtful whether anybody in this world was ever convinced by a bald argument. It is the way in which the argument is presented that rouses us, as is evident when we consider the number of truths we know but never dream of acting on until someone comes, or something happens to make us feel them. It is difficult to conceive anything more disastrously foolish than for women, at this critical period of their progress, to endanger their chances of success by being careless of the effect of their personal appearance, or by neglecting the cultivation of charms of manner, when the use of these two powerful auxiliaries is beyond question a good use. (24)

Her emphasis on feeling rather than reason as the driving force essential to induce personal change is somehow reminiscent of 'The Yellow Drawing Room' to the extent that it is not so much Vanora's arguments that unsettle St Vincent as her powers of attraction. Grand goes on to explain that sometimes, it is not the message that matters but how and by whom it is conveyed. Quite appropriately, she comments that 'there are people who change the feeling of a room the moment they appear in it; it is as if they exhaled something magnetic that soothes the warring passions' (25). Her example, though typical, sheds light on precisely what distinguishes Caird's strategy from hers. At first sight, it seems that Grand's statement perfectly fits Vanora's character: her entrance floods the drawing room in 'an ocean of laughter' and she is described as 'radiant' and 'vital' (23) in contrast to the otherwise 'drowsy' atmosphere. However, instead of 'sooth[ing] the wearing passions', as Grand would have it, on the contrary she upsets them, quite literally. St Vincent's fascination gives rise to 'a feeling of misery, ... a sick feeling of senseless despair' (25) and he finds himself unable to reconcile his contradictory feelings towards Vanora and what she represents: 'I don't believe that I then liked her. I know that I often hated her, and yet I felt miserable out of her sight' (25). By the end of the story, the incompatibility persists and has become mutual. Vanora exclaims: 'to the end of time I should continue to shock and irritate you, and you would stifle, depress and perhaps utterly unhinge me' (29). The story's resolution (or lack of) leaves unanswered the question of whether or not they could overcome their differences, as Clara's discovery of St Vincent's dishonesty prevents them from pursuing their relationship. Caird's use of seduction, then, greatly differs from the usual use 'applied to New Woman fiction [by] many writers' (Heilmann, 2002, 31) in the sense that it leads nowhere, so to speak: it is detrimental to all the characters involved, generates desires that remain frustrated and, most importantly, does not succeed in converting St Vincent to more progressive views.

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[22] See Heilmann (1996, 199; 2002, 16), Bell (89), etc.

The difference between the kind of seduction Grand recommends and that which Caird features in her short story is that the latter is not calculated. Vanora does not exert herself to please St Vincent. On the contrary, she is astonished to find out that he loves her and confesses that she does not intentionally oppose his doctrines but rather 'offend[s] against them unconsciously' (28). In other words, she is not deliberately rebellious but has simply been raised in a way that contradicts his beliefs. She may be frank, sarcastic, and even scornful at times, but only in response to his blame and disapproval. Indeed, she behaves quite differently towards George Inglis and 'treat[s] him with a sort of indescribable good-fellowship, mingled with a peculiar tenderness when she [is] moved that way' (24). Such is not the case with St Vincent. As their second exchange makes clear, Vanora initiates the discussion in response to his reproving attitude:

> One morning, before breakfast, Vanora came out on to the terrace. She walked straight up to me and said, 'Good morning; I think you want to talk to me, don't you?'
>
> I looked at her in despair. If she lived and improved for a thousand years she would never be an ideal woman!
>
> 'You disapprove of me,' Vanora continued calmly. 'I wish you would tell me why.' (25)

In the light of this passage, it becomes obvious that Vanora has in fact no intention of convincing St Vincent of anything. She merely reacts to his paternalism and censure and demands an explanation. If there is 'seduction', it is passive: St Vincent is seduced, but Vanora does not actively seduce him. 'The Yellow Drawing Room' thus reverses the typical roles of the seductive New Woman and resisting Old Man by portraying the former as unaware and casting the latter in the role of pursuer and proselytizer. By doing so, Caird subtracts her New Woman heroine from the category of the 'shrieking sisterhood' that was so extensively criticized by anti-feminists and from which many New Woman writers like Grand felt it vital to dissociate themselves.[23] This alternative—to portray a New Woman as 'unseducing' and 'unpreaching'—allows her to insert subversion at the heart of her fiction and to ventriloquize her revolutionary views in a way that is less compliant and ornate than the classic seductive strategy but, and this is characteristic of Caird, one that suits better her generally radical positions.[24]

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[23] See Eliza Lynn Linton's 'The Shrieking Sisterhood' (1883, 64-71).

[24] See Heilmann (2004, 159-161).

## 2.5. CONCLUSION

In this section, I have examined how 'The Yellow Drawing Room' relates to the contemporary debate surrounding the Woman Question by featuring the encounter between an Old Man and a New Woman. In light of the objectives the narrator sets in the framing narrative, it appears that he fails in several instances to relate objectively the story and to maintain narratological distance from his diegetic counterpart. These instances indicate how deeply Vanora has disrupted his worldview and his own confidence. Moreover, the analysis of the protagonists' various exchanges reveals the existence of three significantly distinct discursive moments marking the evolution of St Vincent's discourse: from conventional and witty to passionate and disjointed. His progressive loss of control, which culminates in quasi-hysterical behaviour, overturns the stereotypical gender balance on which his own arguments rests, thus undermining the traditional Victorian views his character embodies. In sum, Caird's narrative strategy subverts the seduction motif characteristic of New Woman fiction by featuring an unknowingly seductive character who shows no proselytizing intent and confronting her with an enamoured suitor driven by his passion and his own insecurity. Caird thereby manages to stage quite crisply both her radical views and her stinging critique of patriarchy.

# Chapter 3: Comparative Analysis

## 3.1. DEVIANT HEROINES

The preceding analyses have established that Gilman and Caird's short stories each serve a specific purpose. On the one hand, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' challenges the conventional approach to nervous disorders by questioning the medical authority behind it and highlighting its patriarchal roots. On the other hand, 'The Yellow Drawing Room' responds to widespread fears regarding the potential threat New Women posed to society, while at the same time criticizing traditional ideas regarding gender roles and the paternalist attitude that almost always accompanied them. While both texts relate quite closely to their author's personal experience, they are also deeply embedded in the much wider historical context of late nineteenth-century society. Thus, not only can they be read autobiographically in relation to their author's lives, ideas and projects (which has been my approach in the preceding chapters), they also lend themselves to larger-scale analysis, as representatives of the period in which they were written and some of its facet. Indeed, as has already been hinted, the narrator of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and Vanora in 'The Yellow Drawing Room' embody two deviant Victorian types: the hysteric and the New Woman. Although the equation is not exact—types are loose social representations whereas Gilman and Caird's characters are endowed with individual traits—both short stories contain generic elements pointing to their status as symbolic narratives.

In 'The Yellow Wallpaper', the narrator remains anonymous and is only defined in relation to her circumstances: she is a wife, a mother, but above all, she is a woman suffering from a nervous condition and undergoing a rest cure. As Karen Ford perceptively remarks, all characters in fact give the same impersonal impression:

> many details, like the narrator's lack of a name, argue against her individuality, and similarly, the primer-like names of the husband and sister-in-law—John and

> Mary—suggest they are merely representatives for Husbands and In-laws. ... even the female or females in the house appear to be cardboard figures cut out by the patriarchy—first, Mary, the virgin mother who 'is so good with the baby' and later Jennie (a word which means a female donkey or beast of burden) who is 'a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession'. (309)

Because the narrator is unable 'to do [her] duty in any way' (34), other, more appropriate women fill in for her and take over her roles as mother and housekeeper. She is thus reduced to the sole status of nervous patient and the plot revolves around her rest cure. Indications that she represents the Victorian archetype of female hysteria are numerous. First of all, she is explicitly diagnosed as such. John describes her condition as a 'temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency' and 'assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with [her]' (31). Secondly, his understatement is characteristic of nineteenth-century approach to hysteria. In his influential study of the disease's history, Andrew Scull describes this modus operandi, quoting British physician Robert Brudenell Carter (1828-1918) in this respect:

> The medical man had to maneuver to wear out 'the moral endurance of the patient'. Neither sympathy nor alarm should be expressed, no matter how extreme the symptoms. Rather, he should 'commence by a positive assertion that she has nothing at all the matter with her and is, in reality, in perfectly good health'. (69—70)

The similarity between John's methods and those advocated by Carter as early as 1853 is uncanny. As Scull further explains, such proceedings stemmed from the practitioners' suspicion that 'hysterical patients were ... simulating illness' (68) and therefore were told that 'anger or tears, indignation and violent resistance, must all be ignored, met with a calm authority that insists that it will be obeyed, and on no account should any concession be made' (70). Here again, John's attitude corresponds exactly to the standard medical stance. Even though he does not exactly apply Carter's following advice 'to use plain words, and to convey the idea of selfishness and falsehood by their simplest names' (70), he nevertheless insinuates the very same thing by reminding his wife that '[they] came here solely on [her] account' (33) and exclaiming at one point that she is 'as sick as she pleases' (40). Finally, one last indication that the narrator's condition fits the definition of nineteenth-century hysteria is John's recurrent use of the nervous label, which is symptomatic of the nosological shift that had taken place during the century:

> Researches on the nature of the nervous system had gathered pace in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and new understandings of nervous function provided and alternative basis for accounting for hysteria. (Scull, 71)

Instead of the highly—connoted term hysteria, doctors began to favour the term neurasthenia, though both diagnoses overlapped to a considerable extent and involved identical symptoms.[25] The main difference lay in the emphasis this new term put on the neurological factor, which in turn lent a physiological—thus real—basis to the disorder. Yet, as John's overall approach demonstrates, old attitudes towards hysteria persisted, though in new guise and subtler ways. In spite of her efforts to be taken seriously, the narrator of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' faces society's reluctance to relinquish long-established stereotypes. Therefore, she unwillingly embodies the infamous Victorian type of the delusive and whimsical hysteric.

Caird's short story also features generic characters representative of social archetypes. St Vincent, to begin, is perceived by his aunt as 'the most estimable and charming of men' (21) and is characterized by his 'pronounced views' (22) on the Woman Question which he admits are 'old-fashioned' (25). As Miss Clementina Thorne's description makes clear, he is a proper young man in the eyes of Victorian society, whose collective voice he embraces in one of his many diatribes against Vanora's behaviour: 'I confess that I cannot rejoice when I see our beautiful ideas of womanhood set scornfully at naught' (25). His use of the second-person plural illustrates the fact that he stands for more than himself and incarnates not a type but a collectivity comprising those attached to convention and unfavourable to social reform. To some extent, his discourse as well as his defensive attitude fit Sarah Grand's concept of the 'Bawling Brotherhood', developed in her 1894 article 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question'.[26] The Bawling Brotherhood, she explains, designates 'he who is satisfied with the cow-kind of woman as being most convenient; it is the threat of any strike among his domestic cattle for more consideration that irritates him into loud and angry protests' (270). Grand's scathing description applies quite nicely to St Vincent's character, who relishes the idea that Clara might be his ideal woman while at the same time vehemently reproving Vanora for harbouring 'many qualities and ideas that are not suited to [her] sex' (25) for fear of seeing his precious ideals overthrown. Yet, St Vincent does not embody conservative men only. Just as the ranks of female advocates counted many male voices,[27] there were also women engaged in the 'loud and angry protests' against female emancipation, the most strident of these voices being that of British writer and journalist Eliza Lynn Linton (1822-1898). Modern women, she complained, were

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[25] See Scull (97) and Loughran (37). Both authors discuss the distribution of the two diagnoses along class or gender lines (neurasthenia being a more noble condition than hysteria). As interesting and stimulating as their insights are, they are of no direct relevance to my topic, therefore I decided not to include them in this discussion.

> possessed by a restless discontent with their appointed work, and fired with a mad desire to dabble in all things unseemly, which they call ambition; blasphemous to the sweetest virtues of their sex, which until now have been accounted both their own pride and the safeguard of society; holding it no honour to be reticent, unselfish, patient, obedient, but swaggering to the front, ready to try conclusions ... in insolent disregard of duty [and] cynical abasement of modesty. (1883, 236)

There are many common elements between Linton's article and St Vincent's discourse. He makes use of elevated and sugary language to describe the 'sweet lesson of womanly submission' (27) and discusses the 'sacred realms where woman is queen' (25). Similarly, he scolds Vanora for 'sneer[ing] at [her] good and charming sisters' (27), which he regards as paragons of dutiful modesty. His charges against Vanora—that she will 'inevitably [be] ridiculous' (26) and that the 'world would be a howling wilderness' (26) should women forsake their domestic role—echo Linton's rhetoric which sets female virtues as the basis of 'their own pride' and 'safeguard of society'. This comes as no surprise, however, considering that Caird was one of Linton's fiercest opponents and that she more than once used her articles in retaliation to her attacks.[28] Therefore, rather than figuring the type of the conventional Victorian man, St Vincent in fact personifies the whole of patriarchy, including its female supporters.

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[26] Grand's article, which gave rise to a heated debate with conservative writer Ouida, is generally considered to have popularized the phrase 'New Woman' and to have fixed its meaning.

[27] See Bell (83).

Vanora, in turn, represents the figure threatening social order. She is introduced through St Vincent's perspective and immediately associated to a type in his schematic vision of society:

> I had a prejudice against Vanora, and this last freak made me think none the better of her. Evidently she was rather a headstrong and probably affected young person; everyone said that she liked to make herself conspicuous, and that you never knew what she was going to do next. I hate that sort of girl. (21-22)

From the outset, Vanora is coupled with a 'sort of girl' that St Vincent dislikes, a category which he defines in opposition to another, that of the 'true woman' (22), exemplified by Clara. His division of women into two categories—those conforming to the gendered norm and those departing from it—echoes the Victorian binary that opposed the womanly woman on one side, to the unwomanly woman on the other (also referred to as wild woman, Amazon, androgyne or the epicene sex, to quote only a few of her press names).[29] In their writings, feminist activists referred to the same dichotomy though in opposite terms: the New Woman was portrayed as active, bold and progressive, while the Old Woman was passive, subdued and a preserver of archaic values. In her detailed study of this press phenomenon, Michelle Elizabeth Tusan epitomizes the controversy through Sarah Grand and Ouida's debate in *The North American Review* in 1894:

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[28] For example, Caird's 1892 essay 'In Defence of the So-Called Wild Women' was written in direct response to Linton's series of articles 'The Wild Women as Politicians', 'The Wild Women as Social Insurgents' and 'The Partisans of the Wild Women', also published in *The Nineteenth Century*.

[29] See Allen (179) and Linton, in particular her article 'Womanliness' (109-118).

> For Grand, much like writers for the women's press, the New Woman represented a superior breed of liberal-minded women. Ouida, on the other hand, had little patience for the utopian feminist ideals of the women's movement, labeling the New Woman as an 'unmitigated' and 'self-important' bore who was convinced that upon her shoulders 'hangs the future of the world'. It was these two competing images that fueled the New Woman debate during the fin-de-siecle. (171)

No interpretative work is needed to understand that Vanora's character is a New Woman. More deserving of attention, however, is her resemblance to the antifeminist portrayal of the figure rather than to the feminist one. Indeed, as Tusan further explains, the 'icon that [feminists] had created ... embodied *both traditional and progressive ideals* in her role as politically engaged social reformer' (172, emphasis added). This combination took the form of a domestic metaphor, first developed by Grand in the same article that prompted Ouida's reply and later integrated in many New Woman writers' rhetoric:

> Let there be light. We suffer in the first shock of it. We shriek in horror at what we discover when it is turned on, that which was hidden away in dark corners, and as we recover ourselves we got to work with a will to sweep them out. It is for us to set the human household in order, to see to it that all is clean and sweet and comfortable for the men who are fit to help us to make home in it. (1894, 276)

By depicting the New Woman's reforming mission 'as an extension of her domestic duties' (Tusan, 170), feminist writers sought to attenuate her disruptive potential and locate her in continuity with traditional notions of womanhood. However, as the preceding chapter made clear, Vanora does the very opposite. She despises conventions, disparages motherhood and female maternal instinct, and belittles St Vincent's doctrines. Vanora's traits are therefore more reminiscent of Linton's description of the 'swaggering', 'insolent' and 'cynical' woman than of the gentler image promoted by the feminist press. Yet, she departs from this stereotype in two ways. First, she is 'supremely, overpoweringly womanly' (23), in contrast to the threatening portrait of the unsexed or mannish New Woman popularized by the press.

Second, she eventually turns out to be the one maintaining social order after St Vincent destroys it. Indeed, after his amorous schemes threaten her relationship with Clara, she expels him without hesitation and returns to take care of her sister. Ironically, it is St Vincent who ends up jeopardizing the ‘sacred ties and sentiments’ holding together society’s nucleus, the family. Vanora thus represents a hybrid version of the Victorian New Woman: she neither corresponds to the sugar-coated feminist image of the angel-in-the-house reforming the world at large, nor does she fit the conservative caricature of the masculine, unwomanly woman.

To sum up, this section has established that most characters, in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and in ‘The Yellow Drawing Room’, are representative of Victorian types. Most importantly, Gilman’s narrator and Vanora respectively point out the female figures of the hysteric and the New Woman, though in rather complex ways. While the former resists her diagnosis and treatment (based on old-fashioned conceptions of hysteria) and is thus perceived as a hysteric against her will, the latter draws from two opposite depictions of the New Woman and both confirm some of her negative traits (from a popular point of view) while proving others to be wrong. The sophisticated relationships between these female characters and their corresponding type can be explained by their mission to challenge precisely the marginal categories they are relegated to. Thus, in addition to being deviant heroines, the hysteric and the New Woman also deviate from their stereotypes, thereby exposing them as artificial social constructs. As the following sections will show, their strategies mirror each other, in the sense that they are diametrically opposed yet respond to each other, whether in their relation to authoritative discourse or in their interaction with space.

## 3.2. FACING PATRIARCHAL DISCOURSE

The preceding chapters have shown that Gilman and Caird’s heroines engage very differently with the patriarchal discourses they are confronted to. In ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, the narrator internalizes her husband’s authoritative discourse (deriving from his double status as husband and physician) and suffers a mental breakdown as a consequence. His paternalist voice, which is successively caring, infantilizing, admonishing, wheedling or strict, ultimately overcomes her resistance and smothers her initial critical impulses. By contrast, in ‘The Yellow Drawing Room’, Vanora faces St Vincent’s discourse and undermines it through wit, irony, sarcasm, and counterarguments. She dominates all of their verbal exchanges and deeply unsettles St Vincent who struggles to keep control over his speech, both in his first—person discourse and in the diegesis. In the case of the former, his inability to maintain the objective and reasonable narrative persona he had attempted to build in the framing narrative is less due to his ‘morbid attraction’ (27) he feels towards Vanora than to his own masculine insecurity. In the latter, he progressively loses control of his speech during his exchanges with Vanora and starts exhibiting hysterical-like traits. Though on a different scale, St Vincent echoes the fate of Gilman’s narrator in a striking reversal of roles that epitomizes the disruption the New Woman represented to Victorian society. In opposition to the hysterical narrator of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ who is both discursively and psychologically crushed by patriarchal discourse, Vanora resists, scorns and ultimately topples it, thereby unknowingly sabotaging St Vincent’s sense of self. However, the situations in Caird and Gilman’s short stories diverge in two respects. First, Vanora does not impose her views on St Vincent in John’s coercive and forceful way. While he deliberately interrupts, ignores or prevents his wife from speaking, she on the contrary encourages St Vincent to express himself: she urges him to be frank and tells him twice to ‘go on’ (25, 26) and explain his views. Moreover, as was argued earlier, she does not seek outright contact with him but rather acts in response to his own reproving attitude. The second way in which the situation differs from ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ is through Vanora’s own involvement in the emotional turmoil. Whereas John ‘is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious’ (34) and prefers to sleep rather than listen to what his wife has to say, Vanora is affected by the situation: she ‘seem[s] depressed and restless’ (28) and eventually makes the following confession to St Vincent:

> You enthral one part of me and leave the other scornful and indifferent. We have scarcely one thought in common, but I am miserable when you are absent ... when I am not with you there is a sort of ache; your personality seems to fascinate me—I wish to heaven you had never come here. You have disturbed my happiness, destroyed my delight in life, left me miserably dependent on you[.] (29)

This aspect of ‘The Yellow Drawing Room’ is perhaps the most difficult to account for. The passage affords many speculations—was St Vincent mistaken about her inclination towards George Inglis? did she change her mind? or did his insecurities keep him from realizing all along that she was not indifferent? —yet of more interest to my analysis are the parallels that can be drawn between Vanora’s feelings and St Vincent’s. While his obsession with her is fuelled by his need of validation and serves the purpose of restoring his sense of manhood (that is, if she falls for him, in both senses of the word), Vanora’s attraction to him is entirely detrimental to her. She has nothing to gain in the bargain, except for the ‘golden bars of love and duty’ in the ‘dark prison opening out of the sunshine’ (29) that symbolize the gloomy prospect of any traditional relationship for a woman like her. Thus, in spite of affecting St Vincent in a way that somehow mirrors the narrator in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, Vanora’s female counter-discourse differs from male patriarchal discourse which in both texts serves the characters’ selfish purpose of preserving their dominant position as men.

The narrator of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ also delivers a counter-discourse through the production of her journal. Since she is forbidden to write, to do so represents an act of defiance in reaction to the restrictive measures she is subject to. Noticeably, her discursive resistance takes the form of a silent and covert protest not unlike hysteria itself, as it is understood by most modern critics. 'The Yellow Wallpaper'—along with its ambiguity, dialogism, and sophisticated entanglement of different perceptions of reality—embodies the complex and indecipherable nature of the condition: just like the hysterics' bodily manifestations must be translated into language by the physician, the message encoded in the text requires critical work from its reader. Conversely, 'The Yellow Drawing Room' also reflects characteristics of the New Woman by featuring an overt and vocal challenge to patriarchal doctrines. Caird's story places less interpretative responsibility upon the reader, for her message is conveyed in a much more direct fashion. Both short stories thus display an intimate relationship with their central figures: their content illustrates their struggles while their form echoes the nature of their claims.

### 3.3. INTERACTING WITH SPACE

Just as the relationship between the two heroines and patriarchal discourse reflects the stereotypes they represent, the same correlation is observable in their interaction with the different spaces they occupy. In 'The Yellow Wallpaper', the narrator is symbolically imprisoned in oppressive, masculine spaces. The opening of the short story makes this aspect particularly clear: the house is successively described as 'ancestral halls', 'a colonial mansion' and 'a hereditary estate' (31)—a grand and impersonal description which lays emphasis on its patriarchal dimension. While the phrase 'ancestral halls' imbues the house with an austere and traditional aura, the term 'hereditary estate' points to its legal status as inheritable land property, an almost exclusively male prerogative at the time. The narrator later returns to this point by specifying that 'there was some legal trouble ... something about the heirs and co-heirs' (32). The expression 'colonial mansion', in turn, is reminiscent of the place’s imperialist past. All of these aspects (traditional, legal, and political) reflect male omnipresence in late nineteenth-century society: laws were made by men, traditions maintained by men, property owned by men and countries themselves were conquered and established by men. The house’s characteristics provide further evidence that the narrator is trapped in patriarchal space, for several elements evoke an asylum setting: the house ‘is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village’ and has ‘hedges and walls and gates that lock’ (32). Moreover, instead of occupying the room ‘downstairs that open[s] on the piazza and ha[s] roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings’ (32), John imposes that they sleep in the nursery upstairs, which has ‘rings and things in the wall’ and whose ‘windows are barred’ (33). By turning a deaf ear to her requests concerning the house, John deprives his wife of any agency, even domestic. The wallpaper completes the picture of an oppressive and constraining space: although it deeply bothers the narrator, John refuses to change it and she has to bear its ‘vicious influence’ (35) until it finally drives her crazy. Its ‘repellent’ colour and ‘sprawling flamboyant patterns’ (33) both initiate and symbolize the narrator’s descent into madness: her observation of the wallpaper exacerbates her confusion, and she begins to see a ‘faint figure behind ... shak[ing] the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out’ (39). However, the narrator observes, ‘nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so’ (44). Indeed, her attempts to free the woman in the paper only materializes her previously symbolic bonds, for she ultimately locks the door, throws the key and attaches herself with a rope (46-47). Just as her internalization of authoritative discourses results in self-censorship, her confinement in spaces upon which she has no agency leads her to self-restraint. The narrator’s ‘complicity’ to her own bondage can be related to the covert nature of patriarchal dominance in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’: in spite of their masculine overtones, the spaces the narrator dwells in are—technically speaking—feminine ones. The house, the nursery and the wallpaper are all domestic symbols. However, because they all participate in her downfall, they are exposed as oppressive patriarchal constructs. By depicting the traditional ideal of the home as detrimental to woman's sanity, Gilman denounces its instrumental role in the subjugation of woman.

The situation in 'The Yellow Drawing Room' is quite different, if not the exact opposite. The drawing room is a space in which Vanora 'employed her liberty', although St Vincent asserts that she did so 'unworthily' (21). His disapproval echoes the general opinion on the matter: the visitors do anything 'to protect themselves against a threatening summons to say something about the general colouring' and Vanora's female relatives do their best 'to atone for that unpardonable drawing room' (22). However, as St Vincent rightly notes, 'hopeless [is] their protest' (22) for it only emphasizes Vanora's own agency, reflected in the terms the narrator uses to describe the room: 'it was radiant, bold, unapologetic, unabashed' (22). The yellow drawing room thus functions as an objective correlative for Vanora's character as a whole. Indeed, both her appearance and personality are characterized by the colour yellow: she has 'a mass of glistening, golden hair' and 'in the human colour-spectrum, she [takes] the place of the yellow ray' (23). 'The Yellow Wallpaper' features a similar correlation between the narrator and her environment, though in antithetical terms, for the wallpaper anticipates her disease:

> The colour is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others. (33)
>
> It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things. (42)

Quite significantly, the narrator draws her vocabulary from the register of sickness to describe the wallpaper's colour, thereby foreshadowing its devastating effects on her psyche. Indeed, as hinted on several occasions, the wallpaper is part of what causes the narrator's psychosis. The interaction between the narrator and the space she occupies is thus twofold, for it both reflects her mental state and affects it. The only agency she is able to negotiate in relation to her surroundings is by tearing off the wallpaper, but whether or not her attempt to regain control succeeds remains questionable since it also represents the paroxysm of her delusion. Indeed, she manages to peel off 'most of the paper' (47) but not all of it, and her other attempt at reorganizing the room by moving the bed is a failure: 'I tried to lift and push it until I was lame, and then I got so angry I bit off a little piece at one corner—but it hurt my teeth' (46). I choose to interpret this passage as unsuccessful, for her attempts to react to instead of enduring her oppressive environment either prove useless (in the case of the bed) or come at the cost of her sanity.

By contrast, Vanora succeeds where Gilman's narrator fails, as St Vincent's exclamation attests:

> It was yellow! The colour had been washed out of the very daffodils, which looked green with jealousy; the sunshine was confronted in a spirit of respectful independence, brotherhood being acknowledged, but the principle of equality uncompromisingly asserted. (22)

Vanora's wallpaper embodies her progressive claims: just as the room's yellow eclipses the surrounding flowers and competes with the sun, so she outshines her gray-blue sisters and sets herself on equal grounds with man. In Caird's extended metaphor, the yellow drawing-room both reflects and realizes Vanora's freedom and self-expression. Unlike the narrator of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' who is denied any arrangement in the house and is subject to the influence of her hostile surroundings, Vanora actively creates a bright and independent feminine space within a patriarchal house. Worth noticing in this respect is her father's contribution to her emancipation. He is the one who gives her 'permission to decorate and furnish the drawing room at Fairfield exactly as she please[s]' (21) and she mentions on two occasions that his education determined her way of living:

> My father never sought to arrange a ‘sphere’ for me, and in my case instinct seems at fault. (26)
>
> My father never constrained me to move in any particular direction because of my sex. He has perhaps spoiled me. I have hitherto had only a joyous sense of drawing in what was outside, and radiating out what was within me. (28)

In both passages, Vanora uses spatial metaphors to describe her independence. Instead of confining her in a domestic sphere, her father figuratively lets her roam about in life. She is thus able to receive impressions from the world and to make one herself. Her drawing room confirms this reciprocity: it is a space in which she receives visitors from the outside and which in turn reflects her personality in a striking way. In opposition to Gilman’s wallpaper, which affects the narrator to the point of leaving tangible marks on her (Jennie finds ‘yellow smooches on all [her] clothes and John’s’, 42), the drawing room allows Vanora to leave a mark of her own and exert her agency.[30] Whereas Gilman’s nursery figures the artificial and oppressive nature of the patriarchal home, Caird’s drawing room illustrates woman’s capacity to arrange a sphere of their own—a space within the traditional limits of the family yet unrestrictive and outward—looking.

To sum up, the way in which the two heroines respectively relate to patriarchy is materialized through their interaction with space. While the narrator in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ withdraws further and further into the recesses of domesticity (she ultimately merges with the woman in the paper and ‘suppose[s] [she] shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night’, 46), on the contrary Vanora gradually moves away from the house, onto the terrace and into the garden, her outward progression contrasting with the former’s inward regression.

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[30] Worth noticing is St Vincent's use of an inverted sexual metaphor to describe the effect that Vanora’s presence has on him (‘I was penetrated with the glowing atmosphere’, 24) which reinforces the reversal of gender roles mentioned above.

## 3.4. COUNTER-NARRATIVES

In her article on ‘The Yellow Drawing Room’, Stephanie Forward interestingly notes that the narrator’s ‘technique is a psychoanalytic one, of the type used at the time to deal with cases of hysteria’ (300). Showalter briefly makes a similar claim regarding George Egerton’s highly popular short stories, and argues that they ‘form a counterpart to Freud’s case studies of hysterical women’ (xiii). Regrettably, both critics do not elaborate their claims and Forward in particular fails to specify that the technique she refers to belongs to the emergent psychoanalytical approach advocated by Freud or Charcot for example—in opposition to the dominant physiological approach that characterized the period. Their comments nevertheless offer an interesting parallel: as a matter of fact, both Gilman and Caird’s texts could be regarded as female re-writings of the traditional case histories written and published by male doctors. While case studies document the medical treatments applied to female patients, treatments which often consisted in fitting them back into the traditional mould of socially accepted female behaviours, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and ‘The Yellow Drawing’ (and a lot of New Woman fiction in general) articulate a reverse discourse and demonstrate that it is because they are deprived of independence and the means of self—expression that women become hysterical. The main difference between the two is that in the case of Gilman and Caird’s short stories, there is no extradiegetic physician performing the analytical work, yet both feature diegetic male characters undertaking a similar endeavour: John attempts to cure his wife while St Vincent attempts to cure himself. Whereas the former fails to perceive the true nature and causes of his wife’s condition, the latter’s self-reflective project ends with an epilogue that reiterates the same observation that opened the narrative (i.e. that this episode of his life is incomprehensible) and only further asserts St Vincent’s sense of a divided self. The two short stories thus replace the figure of the authoritative physician by incompetent male characters that, most importantly, fail to grasp the message that female characters are trying to convey. As a result, they themselves undermine the patriarchal values they represent: John's paternalism and overconfidence keeps him from performing his medical role correctly and St Vincent's dominating sense of manhood prevents him from creating a relationship with Vanora as an equal. The short stories' unresolved and ominous endings reveal the shortcomings of Victorian patriarchy: the oppression of woman either leads to disastrous consequences on the female psyche or prevents traditional men (whose masculinity relies on domination) from creating meaningful relationships with strong independent women.

'The Yellow Wallpaper' and 'The Yellow Drawing Room' thus perfectly fulfil the dual role that characterizes New Woman fiction according to Heilmann. The main thesis of her most influential work on the topic indeed states that 'New Woman fiction was more than a literary response to the social changes brought about by the Victorian women's movement: it constituted, and conceived itself as, an agent of social and political transformation' (4). While Gilman requires her reader to be critical in order to make sense of the story, 'The Yellow Drawing Room' operates on another level. St Vincent concludes his narrative with the following declaration:

> I have never been the same man since I met Vanora. I am neither my former self, complete and comfortable, nor am I thoroughly a new being. I am a sort of abortive creature, striding between two centuries. The spirit of a coming age has brushed me with his wing, but I resent and resist that which brings havoc into the citadel of my dearest beliefs; and I angrily pluck off the tiny feature which he dropped from those great ploughing pinions of his, that shadow—the firmament of the Future. (30)

Here no interpretative work is needed, St Vincent himself is entirely aware of the reason why he is unable to reconcile his contradictory feelings of love and repulsion towards Vanora. Yet by offering no satisfying resolution and featuring no 'ideological conversion', 'The Yellow Drawing Room' does something more: it not only participates in but poignantly dramatizes the debates so characteristic of the turn-of-the-century. Instead of using her fiction to show how things should be done (by depicting an ideal encounter between a New Man and a New Woman for instance), Caird uses it to face her readers with the insurmountable-looking challenges that characterized late Victorian society. She thereby places a different kind of responsibility upon her readers: unlike Gilman, who buries her critical message under narratological layers which the reader must unravel to find, Caird explicitly voices hers in the narrative and takes her readers to the next step. She leaves them in front of an irresolvable situation and lets them surmise what needs to be changed to solve it. Often criticized for its didactic dimension, New Woman fiction had to face the charges of the aesthetic movement and their contempt for representationality.[31] In view of the preceding analyses, which have brought to light only some of the fascinating aspects of these texts, one can safely say Gilman and Caird's short stories, along with the rest of New Woman fiction, are proof that writing with a purpose does not mean writing without style and appeal.

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[31] See Ardis for a fascinating discussion on the topic.

# Conclusion

It would be wrong to say that Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s famous piece ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and Mona Caird’s lesser-known short story ‘The Yellow Drawing Room’ have more in common than first meets the eye. Except for their publication date and titles, they are fundamentally different, whether in terms of content or formal arrangement. Yet, as this dissertation has shown, they gesture towards each other, in sophisticated ways. Their protagonists, each representative of a late Victorian type, stand on both ends of the relatively narrow spectrum of socially acceptable behaviours, completing rather than opposing each other. In the preceding analyses, I have examined in great detail how these two deviant heroines relate to their environment, whether discursive or spatial, and how these interactions point, each in their own way, to the power structures in place. These structures, which oppress both characters though in different ways, find their (common) origins in Victorian patriarchy, whose main strategy was to label ‘sick’ or ‘unnatural’ any female behaviour departing from the gendered norm. Therefore, as Ann Heilmann comments, ‘to be able to popularize feminist concepts and ideas in their fictional works, writers first had to challenge the discourse of pathology and disease’ (1996, 201) that was constructed around woman. One of the New Woman’s main challenges thus became to disprove the myth of woman’s hysterical nature. This is, I believe, exactly what Gilman and Caird’s short stories do, the former by denouncing the patriarchal roots of hysteria, and the latter by reversing gender roles and revealing the ‘hysteria’ behind the artificial mask of traditional masculinity.

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