Introduction to Literary Studies

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892): Forms and Functions of Unreliable Narration

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“The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892)

*Women and Economics* (1898)

*Herland* (1915)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935)
Today

1. The Context

2. The Story: “Traditional” Reading

3. Unreliable Narration

4. The Story: Another Reading

5. Unreliable Narration in Film
1. The Context
America at the End of the 19th Century

• Gilded Age

• modernization, industrialization

• feminist movement:
  - suffrage
  - self-fulfillment
  - challenging the ideal of domesticity

• neurasthenia and other nervous illnesses seen as result of “unnatural” gender roles
  → West Cure for men
  → Rest Cure for women
2. The Story: “Traditional” Reading
It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate!

Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?

John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

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.
Out of another I get a lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf belonging to the estate. There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there from the house. I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try. I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me. (34)
There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wall-paper. If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds. I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here after all, I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see. (39)
He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.

I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more.

He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get. "Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear," said he, "and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time." So we took the nursery at the top of the house. (31)
"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?" (41)
John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall.

But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so! (36)
I wish I could get well faster.

But I must not think about that. This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had!

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down. (35)
This wall-paper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then.

But in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so—I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design. (36)
There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.

Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day.

It is always the same shape, only very numerous.

And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder—I begin to think—I wish John would take me away from here! (39)
At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.

I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman.

By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. (42)
The front pattern *does* move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!

Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.

Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.

And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.

They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!
I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try. (49)
Hurrah! This is the last day, but it is enough. John is to stay in town over night, and won't be out until this evening.

Jennie wanted to sleep with me—the sly thing! but I told her I should undoubtedly rest better for a night all alone.

That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

A strip about as high as my head and half around the room.

(47)
I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to.

For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.

But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way. (49)
Why there's John at the door!
It is no use, young man, you can't open it!
How he does call and pound!
Now he's crying for an axe.
It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!
"John dear!" said I in the gentlest voice, "the key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!"
That silenced him for a few moments. (49)
"What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing!"

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time! (50)
3. Unreliable Narration
“Those narrators whose account or interpretation of events gives the reader cause for mistrust are described as ‘unreliable narrators’. The reliability of a narrator is compromised most frequently by his or her limited knowledge, emotional involvement in events and questionable norms and values.”

Unreliable Narration

• useful concept only for first-person narrative situation (homodiegetic narrators with internal focalization)

• not simply that we feel that they are not quite telling the truth but that we can read between the lines to get at the truth

• hints often only detected on second (or third, or fourth, …) reading
Signals for Unreliable Narration

• contradictions

• contrasting versions of one event

• discrepancies between statements and actions

• extreme emotionality

• repeated insistence on honesty and reliability

• ...

(Nünning and Nünning 121)
TRUE! --nervous --very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses --not destroyed --not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily --how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

(Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” [1843])
4. The Story: Another Reading
What hints do we get in the story that the narrator is unreliable?

Brainstorm with your neighbor for three minutes.
The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life. (32)
The wall-paper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother—they must have had perseverance as well as hatred. (35)
That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

A strip about as high as my head and half around the room.
She didn't know I was in the room, and when I asked her in a quiet, a very quiet voice, with the most restrained manner possible, what she was doing with the paper—she turned around as if she had been caught stealing, and looked quite angry—asked me why I should frighten her so! Then she said that the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches on all my clothes and John's, and she wished we would be more careful! (43)
But there is something else about that paper—**the smell**! I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here.

It creeps all over the house.

I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, **lying in wait for me on the stairs**.

It gets into my hair.

Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it—there is that smell! (44)
This bedstead is fairly gnawed!

[...] This bed will NOT move!

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.

Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision! (48)
But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way. (49)
Does it invalidate the feminist message of the story if the narrator is crawling and peeling and gnawing right from the beginning?

Discuss this, again, with your neighbor for three minutes.
5. Unreliable Narration in Film
Given what I said about film narration back in October and what you have heard today:

Why do we find unreliable narration far more rarely in film?

And can you think of examples where we do encounter it?