

The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Experience: An Analysis of the Literary Devices in Her Short Stories

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Authors have a variety of literary devices from which to choose, and their choices often undergird the structure of their pieces, both influencing the tone of the stories and provoking and intensifying the emotional response of their readers. The nineteenth-century writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman masterfully uses alliteration, consonance, assonance, symbolism, narrative techniques, structural techniques, and other literary and poetic devices in three of her short stories: “Through This,” “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and “Making a Change.” Each story has a distinct plot and structure, but the specific devices that Gilman employs reinforce the overarching feminist theme and allow readers to experience that theme more completely as they read.

“Through This” is a powerful short story about women’s endurance, self-sacrifice, and survival in a patriarchal world that restricts most female advancement beyond the domestic sphere. Gilman’s title is effective for several reasons. First, it is a summation of the protagonist’s belief that she can only be productive and successful “through” her service to her husband and children. Second, the title sets the tone for the piece since the woman struggles to get “through” her day. Lastly, the title connects with the reader’s desire to get “through” the story because the literary techniques used by the author leave one breathless and anxious.

Gilman uses a variety of literary devices to enhance the reader’s response to “Through This” and to reveal the tensions that exist because of the protagonist’s love for her family, her attempts to fulfill societal expectations, and her desire to dream and make a difference in the world. Gilman writes,

The **d**awn **c**olors **c**reep **u**p my **b**edroom **w**all, **s**oftly, **s**lowly.
Darkness, **d**im **g**ray, **d**ull **b**lue, soft **l**avender, clear **p**ink, **p**ale
yellow, warm **g**old—sunlight. A new **d**ay. With the *great* sunrise
great thoughts come. *I* rise **w**ith the **w**orld. *I* live. *I* can help.
Here close at hand lie the *sweet home* duties *through* which my life
shall **t**ouch the **o**thers! *Through* this **m**an **m**ade **h**appier **a**nd

stronger by my living; *through* **these** rosy babies sleeping here in the growing light; *through* this small *sweet*, well-ordered *home...through* me, too, perhaps—**there's the** baker. I must get up, or this bright purpose fades. (“Through This” 53, emphases added)

In this excerpt, some of the poetic devices—alliteration, consonance, assonance, and repetition—that Gilman employs to affect the tone of this story are highlighted. She certainly uses alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds: “colors” and “creep,” “dawn,” “darkness,” “dim,” “dull,” and “day,” “pink” and “pale,” and “with” and “world.” Here the *d* sound is heavy; the words plod along, weighted down and burdened like the protagonist herself; however, the *p* and *w* sounds are lighter, more hopeful—an optimistic choice that enhances the feeling associated with sunrise. Similarly, repetition of consonant sounds in the words “creep” and “up,” “wall,” “softly,” “slowly,” “dull,” “blue,” and “pale,” and “lavender” and “gold” all provide evidence of the author’s use of sound repetitions as a means of emphasizing what is most important to her protagonist. Gilman also uses assonance, the repetition of vowel sounds, in the phrases “man made happier,” “touch...others,” and “these rosy babies sleeping.” In addition, Gilman repeats the words “great,” “sweet,” “home,” and “through,” a usage that helps to increase the tension that exists between the woman’s loving dedication to her family and the socially-ascribed selflessness that devalues her as an individual and restricts her to living “through” her husband and children.

Furthermore, Gilman uses stream of consciousness narration, which is “a method of narration that describes in words the flow of thoughts in the mind of the character” (“Stream of Consciousness”). Gilman creates a nameless protagonist—a woman who represents all nineteenth-century housewives—and shares her character’s hopeful, erratic, reasonable, and desperate thoughts from dawn to nightfall. Gilman writes,

All is ready—healthful, dainty, delicious. The clean-aproned little ones smile milky-mouthed over their bowls of mush. John kisses me good-by so happily. Through this dear work, well done, I shall reach. I shall help—but I must get the dishes done and not dream. “Good morning! Soap, please, the same kind. Coffee, rice, two boxes of gelatin. That’s all, I think.”...There, I forgot the eggs! I can make these go, I guess. Now to soak the tapioca. Now the beets on, they take so long. I’ll bake the potatoes—they don’t go in yet. Now babykins must have her bath and nap. A clean hour and a half before dinner. I can get those little nightgowns cut and basted. How bright the sun is!
(“Through This” 53-4)

Gilman’s stream of consciousness technique allows the reader to connect to her character in an intimate manner, exacerbates the protagonist’s harried nature, and quickens the story’s pace. In the excerpt above, the wife and mother makes and serves breakfast to her husband and children, her husband leaves for work, the protagonist speaks to a grocer,

returns home, prepares the baby's food, plans her husband's supper, bathes her baby girl, puts the infant down for a nap, and realizes that it is already midafternoon with only "an hour and a half before dinner" (TT 54). Everything this woman has done since she opened her eyes in the morning has been for the benefit of either her husband or her children, and she has had no time for personal reflection or for pursuing her own interests. By choosing the stream of consciousness technique, Gilman enables readers not only to see what a housewife's day entails but also to intimately connect with this woman through her thoughts. The protagonist's thoughts reveal her pride and love for her family (53), her desire to make a difference in and feel connected with the world (53), her frustration at never having enough time to finish chores or write letters to her friends (54-55), and her desperate hope that things will be easier once her children are grown (54). Furthermore, by structuring her

protagonist's thoughts in simple, short sentences—like "That was a good dinner. I like to cook. . . . That pipe must be seen to before too long. I'll speak to John about it. Coal's pretty low, too" (54)—Gilman captures on the printed page what experienced Buddhists call "monkey mind," the bombardment of rapid, random thoughts that can sometimes overwhelm a person.

If Gilman's "Through This" reads like a spinning top that is about to veer off its path and flip over, then "The Yellow Wallpaper" captures the moments that occur after the top swerves away from its centralized rotation and, finally, collapses. The stakes are higher for the protagonist in this story, so Gilman's writing choices reflect that shifting theme and tone. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman tells the story through a series of journal entries—the forbidden written communication of the protagonist herself. This technique promotes a closer connection between the protagonist and the readers: She shares her innermost thoughts and feelings, and readers become her trusted confidants. Gilman writes,

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do? I did write for a while in spite of [my husband and brother]; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition. . . . There comes John, and I must



Charlotte Perkins Gilman, c. 1900. Photograph probably by C.F. Lummis. Restoration by Adam Cuerden. United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs. Public domain.

put this away—he hates to have me write a word. (“The Yellow Wallpaper” 30, 32, emphasis original)

Here Gilman’s narrative perspective enhances the credibility of the narrator—the protagonist—since the reader knows precisely what she is thinking. The protagonist comes across as a sensible woman who unfortunately suffers from depression in a patriarchal society that belittles and oppresses women, and her husband—a product of this society—attempts to restrict her movement, to silence her voice, and to trap her until she is able to once again assume her role as the traditionally subordinate, “happy housewife.” Moreover, Gilman’s journal entry approach also intensifies the reader’s response to the gradual decline of the protagonist’s mental state. As the protagonist’s condition worsens, her “entries” become more erratic, and the reader experiences her desperate isolation and sense of entrapment when she writes about the yellow wallpaper. Later in the story, Gilman switches to the second person to intensify the reader’s experience of the protagonist’s critical analysis of the wallpaper. She writes,

[John] 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. ...[T]he pattern is torturing. You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. *It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream.* The outside pattern is a florid arabesque, reminding one of a fungus. If you can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions—why, that is something like it. (TYW 41-42, emphasis added)

Because the wallpaper is a symbol for this woman’s entrapped status in a society that will not aid her recovery, Gilman’s shift to the *you* pronoun enables her readers to feel as battered, bruised, and helpless as this new mother whose physical, mental, and emotional needs are disregarded due to ignorance and discrimination. Gilman uses toadstools as symbols also. Toadstools are fungi that grow around dead, decomposing organisms, so their inclusion is another inventive association that conveys the relationship between the wallpaper and the oppressive—even parasitic—society in which the protagonist, her husband John, and their son live. Furthermore, despite the fact that readers are informed by the journal’s confessions, Gilman manages to convey that the protagonist is envisioning herself when she sees the “faint figure” who “shake[s] the pattern...as if she want[s] to get” (40). Gilman writes,

There is one marked peculiarity about this paper...and that is that it changes as the light changes. ...At night in...twilight, candle light...and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! ...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...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. It keeps me quiet by the hour. (TYW 42)

Even an unsophisticated reader can see that the protagonist is visualizing her own complicated, oppressed situation within an ugly, complex patriarchal pattern of rules, norms, and traditions that dehumanize women. The narrator *is* the woman stuck in the disgustingly unattractive wallpaper pattern. At the story's conclusion, she has locked her husband out of her room and is on the floor creeping along with her shoulder in "the long smooch around the wall" (TYW 49). However, according to Marianne DeKoven, "[i]t is impossible to think of that creeping woman as any embodiment of liberation, even though she has ripped away 'bars' and even though her creeping circuit takes her over, again and again, her husband's fallen body. She has defeated him and his world of anti-female laws at far too great a cost to herself" (219).

Gilman's short story "Making a Change" has a happier outcome for its female protagonist than have the aforementioned stories. Nevertheless, in this text, as in the others, Gilman is still grappling with the late nineteenth-century social expectations for mothers. Gilman chooses to write "Making a Change" from the third person omniscient point of view, which offers a broader look at how each of the main characters—Julia and Frank Gordins and "Mrs. Gordins, senior" (Gilman's name for Frank's mother)—interact with one another and behave within the restrictive gender-based norms of their society. Although the reader is allowed less direct access to the inner thoughts of Julia, the reader still understands how dejected and depressed Julia feels because of the language Gilman uses:

Upon her tired ears, her sensitive mother's heart, the grating wail from the next room fell like a lash. Her ears were hypersensitive, always. She had been an ardent musician before her marriage, and had taught quite successfully on both piano and violin...But if her ears were sensitive, so was her conscience. ...The child was her child, it was her duty to take care of it, and take care of it she would. ("Making a Change" 57-58)

Julia feels that it is her "duty" to take care of the wailing child—a child whose cries hurt her ears, which were once so instrumental in her career as a musician. Obviously, Julia would rather be working as a musician again, but in her new role as a mother, society does not approve of her continued employment outside her home. Gilman uses the metaphor of a machine to describe Julia's manner of movement and speech, calling it "mechanical" three times, thus stressing her disengaged, emotionless state of mind and her dehumanized, almost lifeless state (MAC 57, 58, 60). According to Julianne Fleener, Gilman believed that "[f]emale exclusion, women denied the opportunity to work, or their imprisonment behind four walls, led to madness" (143). This belief is evident in all three Gilman pieces, but after Julia attempts suicide she is saved by her mother-in-law, who introduces a creative new idea that will improve the lives of both women: Mrs. Gordins, senior, offers to watch her grandson Albert so Julia can once again work as a musician and teacher.

Gilman's use of dialogue is particularly important in this story because it suggests that productive communication between the characters is possible. The progressive changes that occur in their family's social dynamic require respectful discourse and thoughtful responses, and Gilman's realistic verbal exchanges facilitate the familial improvements that occur. This use of dialogue is different from the one-sided conversations with the grocer in "Through This" or the ineffective discourse between the protagonist and John in "The Yellow Wallpaper." In fact, in "Making a Change," the dialogue dictates what is happening in the story. The communication at the beginning of the story is just as ineffective as any that can be found in "The Yellow Wallpaper." However, after Julia's suicide attempt, the story takes a marked turn. Instead of Julia's dying or being saved only to further descend into depression, the dialogue between the two women changes and their improved communication allows Julia to begin recovering. Not only does Julia's mother-in-law save Julia's physical life, but she also seems to revive the person Julia truly is, simply by communicating effectively. Because of the culturally based gender norms, both Julia and her mother-in-law fear Frank's reaction to his discovery that Julia is working outside the home and that her mother-in-law is also earning income through babysitting. At this pivotal point, their effective communication wins over Frank as well: Frank listens to his mother and his wife explain the changes that have occurred at home, and afterward simply replies, "If it makes all of you as happy as that...I guess I can stand it" (MAC 65). Frank's colleagues could judge him harshly; nonetheless, for the sake of his marriage and family, Frank risks taking a progressive stance by listening to the arguments of women and, in so doing, resists being manipulated by the patriarchal norms of the time. However, he would not be able to take such a position if he were not first willing to engage in effective dialogue with his wife and mother, who encourage his progressive stance.

In all three of these stories, the names of Gilman's characters are significant symbols. In "Through This" and "The Yellow Wallpaper," the female protagonists remain nameless, and their anonymity enables them to effectively represent all women in stories that comment on women's societally hindered individuality and the restriction of their voices. According to Gilman, their expected selflessness has rendered them nameless. As Fleener states, "Gilman was working against her own culture's definition of women" (143). Furthermore, in those same stories, the male characters are named "John," which is the most common name for men. The name "John" functions as a symbol that implies not only that these characters represent all men but also that men in society feel deserving of their male privilege.

In all these ways, Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses literary and poetic devices effectively to deepen the readers' experience of her short stories. By employing a stream of consciousness technique in "Through This," coupled with poetic devices that repeat sounds, Gilman creates an almost frenzied experience for readers as the narrator describes event after event as she gets through her day. The repetition of words and sounds (assonance, alliteration, and consonance) reinforces this frenzy as these poetic devices help provide a cadence, almost a drumbeat, that paces the narrative. Gilman uses a journal entry approach in "The Yellow Wallpaper" to engage the reader in the narrator's progressive decline in mental health, an engagement only intensified by a shift to second person that invites the reader to experience what she is experiencing. In "Making a Change," Gilman uses dialogue to pace the narrative, shifting from ineffective

to effective communication between the characters, a process that enables Julia to overcome the patriarchal constraints the other narrators could not. Essentially, as the dialogue improves, so do the lives of the characters. The use of symbol is another literary device Gilman uses effectively in “Through This” and “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The namelessness of the narrators in these stories suggests that women are not highly valued in contemporary society, particularly those who are overwhelmed or who remain trapped by their culturally ascribed gender roles. Finally, the yellow wallpaper itself is symbolic, as is the toadstool pattern the narrator sees in the wallpaper, for the pattern emphasizes the toxic nature of society for women. This poisonous characteristic of patriarchal society is clear, too, in “Making a Change,” in which Julia has become *figuratively* dead—“mechanical” according to the metaphor—and this “poison,” the gendered demands society makes of her, nearly leads to her *literal* death. The use of these literary devices enhances Gilman’s overarching theme that the patriarchal dominance of the society in which they lived was toxic to women and that they were essentially in bondage and deserved a chance to express themselves and to fully discover their identities.

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