

CREEPING INTO FREEDOM: WOMAN'S BODY IN "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER", BY CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

RASTEJANDO RUMO À LIBERDADE: O CORPO DA MULHER EM "O PAPEL DE PAREDE AMARELO", DE CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

RAMPANT VERS LA LIBERTE: LE CORPS DE LA FEMME DANS "LE PAPIER PEINT JAUNE", DE CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

Leticia Rocha Duarte¹

Cynthia Beatrice Costa²

ABSTRACT: Even though the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, has received much attention, especially from feminist literary criticism, there have been relatively few considerations on the main character's body and on how it relates to her ordeal under patriarchal repression. By examining the physical aspect of the narrator's experience, this article investigates two main hypotheses: (1) that the narrator's body is controlled as a means of controlling her mind, but this fails when she uses her mind to free her body; and (2) that the "creeping" movement obsessively mentioned by the narrator can be interpreted as a subversion. This second proposition counterpoints the notion that the narrator's descent into madness is proof of male triumph over female freedom.

KEYWORDS: woman's body; feminist literary criticism; patriarchal repression; creep; The Yellow Wallpaper

RESUMO: Apesar de o conto "O papel de parede amarelo" (1892), de Charlotte Perkins Gilman, já ter recebido muita atenção, sobretudo da crítica literária feminista, houve relativamente poucas considerações sobre o corpo da personagem principal e sobre como esse corpo se relaciona com as dificuldades por que ela passa sob a repressão patriarcal. Ao examinar o aspecto físico da experiência da personagem-narradora, este artigo investiga duas hipóteses

¹ Mestra em Ciências da Motricidade pela Universidade Estadual Paulista "Júlio de Mesquita Filho" - Brasil. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2375-1363>. E-mail: leticiarochaduarte@gmail.com.

² Doutora em Estudos da Tradução pela Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina - Brasil, com período sanduíche em Yale University - Estados Unidos da América. Professora Adjunta da Universidade Federal de Uberlândia - Brasil. ORCID iD: E-mail: cynthiacos@gmail.com.

principais: (1) de que o corpo dela é controlado como um meio de controlar a sua mente, mas isso deixa de funcionar quando ela usa a mente para libertar o corpo; e (2) de que o movimento “rastejante” mencionado obsessivamente por ela pode ser interpretado como uma subversão. Esta segunda proposição contrapõe a noção frequente de que o seu enlouquecimento é prova do triunfo masculino sobre a liberdade feminina.

Palavras-chave: corpo da mulher; crítica literária feminista; repressão patriarcal; rastejar; O papel de parede amarelo

RESUMÉ: Même si la nouvelle “Le papier peint jaune” (1892), de Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a reçu beaucoup d’attention, en particulier de la critique littéraire féministe, il y a eu relativement peu de considérations sur le corps de la personnage principale et sur la façon dont il se rapporte à son épreuve sous la répression patriarcale. En examinant l’aspect physique de l’expérience de la narratrice, cet article examine deux hypothèses centrales: (1) son corps est contrôlé comme moyen de contrôler son esprit, mais cela échoue lorsqu’elle utilise son esprit pour libérer son corps; et (2) le mouvement “rampant” mentionné de manière obsessionnelle par la narratrice peut être interprété comme une subversion. Cette seconde proposition contredit la notion fréquente selon laquelle la descente de la narratrice dans la folie est la preuve du triomphe masculin sur la liberté féminine.

MOTS-CLES: corps de femme; critique littéraire féministe; répression patriarcale; ramper; Le papier peint jaune

1 INTRODUCTION

In the short story “The yellow wallpaper” (1892), by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a female voice expresses her wishes, fears, and anguishes. This voice belongs to a woman spiraling into madness while entrapped in a country mansion. Gothic elements enhance the ordeal she faces as the wife of a doctor who tries to control her every move, in what we can interpret today as a suffocating patriarchal environment in which the female body was forbidden to act freely.

Foucault states that one of the “politics of sex” of the nineteenth century was the “hysterization of women, which involved a thorough medicalization of their bodies and their sex” (1990, p. 146). This was directly related to their role as homemakers, as mothers and wives. Women had to be healthy so they could devote themselves to the health of their children and to the “solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society” (p. 147). As a nineteenth-

century middle-class woman, the narrator in Gilman's short story illustrates how the female body was controlled by men as a means of maintaining a supposed harmony in the home. She lives under the care of her physician husband, who is endorsed by her brother, who is also a physician, and fears the possibility of being sent to a third medical authority, Weir Mitchell, a real-life doctor who treated Gilman (HEDGES, 2012, p. 44).

With its hidden claim for women's emancipation, Gilman's narrative has triggered much interest through time, particularly from feminist literary criticism (see VEEDER, 1988; LANSER, 1989; HEDGES, 2012), having become "an obvious sign of the degree to which contemporary feminism has transformed the study of literature" (LANSER, 1989, p. 415). As much as it has been analyzed and discussed, however, there are aspects of the text that still deserve closer examination. The madness of the narrator, embodied by her final movement of "creeping" (GILMAN, 2012, p. 31-32), has been seen as a defeat or fall (see KING & MORRIS, 1989, p. 31; HEDGES, 2012, p. 53), or as the crawling of a baby who reaches some independence (see JOHNSON, 1989, p. 529; PASCO, 2006, p. 95). We counterpoint these notions by examining how the story shows a woman's body being controlled by men and how the movement of creeping, as it is obsessively mentioned by the narrator without ever being exactly clarified to the reader, can be interpreted as a subversive act against *status quo*.

Approaching literary text as an ideological force (FUNCK, 1993, p. 34) and Gilman's work as both an artistic manifestation and an important historical document, we first present a brief biography of the author and an overview of "The yellow wallpaper" reception through time. Next, in the second and third sections, excerpts from the text are highlighted in order to examine two main hypotheses: (1) that the control of the woman's body fails, and (2) that "creeping", within the context of the story, can be understood as a rebellious, subversive movement. We appropriate the concept of "docile body", suggested by Foucault (1995), as a means of understanding the manipulation of the main

character's body by her husband. McNay (2007) commentary on Foucault, as well as Davison's (2004) and Tomlinson's (2010) views on "The yellow wallpaper" also offer important insight to the building of our arguments. We close the reflection with final considerations and ideas for future studies.

2 CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN: A FEMALE VOICE

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), born in Connecticut, came from a family of "notorious moralists" (LLOYD, 1998, p. 94) with a Puritan past. She got married at twenty-four years old and had a baby but separated a few years later, allowing her daughter to be raised by her ex-husband and his new wife (HEDGES, 2012, p. 45). This is a relevant fact to the understanding of "The yellow wallpaper", because it has autobiographical traits – we will return to this point later.

Gilman lived under the influence of the Industrial Revolution and the several changes generated by it, among them the start of the suffragist movement. However, she was not "in close touch" with it, for she found "its objectives too limited for her own more radical views on the need of social change" (HEDGES, 2012, p. 34). She was "an active feminist and primarily a non-fiction writer" (HEDGES, 2012, p. 34) and became known as an author who "waged a lifelong battle against the restrictive patriarchal social codes for women in late nineteenth-century America" (DE SIMONE, 1995, p. 1).

Her most relevant work is often considered to be *Women and economics* (1898), which used to be adopted as a textbook and was translated into multiple languages (HEDGES, 2012, p. 34). In her study, Gilman discusses family as a patriarchal institution and as an economic system as well, in which women live restricted to a specific place known as home (SOUSA, 2008, p. 83). In the realm of fiction, in addition to the short story "The yellow wallpaper", which received more attention as feminist movements flourished and grew stronger from the

1970s on, Gilman would frequently venture into utopian feminist novels, such as *Moving the mountain* (1911) and *Herland* (1915). It was her way of building women-only societies, representing “a full transcendence of the sorrows and perplexities that most concerned her” (LLOYD, 1998, p. 96).

After being bluntly rejected by a celebrated publisher (HEDGES, 2012, p. 36), “The yellow wallpaper” appeared in the *New England Magazine* in 1892 and became part of the author’s body of texts that explore the role of women in society through literary language. At first, it received mixed reviews, being understood as “a cautionary tale about the dangers of tasteless home decorating to a Poe-esque study of psychosis” (THRAILKILL, 2002, p. 527). Soon afterwards, it was “largely ignored and out of print for more than fifty years”, until reprinted in 1973 by Feminist Press (SIEGEL, 1997, p. 44). In the beginning, its “chilling” quality made it sometimes well-accepted (HEDGES, 2012, p. 38). As an exemplary of horror in short story, it has been compared to works of other masters of the genre – the similarities between Gilman’s story and Edgar Allan Poe’s works have been particularly emphasized (TOMLINSON, 2010, p. 233). Also, many have perceived it as a legacy of *Jane Eyre* (1847), by Charlotte Brontë, because of the gothic traits they share and, more specifically, because of the presence of an entrapped mad woman in a big house (LANSER, 1992).

Indeed, “The yellow wallpaper” can be easily described as a gothic horror tale: a wife is taken to an old country house by her husband, together with their baby and a nanny (none of them make an appearance) and a housekeeper (her sister-in-law, who appears a little). The reason is the wife’s mental condition, a “temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency”, as she, who acts as the narrator, puts it (GILMAN, 2012, p. 2). Having just given birth, she seems to represent “a classic case of deepening postpartum depressive psychosis” (PASCO, 2006, p. 90). The story follows her spiraling into madness as she confronts the emotions triggered by the wallpaper in her bedroom. At a certain

point, she becomes obsessed with the idea of freeing a woman imprisoned behind the bars of the wallpaper, mirroring her own incarceration.

The female narrator naively relates how her husband, a doctor, treats her with condescension by insinuating that she wants to be sick (GILMAN, 2012, p. 18). He also forbids her to work, implying that women could be disturbed by intellectual activities. As Gilman's own experience and historical documents attest, the "rest cure" was considered a valid medical prescription at the time, as a means of keeping women from going insane (MONTEIRO, 1999 p. 43). Nonetheless, no matter how much she "rests", the main character still goes insane, embracing the elements of "female gothic style" of "confinement and rebellion, forbidden desire and 'irrational fear'" (JOHNSON, 1989, p. 521), in addition to "the distraught heroine, the forbidding mansion, and the powerfully repressive male antagonist" (JOHNSON, 1989, p. 522).

In the twentieth century, at first Gilman's short story was solely perceived as a tale of madness. In 1923, Collins cited "The yellow wallpaper" as "one of the best presentations of hallucinosis associated with exhaustion in fiction" (COLLINS, 1923, p. 379). His interpretation of the narrator echoes the one usually applied to Emma Bovary: "She is sentimental, romantic, imaginative. Her husband is literal, specific, standardized. She has never admitted, even to herself, that his virtues at times weigh heavily upon her" (COLLINS, 1923, p. 380). Her husband's virtues, not his authoritarian attitude toward her, would be the major problem in their relationship.

Another relevant aspect in favor of the "tale of madness" approach lies in the unreliable narrator. By conceiving a female character that openly declares to be sick, Gilman would have taken part in the tradition of nineteenth-century "psychological realism": "'Self-conscious' and 'unreliable' narrators were indeed so common that any alert reader of the day would have had to wonder, Is this an account of a madwoman putting pen to paper?" (PASCO, 2006, p. 88).

Feminist studies, however, have taken a major role in the understanding of the short story. The dynamics between husband and wife constitute an illustrative example of “the fear of losing autonomy and identity” that a housewife can experience under the care of a “paternalist husband who consistently refuses to believe that she is seriously ill” (DAVISON, 2004, p. 56). As an attempt to contribute to such approaches, the next section focuses on textual evidence of male dominance over the woman’s body.

3 IMPRISONMENT OF THE WOMAN’S BODY

“The yellow wallpaper” builds a somber gothic atmosphere, mixing more and more illusions into the narrator’s discourse as her madness deepens. There is an element of suffocation, since she is imprisoned both in her life and in the wallpapered bedroom. This imprisonment is symbolized by many elements, such as her “immovable bed” that is “nailed down” (GILMAN, 2012, p. 13) and by her actions in the final scene, in which she locks herself in the bedroom and throws the key through the window (p. 29). Her ultimate self-imprisonment also leads to her final rebellion, because now she can act as she pleases in the space of the bedroom: “It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!” (p. 31).

As a story of patriarchal repression, it shows through the lens of a repressed wife a husband who dictates rules concerning every aspect of her life. This includes how she should behave both emotionally and physically: what she should drink/eat (“cod liver oil and lots of tonics and things, to say nothing of ale and wine and rare meat”; p. 15); when she should move (“‘What is it, little girl?’, he said. ‘Don’t go walking about like that – you’ll get cold.’”, p. 17); where she should sleep (in an old nursery with barred windows, no less – she wanted a room downstairs, but “John would not hear of it”; p. 4); and when she should sleep (“Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after

each meal”, p. 21). It is not uncommon either for him to literally carry her around: “And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head” (p. 15). Not only he treats her like a child, he also takes full control of her body, disciplining it (see FOUCAULT, 1995).

Above all, he forbids her to work – that is, to write: “and [I] am absolutely forbidden to ‘work’ until I am well again” (GILMAN, 2012, p. 2). She sometimes challenges this prohibition, for it is implied that the short story that we read is a piece of her clandestine writing: “There comes John, and I must put this away, – he hates to have me write a word” (p. 6). The lack of work makes her nervous and tired, mostly because she is obliged to pretend: “I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal – having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (p. 2); “I take pains to control myself – before him, at least, and that makes me very tired” (p. 4). During her whole ordeal in the country house, the narrator experiments this intense fatigue: “Half the time now I’m awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much” (p. 15). Her passive attitude comes with a price, and so does her constant exercise of self-control, which is recommended by her doctor husband as the solution to her (imaginary, he believes) problems: “He says no one but myself can help me out of it, that I must use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me” (p. 15-16).

The husband’s physical control over her is clearly demonstrated by the choice of room in the house. Even though the family moved there for three months so that the wife could recover from her uneasiness, she has no saying in the choice of where she will sleep. While she wanted a downstairs room “that opened to a piazza and had roses all over the window” (p. 4), the husband opts for the bedroom upstairs that apparently used to be a nursery. There are bars in the windows, a nailed-down bed, “rings and things in the walls” (p. 5), and the yellow wallpaper about which she becomes obsessed. So, the room where

she is supposed to rest and get better is described as, basically, a prison. There have been many interpretations to the nature of the room; some critics suggest that its description is consistent with that of a Victorian nursery and playroom, while others infer that the house was in fact an abandoned mental hospital, which explains the barred windows, the gate at the top of the stairs, and the rings on the walls (DAVISON, 2004, p. 58). We could argue that both interpretations lead to an almost equally repressive space – a nursery for a grown woman is a prison as much as a mental hospital would be. She is either being treated as a child, as a crazy person, or both.

The wallpaper in the bedroom plays a key role in her madness. Early in the story, she establishes a relationship with it – she hates the wallpaper: “I never saw worse paper in my life” (p. 5). She spends a large part of the narrative describing it, but never to a point of clarifying how it actually looks like: “For, despite all the elaborate descriptive detail devoted to it, the wallpaper remains mysteriously, hauntingly undefined and only vaguely visible” (HEDGES, 2012, p. 49). Her attitude towards it changes as she becomes more and more unhinged; the climax occurs when she reveals that she sees a woman entrapped behind the first layer of drawings, “the woman behind it is as plain as can be” (p. 20). She then pursues the goal of freeing the woman – an obvious parallel to her own situation, as a prisoner of social rules, of the motherhood she refuses to face (“Such a dear baby! And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous”; p. 7), and, most importantly, of her husband.

Being a physician also helps the husband controlling his wife’s body and bodily sensations (TIBURI, 2016, p. 6). When she experiences “ghostliness” (p. 3), he judges that she is actually feeling a “draught” and shuts the window (p. 4). He decides about her appearance and general condition: “I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you” (p. 18). This is complemented by the final remark “Really dear you are better!”, to which the wife responds, “Better in body

perhaps” (p. 18) – she then interrupts her declaration, knowing that she is about to be lectured by him on the perils of thinking about her mental condition. This is relevant because the female character separates body and mind when trying to explain her suffering – she is “better in body perhaps”, but not in her mind. The husband reacts badly because he cannot control her mind as he can control her body.

As Foucault (1995, p. 136) states when discussing military and political tactics, the body can be an “object and target of power” and, when it is “docile”, it “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved”. Even though McNay (2007, p. 35) reminds us that “Foucault’s historical analysis does not account for the different ways the female body may be positioned in relation to the generalization of a military technology of the body”, we may argue that his approach the “docile body” that is trained and shaped with “disciplinary techniques” (McNAY, 2007, p. 36) explains Gilman’s protagonist’s initial submissiveness under her husband’s grasp. Initial because she will later rebel against the “process of hysterization” (FOUCAULT, 1990, p. 153) to which her body is subjected, confirming that nineteenth-century women did not “slip easily and passively into socially prescribed feminine roles” (McNAY, 2007, p. 41). This means that, even under repression, women’s body still found ways to escape to freedom.

One of the possible punishments that the narrator describes she would suffer in case she acted against pre-established rules would be to be sent to another doctor: “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!” (p. 12). This is where the story makes a direct reference to Gilman’s own life, since the author was actually “in the hands” of Dr. Mitchell for a month in his sanitarium and loathed the experience (HEDGES, 2012, p. 44). Both women – Gilman and the character she created – were sent to a man by another man,

none of which were able to help them. In “The yellow wallpaper”, the narrator says her brother agrees with her husband (“My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing”; p. 2), thus presenting herself as surrounded by men who are all in accordance. Even a woman, Jennie, her sister-in-law and housekeeper, seems to agree with the men in their judgment of her: “I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!” (p. 11).

In face of so many “enemies”, the narrator shows suffering without ever blaming them for her emotional stress. About her husband, she says that he “is very careful and loving and hardly lets me stir without special direction” (p. 4), thus comparing herself to a moving object that “stirs” and should be driven by him under the risk of getting lost. She presents reason and rationality as innate elements of John’s personality, thus justifying why her “inner” suffering does not seem relevant to him. This is an example of gender role politics: while women tend to repress desires and emotions, men feel comforted by an “established male tradition” (DAVISON, 2004, p. 50). The husband’s scientific knowledge also gives him permission and authority to acquire complete dominance over their way of living and over her – not only he is a man and her husband, but also a physician. However, this is not met with absolute submission on her part, otherwise she would not present him as it follows: “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. You see he does not believe I am sick!” (p. 1-2). The irony present in the whole story is set in motion by this initial declaration: the husband is a respected doctor, but he cannot recognize his own wife’s sickness and want for proper care.

The narrator does seem to feel manipulated, but never openly so; she often repeats that her husband loves her and wants to see her well – she is the one to blame for her condition: “It is so hard to talk to John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so” (p. 17). Under patriarchy’s

tacit laws, it is as if the environment and her husband's authoritarian stance did not have any impact on her mental state. But her increasing folly is proof that going mad is her way out – this is demonstrated when, after asking her husband if she could go visit friends and his immediate refusal, she confesses: “It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight” (p. 15). From this moment on, the narrative becomes as uneven as the character's state of mind. After she reveals that she sees a woman in the wallpaper, it takes a darker tone and moves fast into her descent – or ascension, as we will discuss in the next section.

4 FEMALE BODY IN MOVEMENT

The body exists between the individual and the social experience, between what is subjective and collective, like a frontier point. It can be approached as an object of investigation through historical, cultural, and anthropological lenses (CORBIN; COURTINE; VIGARELLO, 2008, p. 13). In the case of “The yellow wallpaper”, we have a female body that represents an individual body – the narrator's – and all women's bodies that were, at that time, controlled by men. In this sense, the entrapped female body represented in Gilman's text can be viewed not only as a literary body, but also as a historical body, part of a given moment in time, and a “means of expression, capable of carrying texts, symbols, and meanings”³ (DUARTE, 2010, p. 294). The imprisonment of the female body behind bars – both narrator in the barred-window bedroom and the woman in the barred wallpaper – represents women's situation in the late nineteenth century, when Gilman wrote the short story, even if this interpretation, which seems so obvious nowadays, would only be consolidated more than half a century afterwards, with the rise of feminist literary studies.

³ “meio de expressão, capaz de imprimir textos, símbolos e significados”.

The narrator's body is hers all the while it is not; on one hand, her mind inhabits it, and this is the subjective part of her experience; on the other, her husband controls it, thus turning her body into his possession as well. When threatening to send her to a doctor she does not wish to see, he goes further, transforming it into a collective object – something that they, men, can manipulate as they please. This is how, in context, the narrator's journey into madness can be also seen as an ascension into the repossession of her own body.

The final sequences of the story are marked by movements. Before affirming that she sees a woman in the wallpaper for sure, the narrator had already confessed this suspicion of hers: "There are things in the paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. [...] And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" (2012, p. 16). She next sees the woman "shaking" the pattern: "John was asleep and I waited to waken him, so I kept still and watched the moonlight on that undulating wallpaper till I felt creepy. The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" (p. 17). We notice here two uses of the verb creep: the woman she imagines seeing "creeping about" and the way she feels "creepy" when watching the moonlight on the paper.

The use of "creep" and its variations is very frequent and intriguing in "The yellow wallpaper". According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "creepy"⁴ means "strange or unnatural and making you feel frightened", which may clarify the way the character is feeling as she watches the "undulating wallpaper". The verb "creep"⁵, in turn, can mean (1) "to move slowly, quietly, and carefully, usually in order to avoid being noticed" or (2) "to change very slowly, especially

⁴ Creepy. Available on: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/creepy>. Access 4 July 2020.

⁵ Creep. Available on: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/creep>. Access 4 July 2020.

to increase”. The senses with which it is used in Gilman’s short story, however, seem to imply more than the contemporary notions listed in the dictionary.

Creeping is a fluid movement, performed close to the ground – or to the walls. It separates humans, who stand erect, from other creatures, and it is a sign of their dominance over “every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth”, as we read in the Genesis (1:26; TOWNER, 2001, p. 24), in which the deceit of the serpent – encouraging Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil – provokes God’s fury. “The term ‘creeping things’ includes snakes and all the animals of this sort that may not have the nature of a snake but nevertheless creep in a snake-like way” (SCHROEDER, 2015, p. 57). Considering “creeping” as the movement of the serpent – the “crafty” creature of the Bible (TOWNER, 2001, p. 42) – opens a whole new line of interpretation. The biblical serpent defies God by enticing Eve to taste from knowledge, thus liberating her from ignorance; because of this, it is condemned to creep on the dusty ground forever: “Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life” (Genesis 3:14; TOWNER, 2001, p. 46). Thus, the sense of “creep” in the Genesis describes the movement of reptiles on the ground.

In “The yellow wallpaper”, it is clear that “creep” embodies multiple senses and various types of movement. Tomlinson (2010, p. 237) remembers that the smell of the wallpaper also “creeps”: “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” (GILMAN, 2012, p. 23). The narrator points to the dissimulation and animality of the wallpaper; by spreading its smell through the house, it creeps, it skulks, it hides. The smell allows the wallpaper to *move* through the house – it is immobile at the same time that it is not, permitting us to draw a parallel between the narrator’s passive external attitude (her “docile” body) in opposition to the turmoil she lives inside her mind.

The main character also “creeps” in different ways. Before her final act of rebellion, which is translated into her “creeping” around the room, she creeps in the first sense listed by the dictionary; to avoid being discovered writing, she watches like a hunter watches a prey: “I have watched John when he did not know I was looking”; “She [Jennie] didn’t know I was in the room” (p. 21). As the woman she sees behind the pattern on the wall, she is also beginning to “shake” her situation by disobeying her husband – who sleeps while she is awake. She is the active one here, as is the woman who “stoops down” and “creeps about”. Her actions are changing from lethargic, with the constant fatigue and lying down, and becoming more energetic: “I got up softly and went to feel and see if the paper did move, and when I came back John was awake” (p. 17).

She wants to leave the house and asks her husband if he would take her away, which he refuses. After being lectured once more, she again defies him by staying awake: “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” (p. 19). This is a curious observation, since she had just asked her husband if they could leave. Does she have to move together with her environment, or can she move separately from it, as the woman in the wallpaper? Soon after, she calls the wallpaper pattern – or the context of her life as an entrapped wife? – “torturing”. She describes how it treats her: “It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream” (p. 19). This leads to her perception of the “bars” in the pattern, behind which is the woman that now she believes to see with certainty (p. 20).

As she affronts her reality more and more, the main character finally confirms that there is movement in the wallpaper: “The front pattern does *move* – and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!” (p. 25). And that the movement may be individual or collective: “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” (p. 25). After declaring how hard it seems to move

behind the pattern (“it strangles so”; p. 25), she reveals that she witnessed the entrapped woman going out in daytime: “And I will tell you why – privately – I’ve seen her!” (p. 25). Considering the possibilities of “creep” in the story, the following passage is a significant one:

It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight.

I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines.

I don’t blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight!

I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can’t do it at night, I know John would suspect something at once. (GILMAN, 2012, p. 26).

The disjointed thinking expressed by the narrator is a sign of her spiraling into madness. While this is true, it is also noticeable how she points to an exception – “most women do not creep by daylight” – and soon afterwards admits being this exception herself – “I always lock the door when I creep by daylight”. But why should she creep at all? Perhaps because it is a subversive act, and she is becoming more subversive as her preoccupation with the pattern of the wallpaper and the woman who is entrapped behind it increases. Firstly, she does not trust the reader(s) enough to reveal a “funny thing”: “I have found out another funny thing, but I shan’t tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much” (p. 27). Then she starts to distrust John: “As if I couldn’t see through him!” (p. 27). Finally, she decides helping the woman by peeling off the wallpaper (p. 28). This is a moment of energetic action, and “her standing to tear off the wallpaper appears encouraging and constructive” (PASCO, 2006, p. 96). The night before they will move back home, she locks the door and throws the key through the window, for she wants to “astonish” John (p. 30).

In the locked bedroom, amid a frantic scene in which she wants to tie the woman with a rope, the character sees many women creeping fast outside. She says: “I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did? But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope – you don’t get *me* out in the road there” (p. 31). This is, of course, the turning point, for she clearly identifies herself as the woman she was trying to save. There is also an inversion, because now that she is liberated, she does not want to leave:

I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!

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 that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way.

(GILMAN, 2012, p. 31).

The chilling passage can be read as her total descent into madness, or, as we propose here, as her final physical liberation – now she can creep as she pleases. She does not want to creep in nature (where “everything is green”) because she is not a wild animal; she wants to creep in her own space, the yellow bedroom she used to hate and that now she conquered for herself. When John finally opens the door, he is shocked by her state – whatever that is: “I kept on creeping all the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder” (p. 32). After she assures him that he cannot put her back into the paper, the story ends with him fainted on the floor: “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!” (p. 32). Her creeping “over” him signals a possible victory, as mad as she might have become. As an uncertain, sometimes disingenuous movement, creeping

represents an attack against human virtue and rationality – in this sense, a direct attack against the narrator’s husband, who is often described as the epitome of those characteristics.

When comparing “The yellow wallpaper” to Poe’s “The black cat”, Tomlinson (2010, p. 237) says that the verb “creep” is “a felicitous descriptor for the dominant (and dreadful) movement that unfolds in both these stories” and that “creeping signals the corrosion of a hierarchal system whereby humans are not only elevated above what Poe calls ‘a brute beast’ but man is privileged over woman” (p. 238). This is in accordance with our idea: that the narrator’s conquest of the creeping movement is really a defiance of the established hierarchy. By behaving wildly, the main character does not descend from her position as a woman, but, instead, ascends to an animality that defies male certainties. Her husband faints because he is the one to experience dread now.

Liberation and creeping come together at the end of “The yellow wallpaper”. The main character now creeps as she pleases. This notion of “as she pleases” may suggest that creeping does not mean a single sort of movement but implies a multiplicity of actions that can be interpreted in a variety of ways, as we have illustrated in this analysis. As Tomlinson puts it, in Gilman’s story creeping “becomes a loaded word as it brings into congress horror and *jouissance*, madness and the power of stalking, degeneration and liberation, loss-of-self and the intensity of self-knowledge” (2010, p. 243).

Some scholars have considered the creeping at the story’s close as a good thing, but not necessarily a combative act. Johnson argues that the narrator’s behavior is “an expression of long-suppressed rage: a rage which causes a temporary breakdown” (1989, p. 522). Nonetheless, the outcome would be an optimistic one, “a prelude to psychic regeneration and artistic redemption” (p. 522). This is supported by the fact that we are reading her journal, after all – a

sign that the creeping stage might have been temporary, and that she regained her writing ability at some point. Pasco (2006, p. 95) also believes in “a healthy feature” for the character, suggesting that her creeping is “infantile” and that by performing it “she has arranged the path of her own liberation”, as a child who becomes more independent. Johnson (1989, p. 529) had already pointed to that direction, by stating that:

As we witness the narrator in the final scene, creeping along the floor, we might recall once again that her bedroom is actually a nursery. The fact that she is crawling on all fours – as opposed to lying still and docile under her husband’s “rest cure” – suggests not only temporary derangement but also a frantic, insistent growth into a new stage of being. From the helpless infant, supine on her immovable bed, she has become a crawling, “creeping” child, insistent upon her own needs and explorations. (JOHNSON, 1989, p. 529).

Johnson’s remarks are relevant, especially if we associate them with the “docile” body suggested by Foucault. However, in the story, the main character never says that babies creep – in “The yellow wallpaper”, it is women who creep. The exact creeping movement that she performs is never defined in the text and asserting that it is “crawling on all fours” is one of the possible interpretations. She could be acting more like a serpent or furtively moving about in some strange manner. Her creeping is mysterious because the verb “creep” is used during her narration in different senses: women creep fast outside, the smell of the wallpaper creeps, the main character creeps when other characters are in the room and do not see her there.

In any form, creeping challenges what is expected from a disciplined “docile” body (FOUCAULT, 1995, p. 136). It expresses animality and unpredictability; above all, it expresses motion as opposed to the languid, resting state desired for the main character and for women like her in the late nineteenth-century.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this text, we sought to examine two hypotheses related to the female body as portrayed in “The yellow wallpaper”: (1) that the narrator’s body is controlled as a means of controlling her mind, but this fails; and (2) that the “creeping” movement obsessively mentioned by the narrator in different occasions can be interpreted as an expression of freedom, a triumph over male disciplinary power, not defeat or “infantile” conquest. We concluded that the main character’s final act can be seen as an opposition to her former “docile” body, hence as a rebellion – which does not exclude, of course, other possibilities of interpretation. A textual evidence that supports our inference is the variety of movements suggested by the verb creep.

After a brief overview of the author’s biography and the short story’s criticism through time, in the section “Imprisonment of the female body” we discussed, based on passages of Gilman’s text, how the narrator’s body is controlled by her husband, and how her spiraling into madness may be seen as a way of freeing both her mind and body of his dominance. Then, in the section “Female body in movement”, we deepened our approach of the act of female “creeping” so much repeated in the text.

In the context of “The yellow wallpaper”, creeping can be seen as a positive outcome for the main character. It is an uncontrolled movement of freedom that allows her to go “over” her husband. For once, she is now the active one, while he is paralyzed and inert. Her body is not “docile” anymore; it is finally free from his disciplinary dominance.

Having a woman as author and carrying autobiographical traits turn the short story analyzed into an even more compelling work of literature. Gilman did not only express herself through it, but she gave a female character a voice at a time in which very few women had a public voice – and a body that can act outside the boundaries of what is expected from a nineteenth-century

“homemaker”. In this sense, Gilman’s story shows how fiction can be a possibility to externalize discourses that are different from the hegemonic ones (FUNCK, 1993, p. 34).

In future studies, it is desirable to deepen considerations about the main character’s voice as a physical expression. Another possible path is further investigating relations between the creeping movement in “The yellow wallpaper” and its presence in various passages of the Bible.

REFERENCES

COLLINS, Joseph. “Lunatics of Literature.” *The North American Review*, v. 218, n. 814, 1923, p. 376–387. Available on: www.jstor.org/stable/25113109. Accessed 4 July 2020.

CORBIN, Alain; COURTINE, Jean-Jacques; VIGARELLO, Georges. *História do corpo* – 1. Da Renascença às Luzes. [Volume dirigido por Georges Vigarello]. Trad. Ephraim Ferreira Alves. Petrópolis (RJ): Vozes, 2008.

DAVISON, Carol Margaret. Haunted House/ Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. *Women’s Studies*, v. 33, n. 1, 2004. p. 47-75.

DE SIMONE, Deborah M. Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Feminization of Education. *WILLA*, v. 4, Fall 1995. Available on: <https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/old-WILLA/fall95/DeSimone.html>. Accessed 7 July 2020.

DUARTE, Leticia Rocha. A Educação Física como linguagem. *Revista Motriz*, v. 16, n. 2, abr./jun. Rio Claro (SP): Unesp, 2010.

FOUCAULT, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

FOUCAULT, Michel. *The History of Sexuality – Volume I: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

FUNCK, Susana Bornéo. Feminismo e utopia. *Revista Estudos Feministas*, v.1, n.1, p. 33-48. Florianópolis: Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 1993. Available on: <https://periodicos.ufsc.br/index.php/ref/article/view/15986>. Accessed 7 July 2020.

GILMAN, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. London: Virago, 2012.

HEDDES, Elaine R. Afterward. In GILMAN, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. London: Virago, 2012. p. 33-50.

JOHNSON, Greg. Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in The Yellow Wallpaper. *Studies in Short Fiction*, v. 26, n. 4, 1989, p. 521-530.

KING, Jeanette; MORRIS, Pam. On Not Reading Between the Lines: Models of Reading in 'The Yellow Wall-paper'. *Studies in Short Fiction*, v. 26, n. 1, 1989, p. 23-32.

LANSER, Susan S. Jane Eyre's Legacy: The Powers and Dangers of Singularity. In: _____. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1992. p. 176-193. Available on: www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g6vm.13. Accessed 4 July 2020.

LANSER, Susan S. "The Yellow Wallpaper," and the Politics of Color in America. *Feminist Studies*, v. 15, n. 3, Autumn 1989, p. 415-441.

LLOYD, Brian. Feminism, Utopian and Scientific: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Prison of the Familiar. *American Studies*, v. 39, n. 1, 1998, p. 93-113. Available on: www.jstor.org/stable/40642950. Accessed 2 July 2020.

McNAY, Lois. *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*. Cambridge: Polity/Blackwell, 2007.

MONTEIRO, George. Context, intention, and purpose in "The Yellow Wallpaper": a tale in the Poe and the Romantic tradition. *Fragmentos*, v. 17, p. 41-54. Florianópolis: Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 1999. Available on: <https://periodicos.ufsc.br/index.php/fragmentos/article/view/6408>. Accessed 7 July 2020.

PASCO, Allan H. Crazy Writing and Reliable Text. In *"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman: a dual-text critical edition*. Athens (OH): Ohio University Press, 2006. p. 88-99.

SCHROEDER, Joy A. (translated and edited by). *The Book of Genesis*. Grand Rapids (Michigan)/Cambridge (UK): William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015.

SIEGEL, Jennifer Semple. Charlotte Perkins (Stetson) Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper": Fiction "with a Purpose" and the Need to Know the Real Story. *CEA Critic* 59, n. 3, 1997, p. 44-57. Available on: www.jstor.org/stable/44377193. Accessed 9 July 2020.

SOUSA, Fátima. Essencialismo e construcionismo na ficção utópica de Charlotte Perkins Gilman: "Herland" e "With Her in Ourland". *Via Panorâmica: Revista Eletrônica de Estudos Anglo-Americanos / An Anglo-American Studies Journal*, 2ª ser. 1, 2008. Available on: <https://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/5175.pdf>. Accessed 4 July 2020.

THRAILKILL, Jane F. Doctoring "The Yellow Wallpaper". *ELH* 69, n. 2, 2002, p. 525-66. Available on: www.jstor.org/stable/30032030. Accessed 9 July 2020.

TIBURI, Marcia. Apresentação. In *O papel de parede amarelo – Um clássico da literatura feminista*. Trad. Diogo Henriques. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 2016. p. 5-9.

TOMLINSON, Niles. Creeping in the "Mere": Catagenesis in Poe's "Black Cat" and Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper". *A Journal of the American Renaissance*, v. 56, n. 3, 2010, p. 232-268. Available on: <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.ntu.edu.sg/dist/6/2252/files/2017/08/SS2-Tomlinson-2010-Gilman-and-Poe-1off1wc.pdf> Accessed 4 July 2020.

TOWNER, W. Sibley. *Genesis* (Westminster Bible Companion). Louisville/London/Leiden: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

VEEDER, William. Who is Jane? The Intricate Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *Arizona Quarterly: a Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, v. 44, n. 3, Autumn 1988, p. 40-79.

Recebido em 13/07/2020.

Aceito em 29/12/2020.