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## Chromatic Entrapment: A Color-Theory Reading of the Yellow Wallpaper

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the operation of color in *The Yellow Wallpaper* using a hybrid approach to color theory and symbolism, arguing that the text re-channels chromatic perception as a mechanism of psychic and ideological control. It draws upon Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's description of the affective qualities of color, Roland Barthes' theory of signification, and posits that the wallpaper's "unclean yellow" exists as an unstable sign, which disrupts traditional meanings of color (associated with warmth and vibrancy), in order to convey decay, irritant, and restriction, which helps to define a specific atmosphere which ultimately influences the narrators psychology. This essay traces the chromatic trajectory of yellow, as it moves from an external sensation to a contained internal psychology, in order to demonstrate how color is mobilized as an active component of narrative. Through close textual reading, this paper suggests that color, paired with pattern, constructs a visual system of constraint; a controlled and disturbed set of perceptions that essentially absorbs the narrator into a chromatic architecture of herself. In emphasizing color not as an accessory to plot, but as a vibrant presence within the literary field, this essay engages with questions in contemporary literary criticism regarding the materialism of the senses and semiotics of space. This article suggests that color itself actively contributes to madness, rather than representing it in the fiction of Gilman.

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## INTRODUCTION

The meaning of color within *The Yellow Wallpaper* functions not as a static attribute or marker of interiority, but as a creative element that generates the subjectivity and perception within the text. The narrator's reaction to the wallpaper as 'repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow' is at odds with the commonly accepted perception of yellow as a vibrant and joyous hue. Yellow begins to be associated with confusion, annoyance and psychic turmoil, as well as physical disorientation, directly paralleling Johan Wolfgang von Goethe's assertion that color has a physical affect on the viewer, while Gilman simultaneously subverts it by providing a negative connotation of color. Semiotically speaking, using Roland Barthes' interpretation of symbols, color as a visual element takes on cultural meanings; color here helps in dictating that the wallpaper is 'dull enough to confuse the eye...pronounced enough to constantly irritate' [851], further making perception an active, rather than passive component in the story, culminating in the narrator's perception of a woman behind the patterns; yellow, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, is less an indicator of a deteriorating mental state and more an agent which constructs it.

According to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's understanding of color, *The Yellow Wallpapers* subverts all the normative affective values traditionally associated with yellow. Far from being an image of comfort or energy, the color is an immediate source of pain, disorganization, and hyperstimulation. What is important about this color theory application is that the meaning of color becomes unsettled; it can both represent one thing and generate contradictory responses to that thing. This fluidity is what Gilman utilizes to create the narrator's disordered perception; color, rather than being a way of interpreting the real, is an element which helps the narrator construct her own meaning of reality.

### ***Chromatic Entrapment: A Color-Theory Reading of The Yellow Wallpaper***

*The Yellow Wallpaper*, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, stands as one of the most iconic instances in modern short fiction in which color transcends descriptive function and becomes an operative element in the perception of experience and self. Its persistent focus on the wallpaper's "unclean yellow" seems like a rather early moment at which description is transcended toward a complex chromatic semiotics. From the beginning, the narrator's language foregrounds the disturbing materiality of color, "repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow," which the narrator also likens to "sickly sulphur tint". Color isn't just aesthetically displeasing in this passage; it is becoming affective, psycho-affective.

One productive way of accessing this chromatically charged disturbance is through Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's color theory, which posits that color is an attribute that elicits an affect



independent of that with which it is associated. According to Goethe's formulation, yellow is typically understood as warm, bright, and intimately associated with light; *The Yellow Wallpaper*, however, radically reverses this scheme. The wallpaper's yellow is no longer comforting or illumining but disturbing and suffocating; it is "dull enough to confuse the eye... Pronounced enough to constantly irritate" and thus seems to operate paradoxically. This perceptual confusion could be called a violation of chromo-affect whereby an already assumed emotion associated with a color is instead reversed so as to elicit irritation rather than pleasure.

The wallpaper's color also enters into a system of signification, a semiological space where it is constructed not simply as physical, but as ideological and cultural as Roland Barthes outlines myth as a second-order semiological system. Once merely considered unsightly, it becomes synonymous with decay, illness, and imprisonment. The narrator's constant focus on the word "unclean" seems to suggest a kind of contamination and when combined with its positioning within the domestic interior, the color becomes the emblem of domesticity's own repressive dimensions. In a very real sense, the wallpaper conjures up Barthes's concept of the myth of domesticity, wherein the home becomes an apparatus of control rather than solace.

Furthermore, the chromatic color is intensified in its association with pattern, which the narrator perceives as "bars" behind which a woman appears trapped. This stage seems to signify a moment where color itself has transformed from a mere quality on a surface to the surface itself. The yellow ceases to be merely something to be looked at and instead becomes something that traps the narrator. As this chromatic barrier begins to dominate the narrator's perception and as the subject of the narrative literally identifies with the figure behind the wallpaper, it begins to take on the function of facilitating a transition from outer to inner realities, from objective space to subjective experience.

### *1. Chromatic Distortion and the Pathologization of Perceptuality*

One of the defining characteristics of the narrative is its continued fixation on the wallpaper's foreground and yellow coloration, which contributes to what may be termed a pathological chromatics, where color is inextricably linked to corporeal and psychological malaise. The narrator's reiterated descriptions of the wallpaper's "repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow" and its "sickly sulphur tint" begin to establish a lexicon of contamination: yellow becomes an unpleasant, almost infectious hue, associated with putrescence and illness, which, according to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, exerts a direct physiological and emotional influence on the spectator, and which in Gilman's hands becomes an overstimulus, disrupting perceptual order.



She remarks that the wallpaper is "dull enough to confuse the eye... Pronounced enough to constantly irritate", an oscillation that is a defining feature of chromatic instability. The color is sometimes visible and sometimes obscured, creating a sensory paradox, a contradiction in visibility that contributes to her disturbing disturbance in the process of seeing itself. But this chromatic ambiguity also becomes another indicator of her state of mental breakdown, and moreover, color actively contributes to a general breakdown of perceptual order. Yellow does not merely appear; rather, it actively reorganizes seeing as a field of agitation and confusion, acting as a medium between the external world and inner consciousness.

## *2. The Semiose of Yellow and myth*

Additionally, the wallpaper's coloration creates a semiotic structure which accrues meaning through repetition and fixation, transforming yellow as a sign that, according to Roland Barthes' model of signification, advances from denotation to myth: originally, it is simply an aesthetically disagreeable decoration, but subsequently it comes to embody decay, moral corruption and entrapment, so that the narrator's insistence on the wallpaper's 'unclean' quality immediately suggests moral as well as physical contamination, and evokes broader anxieties that extend beyond personal taste. The accumulating layers of meaning generate what Barthes would term mythic discourse, wherein the interior of the house is revealed to be the site of secret violence: the home, typically the quintessential safe space of refuge and rest, becomes a site of confinement and surveillance.

The transformation of color from its purely denotative meaning is also amplified by the narrator's increasing desire to uncover the wallpaper's significance: she sets out to "follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion", suggesting that what begins as an involuntary reception of color evolves into an attempt at interpretation and decoding. The wallpaper itself becomes text, and the yellow becomes the medium through which its meanings are simultaneously obscured and produced, with color itself participating in a process that transcends visual representation, instead acting as a repository for ideological content.

## *3. Chromatic Progressions: From Outer Exterior to Interior Psyche*

In addition to its semiotic dimensions, color also develops as an internal, rather than external, phenomenon, a progressive absorption of yellow from a given external quality into an interior state. Where at first the narrator appears external and oppositional to the wallpaper, she becomes intimately



bonded to its color as her confinement continues; yellow gradually permeates her entire perceptual world until there is little difference between the color of the wallpaper and her consciousness itself.

She demonstrates this process when she stays up at night, taking in how yellow "goes yellow, in certain lights, and then the rest is dull enough to confuse the eye; then again it changes and is very glaring". Yellow does not merely remain visible, then; it appears to take on movement and form, as it gains a temporal quality as well; when she observes that "the front pattern does move--and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!" this convergence of color, pattern, and movement signifies the hallucination and animation of her visual field. Where color exists as mere visual stimulus to be passively perceived, here it transforms into a complex, internalized stimulus, and the wallpaper changes from being merely visible into being inhabitable and lived in. In this way, it also becomes integral to a complex identity which the narrator increasingly equates with that of the woman trapped behind the paper, which culminates in her excited declaration that "I've got out at last... In spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" This suggests a disintegration of the self-other boundary, where color has begun to mediate not simply the visual world, but the internal world as well.

#### *4. The Interaction between Color, Pattern, and architectural space*

Though it is central, the yellow wallpaper's color cannot be fully interpreted without regard for its interaction with pattern: although the narrator insists the wallpaper's pattern is illogical and contradictory, she begins to see a set of "bars" that encase a figure of a woman behind them. This translation of the wallpaper into an architectural space combines pattern and color to create an architecture of entrapment, wherein yellow becomes the color of the air and the pattern is the prison itself. The woman's freedom relies on the narrator's ability to penetrate the chromatic film, and to dismantle this edifice: the color works hand-in-hand with pattern to form this containment structure. Together, pattern and color function together to create what can be seen as a chromatic system, which operates as both a sign system, and as a space that encloses both of them. The wallpaper functions as an inscription of restriction within a supposedly safe, domestic space: its interiority comes to be refigured through yellow into a new kind of exterior, an outdoor space that serves as the locus for her breakdown.

#### *5. Color as agent in Madness*

The wallpaper's coloration can ultimately be seen not merely as a component or an effect, but as the direct source of the narrator's madness. Though her condition is certainly affected by her treatment and her restricted circumstances, it is also intrinsically linked to the constant experience of the



wallpaper's color, a constant, pervasive stimulus that serves to increase her anxieties, solidify her obsessions, and fundamentally rework her understanding of the world: the color possesses what could be called a chromatic agency, where it acts upon the subject rather than the other way around, and the narrator can be described not as simply viewing yellow, but as being influenced by it, compelled into its intricacies and its narrative. In doing so, the color becomes not an indicator of madness, but its direct producer, and the wallpaper's coloration becomes evidence that perceptions are not merely passive receptions but active constructions.

In summary, from its psychological and affectational qualities to its symbolic role as sign, and from its function as a structure that organizes the narrative's narrative of imprisonment to its role as an active agent within the psychological experience of confinement, the wallpaper's color operates as a defining chromatic system that controls the space of both internal and external reality.

## CONCLUSION

The meaning of the story of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is constructed at all levels by color not as mere decoration but as a fundamental element of the epistemological and psychological underpinnings of the text. By relentlessly describing the disturbing presence of an "unclean yellow," Charlotte Perkins Gilman transforms color into a force which is a direct reflection of and cause for the narrator's mental breakdown. What initially presents itself as a slight annoyance in aesthetic judgment soon expands to become an all-consuming and totalizing perceptual system. In a semiotic way of using Roland Barthes' definition of signs, color functions culturally in visual element; it plays a part in the definition of the wallpaper being 'dull enough to confuse the eye...pronounced enough to constantly irritate' [851], adding another layer to the interpretation of perception as an active not passive element in the story, eventually lead to the narrator's perception of a woman inside the patterns; In "The Yellow Wallpaper", yellow acts less like an signifier of his mental breakdown, but more like an agent of its construction.

With the semiotics interpretation, grounded in the work of Roland Barthes, *The Yellow Wallpaper* employs color as an ideological sign. This interpretation is best expressed through the narrator's claim that the color itself is 'the chief thing', and that 'It is pale yellow, horribly pale, with a grotesque pattern' [851]. This allows the yellow to become an indicator of confinement and violence and consequently produces a myth where the house is shown to be a space of domination, rather than one of security and retreat. This deconstructs the wallpaper from being simply wallpaper and places it as a structured symbol, of power structures of oppression.



However, what makes *The Yellow Wallpaper* remarkable from the perspective of color is its ability to demonstrate color to be not a reflection but rather the composition of a subjectivity. The gradual adoption of yellow within the narrator, until she identifies with the woman hidden behind the pattern, signifies a total blurring of the distinction between seer and thing seen. Color here becomes less a part of describing insanity and more a part of its generation and creation as an active and reorganizing principle of reality and identity.

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