

Repression and Escape in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Tiredness of Rosabel*, Analysis Integrating Feminists' Views

Introduction

When it comes to feminine repression, it is often associated with the feminine identity and the associated constraints brought by such identity (Elbert, 1995). For example, women characters suffering from oppression and escape is often associated with those in patriarchal societies where gendered expectations and societal norms frequently limit women's autonomy and personal freedom. As noted by Friedman (1989), women's narratives contain both a textual and political unconscious, which can be interpreted in the context of the historical repression and oppression of women. By definition, repression refers to the emotional status of women's status when their desires, emotions, and intellectual pursuits, often imposed by external forces such as familial or societal expectations (Mitchell, 2015). In this context, women tend to escape from such forces, which represents an attempt—whether physical, emotional, or psychological—to break free from the constraints that confine the individual. In literary works, women's repression and escape is often portrayed as complicated, filled with diverse perspectives, and sometimes futile.

Two representative literary works that have focused on these themes are *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Tiredness of Rosabel* (1922) by Katherine Mansfield. The two short stories, although written in different historical and cultural contexts, share the similarities of the theme of women's representation and escape from their restrictive environments. For example, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman delves into the female character's personal struggle with postpartum depression and the "rest cure" prescribed during that time. Written in the form of a secret journal, the story highlights both the societal attitudes toward women and the stigma surrounding mental health (Villar, 2024). The narrator, confined to a room by her husband John, is forbidden from writing, a means of mental relief. Instead of allowing her to stay in a comfortable room downstairs, he locks her in a spacious, airy room with unattractive yellow wallpaper. Initially repelled by the room, the narrator soon becomes fixated on the wallpaper, convinced that a woman is trapped behind it and that she must release her.

In Katherine Mansfield's short story *The Tiredness of Rosabel*, the author employs free indirect discourse to explore the contrast between the comfort and beauty of fantasy and the harshness of reality. Through the use of structure, tenses, punctuation, mood, sounds,

and figurative language, Mansfield blurs the lines between imagination and the real world (Murdoch, 2011). Mansfield seamlessly blends the physical senses with imagination, moving between reality and dreams without a fixed structure. The narrative shifts between locations such as Oxford Circus and Richmond and Rosabel's inner fantasy, suggesting that both realms can coexist in the human mind. In the more peaceful setting of her home, Rosabel only returns to reality when a change in her physical position or feelings of tiredness pull her back, demonstrating that, while still connected to her senses in the real world, she immerses herself more deeply in her dreams, spending more time in her inner world than engaging with life (Francis, 2007). Near the conclusion of the story, Mansfield distinguishes between fantasy and reality.

Concentrating on these two stories, the essay aims to explore the women characters around the theme of repression and escape, about how the two themes are represented, which reflected the broader societal constraints placed on women in the typical patriarchal societal contexts. It primarily argues that the protagonist's obsession, in *he Yellow Wallpaper*, with the yellow wallpaper in the room becomes a symbol of her mental struggle and her desperate desire for freedom. Similarly, in *The Tiredness of Rosabel*, Rosabel's internal escape through romantic fantasies represents her attempt to transcend the limitations of her working-class, female existence. The essay further critiques that the women's struggle is not juts about their personal sufferings but also the overall social inequality and unfair forced pressure on women. The essay investigated the limited chances for women to assert their autonomy, shedding light on the societal barriers that often make true liberation unattainable. The final conclusion made by the essay is that both Gilman and Mansfield use the themes of repression and escape to investigate the psychological and emotional toll that patriarchy takes on women. Women's efforts to break down such barriers are ultimately constrained by the very structures that oppress them.

Repression in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

The representation in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, is marked by the female character's self-representation and the husband-John's role as male oppressor. According to Scholz (2017), a prominent aspect of the (female) gothic in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is the recurring theme of repression. The protagonist, confined to a room with yellow wallpaper, is essentially forced to suppress her creative and intellectual impulses. She is prohibited from leaving the room, writing, engaging in any physical activity, or interacting with others. This

total lack of stimulation is arguably what drives her toward insanity, as her repressed energies begin to manifest in her observations of the wallpaper. One striking aspect of the story is the noticeable absence of John, the protagonist's husband. While he assumes the role of the male oppressor—isolating her in the mansion and encouraging the rest cure—he is rarely physically present in the narrative (Qasim et al., 2015). Instead, he is mostly referenced through the narrator's own mental projections of what he might say or think. In this way, 'John' represents the societal pressures and expectations of a woman's role that the narrator has absorbed. When he is physically present, his character shifts from being the antagonist to a caring husband who simply wants to see his wife's mental health improve (Reventos, 1997). Some of the examples of the demonstration could be found:

- John would suspect something at once
- John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least.

Of the theme of repression, the room and the yellow wallpaper in the room are the key object symbols. For the room, it is the place where the woman character was confined and repressed. It becomes a metaphor for her psychological imprisonment. The narrator and her husband sleep in a former nursery, which she describes as having been a playroom or gymnasium, as evidenced by barred windows and rings on the walls. The room is also covered with a drab, unsettling yellow wallpaper. This room serves as a symbol for two things: it functions as a prison for the narrator and reflects her mental deterioration throughout the story (Ridha & Khadhim, 2024). Though the narrator is reluctant to stay in the room, her husband, John, convinces her to do so. The iron bars on the windows give the space a distinctly prison-like feel, while the rings and other fixtures on the walls seem to suggest they could be used to restrain someone. The room's condition deteriorates, mirroring the narrator's own decline, which is further exacerbated when she begins tearing off the wallpaper. Both the room and the narrator are in poor condition at the story's outset, and they both worsen over time (Davison, 2004). The yellow wallpaper, in particular, frustrates the narrator, who describes it as disorienting and maddening with its confusing and erratic patterns.

The wallpaper represents the oppressive societal structures and patriarchy. The narrator despises it and spends countless hours scrutinizing it in an attempt to discern its pattern—an effort that reflects her struggle to understand and find a rationale behind a patriarchal society, only to fail (Ridha & Khadhim, 2024). As the narrator fixates on the wallpaper, she begins to see a woman trapped within it, whom she ultimately identifies as herself. The

wallpaper, much like patriarchy, traps her, and she strives to escape from this metaphorical prison, seeking liberation from the sexist society that confines her (Hume, 2002). As depicted in the story, when the woman identifies with the trapped woman on the wall, it suggests that the wallpaper serves as a projection of her own mental state and the social constraints that bind her. Hence, the women trapped in the wallpaper just symbolized the woman's own domestic role and being forced to receive medical treatment that prescribed to her. She lost her autonomy and be confined within the room by the wall, just like the imagined woman trapped in the wallpaper. From this perspective, the wallpaper becomes a symbol of the protagonist's own psychological repression, highlighting the suffocating impact of both societal expectations and medical practices on her mental health (Gul et al., 2024).

Regarding the gender roles in the large social hierarchical structure which is male-dominated, it is thought that the protagonist's repression is not only a result of her mental illness but also a product of the gendered norms and expectations that shape her life. From feminist's perspective, when women are involved in marriage relationships, their roles and identities are largely constrained by the social expectations and social structure (Ridgeway & Kricheli-Katz, 2013). The relationship between John and the protagonist embodies traditional gender roles and a clearly defined power imbalance. John assumes a dominant position, with his opinions consistently outweighing Jane's. In the context of the nineteenth century, it was socially accepted and expected for men to speak on behalf of women, perpetuating gendered oppression that allowed for the dismissal and mistreatment of women both in public life and private relationships (Broughton & Rogers, 2017). Gilman highlights this dynamic through the protagonist's experiences, portraying how she is silenced and misrepresented by John's authoritative declarations. Despite her own feelings, John repeatedly insists that her condition is improving, invalidating her lived reality. From feminism's perspective, it can be indicated that the broader societal norms that treated women as fragile, dependent, and in need of male authority have dominated the social values, which hindered women's freedom and autonomy to express themselves (Abrams, 1998). Thus, women were often treated as passive and submissive, expected to defer to male authority in all matters, including their health and well-being.

Regression in *The Tiredness of Rosabel*

For the story of *The Tiredness of Rosabel*, the theme of regression can be analyzed from

Rosabel's emotional and physical repression from personal perspective, and regression as a result of gendered discrimination and class-oriented social hierarchy. First from personal perspective, in the story, while Katherine Mansfield painted the picture about a young woman who was trapped by the demands of the monotonous job and the emotional fatigue of the boring life, Rosabel's emotional exhaustion was then mirrored. Rosabel's emotional sufferings of regression comes from work, the repetitive work of standing for long hours, being forced to engage with consumers, and also enduring the drudgery of her position. She felt a strong sense of fatigue as a result of the routine, monotonous and grueling daily sufferings as a result of being treated as a machine or mechanical precision, enjoying very limited space for personal satisfaction or emotional expression (Frrall, 2014). This indicates the constraints of the working class social position on her.

Such work-oriented fatigue and associated suffering further manifested her emotional repression. As the story proceeds, it can be seen that her internal world became further stifled. Such is marked by some plots about her romantic fantasies' stories. Rosabel harbors a deep desire to escape the confines of poverty, a long-term aspiration revealed through her immediate fantasies. She imagines indulging in a luxurious and nourishing evening meal, far removed from her current reality. Later, when she is home and lying in bed, she envisions herself trading places with one of her wealthy customers, stepping into a life of privilege and abundance. Throughout the story, violets, introduced in the opening sentence, serve as a recurring motif. Delicate, charming, and innocent, the flowers mirror Rosabel's own nature, while their purple hue may symbolize royalty, hinting at the elevated role Rosabel yearns to occupy (Game, 1998). The rich young woman who purchases a hat acts as Rosabel's foil, embodying the life Rosabel wishes to lead. Rosabel imagines herself in the woman's position and is both drawn to and unsettled by the woman's beau, who clearly finds Rosabel attractive. This interaction becomes the gateway for Rosabel to construct a fantasy in which she adopts the wealthy woman's life, reflecting her longing for transformation and escape and the chaos inner status (Francis, 2007).

The unique practice of yearning for escape, as what has been portrayed in the story about Rosabel, accurately indicated that in reality, her real needs were repressed by the harsh realities of her life. Her fantasies, although not real, highlights her deep emotional longing for something more than the constraints of her work. However, she had no way to make these ideal status come true, but can just imagine. These imaginations will ultimately turn to be futility, which indicated how Rosabel's internal world is kept at bay, and is confined to

fleeting moments of daydreams that cannot lead to real change or escape from her grim reality (Siegelman, 1992). This the theme of repression being reflected in this story.

Second from larger societal perspective, Rosabel's repression could be thought to be the result of her social classes as a working-class woman. According to Jenson et al. (2020), societies, due to gender discrimination and structured unfairness in job markets, women were often relegated to domestic roles or low-status jobs. Rosabel's position as a shop assistant indicated this situation as her social position is low. As notified by Siegelman (1992), her low social classes and the repetitive work not only made her feel devalued but also powerless to stifle her aspirations. She was confined by the job, and held very little room for self growth and cultivation, which is thought to be the typical life of numerous working-class women. They are lack of upward mobility in their career development path, so she constantly felt a strong sense of meaninglessness. Women like Rosabel were generally expected to behave to serve their family members such as husbands or kids, so the larger society posits very limited chances for them to grow themselves, whether in career or in other relationship circle. Rosabel was treated as a working machine rather than a person with natural desire, emotional needs, and personal psychological demands.

Mansfield's story critiques how women's emotional and intellectual needs are often overshadowed by the realities of their gendered and economic situations. Fundamentally, the feminist theory thought that the romantic dreams that Rosabel clings to represent a form of resistance to the oppressive systems that constrain her, yet they are ultimately unattainable and disempowering; and these fantasies are symbolic of the larger societal forces that limit women's agency, pushing them to rely on fantasies rather than the possibility of real change or fulfillment. Furthermore, *The Tiredness of Rosabel* highlights the ways in which class and gender intersect to create a double bind for women like Rosabel. As what has been analyzed above, as a working-class woman, she is not only oppressed by the expectations placed on her as a woman but also by the economic realities that restrict her opportunities (Jenson et al., 2020). The feminist views thought that such constraints led her to the extreme status of emotional exhaustion, so she had to rely on imagination and fantasy to rescue herself because in reality, she had no chance to escape. In this sense, Rosabel's repression is not just an individual experience but a reflection of the broader social and economic systems that marginalize women, particularly those who lack the privilege of financial independence or social mobility.

Escape in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

While repression is depicted in the story, escape is the second theme shared by the two stories which share the similarities of using imagination to escape from the reality of being constrained. Like in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, according to Jamil (2021), although John dismisses imagination as mere “illusions,” the notion that he successfully suppresses the narrator’s creativity or that her imaginative impulses have been stifled by socially acceptable behavior quickly unravels. Despite John’s insistence that she avoid indulging in “fancy,” her journal entries reveal that, even amidst disruptions that seek to suppress her writing or highlight her fluctuating moods, she begins to use her imagination to make sense of the chaotic and fragmented nature of her world, which indicated her innate power to seek to escape from the reality (Jamil, 2021). She describes the wallpaper vividly: “Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breadths didn’t match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other.” These “unblinking eyes” symbolize her repressed consciousness, which, despite its fragile state, finds a way to express her intuitive grasp of hierarchical divides, such as “up and down” or “higher” and “lower” binaries (Jamil, 2021). Such, from the other perspective, represents her power to break down and seek rescue of herself.

As what has been analyzed above, the yellow wallpaper is the powerful symbol of the social hierarchy and man’s dominance of the social structure, so when the protagonist finally tore them up, it represented her struggle and efforts to escape from the regression of the hierarchical confinement and fight for liberation. She perceives a woman trapped within the yellow wallpaper, symbolizing her own confinement within a patriarchal society (Treichler, 1984). The wallpaper intensifies her sense of entrapment, acting as a persistent reminder of her forced isolation, disguised as medical treatment (Ghandeharion & Mazari, 2016). This pattern reflects the restrictive patriarchal system that the protagonist herself cannot escape, leaving her powerless to assert her identity or feel truly understood (Ghandeharion & Mazari, 2016). Her eventual tearing down of the wallpaper represents both a literal and symbolic act of resistance. The imagined woman was rescued, posing to be a sign that the protagonist also attempts to assert her agency and liberate herself from the confines of her prescribed role as a submissive wife and patient.

However, what was worthwhile to mention is that the protagonist's liberation is achieved only through the complete disintegration of her mental health, raising questions about whether her "escape" is genuinely empowering or simply a symptom of the systemic oppression she endures (Treichler, 1984). From a feminist perspective, the protagonist's breakdown in *The Yellow Wallpaper* can be seen as both an act of defiance and a critique of the limited forms of escape available to women within patriarchal structures (Qabaha & Hamamra, 2021). The protagonist's mental unraveling highlights the devastating impact of societal norms that deny women autonomy and agency. Her identification with the woman in the wallpaper and her eventual breakdown serve as metaphors for the broader struggles of women who are silenced, marginalized, and confined by societal expectations. Hence, although the story ends with the protagonist's crawling over her fainted husband, being treated as a victory, it is still worthwhile to take care of the huge costs of her during the process of escaping.

Escape in *The Tiredness of Rosabel*

Similarly, in *The Tiredness of Rosabel*, the protagonist's romantic fantasies and daydreams offer her with temporary emotional refuge from the bleakness of her reality. In other words, her fantasies serve as a coping mechanism, enabling Rosabel to momentarily transcend the exhaustion and alienation of her working-class existence and woman who is shortage of upward growing and life satisfaction. This imagination enables her to survive and extends her female identity in the constrained world marked by the features of male domination through her duplicity, clairvoyance and exceptional insights (Wilson, 2014). However, according to Wilson (2014), the fantasies serve as a coping mechanism, as Rosabel is able to momentarily transcend the exhaustion and alienation of her working class existence. For example, when Rosabel was on bus for home, she was trapped into the fantasy as if she was a rich woman wearing luxury clothes, being with another rich man who "bending down to kiss her hair" and expressing his love for her. The fantasy was written filled with sensory details, vivid and colorful, showing a big contrast with the boring reality she is suffering. But it is indeed these fantasy that makes her escape from the reality and enables her to transcend from the reality of being a working-class female figure. However, such escape is temporal as Mansfield emphasizes the fleeting nature of such escapism by describing the moments when Rosabel returns to reality. For example, when the bus comes to a stop, her daydreams are abruptly interrupted, forcing her to confront the cold reality: a dimly lit room, coarse clothing, and her tired body. This sudden contrast

underscores the helplessness of her inner struggle in reality, even though she experiences happiness, contented feelings, and satisfaction in her fantasy.

Feminism critique holds the view that the male dominated world is filled with inequality and constraints for women whose aspirations can hardly be realized but be neglected or thwarted by societal expectations. Feminists views think that it is unfair to prioritize women's role as caregivers, objects of desire, or passive workers, who have to depend on males with little consideration of their own individual needs and ambitions (Prasad et al., 2021). The women are endowed with very limited space to express their individuality or ability to pursue their own dreams. Rosabel's fantasies, though vivid, are rooted in a societal framework that equates women's worth with their ability to attract male attention or achieve wealth through marriage. Her inner world's strong sense of powerlessness and imagined escape from the reality was hugely dependent on external factors beyond her control rather than her own agency. Hence, from the story, one can learn that feminist's critique mainly blames the systemic inequalities for women which restrict their opportunities for self-fulfillment.

Comparisons and Conclusions

Both the short stories have exhibited the constrained female characters' image: their struggle to make herself being listened, respected, and presented in the male-dominated hierarchical society. But their specific manifestations to such repression are different due to their distinct social contexts. Like in *In The Yellow Wallpaper*, as summarized and analyzed above, repression emerges through the protagonist's forced confinement and the suppression of her creative and intellectual impulses under patriarchal control (like from her husband as the representative of the male-dominated hierarchical authority). The room with yellow wallpaper becomes both a literal and symbolic prison, reflecting her psychological deterioration and the societal constraints placed on her. The yellow wallpaper itself intensifies her repression, representing oppressive societal structures that trap her identity within patriarchal boundaries. The similar story was found in *The Tiredness of Rosabel* when repression mainly stems from Rosabel's working-class female identity. She felt the exhaustion, contrasted with the vivid imagination of the ideal life in her mind. While her repression is not as overtly tied to a controlling figure as in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, it is deeply ingrained in the systemic inequalities of class and gender. Both protagonists face repressive environments that stifle their ability to express themselves or achieve

autonomy.

Similarly, the second theme of escape, as a response to such repression, is thought to be the self rescue from these female characters' own perspective as there is no external power force that stands out to help them out to fulfill their individualized desire, ideals, and personal pursuits. Their strategies to escape is limited to their mental, and spiritual perspectives, holding very limited influence on real-world situation. For example, In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist seeks liberation through her imagination, which becomes a tool to process and resist her entrapment. Her fixation on the wallpaper and eventual tearing of it symbolize a desperate attempt to reclaim her agency, although this escape is achieved at the cost of her mental health. In *The Tiredness of Rosabel*, escape is achieved through fantasies and daydreams making her to escape from the reality temporarily, but still these fantasies fleet away rather quickly. Unlike the protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Rosabel does not directly resist her circumstances; instead, her escapism highlights her powerlessness within a rigid societal structure. However, both forms of escape reflect the constraints on women due to societal expectations, making women powerless for self-fulfillment.

From a feminist perspective, both stories critique the oppressive systems that constrain women's lives, whether through patriarchal dominance or socio-economic inequality. The protagonists' experiences of repression and their efforts to escape reveal the pervasive impact of these systems on women's autonomy and identity. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist's breakdown serves as both a critique of patriarchal norms and a symbolic act of defiance. In contrast, *The Tiredness of Rosabel* highlights the intersection of gender and class, illustrating how systemic inequalities marginalize women and restrict their aspirations. Conclusively, both stories, as analyzed in this essay, has portrayed the themes of repression and escape as interconnected themes which not only reflected their inner conflicts with the reality, but also shows the larger societal constraints on women. Women are struggling in this reality but has no means but mental illusion to escape, which indicates the need for systemic change to address the societal inequalities that confine women's lives and aspirations.

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