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5 The Reading Habit and 'The Yellow Wallpaper'

BARBARA HOCHMAN

During Charlotte Perkins Gilman's engagement to Walter Stetson, a friend offered her a copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Gilman refused to accept the volume, saying that she would never read Whitman. Discussing this incident, Anne Lane attributes Gilman's refusal of the book to the influence of Stetson, who apparently 'accepted, at least for his fiancée, the conventional view of his day that defined Whitman's poetry as unseemly and unsavory' (Lane xi). Any anxiety Stetson may have had about the consequences of reading *Leaves of Grass* would have rested upon another perfectly 'conventional view' of the day, the notion that one's reading could have an enduring impact on one's life – significant effects, whether benign or pernicious.

Much has been written about Gilman's relation to the 'work' of writing, but her relation to reading deserves more attention than it has received. At the end of the nineteenth century many writers, reviewers, and educators were preoccupied by the pros and cons of what was widely referred to as 'the reading habit.' This essay will historicize 'The Yellow Wallpaper' by suggesting that the story reflects culturally typical anxieties about certain kinds of fiction-reading, especially the practice of reading for escape, through projection and identification. Whether or not Gilman shared these anxieties – and I believe that she did – her most famous story provides an oblique but powerful image of a woman reader who is temporarily exhilarated but ultimately destroyed while absorbed in a mesmerizing text. The figure of the narrator in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' reflects Gilman's own intensely conflicted relation to reading, including her painful inability to read at all during the period of emotional upheaval on which the story is based. Attention to the story's self-reflexive concern with the dynamics of reading elucidates

not only Gilman's own reading practices but also her commitment to fiction 'with a purpose' (as she referred to 'The Yellow Wallpaper' in an exchange with William Dean Howells [*The Living* 121]).

Although Gilman's 'purpose' in writing 'The Yellow Wallpaper' was misunderstood by many of her contemporaries, the strong emotional impact of the story was never in doubt. When Horace Scudder rejected the story for the *Atlantic*, he wrote Gilman: 'I could not forgive myself, if I made others as miserable as I have made myself' (*The Living* 119). Less well known than Scudder's famous response to the story are the comments of a reader who sent a letter of 'protest' to the *Boston Transcript* after 'The Yellow Wallpaper' appeared in the *New England Magazine*. Charging that 'such literature contains deadly peril,' the letter devotes particular attention to the story's powerful grip upon its reader. 'It is graphically told, in a somewhat sensational style, which makes it difficult to lay aside, after the first glance, til [*sic*] it is finished, holding the reader in morbid fascination to the end' (*The Living* 120). This description of reading 'The Yellow Wallpaper' bears an uncanny resemblance to the way Gilman's story itself represents the narrator: 'morbidly fascinated' by the wall-paper, increasingly preoccupied with it, and determined to follow its pattern to 'some sort of conclusion' (19).¹ In the course of the story, the narrator herself becomes a reader – an avid, indeed an obsessive reader of the paper on the walls that surround her. From a nineteenth-century point of view, the narrator becomes what Nancy Glazener has recently called an 'addictive' reader – one who reads incessantly and who, while doing so, loses her last remaining hold on reality (chap. 3).

Gilman's nameless protagonist enters an action-filled world that she creates by inference from a printed design. As a result, her depression and despair are temporarily dispelled. Like a reader absorbed in an exciting tale, the narrator 'follow[s] the pattern about by the hour' (19). Soon she finds that '[l]ife [is] much more exciting than it used to be.' She has 'something more to expect, to look forward to' (27). Like a reader who can't put a book down, she no longer sleeps much 'at night for it is so exciting to watch developments' (28). Like the reader of a detective story (a popular genre at the end of the last century), the narrator's assiduity pays off and she 'discerns something at last' (29).²

To perceive the narrator as a kind of fiction reader is to see that Gilman's story projects a brilliant nightmare-version of what many nineteenth-century commentators represented as a common reading practice – and a dangerous one. In a phrase that might have been used

by any anti-fiction critic of the period, Gilman's narrator herself notes the paper's 'vicious influence' (16).³ Literary journals of the period repeatedly distinguished the valuable 'habit' of consuming books for 'pleasure and improvement' from the kind of reading 'habit' associated with inferior reading matter and with an inferior reader (often, though not always, a woman). If we reflect upon 'The Yellow Wallpaper' in this context, it can be seen as a kind of cautionary tale about nineteenth-century reading – especially, but not exclusively, women's reading.⁴

To put some historical pressure on both the idea of the narrator as a reader and that of the wallpaper as a 'text,' let us set aside the characteristic emphasis on the content of the story implied by the wall-paper. Like the narrator herself, critics of the last twenty years have devoted a great deal of attention to the writing on the wall and have suggested that the wall-paper – like Gilman's story – tells the tale of nineteenth-century women, rendered querulous, infantile, and passive by the restrictions imposed upon them.⁵ With this aspect of the story well established, much can be gained by seeing the wall-paper not only as a symbolic text but as a more literal (indeed a fictional) one.

Understood metaphorically, the problem of 'reading' in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' has been much discussed. The idea that the narrator comes to understand her own existential situation by reading herself into the wall-paper has provided a key to the story for almost twenty years. Many critics interpret the wall-paper – with its dominant pattern, its subordinate pattern, and its emerging image of a woman behind bars – as the 'patriarchal text' in which literary women, in fact all women, are trapped.⁶ Of course, the wall-paper is not always taken as a constricting or constraining text; sometimes it is seen as one that enables the narrator to confront her own situation and gain access to long-suppressed feelings. 'Blocked from expressing herself *on* paper,' Judith Fetterley writes, the narrator 'seeks to express herself *through* paper ... [S]he converts the wallpaper into her text ... and recognizes [in it] elements of her own resisting self' (164). The wall-paper, in short, is repeatedly seen as a kind of text; yet it is never exactly a text that the narrator writes, nor is it exactly a text that she reads.

The wall-paper has neither words nor pages. Perhaps that is why it has so often been seen as an image of the narrator's life, never as an analogue of Gilman's writing, or of other fictional works. Still, the narrator 'follows' the paper as if it were a story with a plot. Through the image of the narrator Gilman inscribes a kind of protocol of reading into her story:⁷ the narrator's 'addictive' reading provides a forceful image of

how Gilman's tale is *not* to be read. This image points to a reader who was widely presumed to exist in nineteenth-century America. I mean the kind of fiction reader who was repeatedly attacked for what one doctor at mid-century called a 'profitless, pernicious habit [that] ... poisons the imagination [and] dissipates the mind' (qtd. in Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 14–15; cf. Borus, 195–6).

The Reading Habit

'The Yellow Wallpaper' sets out to modify contemporary conceptions of readers and reading by emphasizing the social as well as the psychic consequences of the narrator's reading 'habit.' If we see the narrator's relation to the wall-paper as the relation of a nineteenth-century reader to a fictional text, we have a schematic representation of a practice that was severely criticized in the 1880s and 1890s. The anti-fiction prejudice and the widespread ambivalence about the potential effects of the reading 'habit' were deeply ingrained elements of the literary culture within and for which Gilman wrote.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, men of letters regarded the emerging genre of the novel with suspicion. Although disapproval of fiction lost much of its force between the 1860s and the 1890s, it did not disappear. Even at the end of the century, editors, educators, and reviewers often denounced a mode of reading that was presumed to result in a loss of borders and therefore of the reader's sense of reality. This way of reading, moreover, was generally associated with fiction that, like the wall-paper itself, often seemed flamboyant, inconsistent, or outrageous. As many commentators saw it, fiction in general, and certain kinds of fiction in particular, fostered an imaginary merger between the reader and figures who never existed. Sentimental fiction, historical romance, and other popular genres were repeatedly charged with encouraging passivity, escapism, and emotional extravagance. The 'novel-reading habit' in particular was identified with a lack of control. Associated with lower appetites, intemperance, and even corruption, it was seen to foster delusions, indiscriminate desire, and the possible breaking of social boundaries. Carried away by impossible visions graphically represented, a reader might well lose his or her sense of 'place' and even self.⁸

Such an outcome was quite different from that attributed to active, critical reading – the kind promoted at mid-century by writers like Melville or Thoreau and praised in many contexts both before and after

the Civil War.⁹ Between the 1850s and the 1890s educators, writers, and reviewers repeatedly differentiated between reading that was passive or frivolous and reading that was serious, active, and conducive to self-development. Towards the end of the century many commentators stressed the innumerable benefits to be gained by 'spending less than an hour a day' on reading. As one such article titled 'The Reading Habit' put it, 'Of all the habits that can be cultivated, none is more productive of pleasure and improvement than that of reading, provided the books be well chosen' (60). Throughout the century, similar formulations appeared in manuals with titles like *How to Read a Book*, *The Choice of Books*, and Noah Porter's influential *Books and Reading: What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?*¹⁰ Such discussions regularly stressed the critical faculty – the need for activity, choice, and purposiveness in reading.

As an adolescent and a young woman, Gilman saw herself as just the kind of diligent and purposive reader projected by cultural custodians like Noah Porter, Edward Everett Hale (Gilman's uncle), or her own librarian-father, Frederick Perkins. Gilman's 'learned father,' as she describes him on the first page of her autobiography, was the author of *The Best Reading*, a reference book that 'was for long the standard' (*The Living*, 4). Indeed, Gilman claims that she always associated the word 'father' with 'advice about books and the care of them' (5–6). When Gilman was seventeen she wrote to her absentee father, asking him to provide a list of books that she could use as a starting point for her most ambitious goal: 'improvement of the human race' (36, 47).

Between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one Gilman believed that her 'steady reading' would give her access to 'the larger movements of the time' (61). She read voraciously, seeking a way 'to help humanity' (70) and disciplining herself with all her 'powers of ratiocination' (75). As Gilman represents this phase of her life, the image of her reading-self suggests a passionate commitment to the sort of vigorous, reality-bound reading praised by nineteenth-century commentators. It is not surprising to find that fiction-reading plays virtually no role in Gilman's account of her development.¹¹

In writing 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' Gilman entered a highly contested literary field where many fictional genres jockeyed for position. She had a clear sense of what her own fiction was not to provide: escapist visions and vicarious emotional gratification. One could say of Gilman's fiction in general what Ann Lane says of Gilman's utopia: it 'leads us back to reality,' not away from it (xxxiv). Even Gilman's most fanciful stories –

'When I Was a Witch,' or 'If I Were a Man' – employ whimsy for didactic and pragmatic ends, creating a sharp focus on social conventions in contemporary America.¹² Before I examine the narrator's reading practices in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' more closely, a brief look at another Gilman story will suggest how Gilman could inscribe a protocol of reading into her text with a few deft strokes.

A minor character in 'The Girl in the Pink Hat' is 'a romantic soul,' who is always reading 'foolish stories' in 'her interminable magazines' (39, 46). Towards the end of the story, this girl – an innocent victim of male duplicity and aggression – immerses herself in 'one of Leroy Scott's doubly involved detective stories, [and] forget[s] her own distresses a while following those of other people' (46). The girl's 'escapist' reading in this context seems harmless enough. Yet this character, seduced by the fictions of a con man, has failed to act rationally on her own behalf. Only the narrator's intervention saves the 'girl in pink' from destruction. She is rescued because the narrator, seated behind her on a train, pays attention to the troubles of a fellow passenger rather than whiling away her time with 'foolish stories.' Although Gilman seems to concede that there might be some advantages to a tale that simply 'take[s] up your mind' and diverts it (46), she mocks such stories for didactic purposes.

'The Girl in the Pink Hat' can be taken as a gloss on Gilman's sense of the contrast between escapist fiction and her own work. There was a crucial difference for Gilman between reading that might become a substitute for the 'real' world, and reading that might lead one to confront it. No story of hers engages this problem more forcefully than 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'

The Narrator Reads

Presented in the form of a diary, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' begins with a focus on the narrator's writing. Her writing is a pervasive motif for almost half the narrative. Many discussions of the tale emphasize the narrator's frustrated need and desire to write. However, as Annette Kolodny and Richard Feldstein have noted, the focus on writing disappears entirely by the middle of the text (156, 276–7). The last reference to the narrator's writing appears at the beginning of the fourth section ('I don't know why I should write this' [21]). As her effort to write is abandoned, it is replaced by a growing determination to read the pattern inscribed in the wall-paper.

The narrator turns out to be far more persistent as a reader than she has been as a writer, and her commitment only increases as the story continues. Early on, the narrator repeatedly seeks a way out of the room where she is confined. Once she becomes engrossed in the wall-paper, however, her desire to escape diminishes and then disappears. She becomes 'fond of the room ... *because of the paper*' (19), and determined to satisfy her curiosity about its design. The narrator grows increasingly absorbed in the paper and intensely possessive about it. 'There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me or ever will,' she insists (22).

Although the narrator is not represented as much of a reader until the middle of the story, certain details point to her reading habits as early as the opening section. In her initial description of the house she inhabits, the narrator notes: 'It makes me think of English places that you read about' (11). These lines do not specify a particular text that makes the narrator 'think of English places,' but they do establish her as a reader. When she subsequently notes that if the house were 'haunted' she would reach the 'heights of romantic felicity' (9), we may well infer that she has been reading gothic fiction.¹³

The narrator's 'romantic' sensibility is elaborated through many details in the text, and has often been seen as part of the contrast between her and her husband, a contrast sharply drawn along stereotypical gender lines. While the narrator seeks 'romantic felicity,' John is 'practical in the extreme' (9). From John's point of view, his wife's 'imaginative power and habit of storymaking' only exacerbate her 'nervous weakness' (15). References to her 'silly fancies' (22) and 'foolish fancy' (24) abound. As critics have noted, John's view of the narrator as fanciful serves his effort to dismiss her ideas, keep her from creative 'work,' and confine her to domestic functions.

At the outset, however, the narrator's response to the wall-paper itself is far from fanciful or romantic. Instead it is critical and somewhat detached. 'I never saw a worse paper in my life,' she declares in her first description of it; '[o]ne of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin' (13). Many of the narrator's statements about the wall-paper suggest that she is familiar with the vocabulary of aesthetic discourse. Repelled by the wall-paper's 'flamboyant pattern,' she stresses its 'artistic' limitations (13) and asserts, 'I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation or repetition or symmetry, or anything else I ever heard of' (20). These comments designate the paper as an aesthetic object, which the narrator initially considers

from a relatively analytic point of view. She approaches the paper with a set of assumptions about aesthetic unity and what she calls 'the principle of design' (20). Thus the narrator is represented not only as a middle-class woman and fiction reader, but also as an educated person whose reading has not been confined to ghost stories.

The categories used by the narrator, however, often seem unsuited to a description of wall-paper and indeed more appropriate to discussion of a narrative. If we imagine the wall-paper as a fictional text – sometimes dull and repetitive, but also flamboyant, outrageous, self-contradictory, and repellant – we might see it as a sentimental or sensational work, the sort denounced by many nineteenth-century critics, especially those who were partial to realism. It will seem less fanciful to think of the wall-paper in these terms if we take a closer look at how the story renders the narrator's increasing desire to 'follow' the printed pattern on the wall.

While the narrator offers intermittent remarks about the aesthetic composition of the paper until late in the story, her commentary reflects a growing disposition to read the pattern like a plot – a sequence of events – structured around human agents. The narrator's tendency to see the paper as a form that harbours human life is evident from early in the story.¹⁴ At first she attributes human qualities to isolated elements of the design – its 'broken neck' or 'unblinking eyes' (16). 'Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those unblinking eyes are everywhere,' she notes (16). But 'lolling necks' and eyes are not the only animated features of the pattern. 'Looked at in one way,' the narrator suggests in the third section, 'the bloated curves and flourishes – a kind of "debased Romanesque" with *delirium tremens* – go waddling up and down' (20). The paper's 'curves and flourishes' are not explicitly identified as human figures here; but they are nothing if not animated. First they 'waddl[e]'; soon they 'run off ... in full chase' (20). Moreover, the narrator identifies the 'curves and flourishes' with *delirium tremens*, a strictly human affliction (and one that gains additional resonance in the context of the narrator's own emerging 'habit'). As the narrator continues to contemplate the paper, its trembling animation only seems to increase. At times the narrator reads the design as you might read a tale of adventure, throwing herself imaginatively into the midst of the action. Her efforts to 'follow' the pattern are repeatedly frustrated, but her desire to do so is a recurrent, in fact a pervasive emphasis. She is preoccupied with the design's 'lack of sequence' (25) and bent upon resolving the seemingly irrational pattern into some sort of mimetic

representation – one with a beginning, a middle, and an end. 'I WILL follow [the] ... pattern to some sort of conclusion' (19), she insists.

What we might call the climax of the narrator's reading experience occurs when 'at last' she discovers the woman behind bars (29). This, of course, is the image that has galvanized readers of the last twenty years into reclaiming 'The Yellow Wallpaper' for the literary canon in general, and feminist criticism in particular. But since the main focus of the present argument is the process or experience of reading, rather than the implications of domestic ideology, the point to emphasize here is that the narrator gradually discerns a distinct storyline in the pattern that she 'follows.' This storyline centres on a figure that takes on human features, motivations, and finally a specifically human shape. Soon the narrator identifies herself with both the figure and the plot that she has discovered (or projects). Indeed, towards the end of the story she merges with that figure and enters that plot.

Addictive Reading or Creative Practice?

The narrator attributes human features and motives to the paper until the end of the story, but gradually the image of the woman behind bars becomes the central focus of her attention. As discussions of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' have noted, the narrator comes to read the wall-paper primarily by seeing her own situation – her entrapment, frustration, and anger – reflected back to her, first through the 'strange, provoking, formless sort of figure' (18) whose identity is unclear, and finally through the woman who 'shake[s] the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out' (23).

Many readers of the story have argued that the narrator's developing relation to the wall-paper is a process of self-recognition, one that boldly confronts reality, even though the price is high.¹⁵ However, the narrator's identification with the figure of the imprisoned woman can be seen as a practice that divorces her from reality. By the time the narrator triumphantly announces, 'I've got out at last ... [and] you can't put me back' (36), she no longer differentiates between herself and the woman in the paper at all. It is in this sense that the narrator's behaviour looks like an extreme version (perhaps even a parody) of novel-reading as anti-fiction critics imagined it – an activity that by eliciting the reader's own fantasies could render her (or him) useless for the real 'business' of life.

Writing in *Forum* in 1894, Hjalmar Hjorth Boyeson expressed characteristic anxieties about the detrimental effects of sensational and 'infe-

rior' fiction. Using the trope of addiction, he reflects upon Jean Jacques Rousseau's representation of reading in *The Confessions*. According to Boyeson, Rousseau 'was unfitted for life by the reading of novels' (724). *The Confessions*, he argues, shows how Rousseau sought refuge in fiction from 'the "sordid" reality which surrounded him' (724). He read 'with a ravenous appetite for the intoxication which he craved ... more and more ... Like the opium habit the craving for fiction grew upon him, until the fundamental part of him suffered irreparable harm' (724). Boyeson emphasizes that the 'detrimental effects' caused by Rousseau's 'intemperance in the matter of fiction' were the typical result of 'dwelling too long' in an alternative reality constructed by reading (724).

In an essay entitled 'The Novel-Reading Habit' published in 1898, George Clarke, like Boyeson, elaborated the seductive powers of fiction by comparing 'the effects of novel-reading ... with those of indulgence in opium or intoxicating liquors' (674). Emphasizing that '[t]he sensations excited by fiction ... are superior in rapidity of succession to those of real life,' Clarke notes that fiction seems to offer 'escape' from 'tedium and anxiety' (671, 674). Among the 'easiest victims,' he explains, are '[p]ersons who ... have an abundance of leisure time, and who have not acquired by education a healthy interest in subjects of serious study or a taste for what is best in literature' (674). The narrator of 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' subjected to the enforced 'rest' of a 'cure' for depression and prevented from exercising whatever interest she may have had in 'the best' literature, reads the wall-paper precisely for relief from 'tedium[,] ... anxiety,' and the pressures of 'real life.' But for her, as for Boyeson's Rousseau or Clarke's addicted novel reader, what begins as diversion ends as intensified debility and even obsession.

When nineteenth-century commentators emphasized that if a reader were to identify too completely with a fictional character he or she might have trouble returning to the demands and the limits of daily reality, they drew upon another common assumption about reading: the idea of the novel reader as a self-involved and isolated person.¹⁶ By 1890 an 'excessive indulgence in novel-reading' had long been associated with the image of the solitary reader. The act of reading itself – private, silent, infinitely absorbing – was seen as a kind of metonymy for the dangerous moral and social situation of every fiction reader, first cut off from daily life in the very act of reading, and then later, as a consequence, radically dissociated from appropriate social roles and responsibilities.¹⁷ I suggest that by elaborating the narrator's preoccupation with

the woman in the wall-paper until it reaches fantastic proportions, Gilman sought to prevent her own readers from identifying uncritically with the narrator's situation and thereby in a sense reproducing it. If 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' as Fetterley suggests, is 'a text that can help the woman reader to effect an escape' from the constrictions of domesticity (such as Gilman herself achieved in her own life), it is such a text only insofar as readers employ a particular reading strategy, one that enables them to differentiate between their own experience and that of Gilman's narrator (164).

Like all Gilman's work, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' has clear didactic purposes. Gilman meant her story to be read as social criticism – not merely, let us say, for excitement and suspense, like detective fiction or a ghost story. But Gilman well knew that there could be a considerable gap between an author's intention and a reader's response. How could she lead her reader to perceive the wider social issues implicit in the narrator's experience? I have been proposing that Gilman designed her tale to discourage her readers from identifying with the narrator as the narrator identifies with the woman in the subpattern. From this point of view there is a certain irony in the fact that feminist readings of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' have relied so heavily on identification with the narrator.

As Susan Lanser pointed out in 1989, feminist interpretations of the story have often been shaped by 'an unacknowledged over-identification with the narrator-protagonist. I now wonder,' Lanser wrote, 'whether many of us have repeated the gesture of the narrator ... [determined to] read until she finds what she was looking for. ... [W]e may have reduced the text's complexity to what we need most: our own image reflected back to us' (420). Feminist readers, of course, do not literally identify the woman in the wall-paper as themselves; nor do they (like the narrator) see the printed text as their own habitat or antagonist. Thus, as Lanser notes, the final move of many feminist discussions has been to shift the focus of attention from the narrator to the author of the tale. The story encourages this move in part by the structural anomaly created when the narrator stops writing. In the course of the story, the narrator's preoccupation with the wall-paper displaces her desire to write in her diary and culminates in her quixotic attack on the material text. Stripping paper off the walls, crawling around the floor of the nursery, she cannot be imagined as writing at all, and at this juncture if one asks whose writing we are reading, the figure of Gilman herself comes into view.

The Author as Reader

Like the narrator/protagonist whom she created, Gilman was both a writer and a reader. Gilman's own defiance of the doctor's orders – her persistence as a writer – is well known to students of her work. Yet her reading practices, which have received little emphasis, are equally relevant not only to the design of 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' but to the experience on which the story draws. I have already suggested that Gilman's reading as a young woman provides a sharp contrast to that of both the narrator and the 'addicted' novel readers so graphically imagined by certain commentators of the period. Indeed, like Edith Wharton, and other upper- and middle-class women of her generation, Gilman was forbidden to read novels as a child (*The Living* 30).¹⁸ Reconstructing her childhood in her autobiography, Gilman (like Wharton again [*Backward Glance* 33–5]) emphasizes the powerful attraction of scenes created by her own imagination. She describes how she devoted a portion of each day to imagined scenarios until the age of thirteen, when she was required by her mother's disapproval to 'give them up' (*The Living* 23). It was after renouncing the pleasures of what she calls 'wishing' that Gilman wrote to her father for a list of the 'best books.' From this point on, as Gilman tells it, she read for the logic and hard facts of natural history, philosophy, and science. She would seem to have internalized the disapproval widely associated with fictional worlds in late-nineteenth-century American culture.

As we have seen, Gilman's 'reading habit' helped her shape large ambitions for herself and her society. In this sense her experience as a reader corresponds to a pattern that recent feminist historians have traced. By drawing on the letters, diaries, and commonplace books of nineteenth-century women, as well as the work of response critics and theorists of reading, Mary Kelley, Barbara Sicherman, and others have shown how, for many women of the period, reading became an active and 'creative' practice with 'transformative potential' (Kelley 404). This view of nineteenth-century women's reading constitutes a challenge to the image of the passive or addicted fiction reader. It also challenges an idea proposed by Wai-Chee Dimock: that 'The Yellow Wallpaper' was designed for a woman reader who did not exist at the turn of the century.¹⁹ The nineteenth-century women whose reading habits Kelley and Sicherman describe were the forerunners of the 'professional' readers who rediscovered Gilman's tale a century later.

Up to a point, the work of Sicherman, Kelley, and others restates the

idea of women's reading as a private encounter in which a book – often a novel – stimulates the fantasy or imagination of a solitary reader. But these historians represent the reading experience as empowering and creative, not solipsistic or self-destructive. Describing the reading habits in one Victorian middle-class family where reading was a central activity, Sicherman emphasizes 'the freedom of imagination women found in books ... Reading provided space – physical, temporal, psychological – that permitted women to exempt themselves from traditional gender expectations, whether imposed by formal society or by family obligation' ('Sense and Sensibility' 202). Discussing Alice Hamilton and her siblings,²⁰ for example, Sicherman underscores the imaginative intensity of the reading experience. There are times, to be sure, when this intensity itself suggests the very dynamic that elicited the concern of the anti-fiction critics. Writing in her diary in 1890, the young Agnes Hamilton describes herself as living 'in the world of novels all the time' and expresses anxiety about her "insane passion" for reading' (207–8). Comparing it to 'an addiction,' Hamilton notes that she has 'resolved not to read another novel for a week at least, and [that she] consequently feels like a reformed drunkard' (qtd. in Sicherman 207–8). The imagery of addiction and intemperance should sound familiar by now; but it is important here to stress the differences between Hamilton's 'insane [reading] passion,' and the 'addictive' reading imagined by anti-fiction critics, or by Gilman in 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'

Insofar as Hamilton's reading threatened to overwhelm her at times, she herself was aware of this as a problem, and reflected upon the issue. But more than that, Hamilton's reading, like that of her sisters and many other nineteenth-century middle-class women, took place not in isolation but in the framework of a highly supportive interpretive community where books were often read aloud in company and discussed in a variety of contexts.²¹ Many nineteenth-century women were avid consumers of books; but they did not necessarily read alone. Indeed, for American women of the period, reading was often what Mary Kelley has called a 'collective practice' (420). 'The female culture of reading,' Sicherman writes, 'fostered friendship and love, healing and learning, [and] reinforced individual efforts at self-creation' ('Reading and Ambition' 79).

Unlike the women described by Kelley and Sicherman, the narrator/reader of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is denied both peer support and self-expression through writing. Since her enforced isolation makes reading her *only* activity, the desires stirred by her reading have no constructive outlet and are forced back upon themselves under the coercive con-

ditions of the 'rest cure.' By contrast, Gilman herself can be taken as another example of a nineteenth-century woman whose reading became a ground of constructive self-fashioning. If the interpretive conventions denounced by anti-fiction critics are in some sense analogous to those of Gilman's narrator, the reading practices described by Sicherman and Kelley are in some sense analogous to Gilman's own. The story of Gilman as a reader does not end as disastrously as that of the narrator in 'The Yellow Wallpaper.' But it does not end as happily as Kelley's narrative of 'learned women' in antebellum America or Sicherman's tales of 'female heroism.' A lasting and little-noted consequence of Gilman's 'breakdown' (as she refers to it in her autobiography) was a permanent inability to read at all with any ease or pleasure. Her refurbished life and her enormous productivity as a writer and lecturer are all the more amazing in the light of this enduring handicap. At one point in *The Living* Gilman attributes her 'ruin' in part to 'the rigid stoicism and constant effort in character-building of my youth; I was "over-trained" and had wasted my substance in riotous – virtues' (98). If Gilman's self-analysis is correct, she paid a heavy price for her renunciation of 'wishing' and other imaginative outlets. Her lonely and rigorous attempts at self-shaping through 'the power of ratiocination' may have contributed not only to significant achievement, but also to inordinate pain.

Gilman's autobiography tells the story of a child who read 'eagerly, greedily,' a girl who read steadily, with warm interest, in connected and scientific study' (99), and a woman who 'lost books out of [her] life' (100). 'The Yellow Wallpaper' was written at a time when Gilman 'could read nothing' (99); years later the effort to read still turned her mind into 'boiled spinach' (99). In this context the narrator's determination to 'follow' the design of the wall-paper and make it cohere may also reflect Gilman's own desperate – and futile – struggles with printed matter during her most difficult days.

Feminist readings of Gilman's story have elided both the figure of the narrator as an isolated, fantasy-ridden reader and the figure of Gilman as a tormented one. It is worth bringing these images back into focus because 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is informed by two contrasting and historically specific images of women reading: isolated, 'addicted,' and identifying with a phantom on the one hand; capable of 'creative appropriations'²² that become the ground of far-reaching ambition (but, at least in Gilman's case, also emotional stress) on the other.

'The Yellow Wallpaper' reflects the destructive consequences of solitary reading, reading for escape and for the vicarious satisfactions of

identification and merger. At the same time, the story, like Gilman's autobiography, attests to the 'transformative potential' of reading. If Gilman's narrator fails to realize that potential, Gilman well knew that there were other women like herself who could do so, despite the price. Many of Gilman's readers in the late twentieth century have read 'The Yellow Wallpaper' in that spirit, even if they have not always perceived the story's direct engagement with certain nineteenth-century reading practices – including Gilman's.

NOTES

- 1 When the story was first published in the *New England Magazine*, 'wall-paper' was spelled both with and without the hyphen. Recent editions of the story vary considerably in this respect. The edition that I am using deletes it, and I have done so when citing from the text, or mentioning the title. Elsewhere I retain the hyphen because it puts a certain emphasis on the wall-paper as 'paper.'
- 2 On detective stories at the end of the century, see Klein.
- 3 In the words of one essay on 'the novel-reading habit,' 'When the confirmed novel-reader has an idle hour the craving for his customary dissipation seizes him. Not being conscious of the viciousness of his habit, he offers less resistance than the toper and proceeds at once to indulge it' (Clarke 675).
- 4 Although, as Glazener notes, 'women were widely charged with addictive reading' (310), men, too, were cautioned that excessive novel-reading could draw one away from the vital concerns of life. For a challenge to the idea that nineteenth-century novels were mainly read by women, see Zboray, *A Fictive People* (chap. 11).
- 5 For readings of the story along these lines see Gilbert and Gubar, Fetterley, and Kolodny. For a recent reassessment of the way feminist literary studies have engaged separate sphere ideology, see Amy Kaplan.
- 6 To Gilbert and Gubar, Gilman's tale represents 'the story that all literary women would tell if they could' (145). 'The paper,' they write, 'surrounds the narrator like an inexplicable text' (146). In Annette Kolodny's formulation, towards the end of the story the narrator is 'totally surrendered to what is quite literally her own text – or rather herself as text' (157).
- 7 In 'First Steps Toward a History of Reading,' Robert Darnton proposes that insight into both readers and texts could be gained by 'comparing readers' accounts of their experience with the protocols of reading' inscribed in literary works (157).

- 8 On 'unreasonable' fantasies of advancement stimulated by fiction, see Borus (29–30). Glazener notes that 'the problem of literature's becoming a substitute for reality ... preoccupied [contributors to] the *Atlantic*' toward the end of the nineteenth century (105–6). For a discussion of the hostility to novel-reading in the early Republic, see Davidson (39–44 and chap. 3).
- 9 That 'alert and wakeful' reading was associated with serious, generally male, and elitist pursuits can be clearly seen in the 'On Reading' section of *Walden* (94), or in Melville's review of Hawthorne's *Mosses From an Old Manse*. The exclusionary emphasis of these texts may account for their disappearance from the most recent *Norton Anthology of American Literature*.
- 10 See Philes, Porter, Richardson. Some commentators criticized the growing emphasis on purposive reading. In 'The Vice of Reading' Edith Wharton directed her irony against what she called 'mechanical' readers, encouraged by the notion of reading for improvement and social advancement (513–21). See also Dunn.
- 11 Rare exceptions in *The Living* include fleeting references to Scott (1) and *The Virginian* (93). Discussing her attempts to acquire 'desirable traits' in her girlhood, Gilman refers to her project of imitating 'some admired character in history or fiction.' But since, as she explains, she got only 'as far as Socrates' (59), the 'fiction' in question is certainly not the nineteenth-century novel.
 Gilman's diary suggests she read more fiction than her autobiography reflects. During the 1880s and 1890s she read fiction by James, Alcott, Fuller, Frederic, Phelps, Poe, Twain, and many others. In general, her references to fiction reading are extremely sparse and matter of fact. Occasionally, however, they reflect the strong ambivalence about the power of fiction to beguile or enthrall that is under discussion here. (See, for example, pp. 19, 37.)
- 12 Gilman's ghost stories present the most serious challenge to the claim that her fiction 'lead[s] us back to reality.' Yet even 'The Great Wisteria,' one of Gilman's richest ghost stories, makes a forceful point about the stigma attached to unwed mothers. More obliquely and (for this reader) less successfully, 'The Rocking Chair' engages gender relations through its focus on the desirability of 'golden haired' girls.
- 13 Susan Lanser points to the gothic resonance of 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' linking the narrator's description of the house to that of the house in *Jane Eyre* (427–8). On 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the 'gothic,' see also Lane (xvii) and Shulman (xiv–xvi).
- 14 Here again, the narrator's responses are typical of nineteenth-century reading conventions generally. In representations of reading throughout the century, both professional and nonprofessional readers commonly used the

- trope of the book as a living thing – friend or foe. 'Books are only makeshifts for men,' in the words of one commentator (cited in Philes 13); or, as Bronson Alcott puts it, 'Good books ... like living friends, have their voices and physiognomies, and their company is prized as old acquaintances' (cited in Baldwin 13). For a discussion of the widespread reading practice of identifying books with people, see my *Getting at the Author*, especially chap. 1.
- 15 Many readings suggest that the narrator comes to recognize desires that she has suppressed and aspects of her self and situation that she has failed to acknowledge. See Fetterley, Gilbert and Gubar, Kolodny, Lanser.
 - 16 The image of the solitary reader has a long history. It played a role in the polemics of anti-fiction critics well before the nineteenth century, and was taken up in the twentieth century by theorists of the novel like Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukacs, and Ian Watt. In 1977 J. Paul Hunter suggested that the novel is 'naturally' an isolating medium (456, 472, 478). Since then, Roger Chartier has proposed 'the sociability of reading' as 'a fundamental counterpoint to the privacy of the act of reading' (158), and Elizabeth Long has challenged the 'hegemonic picture of reading as a solitary activity' (192).
 - 17 Solitary reading can be seen from a different perspective, of course. 'Private reading is already, in itself, an act of autonomy,' Cora Kaplan writes; 'in turn it sets up or enables space for reflective thought' (123). See also Radway (90–4).
 - 18 Gilman also describes a visit to a ninety-nine-year-old woman who, when asked what she does with her time, answered, "'I read nov-els. When I was young they would not let me read them, and now I read them all the time'" (*The Living*, 111).
 - 19 Attempting to historicize Wolfgang Iser's construct of the 'implied reader,' Dimock suggests that 'The Yellow Wallpaper' 'implies' an educated, rational, authoritative woman reader who was 'not quite real' in the 1890s. The 'cultural work' of the story, Dimock claims, was precisely to bring this woman reader into being. But there were many kinds of women readers, including educated and critical ones, in late-nineteenth-century America. Moreover, as Kolodny notes, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' does not exclude the male reader, and can even be seen as directed towards making him a 'better reader' (162). In *The Living*, Gilman emphasizes that 'the real purpose of the story was to reach S. Weir Mitchell and convince him of the error of his ways' (121). To recognize Gilman's designs on a male reader is not to deny the story's feminist concerns.
 - 20 'The Hamiltons of Fort Wayne, Indiana were an intensely and self-consciously literary family,' Sicherman writes; 'Hamiltons of three generations

- were distinguished by their literary interests' (202–3). Alice Hamilton became a doctor and the first woman on the medical faculty at Harvard; her sister Edith Hamilton is well known for her work on classical mythology.
- 21 Reading aloud was a common practice in many middle-class families (Kelley 407; Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility,' 206). Gilman's diaries provide ample evidence of the practice. See also Zboray and Zboray, 'Have You Read?' (168–70); 'Books, Reading, and the World of Goods' (588, 590–1, 596–7, 600).
- 22 On the idea of reading as creative 'appropriation' see Chartier (171). In 'Sense and Sensibility' Sicherman suggests that imaginative identification allows a reader to occupy a variety of subject positions, crossing lines of gender and class, selectively appropriating what can be useful to the self. On multiple subject positions encouraged by reading, see also Cora Kaplan (130–1, 139, 142).

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