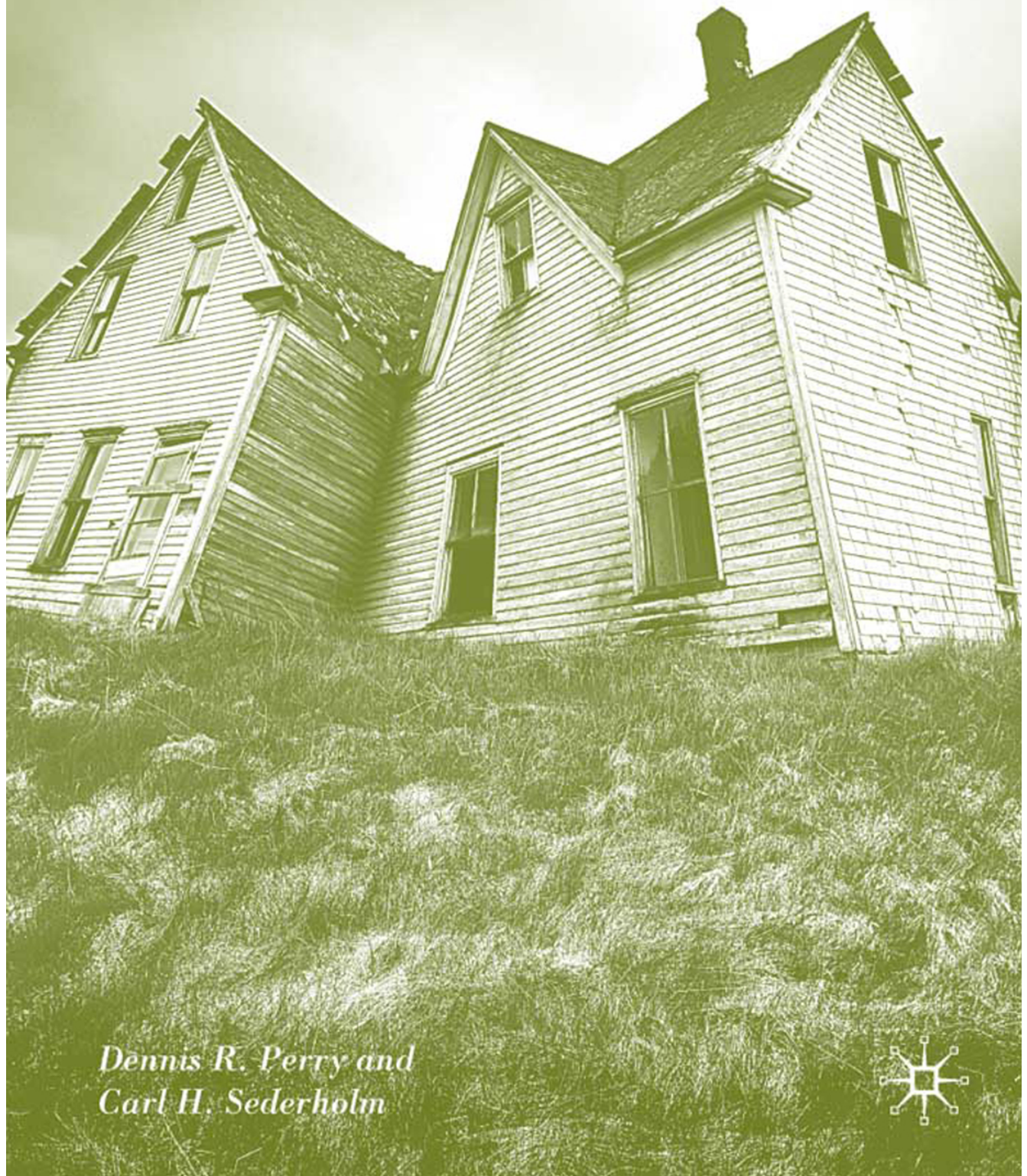


POE,
“THE HOUSE OF USHER,”
AND THE AMERICAN GOTHIC



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CHAPTER 2



FEMINIST “USHER”: DOMESTIC HORROR IN GILMAN’S “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER”

One of the recurring claims about Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” is that it bears certain unmistakable likenesses to some of the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Over the last 20 years, several critics have explored this significant literary relationship by reading “The Yellow Wallpaper” in light of tales such as “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat,” “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” and “The Pit and the Pendulum” (Golden, *Sourcebook* 28). Furthermore, many of Gilman’s earliest readers believed “The Yellow Wallpaper” to be an explicit extension of Poe’s interest in themes like madness, horror, and suspense. All of these approaches share the assumption that Gilman’s relationship to Poe is clear and obvious. Gilman herself clearly articulates her long-term interest in Poe not only in the many passages of her diary, but also in the section on Poe in her “Studies in Style.” While critics rightly point to Poe’s overall influence on Gilman, they typically overlook one of the most significant literary connections between them—the relationship between “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Although we do not wish to dismiss other readings that compare Poe and Gilman, we want to emphasize “Usher’s” unique significance for reading “The Yellow Wallpaper,” particularly because of its shared interest in women and madness. In fact, we argue that “The Yellow

Wallpaper" invites us to reread Poe's tale not only from a generally more feminist perspective but also from Madeline Usher's point of view. By inviting us to see "Usher" from Madeline's point of view, Gilman helps us understand Poe's own reading of his mysterious heroine. In fact, Gilman's literary conversation with Poe may serve as one of the most striking examples of the intertextually strenuous conversations in this study. In this chapter, we argue that Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" ought to be approached as a reading of "The Fall of the House of Usher," particularly because of the way it forcefully inverts Poe's predominantly male perspective. Gilman's approach is particularly significant because it tells the story from the point of view of a woman who feels trapped by the males in her life who presume a logical and rational means of explaining her "illness."

We see Gilman's dialogue with Poe paralleling Anna Nardo's claim about George Eliot's own dialogue with John Milton. As Nardo writes, Eliot puts "Miltonic language in dialogue with itself, [and evaluates] Miltonic characters and episodes by Milton's own language" (25). Likewise, Gilman may also be said to employ the language of Poe's psychological Gothicism in "Usher" in order to make a powerful and horrific feminist statement. As we read "The Yellow Wallpaper" in light of "The Fall of the House of Usher," we will recognize that there are new questions that want asking, new takes on character motivation that emerge, and new interpretations of action that demand consideration.

I

The earliest reactions to Gilman's innovative tale—particularly those based on its feminism and Poe's influence—have tended to dictate the tenor of readings and debates about the story ever since. At the time of its publication, some readers recognized it as a Gothic horror tale with a twist—"The Fall of the House of Usher' told from the point of view of the Lady Madeline" (Scharnhorst 17). In fact, others suggested that the story was even more terrifying than Poe's work. For example, Gilman's husband, Walter Stetson, claimed that the story was "more horrifying than even Poe's tales of terror" (Haney-Peritz 95). Moreover, William Dean Howells remarked that it was "too terribly good to be printed" (vii). Even worse, when Horace Scudder, the editor of

The Atlantic Monthly, rejected "The Yellow Wallpaper," he did so by complaining that the story made him feel so "miserable" that he was loathe to share such feelings with his readers. As he wrote to Gilman, "I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself!" (*Living* 119). Though they don't say so directly, both Stetson and Howells imply that their horrific response to "The Yellow Wallpaper" may have had something to do with its portrayal of female madness, something that they were clearly not prepared to deal with. But even in more recent times, despite critical emphasis on the story's feminism since the 1970 Feminist Press edition that introduced Gilman into the canon, Poe is recognized as an influence on Gilman's story. Annette Kolodny notes, for example, that "the story located itself . . . as a continuation of a genre popularized by Poe" (Kolodny 153–54).

Scudder's reaction, particularly, has received a great deal of attention over the years by feminist scholars because of its implications that Gilman's story was somehow an affront to his sense of masculinity. But Scudder's reaction, as Kolodny suggests, may present a larger problem contemporary readers had with the story. In other words, readers like Scudder brought to "The Yellow Wallpaper" a sensibility conditioned by reading Poe. Thus, "The Yellow Wallpaper" was understood to draw on Poe's influence but was innovative enough to use a female narrator and to change the setting to a comfortable summer house. As Kolodny argues, Poe's presence was so strong that it seemed to trump Gilman's larger purposes in the minds of her readers: "Poe continued as a well-traveled road, while Gilman's story, lacking the possibility of further influence, became a literary dead end" (155). She continues that "those fond of Poe could not easily transfer their sense of mental derangement to the mind of a comfortable middle-class wife and mother; and those for whom the woman in the home was a familiar literary character were hard-pressed to comprehend so extreme an anatomy of the psychic price she paid" (154–55). Such readings, Kolodny argues, fail to grasp the point of the story. Kolodny's reading generally reflects widely held assumptions about "The Yellow Wallpaper's" original reception as primarily a Gothic story. Julie Bates Dock challenges this view by demonstrating that certain "'facts' need reassessment as scholars increasingly acknowledge that literary criticism is as grounded in historical biases as the literature it seeks to interpret" (52). As Dock argues,

"Reviewers demonstrate that the story's first readers did recognize its indictments of marriage and of the treatment of women" (59–60). Indeed, though Poe's influence caused many readers to overlook Gilman's feminist point entirely, others got it.

The result of some of the feminist readings of Gilman's story is to pit her feminism against Poe's alleged literary patriarchalism. Judith Fetterley, for example, tries to distance Gilman from Poe by his more aggressive violence, particularly in tales like "Murders of the Rue Morgue." She reads Poe's story as a parable of female victimhood with the ape as man's secret animal hate and aggression. In contrast she argues for Gilman's literary independence from Poe, one that stresses a less violent emphasis that distinguishes her from her forebear. Kolodny is answered in part by Beverly Hume, who finds the "potential violence" in "The Black Cat" and "The Yellow Wallpaper" comparable: "Gilman's narrator displays a chilling potential for domestic violence that not only haunts this tale, but threatens to undermine Gilman's stated feminist goal to 'reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways'" (4). Our position is that the critical opposition between Gilman's feminist agenda in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and her reliance on Poe's psychological Gothicism misses the point. A look at her story in light of both Gilman's personal experience and Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" argues for a feminism that grows out of her response to what might be called Poe's own Gothic feminism.

Gilman's interest in Poe largely coincides with the period of some of her darkest and deepest psychological anxieties. During the five years following her marriage to Stetson in 1884, Gilman struggled with that decision. She almost immediately regretted what for her were the grating routines of domestic life. When her daughter Katharine was born in 1885, her depression and anxiety increased exponentially; she later wrote about this period that she felt deep monotony, characterized by a sense of hopelessness and regret. As she puts it, "Every morning the same hopeless waking . . . the same weary drag. To die mere cowardice. Retreat impossible, escape impossible" (Scharnhorst 7). She eventually escapes temporarily to California, alone, to stay with her brother, and while there she enjoys recovery in her freedom and opportunity to do her literary work. But upon returning home six months later (March 1886), she again slipped into a state of nervous despair. Finally,

in the spring of 1887, she seeks S. Weir Mitchell's "rest cure," leading her after a summer's trial "so near the border line of utter mental ruin" that she crawled about the room, hid under beds, as she recounts, "to hide from the grinding pressure of that profound distress" (Scharnhorst 10). Even worse, Mitchell failed to understand Gilman's condition completely. Elaine Hedges writes that, even though Mitchell was a confirmed "nerve specialist," he did not approach Gilman with a personalized treatment. Instead, he considered her case as something that could be resolved with a return to her domestic activities with a commitment to "never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live" (Hedges 128).

During these years of feeling desperately entrapped in marriage and motherhood, Gilman often turned to Poe for diversion. In fact, she often recorded in her diary the names of the Poe stories she read or had been read to her. Some passages read as follows: "Read Mother S. 'The Black Cat'" (January 9, 1885); "and he (Walter) reads to me, Poe . . ." (January 12, 1885); "Sam lends me one vol. of Poe's works" (March 21, 1887); "Read 'Murders of Rue Morgue to Hattie'" (November 17, 1893) (Knight, *Diaries*). Obviously, Poe was a regular part of her reading over an extended period of time. It may well be that reading him just at this time had a significant early influence on her writings. Could it be that her interest in Poe had something to do with her own sense of mental collapse? While we can only speculate on that question, it could be that in her mental distress she saw herself as if she were a character out of Poe's imagination, a character bordering on madness. What is certain, though, is that many of Gilman's short stories draw on her long familiarity with Poe's writings. In fact, she wrote several Gothic short stories during the same creative period in which she composed "The Yellow Wallpaper." Though not as accomplished as "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman's tales such as "The Giant Wisteria" (1891), "The Rocking Chair" (1893), and, in "avowed imitation" of Poe, "The Unwatched Door (1894)" drew on the kinds of Gothic idioms she almost certainly learned from Poe (Knight, *Gilman* 29). This last story combines elements from several of Poe's tales in an "attempt to capture Poe's distinctive literary style" (Knight 32). While as a struggling young writer Gilman was primarily "interested, above all, in the effect or cash-value of a work" (Scharnhorst 12), it is also possible that she found Poe's portraits of the disintegrating

minds of psychologically and physically trapped characters to harmonize with her personal struggles. This idea is all the more plausible given the fact that her more natural literary bent was largely didactic and reform oriented. Even though Gilman's aesthetic interests are more didactic than Poe's explicit aestheticism, she learned from Poe some powerful Gothic ways of dealing with culturally induced psychological issues.

Gilman's interest in Poe is significant because through Poe, or more specifically, "The Fall of the House of Usher," Gilman finds a voice and a narrative structure to express her frustrations and make a powerful early feminist statement. Although we strongly agree that "The Yellow Wallpaper" represents one of the most significant expressions of nineteenth-century feminism, we disagree that focusing on Poe's influence crushes such an endeavor; in fact, we argue that Poe's influence is crucial to understanding the full impact of the story—then and now. In short, Poe has never left the critical conversation about "The Yellow Wallpaper." However, as Dock notes, Poe's influence has sometimes been questioned as a way to bolster feminist readings that wish to divorce women's issues from what some have misperceived as mere Gothic ornamentation. Dock laments the fact that many critics want "The Yellow Wallpaper" to be either a Poe-inspired tale or a work of pure feminism. To illustrate her point, Dock quotes from a 1993 Macmillan anthology that buys into the idea of "The Yellow Wallpaper" being first read as a "ghost story in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe" (59). Why were feminist readings of "Yellow Wallpaper" overlooked for so long? According to Dock, the answer is "embedded in the ideological constructs of its time" (60). That is, "feminist critics of the 1970s garnered evidence to confirm their version of literary history as a patriarchal exclusion of women writers" (60). If we realize that Gilman's story was recognized as both Gothic and feminist from the beginning, we can explore how the two function together in the narrative. As Carol Margaret Davison argues, one recent area of study that helps us see links between the feminist and Gothic sides of "Yellow Wallpaper" is the concept of the Female Gothic. She employs this approach to counter readings of Gilman's story as either a nonpolitical ghost story or a non-Gothic feminist piece (48). Davison invokes Michelle Massé to shore up the connection between the feminist and the Gothic, noting that "The Yellow

Wallpaper' speaks back, consciously or otherwise, to various established Gothic traditions" (qtd. in Davison 69). We agree. Of course, speaking back is an essential strategy of feminism, and we further contend that rarely has it been done so powerfully than in Gilman's dark tale of female imprisonment.

There is no doubt that if we only slavishly compare the structural elements of "Usher" and "Yellow Wallpaper" we will do justice to neither Gilman nor Poe. Even worse, we risk placing Gilman in a position subordinate to Poe and thereby denying her full credit for her rich innovation and insights. To avoid this problem, we argue that "The Yellow Wallpaper" establishes a complex dialogue with Poe, one that invites us to reread "The Fall of the House of Usher" not only from Madeline's point of view but also from the oppressive patriarchal point of view that Poe implicitly exposes. In the context of the story that Gilman writes, with its predominate themes and imagery, we can define how she "speaks back" to "Usher." In short, Gilman speaks back to Poe by resituating "Usher" in terms of genre, reading it as a Female Gothic. This is not to say that she forces an unnatural reading on the text; but, in fact, she uncovers "Usher's" essential nature as a Female Gothic scenario—a wholly innovative approach for her time. More than merely an eighteenth-century Gothic narrative told by a woman about an unjustly imprisoned heroine in a medieval castle, the Female Gothic has more recently been defined as an enduring genre criticizing oppressive patriarchies, centering on the struggle between men and women and their societal roles, and championing feminist independence. In fact, the Female Gothic is really as much a mode of reading as a genre, since early Gothic novels, such as those by Radcliffe and Edgeworth, are now often read in feminist terms.

Anne Williams has brilliantly challenged such feminist approaches of the Gothic for using psychoanalysis "more as a means of social *diagnosis* than as a model of *interpretation*," skipping past the immediate narrative details in favor of reflecting on "historical conditions" (137–38). She alludes to Janice Radway's observation that Female Gothic fiction "cannot really express 'feminist protest' because they so manifestly side with the status quo" (138). While we agree that Williams and Radway make a convincing argument about early Female Gothics, we would place "Yellow Wallpaper" in a unique category. We would argue that in her tale of female

oppression, Gilman functions as a pioneering feminist critic, using fiction as her medium to reimagine and rewrite the Female Gothic in just the sorts of broad historical and cultural terms feminist critics now read early Gothic novels. Contrary to her Gothic forebears, Gilman in no way justifies the cultural status quo nor allows for a happy ending. This she does, in part, because Poe first points the way. In order to trace Gilman's Gothic conversation with "Usher," we must first identify what seems to have most impressed her about the story, evidenced by what she includes from it in "Yellow Wallpaper"; next we analyze the uses she makes of these elements in adapting them for her own political purposes. While we will use current terms to define gender relations and cultural conventions from a feminist perspective that Gilman didn't use, her anticipatory and revelatory reading of age-old women's problems is, we believe, so in sync with current critical thinking that it does not seem out of place.

II

A striking aspect of "Yellow Wallpaper" that points back to "Usher" is the narrator's insistence on exploring the dark side of her life in opposition to John's pressure to be positive and not discuss her illness. As Janice Haney-Peritz observes, the "oppressive structure that is at issue is a man's prescriptive discourse about a woman" (97). But Gilman's narrator chooses a different text to read than her husband would prescribe. Barbara Hochman writes about how Gilman's story reflects anxieties in her day about reading, "the notion that one's reading could have an enduring impact on one's life, whether benign or pernicious" (89). She goes on to note that Gilman's narrator, over the course of the story, becomes "an avid, indeed an obsessive reader—of the paper on the walls that surround her" (90). Her character reflects Gilman herself who was described as an obsessive reader. Hochman links Gilman's and her narrator's experience to that of Agnes Hamilton, who writes in her diary "about her insane passion for reading," even comparing it to an "addiction" (qtd. in Hochman 102). We want to more specifically claim that in her narrator Gilman reflects her own close, even obsessive, reading of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," reflecting in her narrator the powerful pull Gothic literature had for her as a mirror to explore the forbidden

aspects of her inner self. From this perspective, the excesses of Gothic literature became a model for Gilman's own psychological excesses that she was trying to both understand and express.

"Yellow Wallpaper" presents a narrator who is determined to find a Gothic story in her experience. While not stated explicitly, she gives evidence of being a fan of Gothic literature, an imaginative type like Austen's Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abby*, who overlays her Gothic reading onto her own experiences while visiting a mysterious castle. Gilman's narrator admits to John's assessment of her as having an "imaginative power and habit of story-making . . . sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies" (Gilman, "Wallpaper" 46). This diagnosis is borne out upon her first encountering their summer rental. She refers to it in language that yearns for the strange and exotic, delighting in the romance of naming it "ancestral halls," even wishing to call it a "haunted house." But, recognizing that she is being fanciful, she revealingly resigns herself by stating "that would be asking too much of fate" (41). But despite such reality checks, she continues to wonder: "Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it" (41). Trying to transfer her experience from mundane reality to imaginative fancy, she is disappointed that the only reason the house is deserted stems from family squabbles over the estate, which "spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid" (42). Still determined, however, to have her Gothic way, she once again gives in to her imagination: "But I don't care—there is something strange about the house—I can feel it" (42). Like the narrator of "Usher," she brings into the house with her an imagination prepared for, even hungry for, the weird and uncanny. E. Suzanne Owens contends that in the tradition of haunted house stories the narrator's suspicions about the nature of the house suggest her rationality, since such suspicions usually prove the narrator's insight (68). We disagree, for reasons to be more fully established below, including the fact that Gilman is doing anything with her iconoclastic story but following predictable genre conventions.

The narrator's yen for Gothicism is, in the context of the story, forbidden knowledge, a giving "way to . . . fancies" but a yen she can't resist (44). In this sense she is a descendent of Poe's imaginative women, Ligeia and Morella, themselves specialists in weird knowledge. In her case, she is in a psychological/emotional struggle

with her doctors who are baffled by her problems. Unconsciously, her obsession with the wallpaper represents several liberating things she needs. First, it is the freedom to use her imagination. At one point she states that studying the wallpaper is "as good as gymnastics" (48). Having been restricted by her rest cure from writing—that is, thinking—her active mind hungers for an imaginative challenge to spark her "habit of story-making." Second, the wallpaper is a means of escape into an alternate reality from the stifling routine imposed upon her by her unimaginative husband. "I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus," she complains, but even this wishful thinking is cut off by her awareness of John's presence: "But John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition . . ." (42). Finally, the wallpaper enables her to journey through the darkest labyrinthine paths of her own mind in an unconscious effort to understand and cure herself. All that she imagines about the house being "queer," "strange," and ghostly are projections of her own troubled psyche.

The problem of the narrator's reading the wallpaper shares with Poe's "Usher" the problem of reading reality. The spirit's frustration at facing the dead blind wall of an intolerable reality made inexplicable by a troubled, sensitive mind may be the major insight Gilman draws from Poe's masterpiece in writing "The Yellow Wallpaper." That is, the mind can become a Gothic workshop of the imagination when it is confronted by oppressive routine. In essence, she discovers the psychological foundations of the Gothic as definitively brought out in "Usher." As Richard Wilbur argues, "The House of Usher *is*, in allegorical fact, the physical body of Roderick Usher, and its dim interior *is*, in fact, Roderick Usher's visionary mind" (264). The same becomes true for Gilman's narrator, who becomes increasingly one with the strange room in which she is imprisoned. Gilbert and Gubar come to a similar conclusion about Gilman's narrator, that she has been sentenced to "imprisonment in the 'infected' house of her own body" (qtd. in Golden 148). In "Usher" this pattern of connection between person and place begins with Poe's narrator, who, after a long day's journey, finds himself before an inexplicably melancholy, gloomy, and depressing landscape presided over by a house that to look upon becomes a "hideous dropping off of the veil" (397). His feelings become a "mystery all insoluble" precisely because

they spring from his unconscious. He seems to realize this on some level when he decides that his experience "*must* have been a dream" (400). Of course it is a waking dream of an imagination that, in anticipation of Gilman's narrator, has somehow conditioned itself to project dark fancies upon reality. But, unlike the perfectly clear motivation of Gilman's narrator in her oppressive lifestyle, we are not given any background on Poe's narrator other than his early friendship with Roderick Usher.

Strangely, once inside the house, we see that the narrator's distorted imagination is nearly a perfect reflection of Roderick Usher's, full of fears and odd fancies. In the perfect construction of the tale, Poe makes the descriptions of each aspect of the story a description of the rest. So, while Roderick's cadaverous and hypersensitive condition of living death mirrors the description of the ancient house whose fissure puts it on the verge of collapsing, and of his sister who is, in fact, dying, his condition also describes the narrator's. They share a "morbid" imagination, an "anomalous species of terror" (403), and radiate gloom outward on all with which they interact (405). Why are they so alike? Why does Poe double them—and everything else within the tale? That is one of the things that have kept critics busy since its publication. We would argue that consciously or unconsciously, Gilman's answer to the question becomes a founding conception of "Yellow Wallpaper." From the perspective of her story, the narrator and Usher share assumptions about social relations that are systemic, but are now in decline. Like the Usher house itself, the system is cracked and its stones are crumbling. It radiates an "air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom [that] . . . pervaded all" (401). Furthermore, this atmosphere is described as unnatural, with "no affinity with the air of heaven," fed by the tarn's "pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued" (399–400). This "system" infects all the inhabitants of the house and anyone who comes near. It is, in fact, killing Roderick and Madeline, the representative Gothic Adam and Eve of the latter days, whose impending fall will signal the end of the old regime and the potential for a new social construction. At least, this is what Gilman seems to have seen in Poe's descriptions. The surface inexplicability of these details, the seemingly unmotivated actions and reactions of the characters in "Usher," all point to a world that has become a Gothic madhouse—impossible to read—about

to collapse under the weight of its incompatibility with human habitation.

Gilman translates the confrontation with the inexplicable into her narrator's continuing and morbid fascination with reading the "pointless pattern" of the wallpaper (48). Haney-Peritz's notice of the word "pronounced" in the description of the wallpaper suggests that the issue of reading is at the heart of the wallpaper's fascination (97). Like the House of Usher, the room in which the paper hangs is in decline: "The floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars" (47). The wallpaper itself has also seen better days, "stripped off . . . in great patches all around the head of my bed" (43). Like the suggestion of the decline of a venerable system in the details of the House of Usher, so her room is in constant decay that reflects, as the decay of the House of Usher, the mind of its inhabitants. With these details and others, Gilman also adds to the sense of inexplicability by an "undercurrent" of meaning that readers would wonder about that the narrator herself misses. While the narrator assumes, for example, that the room had been a playroom or nursery, it may have actually been—or is—a room in an asylum. The barred windows, the gate at the end of the stairs, and John's insistence that she stay in this particular room all point in that direction. Also, the fact that the paper is torn off near the bed "about as far as I can reach" suggests the extent of her dementia, that she is unaware that she tore off the paper herself. Is this a "summer rental" or a stay at an asylum, making the people she sees outside the window real? All of which, of course, introduces the problem of the narrator's unreliability. Brilliantly, in the tradition of Poe, the narrator tells her story in as potentially confused a manner as the wallpaper design itself. We never know when the story is accurate or when it may be plunging off "at outrageous angles" and destroying itself in "unheard of contradictions" (43). Her remark about being "too wise" and knowing things "nobody knows but me" certainly reminds us of the delusional narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart," who repeatedly congratulates himself on his acuity (50). Hence, reading the "Yellow Wallpaper" is as difficult for us as reading the wallpaper is for the narrator. From this perspective the story becomes "broken" (46), "absurd" (46), "formless" (47), grotesque (49), and confusing (48)—in other words, unreadable.

III

Given Gilman's own mental condition, including her feelings of psychological claustrophobia in her marriage (now thought to have been exacerbated by postpartum depression), she certainly must have been struck by Poe's powerful presentation of Madeline Usher, a woman who is wordless throughout the tale and, when still alive, is screwed into a coffin that is placed in a copper-sheathed "don-jon-keep" with a heavy iron door. With the character of Madeline, Poe, whether consciously or not, creates one of the most striking literary examples of repression, particularly to his time. Not only is Madeline never seen interacting with anyone until after her death, she is kept mostly invisible within the narrative itself. Her brief appearance when alive, walking in a distant room with no awareness of those watching her, feels more like seeing a ghost than a person. The narrator, in fact, "regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread" (*Tales* 404). Madeline is thus presented as a figure that inspires awe, even fear—a strange, inexplicable other. As D. H. Lawrence stated of "Usher," Madeline represents "the mystery of the recognition of *otherness*" (82). By burying her alive Roderick seeks to control the uncanny other. But as Diane Long Hoeveler notes, and Gilman had intuited, "the return of Madeline from the 'dead,' her strange immersion into and emergence from the depths of the tomb, complete with blood, represents that moment in the text when the signifier goes out of control" (*Tales* 393). That is, she breaks free from how she has been defined and controlled—killed, as it were—by Roderick. What must have made this aspect of the tale even more disturbing for Gilman is that Madeline was entombed alive by a brother who not only knew of her catalepsy, but who claimed her as a "tenderly beloved sister" over whom, when discussing her impending death, he "buried his face in his hands," hands through which "trickled many passionate tears" (404). Did Gilman see in this dire situation the essence of the female problem—women silenced by the loving men in their lives, making their existence a living death? Gilman's own husband at the time, Stetson, was reasonably amiable and they remained on friendly terms after their divorce. It wasn't that he was cruel or demanding, except that like most men of the period, he expected her to perform a particular role, one she was not comfortable with.

Like Madeline, Gilman's narrator is imprisoned in a room with bars, is not allowed to express herself in writing, nor speak if it is to complain about her situation. As Roderick "loves" Madeline, so John "loves" Gilman's narrator.

Perhaps the most powerfully effective "Usher" image for Gilman is the presence/absence of Madeline. While she is only seen three times briefly by the narrator—walking in a distant room, in her coffin, and returned from the dead—she virtually shapes the narrative. We learn early on that Roderick's peculiar behavior is a result of Madeline's "long-continued illness," a behavior amplified immeasurably after her death. She is the absent instigator of Usher's art and song, of his reading, particularly *Vigiliae Mortuorum* (Vigils for the Dead), and of his "anomalous species of terror" (403). Like John, Usher fears his female counterpart's unusual condition, perhaps seeing his own impending downfall reflected in her. As symbolic (Madeline) and real (Gilman narrator) mothers, their health is basic to the health of the family; their lack of health, like the fissure and the smooch, is indicative of the impending psychological destruction of the family. Her "suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death" suggests her awareness of her influence on the men, and possibly her vengeful plans (410). Each appearance of Madeline is more awesome and terrifying, until she returns from the grave and falls on Roderick, bringing him to his death. The fact that they share their fate became important for Gilman's conception of the system and how it brings down both men and women. Like Roderick, of course, John falls (in a faint) in the end when he sees his wife "creeping" around the room. Importantly, Gilman would have noted that Roderick and Madeline are twins, in person and destiny. The fissure that brings down the house, and is echoed in the "smooch" Gilman's narrator makes on the wall, is the cracked relationship between the genders. Madeline is thus the powerful, though silent and mostly absent, major agent of all action, thought, fear, and art in the story. As Gilman might have said, the repressed eventually triumph, but only tragically.

Another dimension of Madeline's presence/absence is her being Roderick's identical twin. In a sense, this makes her physically present wherever Roderick is, her image invoked by him. While little specific information is given to us about Madeline's life or habits before her illness, her likeness to Roderick suggests

that she may have also been an active intellectual, reading, writing, painting, and playing an instrument. In the context of "Ligeia," published the year before, in 1838, and "Morella," published three years before that, it's quite possible that Madeline was more than a mere cipher. Various textual cues point us in this direction. First, as in the other tales, in which the narrators are secluded from the world, spending all of their time deeply studying "forbidden" transcendental and mystic works of philosophical idealism under the tutelage of the gigantic intellects of their talented wives, Madeline has been his "sole companion for long years" (404). In "Morella," the title character and her husband were speculating about "wild Pantheism," a subject closely related to the sentience of inanimate things (230). Also, as in the previous tales, Roderick is torn inexplicably between loving concern and hostility toward his sister. No more than in "Ligeia" or "Morella" is the sudden turn from adoration to loathing explained. Suddenly the man turns off his loving attention and the female begins to fade away. In the case of "Morella" the narrator becomes haunted in his studies by strange, forbidden meanings he can't articulate, turning his joy in Morella "into horror" (230). In "Ligeia," the death of the wife is also seemingly brought on by the pair getting too near knowledge "too divinely precious not to be forbidden" (316). Certainly it is possible that Roderick, also an ardent reader of strange texts, may have found with Madeline forbidden truths about the sentience of inanimate things, causing in her a physical malady, and in him, madness.

Another possibility in terms of Madeline's talent is that Roderick became jealous of Madeline's superior intellect, a quality he apparently values, since he displays his talents to his friend regularly with his painting, improvisations, and readings. Thus, he may have begun, like Morella's husband, to withdraw his love, to read on his own, causing Madeline, like her literary predecessor Morella, to pine "away daily" (231). Speculating on the above, might not John be jealous of Gilman's narrator's gifts as a writer and an intellectual, only able to tolerate her presence when she is childlike, submissive, and silenced?

A striking aspect of Poe's tale is the presence of suspicious medical men about the House of Usher, who would certainly have caught the attention of Gilman. Herself the victim of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's ill-conceived and damaging rest cure, Gilman

was critical of the reckless treatment that would prevent her from putting pen to paper ever "again as long as I lived" ("Why" 348). (She later claimed that she sent him a copy of the story, and that though he never acknowledged receipt of it, she was "told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading *The Yellow Wallpaper* [*sic*])" ("Why" 349). In "Usher" the medical men are presented as suspicious, incompetent grave-robbers whose "eager inquiries" about Madeline's burial suggest the need to secure her within the family crypt (*Tales* 409). Their clueless bafflement before Madeline's disease, and the "low cunning" of their hopes to steal her body for research, embodies a Gothic type that Gilman likely found analogous to Mitchell and his own incompetence. Further, since Mitchell's rest cure treatment, and its strictures against any intellectual activity including writing, was designed to silence Gilman's identity into conformity, she would eventually perceive him as a pillar of the oppressive patriarchal establishment. Importantly, her narrator's husband, John, is also a physician whose patronizing and dismissive manipulations of his wife witness his own "low cunning" and stubborn incompetence. His imagination is too limited to imagine his wife's being cured except by submission to his infallible will. Crucial to Gilman's reading of "Usher" on this point of medical practice is the utter inexplicability the women's illness present to their doctors. In their own way, like Poe's policemen who follow the same plodding methods in trying to solve every case, these medical men employ a Procrustean bed for every illness. In fact, in her day most misunderstood female maladies lumped under such categories as "hysteria" or "nervous depression." Like the patriarchy itself, medical science is a hardened system that assumes an absolute authority to silence and dictate.

Reflecting the cultural systems of society, including the medical, is the setting of the House of Usher itself. The importance of setting in "Yellow Wallpaper" points to Gilman's reading of the Usher House itself as an important symbol of broader issues. Its very presence induces in the narrator an "insufferable gloom," an "unredeemed dreariness of thought," and an "utter depression of soul" (397). The narrator's horrified reactions to the house, for Gilman's purposes, become a model of how she wants her readers to respond to "Yellow Wallpaper." In addition to her stated goal

to "save people from being driven crazy" ("Why" 349), it seems clear that she wants to shine a harsh light on the way things are. Gilman intends to awaken readers from the opiate of traditional gender relations, to give them a "bitter lapse into every-day life," so that they can experience "the hideous dropping off of the [cultural] veil" (*Tales* 397). She wished to show everyday life as so akin to a Gothic horror story that "no goading of the imagination could torture [it] into aught of the sublime" (397). The narrator's "experiment" of looking at the house's "inverted images" reflected in the tarn serves various purposes for the tale, including its symbolic reflection of how inverted the house and family are in terms of its unwholesome history. It also emphasizes a couple of points that Gilman certainly makes in "Yellow Wallpaper," that the status quo is an inversion of the natural, equal relations men and women are capable of enjoying. Thus, like the inverted image in the tarn, the world Gilman creates around John's dysfunctional little family has "an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven" (399). In addition, the reflection of the narrator in the wallpaper suggests, like the reflection of the house in the tarn, feelings of seclusion and imprisonment.

Gilman witnesses that the House of Usher's "discoloration of ages" and "specious totality" are on the verge of collapse—its day is at hand (400). The house, like Madeline and Roderick, exists in a living death. G. R. Thompson appropriately sees the house as a "death's-head looming out of a dead landscape" (89). Poe has set his tale at the moment just before the psychological apocalypse of the Ushers. Gilman, too, sets her story at the eleventh hour for the mad narrator's remaining shred of sanity. Like Usher's fissure that has split the house precariously in two, so the oppressive social system has split the genders in two in a way that signals the possibility of a new order for the new century. As the minute "fine tangled web-work" spread across the "crumbling" stones of Usher, so the ripped wallpaper is a similar "indication of extensive decay" suggesting "little token of stability" (*Tales* 400). The fact that the House of Usher seems alive, bearing a relationship to its inhabitants' "morale," is echoed by Gilman in the ever-changing pattern of the yellow wallpaper that seems to imprison a woman. As Cynthia S. Jordan observes, the reflection of the house in the tarn represents Madeline, "Roderick's physical and psychological counterpart" (7). Thus, both houses get inside the heads of their

inhabitants, driving them crazy and reinforcing their function as symbolic of a demented, all-pervasive social system.

Finally, pervading all of these images and themes that would have stood out to Gilman in her state of mind at the time she wrote her masterpiece is "Usher's" terrifying atmosphere of the Gothic. Not, however, the mere setting in a dilapidated mansion, strange occurrences, weird characters, or living burial, but the psychological Gothic of the impossibly blurred lines between reality and dream, dream and madness. Poe's entire story is the model for the wallpaper itself. It is a metaphor for an arabesque text that won't permit itself to be read: "*er lässt sich nicht lesen*" (*Tales* 506). Poe's quote from "The Man of the Crowd" captures one of the hallmarks of Poe's fiction—its inexplicability. Among the "considerations beyond our depth" that Poe's narrator senses are Roderick's fear, the parallel sounds during the reading of *The Mad Trist*, the strangely condensed storm, Roderick's secret—all of which is emphasized by images like the source of the ghastly light in Roderick's painting and the intricate passageway into the great room of Usher. For Gilman, "Usher" embodies whatever cannot be read finding its way into her story as the narrator's mental problems, John's refusal to pay any heed to her, and the design of the wallpaper itself. Among the blurred lines "Usher" spawns is the uncanny reflection of the characters in their respective houses. Poe's narrator is as much an inversion of Roderick as the tarn image is of the house, and as Roderick is of Madeline, and Gilman's narrator is of the reflection of the women behind the wallpaper and those creeping about the estate.

Not surprisingly, in both "Usher" and "Yellow Wallpaper," the liberation of the repressed is linked to the finding of the self. In the case of Madeline, the faint smile on her lips at the time of her burial signals the emergence of the self, unencumbered by Roderick's shadow. In fact, her death may be considered an act of will, an escape in the same way Gilman's narrator escapes through insanity. The latter finds herself, like Madeline, resisting the wishes of her male companion. In both "Usher" and "Yellow Wallpaper," the establishment of the female self is based in resistance to male discourse, in becoming the opposite of what the male wants. Hence, in both stories this defiance is an act of communication, of rewriting the script in amazing ways. Just as Gilman's narrator wants "to astonish" John, so Madeline's horrific arrival similarly

bowls Roderick over. They both do so by writing on themselves—the smooch on the shoulder in “Yellow Wallpaper” and the blood on Madeline’s robes in “Usher.” Such shocking self-inscription, like both genre-breaking narratives themselves, astonishes out of all complacency. The path into such writing is the journey inward, represented by the room and the crypt. As in the story of the classic heroic journey, the Female Gothic hero must be buried in the belly of the beast, or must sojourn in Hades, before emerging victorious. Gilman’s heroic, and groundbreaking rereading of “Usher” allowed her into a conversation not only with Poe and his great tale, but with women and feminist literature that still speaks loud and clear.