

## A Queer Eye for Gilman's Text: *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a Film by PBS

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This article puts forward a queer interpretation of PBS's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1989), adapted from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's canonical story. It is structured in three parts: an approach to the term *queer*, a reading of the queerness (and feminism) of Gilman's text and an analysis of the queer (and feminist) aspects of the film. The third part also responds to the only academic essay about PBS's production, by Janet Beer, which ignores the movie's queer character. This section discusses the queer treatment of topics—the instability of identity, autoeroticism, lesbian tendencies, mental illness, women's solidarity, and gender and class inequalities—while dialoguing with film critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Laura Mulvey. The queer use of formal resources—light, shots, sound, music, symbolism and scene-motifs—is also highlighted. My ultimate aim is to demonstrate that *The Yellow Wallpaper* is an innovative queer adaptation of Gilman's piece for a modern audience.

Keywords: queer theory; film studies; feminist literary criticism; Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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## Una mirada *queer* al texto de Gilman: *The Yellow Wallpaper*, una película de PBS

Este artículo propone una interpretación *queer* de *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1989), una adaptación de PBS del relato canónico de Gilman. Consta de tres partes: una aproximación al término *queer*, una lectura *queer* (y feminista) del texto de Gilman y un análisis de los aspectos *queer* (y feministas) del film. La tercera parte también responde al único ensayo académico sobre dicha producción, escrito por Janet Beer, el cual omite el carácter *queer* de la misma. Esta sección explora el tratamiento *queer* de los temas—identidad inestable, autoerotismo, tendencias lésbicas, enfermedades mentales, solidaridad entre mujeres y desigualdades de género y

clase—a la vez que dialoga con críticas de cine como Linda Hutcheon y Laura Mulvey. Se señala además el uso *queer* de los recursos formales—luz, planos, sonido, música, simbolismo y motivos escénicos. Mi objetivo principal es demostrar que *The Yellow Wallpaper* es una innovadora adaptación *queer* de la obra de Gilman para un público moderno.

Palabras clave: teoría *queer*; estudios de cine; crítica literaria feminista; Charlotte Perkins Gilman

# I. WHAT IS *QUEER*? FROM SEXUALITY AND GENDER TO RACE AND CLASS

An adjective, a noun and a verb, the word *queer* has become remarkably pervasive in academia in recent years. “Perhaps a borrowing from German [...] *quer*,” the adjective *queer* has several meanings such as “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric” and even “suspicious, dubious” (*OED* 2019a). As a noun, the sense of “homosexual man” dates from the late nineteenth century. The verb *to queer* chiefly means “to ask, inquire; to question” (*OED* 2019a). The senses mentioned are relevant for queer theory, which dates from the 1990s (*OED* 2019a) and affirms the need to be suspicious about and question apparently natural ways of thinking. It must be clarified, however, that *queer* and *homosexual* are not synonyms. In their introduction to *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, Donald Hall and Annamarie Jagose comment that

queer speaks to the unintended but profound naturalization of the dominant system of sexual classification effected by the political successes of the lesbian and gay movements, staking an alternate claim [...]. While arguing for the validity and significance of various marginalized sexual identities and practices—such as [...] bisexuality, intersex and transgender subjects, [...] and sadomasochism—queer studies attempts to clear a space for thinking differently about the relations presumed to pertain between sex/gender and sex/sexuality [...]. Rather than separating sexuality from other axes of social difference—race, ethnicity, class, gender, nationality and so on—queer studies has increasingly attended to the ways in which various categories of difference inflect and transform each other. (2013, xvi)

To develop these ideas, I will refer to the work of some of the principal experts in queer theory today. Readers need to be aware that there is neither a unique nor a fixed definition of the term queer, which is marked by indeterminacy and challenges our willingness to tolerate the overlapping of supposedly contrary concepts (e.g., normal/abnormal).

For Jagose, queer is “a category in the process of formation,” whose “political efficacy [...] depends on its resistance to definition” (1997, 1). She adds that “queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire” (3) and on calling into question “any ‘natural’ sexuality [...] [including] terms such as ‘man’ and ‘woman’.” This leads to queer theory’s utter rejection of binary oppositions (e.g., masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual), instead putting forth an identity which is “always ambiguous, always relational” (96). Denaturalizing and destabilizing normativity are thus the core aims of queer research. Judith Butler’s pioneering attempt to denaturalize gender and sexuality is widely known: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender [...] [since] identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (1990, 25). Regarding sexuality, Butler contends that “gender does not necessarily follow from sex and [...] sexuality [...] does not seem to follow from gender” (1990, 135-36). In fact, the illusion of a “gender core [...] [is only] maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality [...] [and] reproductive heterosexuality”

(136). To challenge normative beliefs and provoke social change, she urges subversion through queer performance, which leads to the confusion and proliferation of both genders and sexualities. In a later text, Butler elaborates on performativity by positing that “gender is a kind of a doing [...] with or for another” (2004, 1). To the nominally gender-deviants, whose lives are qualified as less than human, she points out ways of undoing gender through “speech” and “language” as favorite means to pursue society’s transformation (199)—a linguistic emphasis that will be questioned below.

A major exponent of queer thought is Eve Sedgwick, for whom queer “can refer to the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances [...] of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality [that] aren’t made [...] to signify monolithically” (1993, 5-9). Her words join with Jagose’s and Butler’s calls to defy imposed definitions by taking into account the aspects that do not fit into established parameters. On this basis, Sedgwick proposes that we extend the notion of queer beyond sexuality and gender to other fields to highlight “the ways that race, ethnicity, [and] postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses” (1993, 9; italics in the original). Both she and Butler (2004) praise Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the “mestiza consciousness” ([1987] 2012) for its intersectional approach to the subject. I would add that Anzaldúa’s oeuvre advocates a queer scholarship that aims to explore people’s material conditions so as to challenge and, ultimately, change the white-hegemonic heteropatriarchal liberal-capitalist system. Taking this into consideration, an up-to-date queer analysis of literature or film would be one that focuses on issues which non-queer scholarly approaches tend to gloss over—from masturbation and fetishism to mixed-raced individuals and socioeconomic class—and which aims at an ideological-material rebuilding of the world.

As one might expect, queer researchers have been the target of criticism, mainly due to the radicalism of some of their arguments. For example, Tim Dean and Christopher Lane argue in “Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis: An Introduction” (2001) that queer thought “advocates a politics based on resistance to all norms” (quoted in Ahmed 2013, 426). On his part, Gerard Coll-Planas (2013) suggests the need for a minimum set of norms in the realm of sexuality that protect people from harassment, rape, pedophilia and necrophilia. From my point of view, one of the most insightful contributions of queer theory is to make academics realize how little we actually know about sexuality, which is mysterious, elusive, chaotic, unclassifiable and far more flexible than we might have imagined. Sedgwick’s opening up of the use of queer as a tool with which to analyze other areas besides sexuality is commendable, given its rejection of rigid definitions, its emphasis on the relational character of identity and its enormous value for literary and film studies.

It must be emphasized that this article relies precisely on the notion of queer as a critical paradigm that cuts across boundaries, from desire and language to sexuality and socioeconomic class. I am also critical of the fact that, due to its predilection for ambiguity, queer rebellion may have vague, if not vain, results. Along with Donald

Morton (1996), I hold that it is vital not to neglect the material dimensions of queer thoughts and actions so that going queer does not paradoxically end up reinforcing the established order. The analyses below, therefore, both celebrate and reassess queer revolution.

## 2. QUEERNESS IN GILMAN'S "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"

In its 127-year history, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) has posed innumerable questions to literary criticism, some of which have received multiple answers. This is in coherence with queer research, which is concerned with opening up interpretative possibilities that transcend established parameters. Therefore, I will examine aspects of Gilman's tale that can fruitfully be read from a queer perspective, starting with the difficulties faced by critics in determining its genre—diary (Michaels 1987), autobiography (Rogers 1988) or "literature of hysteria" (Diamond 1990, 59) have been suggested, among others. Specialists are further divided when it comes to determining whether the story is realist (MacPike 1992), gothic (Becker 1999) or both (Núñez-Puente 2006). Such generic instability signals the queerness of the text.

Gilman's unnamed leading character can be said to have queer features too. Living in the late 1800s, the protagonist is required to stop her work as a writer after becoming an upper-middle-class wife and mother. She is told that she has a "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman [1892] 1992, 25) and her doctor orders her to rest. Nowadays, we would suspect she has postpartum depression, which the author herself may have suffered from (Gilman [1913] 2009). The disorder was not classified as such at the time and the condition was labelled hysteria, an illness which women, especially intellectual and upper-to-middle-class ones, were said to be prone to. Diagnosing female patients as mentally ill is rewarding for patriarchy because it reinforces the sane man/insane woman gender hierarchy (Felman 1997; Showalter 1985). From an alternative point of view, Elin Diamond has suggested that hysteria is dangerous for patriarchy, since a self that is unstable cannot be pinned down to any fixed definition, thus offering what I would qualify as a queer "disruption of categories and systems of meaning" (Diamond 1990, 61). This controversial issue (hysteria as either mortifying or liberating) will be reconsidered in the next section, especially concerning whether the protagonist's supposed hysterical fit at the end of the story is productive as regards social change.

Socioeconomic class, the study of which matters to queer theory, is a crucial topic in Gilman's tale from its very first lines: "It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer" ([1892] 1992, 24). It must be noted that, given the couple's social status, they cannot be deemed "ordinary," a qualification that has been attributed to an unreliable narration (Núñez-Puente 2006, 31). Later on, the character-narrator describes the estate as having "lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people" (25), an affirmation that gives us a glimpse

of her classism (Núñez-Puente 2006, 31). As for the other female personae, Mary (the baby's caretaker) is presumed to be working-class and the character-narrator defines Jennie (her sister-in-law) as a "housekeeper" that "hopes for no better profession" (24). The protagonist is lucky to be able to count on other people to do the motherly and domestic duties that would otherwise be expected of her, and it is unethical of her to regard them as inferior. An updated queer reading of Gilman makes us reflect on the artificial ranking not only of genders and sexualities, but also of jobs and salaries, which entail the formation of unequal classes and oppositions such as respectable/nonrespectable people.

On another note, the heroine embodies a queer self, one that has severe problems living with her contradictions and adjusting to the gender parameters of her time. She fights against the two principal voices informing her knowledge of the world: her husband's, which stands for patriarchal authority, and what she "personally" (Gilman [1892] 1992, 25) believes and disagrees with. John, her husband, is a doctor who orders her around and "scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (24); his embodiment of masculinist rationality, however, crumbles in the end when his spouse goes out of control, looks him in the eye and he simply faints, thereby displaying the weakness of traditional femininity. In a Butlerian fashion, this role reversal queerly troubles the period's binary gender regime.

Because of the lack of ethical-affective dialogue between the protagonist and her partner, their sexual life is not intersubjective enough. For instance, when she asks him to have their cousins for a visit, he forbids it saying that it would be as bad as "put[ting] fireworks in [her] pillow-case" (29), a metaphorical expression which suggests his refusal to have sex with her (i.e., penetrate her "pillow case"). William Veeder (1988) argues that the couple has no sexual relations during the whole summer and that the husband pretends to work overnight because he has a lover. Towards the end, it is striking that the wife hides her bedroom key "under a plantain leaf!" (42). Of all plants, the author's choice of a plantain, a phallic symbol, gives readers a clue about the main character's lack of sexual satisfaction. Questioning whether normative heterosexuality satisfies everybody is among the goals of queer theory.

The main character's relationship with her sister-in-law lacks affection too, Jennie simply acting as a guardian when her brother is out—an instance of how patriarchal women may become other women's enemies. Furthermore, both women follow John's commands without discussion, a lack of dialogical interaction that prevents a truly ethical mutual recognition from taking place. The heroine's cold relationships with her family, her inability to look after her baby due to her illness and the lack of the social interaction she would need as a writer underpin her anxiety to make affective contact with someone—who might be hiding in the yellow wallpaper in her bedroom. As mentioned in the first section, this longing for interpersonal intercourse resonates with queer studies' conception of the self as necessarily relational.

Given the text's stated questioning of heterosexuality, some scholars deem it the product of Gilman's own barely affective relationship with her husband (J. Allen 2009; Horowitz [2010] 2012). Others claim it as lesbian (P. Allen 1999; White 1997) or even queer (Crewe 1995), the woman's figure that the heroine finds in the wallpaper being the female lover she craves. Jonathan Crewe identifies a "chiastic exchange" between the protagonist and the imprisoned figure—"I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled" (Gilman [1892] 1992, 39)—who at the same time becomes "her own same-sex partner [...] and her own 'liberator'" (Crewe 1995, 281). He goes further in asserting that, in the 1890s, there is a necessary "lesbian implication" (1995, 280) in the protagonist-narrator's statements that "Jennie [her sister-in-law] wanted to sleep with me" (39) and "she [Jennie] wouldn't mind doing it herself" (40). As we will see, the lesbian inclinations of this nineteenth-century wife become compounded with autoeroticism, which means she cannot be identified simply as lesbian, but perhaps as bisexual—and definitely as queer.

Sexuality is also represented in Gilman's text by means of the imagery used to describe the wallpaper. It has "smooch[es]" (35, 40), one of which "runs round the room [...] a long, straight, even smooch, as if it had been rubbed over [...]. Round and round and round—round and round and round—it makes me dizzy!" (37). These "smooches" have puzzled critics, some of whom have suggested they imply onanism (P. Allen 1999; Núñez-Puente 2006), which used to be considered a symptom of the hysteric. That is, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the medical authorities still believed that the "habits of the [...] homosexual or intersexual woman might take the form merely of masturbation" (Jeffreys [1986] 1997, 170). In those days too, lesbianism and solitary sex were categorised together as both being the result of frigidity understood as the "dislike of" or "failure to respond with enthusiasm to [...] sexual intercourse" (Jeffreys [1986] 1997, 171-72). In line with this, Sedgwick has found connections between lesbianism and masturbation in the works of some nineteenth-century women writers. I propose that the name Charlotte Perkins Gilman be added to those of Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson and the Brontës, whose queer writing has been studied by Sedgwick (1993, 109-28).

The textual gaps, intricate expressions and leaps in time in "The Yellow Wallpaper" can also be called queer, given their attempt to, precisely, queer masculinist discourse. This style is reflected in the wallpaper itself, which seems to have a queer (unconventional, nonlinear, incomprehensible) design too: "One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (Gilman [1892] 1992, 37). As its lines "plunge off at outrageous angles," it becomes an uncontrollable "kind of 'debased Romanesque' with *delirium tremens*" (31; italics in the original), and its "defiance of law [...] is a constant irritant to a normal mind" (34). The main character comes to admit that it "is getting to be a great effort [for her] to think straight" (32) and the word *queer* appears three times, the first as early as the third line of the story: "there is something queer" (24). Although the straight/queer binary was not commonly recognized in the



late nineteenth century—*straight* was first recorded as “heterosexual” in 1941 (*OED* 2019b)—the presence of the word *queer* can certainly incite a queer interpretation on the part of today’s readers.

Last but not least, an issue that has occupied numerous academics is that of the narrative voice, especially in relation to the ending: if the story is narrated in a homodiegetic fashion, when the protagonist apparently goes insane, we should ask ourselves who is narrating. This has led to the hypothesis of a second narrative voice apart from the main character’s (Feldstein 1992; Núñez-Puente 2006; Rogers 1988). Her words, “I’ve got out at last [...] in spite of you and Jane” (42), are equally cryptic, since “Jane” could refer to John’s sister (Jennie) or to the unnamed heroine’s patriarchal self—the one who would remain under her husband’s yoke. A personality that splits into two and an inconclusive denouement—we do not know whether she will recover—are also marks of the queerness Gilman confers on both the identity of the character and the writing.

### 3. *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER*: A QUEER FILM ADAPTATION

In 1989, PBS launched *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a television production. According to Janet Beer, although the adaptation “was almost entirely the work of [the scriptwriter,] Maggie Wadey,” some decisions were made with the producer, Sarah Curtis, and the director, John Clive (1997, 197). Beer’s essay, included in her book *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction* (1997), concentrates mostly on the screenplay and omits any reference to the queer singularity of the production. My study both differs from and responds to Beer’s by carrying out a queer discussion of the movie. I thus explore its queer treatment of topics such as the instability of identity, autoeroticism, lesbian tendencies, mental illness, women’s solidarity and gender and class inequalities. I also point out how the film’s use of formal resources—light, shots, sound, symbolism, scene-motifs and Carl Davis’s soundtrack—contributes to representing the aforementioned issues.<sup>1</sup> It must be added that my analysis is both critical and speculative, as I believe the evocative form and content of PBS’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* demand this queer kind of reflection.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I agree with Linda Hutcheon that the soundtrack composer can also be considered an adapter, since music “reinforces emotions or provokes reactions and directs our interpretation of different characters” (2013, 81).

<sup>2</sup> From amateur videos and animations to stage plays and ballets, the audiovisual recreations of “The Yellow Wallpaper” seem countless, proving its continuous appeal. Among the screen versions, Marie Ashton’s short (1977) stands out for its queer features. The way that Elizabeth (Sigrid Wurschmidt), the protagonist, stares at Jennie (Susan Lynch) is noteworthy throughout. Once she touches Jennie’s arm and back making her feel uncomfortable; on another occasion, Elizabeth giggles as she lies on the bed with her dress and legs lifted up, which triggers speculation about solitary sex. More recent movies, however, have chosen to draw inspiration from the horror aspects of Gilman’s work—e.g., in Logan Thomas’s motion picture (2012), the main character is tortured by visions of her dead daughter.



### 3.1. Opening Credits and Scenes: The Instability of Identity

As the movie starts, we see the stout façade of a mansion whose garden is full of weeds and withered flowers. The gothic appearance of the house could symbolize the enduring resistance of the masculinist order. Inside, the furniture is covered by innumerable white sheets and there are flies buzzing against the window panes. Both shots may be read as synecdoches of the puritan ideology and its ghostly legacy. The protagonist is then shown travelling by carriage while we hear an auditory flashback of her doctor describing her illness to her husband and prescribing “a period of complete rest” to her (01:29). As the opening credits roll, the authority of the male word is thus established. The slow-motion discontinuous shots of the actress’s profile display half of her face in a fragmentary manner, which underscores the instability of her situation—before she was a healthy independent writer, now she is an ill mother who depends on her husband and has to obey her physician. Uncertainty and change are marks of a queer identity, although they only provoke negative effects in her case.

It is worth noting here that the gloomy light and colors used at the beginning are maintained throughout the film, as even the yellow wallpaper and dress that appear later are dull. This places viewers in the nineteenth-century atmosphere of austerity and ideological darkness with regard to women; at the same time, it contributes to blurring any type of categorical truth, facilitating the emergence of the kind of alternative ideas preferred by queer theory. The first musical composition we hear, a slow tune played by wind instruments, causes the audience to feel worried as well as curious to find out more about this woman.

### 3.2. Self-Eroticism

The main character in this production is called Charlotte (Julia Watson); her husband John (Stephen Dillane) likes to call her Lotta, presumably as a term of endearment. The fact that she has two names is important, particularly bearing in mind how she unfolds into more than one self as the movie progresses. This unfolding partly manifests in her self-eroticism, an aspect of sexual behavior that queer scholarship is interested in.

For some literary critics, as previously noted, the wallpaper’s “smooches”—together with its stunning circling pattern—connote masturbation and PBS’s adaptation would seem to support this idea. Charlotte goes to bed during the day, in her nightgown and with her hair loose, supposedly to take a nap. The camera focuses on how her hand grabs a bar of the bedhead; this is followed by a close-up of the wallpaper that looks as if it were expanding. At the same time, we hear a panting that rises in crescendo and may lead us to speculate about a female orgasm (29:12). Charlotte opens her eyes and shouts as two eyes appear from the wallpaper and stare at her—the wallpaper’s eyes are repeatedly mentioned in Gilman’s story. These eyes could be symbolic of the multiple I’s (i.e., aspects) of her personality, as well as of her refusal to acknowledge the Kristevian abject (1992): the queer masturbating Other within her I.

As described above, the concept queer encompasses non-heteronormative practices (Grosz 2013). In the light of this, the possibility of a fin-de-siècle wife-and-mother who masturbates is queer, not only in that period but even today, since female self-stimulation remains a taboo topic. In the case of this movie, the main character's autoeroticism is in fact justified: on the one hand, it does not entail the risk of pregnancy, which Charlotte seems keen to avoid at the moment; on the other, from a previous bed scene with her husband, the viewer understands that her sexual life with him is unsatisfactory. The mere fact that the movie chooses to portray solitary sex grants the heroine the right to both rebel and enjoy herself despite her situation. During the protagonist's orgasm, the audience is shown the wallpaper instead of the actress's face. Consequently, the film does not expose the woman's onanism to the gaze of spectators, thus purposefully circumventing the problem Laura Mulvey warns of, namely, that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female [...]. Woman [is placed] as image, man as the bearer of the look" ([1975] 2010, 2186). Mulvey encourages filmmakers to destabilize the link between the objectifying male gaze and the observed female and, as I go on to argue, PBS's *The Yellow Wallpaper* follows her line of reasoning by putting forth an alternative feminist view of a woman's body and pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

It is vital that the audience recognizes that the eyes coming out of the wall actually belong to Charlotte, as if she were looking at herself in a mirror. The heroine will continue seeing a woman's figure in the yellow wallpaper, an obsession with the female that supports the lesbian interpretation that is put forward below. Moreover, the audience's experience of the protagonist's pleasure comes from hearing her gasping. The choice of the sense of hearing instead of seeing also disrupts the masculinist economy of the gaze challenged by Mulvey. As explained above, the autoerotic moment reveals Charlotte's sexuality as both queer, which is to say unexpected—a fin-de-siècle wife's onanism—and ambiguous—given her latent bisexuality.

Another erotic scene in the movie also happens when Charlotte is alone. By chance, she finds the mansion's secret library, enters, caresses the books and tries to embrace the shelves (13:23). She then appears lying on her bed, reading, surrounded by several books. The shot of her whole body in a relaxed, happy, pleasurable attitude invites us to identify the queer links between female sensuality and intellect. When John finds out about Charlotte's library visit, he persuades her not to go there again because reading is too exhausting and she must proceed with the rest cure. The juxtaposition of the two scenes foregrounds the veto on knowledge imposed on nineteenth-century women, be it bodily or intellectual knowledge.

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<sup>3</sup> Film studies have turned to women directors in search of alternative nonsexist cinema (Kuhn 1994). This move, however, may be argued to rest on an essentialist assumption, as there are also patriarchal women and feminist men—John Clive could perhaps be named as an example of the latter.

### 3.3. The Treatment of Hysteria

Like self-eroticism, mental illness constitutes another taboo area that interests queer researchers. One day Charlotte faints, prompting John to call her physician.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Stark (James Faulkner) debases his patient in multiple ways: he tears out the blank pages left in the diary she has been writing in secret, thus silencing her literary voice; he insists that, as a married woman and a mother, her only responsibilities are “[her] child, [her] husband, [her] home” (48:24); and he grabs hold of one of her earrings in a bluntly objectifying manner. Afterwards, the doctor shares with John some photographs of “a very extreme form of cure” (53:46) that appeals to “feminine vanity,” a statement that exposes his male chauvinism. Although not all spectators might be aware of this, those are the photographs of Dr. Charcot’s female patients at the Salpêtrière hospital between 1876 and 1880 (Didi-Huberman 2007). Based on these images, feminists have questioned the degree of dramatization, and even pornographic exposure, supposedly sick women were subjected to as they posed as models following the instructions of the cameramen (Showalter 1985). PBS’s film condemns this medical treatment too through the unprofessional manner in which both men leer at the women in the photos. In this way, the movie’s explicit criticism of the reifying male gaze identified by Mulvey continues to pay tribute to her groundbreaking study.

Before the doctor’s visit, John scolds his wife for alluding to her feelings, to which she retorts: “my feelings are the only things left to my life” (46:23). When the two men are alone, Dr. Stark comments on women’s denial of sexual feelings. When John says that his spouse “doesn’t seem to deny them” (53:15), Stark replies that he should not judge based on his “own personal experience,” although it is he who is generalizing about women. Generalizations have often been the target of queer academics, who choose to focus on the particulars of every case to avoid homogenizing individuals. PBS’s production attacks the nineteenth-century belief that all women have a propensity for hysteria and so must be medicated when the condition arises. Towards the end of the film, Charlotte puts her fingers down her throat and vomits up the medicine given to her (01:06:25), a symbolic act of rejection of the status quo à la queer.

PBS’s portrayal of the pathologization of women as hysterical invites me to speculate on the cited “smooches” in Gilman’s text yet again. In the nineteenth century, the circular “smooches” might allude to the pelvic massages and vibrators that were applied to allegedly hysterical women, as shown recently in Sarah Ruhl’s stage play *In the Next Room* (2009) and Tanya Wexler’s film *Hysteria* (2011). Charlotte’s erogenous zones might have been manipulated in this way by her physician. Therefore, the movie’s Charlotte, whose eyes are closed during most of the autoerotic scene described above, could be recreating or even dreaming about this medical procedure, which would likely cause her both pleasure and disgust.

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<sup>4</sup> Her fainting fit is due to the stress provoked by her mother-in-law’s visit. Unpleasant and narrow-minded, Mrs. Stamford (Dorothy Tutin) proves to be the prototype of a patriarchal woman.

### 3.4. Feminist Solidarity

In Gilman's narrative, the heroine and Jennie never join forces against John's authority. Similarly, throughout history women have never been sufficiently united to bring about the downfall of patriarchy. In this respect, the strangeness and revolutionary potential of women's solidarity make it a characteristically queer topic. In addition, and as mentioned earlier, queer studies is also concerned with socioeconomic class and how it intertwines with factors like gender, a comparatively neglected area of study. We may wonder why Jennie decides to spend the summer with her brother and his spouse. Apparently, she has neither a husband nor children; perhaps she needs money and is happy to have a place to live for free. If so, this would convey a criticism of the economic difficulties faced by unmarried women in those days. Since she has not succumbed to compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), we may also speculate about her sexual orientation and the problematics of lesbians in and out of the workplace both then and today.<sup>5</sup> In the PBS adaptation, Jennie (Carolyn Pickles) appears variously holding her baby nephew, brushing Charlotte's hair and helping her dress, supervising meals and folding linen, as well as doing other household chores. She plays the piano so that her brother and sister-in-law can dance together, and plays and sings for John and Dr. Stark, although they continue talking without paying her any attention. A caretaker, a homemaker and an entertainer, the movie's Jennie is a reminder of the way in which working-class housewives have been exploited throughout history.

PBS's Jennie stands up to John only once. Despite that, her words and accusatory tone clearly question male despotism: "And do you always know what's right for Charlotte? Has it occurred to you that even Dr. Stark may sometimes make mistakes?" (01:02:09). The use of a mirror shot duplicates her image at this point, a technique by which she appears more powerful than her brother. His reflection is shown too, but it appears distorted and in the distance, making him more insignificant. At a symbolic level, the visual composition reinforces Jennie's challenge: patriarchal men are being asked to look at themselves in a mirror and reevaluate their behavior regarding mothers who also work outside the home. After his sister's outburst, John is left speechless and simply leaves the house as usual, going across the garden and shutting the gate after him. This is one of the *scene-motifs* (my own compound to name motifs shaped as scenes) that underscores his belonging to the public realm.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> John McCarty's filmic retelling of "The Yellow Wallpaper," *Confinement* (2009), is set in contemporary times. A couple rents a house so that Kathy (Colleen Lovett) can recover from post-natal depression, while her sister-in-law Mary (Nina Lorcini) looks after their baby elsewhere. When Mary complains that something must be done about Kathy, as she cannot take care of the baby forever, John (Tony Pallone) replies: "What would you be doing if you weren't looking after him? Sitting around swapping fantasies with your looser girlfriends?" (24:52). Does he mean they are unemployed, childless, single or lesbian? All these adjectives could be applied in this case, given the actress's subtle butch look.

<sup>6</sup> John's continual winding of the clock is another scene-motif that defines him, revealing his obsession with control as well as his highly predictable, anti-queer life.

In the movie, Jennie is always pleasant and considerate towards her sister-in-law. She is deeply affected by witnessing an argument between the couple and cries about what might be going on in the yellow-wallpapered room before the film's end. Thanks to her confrontation with the master of the house, spectators can speculate about how different the story might be if the two females joined forces against patriarchal law. Hence, PBS's version adds a crucial detail for women viewers at the turn of the twentieth century: solidarity. By allying herself with her sister-in-law and rebelling against her brother, Jennie makes an incipient gesture of solidarity that is a lesson to the world today, which is in need of more feminist coalitions.

### 3.5. Compulsory Heterosexuality and Queer Existence

There is another scene-motif featuring the gardener's daughter riding a bicycle, until she is told she has become a woman and is no longer allowed to do that. The girl reminds us of the way in which the New Woman advocates rode bikes in the late nineteenth century while claiming their right to lead their own lives, including their sexuality. The child is usually shown wearing a white flounce dress; however, during one of Charlotte's naps (25:38), she is seen dressed as an acrobat in red and white, balancing on the bicycle next to an also red and white rosebush—a sequence that clearly symbolizes her menstruation and adult sexuality. The gardener's daughter showcases the relative freedom then offered to girls until they became women, whose (sexual) lives were determined by their husbands. Charlotte is fascinated by the girl's seriousness and determination, which remind her of the time when she contemplated editing a journal. As she finally admits, her fertile plans about her profession were aborted when she “met John” (23:37), who has a thriving career and whose professional trip to London brings about the film's climax.

John travels to the Royal Academy of Medicine to deliver a paper on how to improve the health of the poor by means of the “restorative qualities of pleasure,” including “books and pictures freely [being] shown” to them (01:07:94). This is highly ironic because he does not allow his wife to read and seems unconcerned about her pleasure; besides, his contempt for the lower classes is made evident from the beginning—“superstition is for servant girls,” he claims (08:14). While he is away lecturing, his spouse locks herself up in the yellow room, blocks the door and spends the night pulling off the wallpaper. He returns next morning, runs upstairs and forcibly breaks into the room. When he finds Charlotte crawling around on the floor, there are no words spoken, only a terrifying close-up of her strange-looking, ghostly face (01:12:16). Her Medusian look is so powerful that he faints as if struck by “the deadly *femme castratrice*” (Creed 1993, 127; italics in the original). Their gender roles are thus reversed not only in terms of the symbolic order, she being the gazing “male” and he the fainting “female,” but also in physical terms since she climbs over his body lying on the floor. Although the situation cannot be interpreted as a triumph for the protagonist, whose mental condition seems deeply disturbed, it does lay the blame for her current state on patriarchy's negligence—

at the beginning of the movie, she was actually healthier, and it is due to the wrong medical diagnosis and treatment that she is having a psychotic breakdown.

While John is in London, the movie crosscuts scenes of him delivering his paper and Charlotte tearing off the wallpaper (01:08:06), thus perfectly foregrounding the nineteenth-century gender regime of separate spheres. Every time she tears off a strip of wallpaper, a sharp metallic creak is heard. At the symbolic level, this knife-like sound hints that she has got hold of the phallus, albeit only temporarily. When she finishes, there is silence and she is shot from below, suggesting she has gained a sense of self. Moreover, her fingertips are stained in an inky black as a metaphor for the writing side of her self. We are also shown other contrasting shots regarding gender roles: he faces his audience and she a blank wall; as he shakes hands with his medical colleagues, a woman's hand emerges mysteriously from the wallpaper.

Performed by the same actress, the wallpaper figure is dressed in yellow and has gray hair. Since Charlotte finds a yellow dress in a trunk earlier in the film, we could think that the wallpaper woman stands for her projection in the future as a healthy old woman. This explanation would suffice if it were not for the fact that, at once, the two women join their lips, close their eyes and the wallpaper woman caresses Charlotte's face (01:10:40), a sequence that invites speculation à la queer. Their passionate meeting complicates the already multiple sexuality of a fin-de-siècle masturbating wife-and-mother, who, I would like to insist, could be called bisexual and is definitely queer. To enhance the impact of the women's kiss, there is a close-up of their faces and the image is frozen for a few seconds. In this way, the heroine is "undoing" (Butler 2004) both the pattern on the wallpaper and the regime that regulates her sexuality and gender, not through language but through affect: "the body's capacity to enter relations" (Braidotti 2002, 104).<sup>7</sup> Through such "undoing," PBS's adaptation grants the character the affective Other she longs for in Gilman's tale. As for the soundtrack, when the two women are face to face, there is soothing organ music, and as they approach each other, the soft jingle of a bell is heard. The religious-sounding music gives the scene a special halo, as if the pair were joined in body and soul, thus reinforcing the idea of women's solidarity discussed above.

### 3.6. The Post-Ending: The Political is the Personal

To Gilman's denouement, the film adds a puzzling extra scene that shows Charlotte wearing a yellow dress and crawling in circles on a bed of dry leaves (01:13:45). I propose the term *post-ending*, rather than the more literary *epilogue*, for audiovisual texts that revisit their endings in order to actively involve their viewers in, for instance, post-film discussion. In this case, the allegorical post-ending invites the kind of speculative inquiry that queer thought requires.

<sup>7</sup> There is an affective impulse in queer theory's attempt to disarm the Hegelian violence of recognition (of the Other); I thus suggest that queer researchers pursue an in-between Braidottian-Butlerian method.



Displaying Charlotte in an animal-like position as she crawls on the fallen leaves underscores her convergence with so-called nature, the ultimate Other, whose situation concerns queer studies too (see, for example, Gaard 1997). In fact, the female figure slides out of shot and we can only see leaves at the very end, which could be read as an ecological statement. From a symbolic point of view, the scene suggests that humans must come into profound contact with nature (body, leaf), queer—i.e., delve into—our conception of it and eventually stop its maltreatment. More literally, the post-ending foregrounds the fragile materiality of the body and of nature, both of which must be handled with respect and affection. To regain happiness again and be able to resume her activities, Charlotte is going to require not only an alternative treatment but also an Other that can establish an equitable affective relationship with her, since “affects” and “connections” are crucial for the life of the “embodied subject” (Braidotti 2002, 21). The actress’s circular movement indeed reveals the need for a guiding hand, a friendly Other, implying the futility of lonely rebellion. In this connection, Morton challenges the apparently liberating moments of queer self-invention that do not produce “a structural change in society” (1996, 273-74). The lesbian and autoerotic moments discussed throughout this article could be criticized on the same grounds: though rebelling in private can be transformative for the self, it is not enough to bring down patriarchy and lead to greater alterations. That notwithstanding, as can be gleaned from both the text’s and the film’s protagonists’ trajectories, women and men need to join forces à la queer and fight together to achieve real change both in and out of the home.

The soft music played during the post-ending is exactly like the piece heard at the start of the film. Using the same composition replicates the circular structure of the adapted text, which opens and closes with a temporal reference: “It is very seldom” (Gilman [1892] 1992, 24) and “every time!” (42). Both the story and the motion picture hint that women’s history tends to repeat itself. It is about time that social transformations are implemented so that mothers who work can carry out their occupations, as well as their hobbies, without being stigmatized, sometimes by other women. It is about time too that people who do not identify as heterosexual are not deemed to be ill, unless everybody is, since our (sexual) potential cannot be foreseen and all of us are queer.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Both Gilman’s tale and PBS’s adaptation portray a self who feels constrained by gender rules and tries to free herself. Queer thought and action also attempt to radically alter the status quo by, for instance, avoiding categorizing people as either normal or abnormal and searching for a dialogue among categories instead. The desire for radical transformation makes queer advocates quite different from lesbians and gays, who simply call to be allowed to join the existing system—for example, by getting married. As implied throughout this article, queer studies is interested



in the in-between aspects of identity, the ambiguity and instability that do not fit into naturalized classifications. The PBS production is explicit in its depiction of a fin-de-siècle wife-and-mother who masturbates, has lesbian tendencies and finally revolts against her domineering husband; hence, she is represented as a queer subject who neither adjusts to nor subscribes the established gender and sexual norms. The movie also alludes to the possibility of a feminist alliance that could overthrow the unjust patriarchal regime. By adding an extra scene after the ending, it encourages the audience to ponder on the protagonist's lonely revolution. Gestures like hers can attract some people's attention, maybe achieving temporary outcomes; nonetheless, it is imperative to add a material dimension to queer desire if we want to remodel our socioeconomic framework and bring about real transformation leading towards a more isonomic world. This includes the treatment given to women, workers and other supposedly second-class citizens in the domestic, medical and work spheres. In addition, the textual and the televised heroines long for contact with an affective Other, who indeed materializes in the screen version, whose affection will be vital for their recovery. In both cases, then, affective relationships that celebrate connectedness are seen as the cornerstone to the kind of queer revolution that seeks to dismantle hierarchies.

In its urge to free the queer I, PBS's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is an innovative queer response to Gilman's piece that interpellates viewers at the turn of the twentieth century. As implicit in the post-ending, the audience is invited to engage with the movie's queer proposals, reflect on the injustices caused by a white-supremacist heteropatriarchal liberal-capitalist system and demand changes. A queer revolution should start by building a non-dualistic link with the Other—be it a sexual fantasy or a film adaptation—and others—e.g., people whose sexual orientation or economic means are different from one's own—in order to lead as ethically sound a life as possible. This entails a blurring of categories through intersubjective relationships—in other words, the achievement of the first affective queer goal.<sup>8</sup>

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