

How and why have Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* used inanimate objects as motifs for female madness?

## Extended Essay – English A1

### Research Question:

‘How and why have Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* used inanimate objects as motifs for female madness?’

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this extended essay is to challenge the categorization of the female protagonists in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's\* *The Yellow Wallpaper* as 'mad', by examining the question 'How and why have both authors used inanimate objects as motifs for female madness?' The scope of this essay encompasses two works but contrasts a third, which amongst many focusing on the 'mad woman' endeavor to depict female 'madness' as a reaction to the limitations of the feminine role itself. The unique use of inanimate objects by Plath and Gilman as motifs to portray Esther and the unnamed narrator's experiences, in this revolutionary era of literature, drew me to these particular works. This paper explores Plath and Gilman's use of a predominant motif to cast light on the actual complexity, strength and defiance of their protagonists' behaviour, which overrides the simplistic and generalized nature of 'madness'.

The motifs unite the complex milieu of factors oppressing the protagonists in a striking and evocative symbol. Plath's bell jar alludes singularly to Esther's oppression, whilst Gilman's wallpaper is two-fold; it is symbolic of the unnamed narrator's oppression, but it is simultaneously a source of enlightenment. As a contrast, Shakespeare's portrayal of the beautiful but insubstantial Ophelia with the motif of flowers highlights the importance of motif choice. Unlike Shakespeare's Ophelia, it is evident that the conclusion of 'madness' bypasses the intricacies of Plath and Gilman's artistry in depicting these two women.

The link between character complexity and the employed motif leaves other doorways open to exploration. Are the motifs a reflection of Plath and Gilman's attitude towards female 'madness'? Is it reasonable to claim that Plath views female 'madness' as detrimental, whilst Gilman sees it as a form of rebellion, liberation and imaginative freedom?

295 words

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\* In different publications her name alternates between Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Charlotte Perkins Stetson. For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen to refer to her as Gilman.

**Introduction:**

In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonists, Esther and Gilman's unnamed narrator, are set apart from society and quite obviously different. Esther Greenwood becomes alienated by American society in the materialistic 1950s, whilst the unnamed narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* suffers from the 'rest cure', a remedy commonly prescribed to women during the Victorian era for unexplainable mental illness. A popular generalization that has been used to account for the unusual behaviour of women in literature is 'madness'. Since Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with the renowned 'mad' Ophelia and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* with the reputed Bertha, the supposed 'mad-woman in the attic', there has been interest surrounding the 'mad' woman in literature, as it has both captivating and sinister appeal. The famous Ophelia, captured by Shakespeare's imagination in the 1600s, is considered by critiques to be the epitome of the "love-mad woman" (Small, 1996:12). She is depicted as weak and without substance or depth, as her purpose in the play is to act merely as a foil to Hamlet's "antic disposition" (Thomas Neely cited by McEvoy, 2006:70). Shakespeare eroticizes Ophelia's 'madness' to be theatrically alluring, in tune with societal preconceptions of his era, where "women, especially virgins, were prone to 'hysteria', a condition thought to be the product of a diseased or 'wandering' womb" (McEvoy, 2006:15). She is beautiful and feminine, reinforced through Shakespeare's association of her with flowers, but she is passively picturesque, a lost soul, exemplified by the pristine nature of her suicide in the stream, still arm in arm with her flowers. The construction of Brontë's Bertha occurred in the 1800s, a period in which psychiatry produced views that "women were more vulnerable to insanity than men because of the instability of their reproductive systems" including puberty, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause, which "interfered with their sexual, emotional and rational control" (Showalter, 1987:55). In contrast to Ophelia, Bertha's portrayal by Brontë "shows an evolution from Romantic stereotypes of female insanity", as seen in *Hamlet*, "to a brilliant interrogation of the meaning of madness in women's daily lives" (Showalter, 1987:66). This renewed perspective set the scene for Gilman to write *The Yellow Wallpaper* in 1890, and later in the 1950s for Plath to write *The Bell Jar*. Both of these women present female 'madness' as a reaction to the limitations of the feminine role itself, presenting it in light of its social context.

Is the description of ‘mad’ in relation to any one of these female protagonists therefore too simple and easy? Trinh T. Minh-ha’s assertion that “All deviations from the dominant stream of thought can easily fit the category of the mentally ill” (cited by Cazenave, 2000:65) is valid, because in viewing the unconventional behaviour of Esther and the unnamed narrator, many readers will play with the idea of ‘madness’. Madness is a term that evokes erratic, unexplainable and unreasonable actions which defy the orthodox view of human behaviour. Esther becomes increasingly suicidal and loses her ability to read and write, whilst the unnamed narrator becomes immersed in the world of the yellow wallpaper. However, Esther and the unnamed narrator’s behaviour has a complexity that overrides the simplistic and generalized nature of ‘madness’. They both demonstrate a sensitivity to and rejection of the societies in which they live. They are marginalized due to their individual evolution and have a deeply disturbed sense of identity. The use of the term ‘mad’, therefore eradicates the specificity and meaning of their situations. In addition, contrary to the uncontrollability of madness, the two protagonists are conveyed as defiant and strong in their dilemmas. It is therefore evident, that, in the case of Plath and Gilman’s portrayal of Esther and the unnamed narrator, the conclusion of ‘madness’ bypasses the intricacies of their artistry in depicting these two women, and also the true meaning of their characters’ lives and struggles. This paper will examine how and why both authors have used inanimate objects as motifs for their characters’ dilemmas and behaviour.

It is the complexity of Esther and the unnamed narrator that is the driving force behind Plath and Gilman’s use of a predominant, inanimate motif, identified in the chosen titles *The Bell Jar* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. These inanimate motifs are used by both authors, more proficiently than words, to convey a psychologically realistic account of the complexities, depth and strength of Esther and the unnamed narrator, and to ultimately transcend the simple notion of ‘madness’. As a contrast to Plath and Gilman’s striking assertion of their character’s complexity and strength, tied up in the use of their chosen motif, Shakespeare’s portrayal of the ‘mad’ Ophelia, aided by the live and feminine motif of flowers will also be explored. It is a significant comparison because Shakespeare’s construction of Ophelia’s character incites sympathy rather than admiration, due to the reduced strength and complexity conveyed by his chosen motif. This

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enhances the reader's understanding of the immense impact of the bell jar and yellow wallpaper. These motifs assist the authors in shaping the complexities of their protagonist's predicament and complementing other techniques to bolster this outcome. The differing effects of the bell jar and the yellow wallpaper is explanatory of Plath and Gilman's choice of alternate motifs to represent female subjugation and assists in communicating their ultimate view on female 'madness'.

### **Plath and Gilman's motifs transcend the simplistic notion of 'female madness':**

In shaping the nature of Esther's state of mind, Plath has relied on the motif of the bell jar to embody her complexities, which eliminates the ability to simply categorize Esther as 'mad'. The bell jar mirrors Esther's entrapment and isolation, enabling Plath to communicate her rejection of the materialistic 1950s, which is only a component of the amalgamation of feelings she is experiencing. These emotions are reflected by the bell jar with its connotations of suffocation in, "The air of the bell jar wadded round me and I couldn't stir" (Plath, 1999:195). Plath's constant reference to the stifling and "sour air" (1999:2) of the bell jar reinforces the distorting and impenetrable vacuum Esther is beginning to disappear into. The images that plague Esther during her descent into depression are designed by Plath to reoccur in her consciousness, so that they are understood to be polluting Esther's freedom, by further congesting the haze of the bell jar. For example, we are introduced to cadaver imagery in, "I felt as though I were carrying that cadaver's head around with me on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar"(Plath, 1999:2) stemming from Esther's first experience seeing dead bodies. Esther's concern about the Rosenberg's electrocution, in "It was a queer, sultry, summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs" (Plath, 1999:1) like the cadavers, reverberates throughout. Through this repetition the motif of the bell jar exacerbates her sense of suffocation and alienation, ensuring a vivid understanding in the reader as to Esther's state of mind.

The bell jar is symbolic of Esther's deeply disturbed and dwindling sense of identity, adding another layer to her complex condition, and distancing her from the simple notion of 'madness'. Initially, Esther reflects on her time spent in New York on a scholarship as an editor

at a fashionable women's magazine. Plath immediately highlights the harshness of the New York landscape, "Mirage-grey at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets wavered in the sun..." (1999:1) which gives us an indication of Esther's hesitance and discomfort in this environment due to her individual evolution, which results in her marginalization. The artificial aspects of American society are emphasized, which impresses upon us her confusion, self-consciousness and dissatisfaction, further contributing to Esther's dwindling sense of self. Plath has Esther reflect scathingly on the materialistic focus of her life, "I got such a kick out of all those free gifts showering on to us" (1999:3) and describes Lenny's artificial smile as a "big, wide, white tooth-paste-ad smile" (1999:8). Plath portrays Esther as attempting to combat her feeling of entrapment within New York's artificiality when she "piece by piece" feeds her "wardrobe to the night wind" (1999:118). This discomfort Esther encounters in New York is representative of her deeply disturbed identity as she is a soul which is being torn apart by its less and less confident hold on a sense of self. Plath continually comments on Esther's passivity, as she feels "still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo" (1999:3) Esther also says, "The silence depressed me...It was my own silence" (Plath, 1999:20) which Plath illustrates in the confinement of the bell jar. The motif of the bell jar embodies a vivid representation of Esther's emotions and experiences, as it is a physical barrier between Esther, society, and her personal development. The striking ability of the bell jar to evoke Esther's multifaceted entrapment, allows the reader to appreciate that her 'madness' does not stem from irrationality, but it is instead a defiant reaction to the limitations of the feminine role itself.

The motif also depicts the forced reserve Esther experiences between herself and men, illustrating her domination by a patriarchal society, another pillar of her complex condition. She meets Marco, the 'woman-hater' and is locked into passivity. He says, "Pretend you are drowning" and she lets herself "blow and bend like a tree in the wind" (Plath, 1999:113). Similarly, Plath depicts Esther's conversations with Buddy Willard as ending in her submission, such as when Buddy superiorly explains to Esther that a poem is "A piece of dust"(1999:59) and despite Esther's anger at this remark she tamely responds, "I guess so" (1999:59). The locking of Esther's ability to explicitly state her personal views in the presence of 'hypocritical' men like

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Buddy is demonstrated by Plath, when she reveals that Esther “spent a lot of time having imaginary conversations with Buddy Willard...only they finished with me answering him back quite sharply” (1999:59). Again, Plath’s bell jar is representative of Esther’s inability to be forthright with men, as it is a segregating barrier.

Plath emphasizes Esther’s belief that she is trapped by her sexuality, another aspect of her multifaceted condition echoed by the confines of the bell jar. Plath bases Esther’s perception of her own ‘madness’ on the view that there is a division between her creativity and femininity. She conveys Esther’s belief that motherhood and her passion for writing are incompatible, and consequently she refrains from any experimentation for fear of becoming defeated by marriage and children. Plath uses the metaphor of a fig-tree to demonstrate that Esther’s entrapment within her sexuality means that she is confused at the prospect of her future. She can only visualize herself sitting passively “in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which of the figs I would choose” (Plath, 1999:81). In Plath’s choice of the suffocative bell jar as the predominant motif, which is the key element in controlling Esther’s depression and ‘madness’, her view that female ‘madness’ is singularly detrimental is effectively communicated.

The motif of the yellow wallpaper is used by Gilman, like Plath’s bell jar, to transcend the simplicity of ‘madness’ and to aid audience understanding of the strength and complexity of the protagonist’s behaviour. Literary critic, Linda Wagner-Martin says *The Yellow Wallpaper* “convinces less by its explicit content than by its metaphoric impression” (cited by Meyering, 1989:56), and the motif is essential in conveying the true nature of the unnamed narrator’s situation. Gilman chooses to keep her protagonist unnamed, as it reflects the anonymity of her double, the woman behind the paper and of all women during this period. This correlates with Gilman’s purpose, like Plath, to set female ‘madness’ within its social context by exemplifying the limitations of the feminine role. Gilman’s characterization of the unnamed narrator is a polemic against the ‘rest cure’, as it is the direct cause of her oppression. The yellow wallpaper itself is symbolic of the narrator’s alienation from intellectual life, which is portrayed by the narrator’s increasing immersion in it. As opposed to Plath’s simple and direct use of the bell jar



to communicate Esther's suffocation, Gilman uses the yellow wallpaper to establish the two-fold and hence complex nature of the narrator's 'madness'. Firstly, she is a victim of a repressive, patriarchal society that prohibits intellectual activity as depicted by the over-riding and constraining pattern of the wallpaper. Secondly, her 'madness' is intensified by the narrator's own realization of her oppression, which is communicated through her vision of the woman trapped in the wallpaper.

Initially, Gilman portrays the unnamed narrator as being repelled by the wallpaper, "The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smoldering unclean yellow" (1973:9). The yellow wallpaper at this stage, only adds to her sense of domination, as a result of its heavy pattern. This is because she is confronting the wallpaper through the eyes of her passive feminine self. This is consistent with the polite beginning of her journal, where she expresses her disagreement with her husband's prescribed 'rest cure', stating "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change would do me good"(Perkins Gilman, 1973:5). The language she uses in early entries is characterized by Treichler as containing "stereotypical women's language"(cited in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 1984:63) as the topics she discusses are limited, marked by exclamation marks, "I am a comparative burden already!"(Perkins Gilman, 1973:6), italics "*perhaps*"(Perkins Gilman, 1973:6) "*reason*"(Perkins Gilman, 1973:6) and repetition of the impotent refrain, "What is one to do?" (Perkins Gilman, 1973:5). Gilman portrays the narrator as offended by the 'living wallpaper', as opposed to the 'dead paper' onto which she secretly writes, which appears aggressively alive; "the lame uncertain curves...commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions (1973:8).

The duality of the yellow wallpaper is revealed by Gilman, mirroring the complexity of her protagonist's condition, when the narrator begins to view the wallpaper positively. She says, "I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps *because* of the wallpaper" (Perkins Gilman, 1973:17). The main protagonist becomes captivated by the wallpaper and Gilman uses this to illustrate its duality; it is symbolic of her oppression, but it simultaneously represents the narrator's awakening to her own deeply disturbed sense of self, which destabilizes her rationality completely, plunging her into 'madness'. She says "I determine for the thousandth

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time that I *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion” (Perkins Gilman, 1973:17) and through this, Gilman is identifying her protagonist’s sudden awareness of the importance of the wallpaper’s highly expressive nature, that she is being marginalized due to her individual evolution. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar assert that “she revises it, projecting her own passion for escape into its otherwise incomprehensible hieroglyphics” (cited by Golden, 1992:146) however, it appears more reasonable to suggest that it is Gilman’s intention for the yellow wallpaper to mirror the narrator’s position and enlighten her, rather than act as a medium onto which she projects her desires. This can be accounted for because Gilman allows the narrator to see a woman trapped behind the wallpaper, whom Treichler deems to be “the narrator’s unconscious and all women” (cited in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 1984:63). The woman is depicted as ‘always creeping’ and shaking the pattern of the wallpaper. The narrator comments, “And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so” (Perkins Gilman, 1973:24) highlighting her own suffocation. The woman trapped behind the wallpaper strengthens the duality of Gilman’s wallpaper; its repressive affiliations, as the woman has to ‘creep’ or ‘crawl’ behind it and its simultaneous liberating quality, as the woman is depicted as actively trying to escape from confinement. This duality is again emphasized in an exchange between the narrator and her husband, as the narrator relates, “John...said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wallpaper...I had no intention of telling him it was *because* of the wallpaper” (Perkins Gilman, 1973:23). John, through his male eyes, views the wallpaper as hindering his wife’s recovery, whereas the narrator affirms that she is ‘flourishing’ because of the wallpaper, eliminating her supposed ‘madness’ but identifying the oppression of the feminine role. Unlike Plath, Gilman understands female ‘madness’ as a form of rebellion, connected to liberation and imaginative freedom, as the yellow wallpaper acts as the catalyst responsible for unleashing the narrator’s imagination and awareness of her own oppression.

Contrary to Plath and Gilman’s use of inanimate motifs, Shakespeare uses the live motif of flowers to aid his portrayal of the mad Ophelia. The flower imagery that is continuously present during Shakespeare’s portrayal of Ophelia’s ‘madness’ such as the Queen’s description of her suicide, “There with fantastic garlands did she make / Of crowsfeet, nettles, daisies and

long purples” (Shakespeare, 1996:17) renders Ophelia an insubstantial and weak character. The motif of flowers provides no striking symbolism for the causes and complexities of Ophelia’s mental state, only her beauty and thus the audience is able to more easily place Ophelia into the generalized and demeaning category of the ‘mad’. The flower motif, which evokes fragility, vulnerability and simplicity, lacks the multifaceted nature of the bell jar and the yellow wallpaper and paints Ophelia as an uncomplicated and weak female character. In Heather Brown’s essay, *A Modern Interpretation of Ophelia*, she applies Virginia Woolf’s metaphor likening women to mirrors, “Women have served...as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Brown, wwwsite) to Ophelia’s character. She states “Aside from the male characters using Ophelia as a ‘looking glass’ – casting their reflection upon her, showing themselves and the audience their power over her – Ophelia serves no purpose in the play. She is Polonius’ pawn, Laertes’ chaste sister and Hamlet’s lover” (Brown, wwwsite). Unlike Plath and Gilman, who use their protagonist’s sensitivity to their societies, marginalization due to individual evolution and deeply disturbed sense of identity to portray their complexity and defiance to the limitations of the feminine role, Shakespeare explores no sources of female oppression. In Shakespeare’s use of a flower motif to depict Ophelia, his purpose is to position her as a mere foil to enhance the domineering masculinity of Hamlet, Polonius and Laertes, which portrays her as a character to pity rather than respect. In contrast, Plath and Gilman’s use of the bell jar and yellow wallpaper create a psychologically realistic portrayal of their character’s complex situations that allows readers to admire the strength and endurance of their two female protagonists.

**Additional techniques enhance the complexity conveyed by the motif:**

The complementary techniques used by the authors strengthen the role of the motif in communicating the complexity of Esther and the unnamed narrator’s experiences. They assist in transcending the simplistic notion of ‘madness’, which is the ultimate reason for including inanimate object motifs. Shakespeare uses no additional devices to enhance his portrayal of Ophelia with his flower motif. Plath develops repetitive imagery of purification and confinement,

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which are branches of the entrapment and congestion conveyed by the ball jar, while Gilman focuses on elevating the Gothic element emanated by the wallpaper.

Plath conjures repetitive imagery that reinforces the effect that the stifling bell jar, indicating another aspect of motif use in consolidating the complexity of Esther's condition. Throughout the novel Plath portrays Esther's obsession with purification, "The longer I lay there in the clear hot water the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last...I felt pure and sweet as a new baby"(1999:22). This relates to the 'sour air' of the bell jar that builds up, polluting her very being. This congestion of impurities can be interpreted as her imprisoning femininity, of which she seeks to be purged. Plath's purification imagery commences when Esther contemplates a Japanese method of suicidal cleansing and redemption, in "They disemboweled themselves when anything went wrong" (1999:145). Esther's first experience of shock treatment reciprocates this as she felt "the sap fly out of me like a split plant" (Plath, 1999:151). *The Bell Jar* connects shock treatment to female sexuality and creativity. Although electrotherapy may lead to renewal, it is painful and controlled by men. Elaine Showalter argues that "Plath mythologized electrotherapy as a possession by a male god, and to be seized by this electric god was to be born again only of *man*, fathered rather than mothered, and thus, in Plath's imagination, purged of the inheritance of feminine vulnerability" (1987:217). Towards the end, electrotherapy causes the cleansing Esther needs to relieve the bell jar, "The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to circulating air" (Plath, 1999:217) justifying Showalter's assertion. Plath links Esther's purgation and rebirth in the conclusion of the novel with electroshock treatment, as it resolves the split between Esther's feminine and creative self, which again identifies the limits of the feminine role. The repetitive imagery of purification leads us to understand Esther's insecurity within her own femininity, which is another layer of her multifaceted condition.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the Gothicism of the wallpaper is enticing, as it is both beautiful and horrific, mirroring the complexity of female 'madness'. This provokes the narrator's exploration of the wallpaper, and it is this investigation that reveals to us, the highly complex milieu of factors responsible for the protagonist's behaviour. The unnamed narrator's journal entries reveal the sinister nature of the setting, "A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would

say a haunted house” (Perkins Gilman, 1973:5) and the narrator’s feeling of suspicion towards it, “there is something strange about the house – I can feel it” (Perkins Gilman, 1973:6). The nursery, the room she must stay in with the yellow wallpaper has barred windows, rings in the wall, torn sections of the wallpaper, the floor is “scratched and gouged and splintered” (Perkins Gilman, 1973:11) and the bedstead is described as ‘gnawed’. This sinister edge that entices the unnamed narrator’s imagination is captured in Gilman’s portrayal of the wallpaper, “There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down” (1973:9) and the “great slanting waves of optic horror” (1973:10). The emergence of the narrator’s ‘creeping’ double in the wallpaper, “And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about that pattern” (Perkins Gilman, 1973:14) reinforces the haunted, truly Gothic nature of the short story and the narrator’s deep-set complexity. A striking image created by Gilman, which encapsulates her intended horrifying effect, is when the unnamed narrator begins to tear the wallpaper off and, “All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!” (1973:12). This gruesome imagery that emanates a Gothic mood is vital because it paints the wallpaper mysteriously, and its shadows enable us to unravel the unnamed narrator’s entangled state.

### **Conclusion:**

Through the psychologically realistic depiction of Esther and the unnamed narrator, with the use of inanimate motifs, both Plath and Gilman are able to transcend the simplistic notion of ‘mad’ in relation to their protagonists. The motifs, the bell jar and yellow wallpaper, convey their ‘madness’ as complex and multifaceted, stemming from the limitations of the feminine role within the social contexts of each text. For Esther, the bell jar is representative of her suffocation, alienation and loss of identity, and for the unnamed narrator, the yellow wallpaper reflects her intellectual and societal restrictions. The impacts of these two motifs are bolstered by other literary devices Plath and Gilman have employed.

The choice of a particular inanimate object as a motif is important, and consequently Plath and Gilman have chosen different motifs for the expression of contrasting character situation and

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influence. Shakespeare's flower motif enabled him to associate weakness with Ophelia, and this demonstrates the importance of motif choice. Plath's bell jar acts as a barrier between Esther and her environment, a motif that alludes singularly to her immense oppression. Contrastingly, Gilman's motif of the yellow-wallpaper is two-fold; it is symbolic of the unnamed narrator's oppression, but also it is the source that enlightens her to her own oppression and awakens her imaginative powers.

It is evident that Plath and Gilman agree that 'madness' is gender-inflicted, which can be deduced from the strength exuded by both women and evokes admiration in the reader. The exploration of character complexity through these motifs is one of many possibilities. Perhaps, the most intriguing is whether the motifs are a reflection of Plath and Gilman's attitude towards female 'madness'? Is it reasonable to claim that Plath views female 'madness' as purely detrimental, whilst Gilman sees it as a form of rebellion, liberation and imaginative freedom?

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