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Exploring Neurotic Desires: A Comparative Study of Female Protagonists in *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Birthmark* by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Abstract

This paper examines the interplay between neurotic desires and patriarchal dominance in the female protagonists of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* (1843). While each text has received critical attention within feminist and psychological scholarship, little research has approached them together through the lens of Karen Horney's theory of neurotic needs. Adopting a qualitative, text-based analysis, the study maps the characters' behavioral patterns, emotional struggles, and symbolic actions to specific neurotic needs, including the pursuit of affection, approval, independence, and perfection. The study shows that the neurotic needs for affection, approval, and independence are present in Gilman's female protagonist, while the neurotic needs for affection, approval, and perfection are prominent in Hawthorne's protagonist. The study reveals that these compulsions are not merely personal traits but are deeply rooted in the constraints of male dominated social structures, which amplify psychological instability and drive the narratives toward tragic outcomes. By linking literary representation with psychoanalytic theory, the research offers fresh insight into the psychological mechanisms of gendered oppression, enriching both comparative literary analysis and feminist psychology discourse.

Keywords: Neurotic Desires, Gender Studies, Karen Horney, Feminist Psychology, Comparative Literature, Male Chauvinism, Psychological Oppression

Introduction

Neurotic disorders have long been a subject of critical debate in literature and psychology, offering profound insights into the complexities of the human psyche. The Scottish physician William Cullen first coined the term "neurosis," deriving it from the Greek word neuron meaning "nerve," and the modern Latin suffix -osis, denoting an abnormal condition or disorder (Knoff, 2010). Neurosis is frequently associated with stress, anxiety, and instability in personality,



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manifesting in individuals who struggle to regulate their obsessions. Such individuals either attempt to escape harsh realities or develop extreme fixations, both of which disrupt emotional and psychological balance.

Human beings, however, are not shaped in isolation. Many individuals are profoundly influenced by dominant personalities around them, and within patriarchal societies, male dominance often imposes itself upon women. This imbalance becomes particularly destructive in marital relationships, where women are compelled to submit and conform to their husbands' authority. Excess in any domain leads to harmful consequences; therefore, whether it is the neurotic need for affection, approval, independence, or perfection, the inability to moderate such compulsions can result in psychological breakdowns. As Karen Horney asserts, "Neuroses involves deviation from the normal" (Horney, 1937, p. 21).

The disparity between the male and female psyche has historically created unequal dynamics in relationships, in which men assume pragmatic, authoritative roles, while women are relegated to dependent and submissive positions. This unbalanced relationship produces psychological instability, reinforcing neurotic tendencies in women. In her influential text *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*, Karen Horney (2012) emphasizes that "self-idealization always entails a general self-glorification, and thereby gives the individual the much-needed feeling of significance and of superiority over others. But it is by no means a blind self-aggrandizement" (p. 22). Horney's framework illuminates how unrealistic ideals whether imposed by society or internalized by individuals intensify neuroses and distort authentic self-hood.

Similarly, Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (2014) critiques the cultural structures that reinforce male supremacy: "Society, therefore, as it becomes more enlightened, should be very careful not to establish bodies of men who must necessarily be made foolish or vicious by the very constitution of the profession" (p. 43). Wollstonecraft's observations highlight the social construction of gender inequality, in which men are conditioned to dominate and women are trained to obey, a condition reflected in literature and lived experience alike.

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), the female protagonist is confined in a "colonial mansion" (p. 18), a symbol of both physical restriction and psychological isolation. Subjected to her husband's rest cure, she is denied meaningful activity and autonomy, leading to the intensification of her neuroses. Her obsessive focus on the yellow wallpaper



represents her inner turmoil and her yearning for independence and approval. As Horney (1937) observes, “the frequency of neuroses shows all kinds of pressure can easily divert our constructive energies into unconstructive or destructive channels” (p. 17). Gilman’s protagonist exemplifies this destructive redirection, as repression transforms her desires into compulsions that destabilize her mental health.

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Birthmark* (1843) presents a similar trajectory through the character of Georgiana, whose neuroses stem from her husband Aylmer’s relentless fixation on her facial birthmark. Initially a minor blemish, the mark becomes a symbol of imperfection under her husband’s obsessive scrutiny. As Aylmer’s desire for perfection grows, Georgiana internalizes his perspective, gradually developing a neurotic personality consumed by self-doubt and desperation for approval. Her submission to her husband’s authority culminates in her tragic death. Wollstonecraft (2014) captures this dynamic when she writes, “the blind lead the blind, one need not come from heaven to tell us the consequences” (p. 48), a statement that reflects how unchecked masculine authority guides women toward ruin.

Literary depictions of female characters often reveal deep psychological complexities shaped by neurotic desires for affection, approval, independence, and perfection. Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Hawthorne’s *The Birthmark* provide profound insight into the inner lives of women struggling against male-dominated social systems. Through their protagonists, these stories expose the devastating impact of patriarchal structures on female identity, freedom, and mental well-being. This study aims to explore these themes by applying Karen Horney’s Theory of Neurotic Needs as a psychoanalytic framework, thereby analyzing not only the role of neurotic desires in the protagonists’ psychological collapse but also the destructive impact of male chauvinism on their emotional and social existence.

Materials and Methods

This research is qualitative in nature and employs the content analysis method to examine how neurotic desires lead to psychological disorders in the female protagonists of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Birthmark*. In addition to exploring the role of neurotic desires, the study also investigates the impact of male chauvinism on women’s mental health through an in-depth analysis of recurring themes and patterns in the selected texts.

Karen Horney’s Theory of Neurotic Needs provides the theoretical framework for this study. Horney categorizes ten neurotic needs into three movements: moving toward people, moving



away from people, and moving against people. These needs include the pursuit of affection and approval, a partner, restriction of one's life, power, exploitation of others, prestige, personal admiration, personal achievement, perfection, and independence.

The analysis demonstrates that the protagonists primarily exhibit three dominant neurotic needs: affection and approval, perfection, and independence. Gilman's protagonist embodies the yearning for independence as symbolized by her obsession with freeing the woman trapped in the wallpaper, while Hawthorne's Georgiana reflects the destructive pursuit of perfection through her willingness to risk her life to remove her birthmark. Both protagonists also display an overwhelming desire for affection and approval, obediently following their husbands' dictates despite personal discomfort.

This framework enables an in-depth exploration of how neurotic needs function within patriarchal constraints, thereby highlighting the link between individual psychological instability and systemic male chauvinism in the selected short stories.

Results and Discussion

This section discusses the interplay between neurotic desires and male chauvinism in shaping the psychological instability of female protagonists in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* (1843). Drawing on Karen Horney's theory of neurotic needs, the analysis reveals how the protagonists' needs for affection, approval, independence, and perfection are intensified by patriarchal dominance, resulting in psychological disorders, loss of identity, and ultimately, madness or death.

Neurotic Desires Leading to Psychological Instability

Desires form a natural part of human life, encompassing aspirations for love, power, recognition, health, and freedom. While healthy desires strengthen individuality, unhealthy or excessive ones cause neuroses and emotional breakdowns. As Shakespeare noted in *Hamlet*, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (1604/1998, Act 2, Scene 2). Gilman's unnamed protagonist and Hawthorne's Georgiana embody unhealthy desires, as their longing for approval and perfection is exacerbated by oppressive marital environments.

Karen Horney (1937) stresses the role of external factors in intensifying neuroses, arguing that "anxiety is the dynamic center of neuroses" (p. 41). Within patriarchal societies, where women's



voices are consistently suppressed, this anxiety grows unchecked. Helen (1925) observes that “the inferiority of women is man-made” (p. 12), underscoring how socio-cultural structures nurture female subordination.

The Yellow Wallpaper: Affection, Approval, and Independence

Gilman’s protagonist, confined to a colonial mansion by her physician husband John, experiences a decline in mental health due to her neurotic need for approval. She complies unquestioningly with his rest cure, despite her inner opposition: “Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?” (Gilman, 1892/1998, p. 21). Her husband’s dismissal of her emotions “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (p. 18) reveals a pattern of belittlement typical of male chauvinism.

Her yearning for independence surfaces through secret writing, an act of rebellion against John’s authority: “There comes John, and I must put this away he hates to have me write a word” (Gilman, 1892/1998, p. 30). The wallpaper in her room becomes a projection of her inner conflict, its trapped woman symbolizing her desire for freedom. Ultimately, her madness is both a tragic collapse and an assertion of independence: “I’ve got out at last... And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (p. 96).

The Birthmark: Affection, Approval, and Perfection

Hawthorne’s Georgiana, initially content with her appearance, becomes ensnared in her husband Aylmer’s obsession with her small birthmark. Once praised by admirers, the mark is re- framed as a defect: “Seeing her otherwise so perfect, he found this one defect grow more and more intolerable” (Hawthorne, 1843/2003, p. 6). Georgiana internalizes this critique, confessing, “You cannot love what shocks you!” (p. 5). Her need for approval transforms into a destructive pursuit of perfection, aligning with Horney’s (1937) assertion that “among the drives towards actualizing the idealized self the need for perfection is the most radical one” (p. 24).

Georgiana ultimately accepts her husband’s authority over her body and psyche: “Remove it, whatever be the cost, or we shall go mad!” (Hawthorne, 1843/2003, p. 16). Her death demonstrates the fatal outcome of male chauvinism when women are coerced into conforming to impossible ideals of flawlessness.



Impacts of Male Chauvinism on Mental Health

Male chauvinism compounds these neurotic struggles by silencing women and undermining their individuality. Wollstonecraft (1792/1996) argued, “To speak explicitly, women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue” (p. 45). In both stories, husbands embody patriarchal authority John as a physician and Aylmer as a scientist imposing control under the guise of rationality and pragmatism.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, John infantilizes his wife: “He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction” (Gilman, 1892/1998, p. 26). Though cloaked as care, this erodes her autonomy and reduces her to dependency. His threats of sending her to Weir Mitchell if she resists “John says if I don’t pick up faster, he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall” (p. 45) illustrate the coercive power of medical patriarchy. His disbelief in her suffering further intensifies her isolation: “You see, he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do?” (p. 19).

Similarly, in *The Birthmark*, Aylmer’s scientific authority dehumanizes Georgiana, treating her as an experiment rather than a partner: “I shall correct what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work!” (Hawthorne, 1843/2003, p. 8). Georgiana’s compliance reveals her internalized oppression. Even as she faces death, she affirms Aylmer’s efforts: “You have aimed loftily; you have done nobly. Do not repent” (p. 19). Her submission symbolizes how deeply male chauvinism infiltrates women’s self-perception, leading them to conflate domination with love.

Comparative Insights

Both protagonists endure marital relationships shaped by male dominance. John and Aylmer embody intellectual authority, interpreting their wives’ experiences through medical and scientific rationality while dismissing female emotion as irrational. Their constant reminders of female “weakness” whether nervousness or a birthmark undermine their wives’ confidence and reinforce dependence.

Despite these parallels, the outcomes diverge. Gilman’s protagonist experiences psychological collapse but achieves symbolic liberation through madness. In contrast, Georgiana succumbs to death, reflecting the fatal consequences of perfectionism. Their environments also contrast: Gilman’s protagonist is confined to a nursery with “horrid wallpaper” (Gilman, 1892/1998, p. 42), while Georgiana inhabits a luxurious laboratory infused with scientific odors (Hawthorne,



1843/2003, p. 13). Yet both spaces function as prisons, reflecting how environment amplifies psychological breakdown.

Secondary male figures also reinforce this oppression. In Gilman's text, the protagonist's physician brother supports John's treatment plan, eliminating alternative perspectives. In Hawthorne's, Aylmer's assistant empathizes with Georgiana but lacks the power to intervene. Both cases highlight how male networks collectively sustain female subjugation.

Together, these narratives reveal the destructive interplay of neurotic desires and male chauvinism. The unnamed protagonist loses her identity symbolized by her lack of a name while Georgiana's identity is erased with the removal of her birthmark. Both women surrender autonomy and self-esteem, internalizing their husbands' perspectives until they collapse into madness or death. Male chauvinism not only denies women independence but also manipulates their desires, channeling them into neurotic compulsions that devastate mental health.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark*, through Karen Horney's Theory of Neurotic Needs, highlights how neurotic desires destabilize women's psychological health. In Gilman's story, the protagonist's neurotic needs for affection, approval, and independence drive her into complete mental collapse, while in Hawthorne's text, Georgiana's neurotic needs for affection, approval, and perfection lead to her death. Both narratives reveal how excessive neurotic desires, shaped by oppressive environments, result in tragic endings. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the destructive impact of male chauvinism, which erodes the protagonists' identity, autonomy, self-esteem, and marital harmony. The dominance of patriarchal authority not only suppresses women's individuality but also intensifies their psychological vulnerabilities. This research affirms the link between gender oppression and neurosis, enriching feminist literary and psychoanalytic discourse. Future studies may extend this work through ecofeminist perspectives or postcolonial readings of Gilman's text.



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