What Cannot Be (Re)written: Disentangling Panoptic Structures in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" and *Herland*

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With its centered tower encircled by inmates' cells, Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon was an architectural response to an eighteenth-century social problem: how to best control a prison's population. Its design—a circular structure with a centered tower that is "...pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring…and divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building"—positions inmates' bodies relative to the watchtower, in order to perpetuate a sense of constant surveillance.[1] The incarcerated cannot see into the watchtower from their cells. They cannot discern whether or not they are actually being observed. Blending this sense of visibility with invisibility, the Panopticon produces docile bodies, evaluated from a distance and controlled through the mind.[2] Thus, as Michel Foucault warns in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), "visibility is a trap" (200). Psychological infrastructure, more than physical design, establishes and re-enforces its power.

The Panopticon's design, however, is not dependent on a prison setting but can be evoked in any setting that constructs a panoptic relationship between the observer and the observed. Literary representations, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" and *Herland*, further illuminate connections between setting and psychological control to reinforce oppressive ideology. Frequently anthologized and read across disciplines, the female narrator in "The Yellow Wall-paper" succumbs to the panoptic confinement designed and enforced by her husband, who also serves as her physician. Twenty years later, Gilman's serialized utopian novel, *Herland*,

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[1]This description of the Panopticon comes from Michael Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), which describes both its physical architecture and its effect on prisoners (200).

[2]Foucault introduces the term "docile bodies" in part three of *Discipline and Punish*, arguing that disciplined bodies become docile when power is "dissociate[d]" from the body or when the body becomes the object of "strict subjection" (138).

seems to revise "The Yellow Wall-paper" by portraying an all-female society's response to gender roles. And yet, this gender reversal strategy only repositions the observer and the observed when the community incarcerates three male characters.[3] The novel (inadvertently) preserves the narrative that it seeks to resist. Characters located within panoptic surveillance are subjects without agency, perpetuating the design that they attempt to overturn. Whether structured as a prison (Bentham's Panopticon), a nursery (the narrator's room in "The Yellow Wall-paper"), or a utopia (the all-female society in *Herland*), the observer and observed are equally enveloped in the psychological effects of the panoptic power structure. It is impossible to eliminate the Panopticon within the shadow of the Panopticon because its design—or narrative structure used to maintain oppressive ideology—perpetuates its effect.

In "The Yellow Wall-paper," both nineteenth-century patriarchal ideology and the "rest cure" comprise the panoptic structure.[4] The narrator is confined to an upstairs bedroom and controlled through constant surveillance. Her room, previously a nursery, contains barred windows, a bed bolted to the floor, "rings and things" in the walls, and a gate at the top of the stairs (648). However, it is the wallpaper's pattern, as John S. Bak points out in his panoptic reading of the story, which is most distressing to the narrator, particularly its "bulbous eyes" (43). The story's narrator explains to the reader that she "…know[s] a little of the principle of design" and the pattern is "…not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alteration, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that [she] ever heard of" (651). Its replication in her irrational confinement further contributes to her obsession to follow "…that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion" (650). In this way, the narrator, as Jane Thrailkill contends, "…becomes a participant in the drama of the wallpaper…[which] insistently solicit[s] attention from its analyst" (548). She must solve it (not the pattern, but the flaw in the rest cure's design represented by

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[3]I borrow the term "gender reversal strategy" from Carter-Sanborn, who asserts that readers identify Gilman's "main tool" in *Herland* (and *With Her in Ourland*) as "role reversal" (2).

[4]Invented by Silas Weir Mitchell, the "rest cure" was prescribed to nineteenth-century women (and men) who exhibited symptoms of a "nervous condition." It prescribed six to eight weeks of bed rest, extra meals, and removal from the home's "potentially toxic" social atmosphere ("Rest Cure"). Charlotte Perkins Gilman underwent this treatment, and Thrailkill situates the beginnings of scholarly treatments that connect "Gilman's experience with the rest cure" and the "paradigmatic of the patriarchal silencing of women" in 1970s feminist scholarship (526). See, also, Hochman, Fetterley, and Lanthrop.

the pattern) before she becomes a part of its perpetuation; and yet, by trying to solve it, she sustains the psychological effects of its design. Confined in a prison-like setting, the narrator "*feel[s]*" that "there is something strange about the house," that she cannot fully articulate—the relationship between visibility and invisibility, which renders her powerless to control her subjection (648, emphasis added). Even when John is physically absent to observe her adherence to the "rest cure" the wallpaper's pattern acts as a psychological extension of his surveillance.

Just as the narrator is observed by John (and the wallpaper), she enacts the role of observer in her isolated environment. Foucault describes this as "permanent visibility," which sets up an "automatic functioning of power" in which the subject of observation becomes part of the observing. In other words, subjects cannot escape the "…power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (201). Refusing her prescribed stasis, she examines both the internal and the external—the wallpaper within the room and the garden outside her barred windows. In contrast to the wallpaper, the garden represents order with its "…box-bordered paths, and lines with long grape-covered arbors" (654). Part of the natural world and separate from the confines of her bedroom, it appears free, "*delicious*[ly]" hopeful (648); but, as Lee Schweninger argues through her ecofeminist reading of the story, its liberating presence is deceptive, or a "…site of limits, of control, of the artificial, [and] of denial" (27). The narrator cannot access this space physically. Instead, she must position herself in the garden psychologically, or separate from her body which remains trapped in the home, in order to enjoy its freedom.

Indeed, if the garden is examined closely, its narrative progression resembles the narrator's sequential analysis of the wallpaper's design and her eventual self-positioning within it. The garden's "lines" become "gnarly" as the story unfolds (649). The narrator increasingly lacks the ability to distinguish between what exists within and what exists outside of her room. The "smooches" she creates are like garden paths, and the pattern's disorder reminds her of "fungus." The "horrid paper" oozes into the garden becoming "mysterious" and "riotous" (649). By the end of the story, the narrator envisions multiple women creeping in the garden, all resembling the woman in the wallpaper she helps to escape. Like her perception of multiplying eyes in the wallpaper's design, elements from the garden enter her room, and conversely, her room spills into the garden, simulating and per-

petuating a panoptic design capable of infiltrating both internal and external, mind and body.[5]

Despite her progressive assimilation, the narrator still attempts to resist through the act of writing. She writes, "There comes John, and I must put this away,--he hates to have me write a word" and confides further in a contextual aside to the reader, "I can write when [my sister-in-law] is out, and [I can] see her a long way off from these windows" (650). Nonetheless, her subversive writings also progressively succumb to a prescribed narrative. As the story continues, her entries become shorter and less grounded in chronological time. For example, the first entry notes that they are renting the home for three months; the second entry records a time span of two weeks between the first and second entries; and the third entry conveys that the Fourth of July has ended (650). After the third entry, however, there are no further references to chronological time until the last section's "Hurrah! This is the last day" (655). As the length of each entry gets shorter, time loses its distinctions, coinciding with her integration into the pattern's design. Foucault contends that the Panopticon "…create[s] and sustain[s] a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, …inmates [are] caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (201). As the narrator becomes more consumed by unraveling the wallpaper's design, in an effort to unravel her illness and its prescribed cure, she writes less. By writing less, she conforms to her husband's/physician's directive to not write. Consequently, she conforms to the rest cure's panoptic effect, enacting what she attempts to resist.

Even though her writing is an act of resistance, the narrator cannot write her own text because the Panopticon has written it (and is writing it) for her. Instead, the narrator's voice embodies asides like "I never used to be so sensitive" and "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time…when I am alone" (650). John tells her that she is the only one who can help herself, but she confides to the reader that John "takes all care *from* me" (648, emphasis added). However, as Judith Fetterley rightly argues, "John's definition of sanity requires that his wife neither have nor tell her own story" (160–64). The narrator cannot write her own text because she does not have the agency to write it. Instead, her text merges with other texts—the wallpaper, the garden, the rest cure, nineteenth-century patriarchal ideology, John—so that, by the end of the narrative, it is difficult to distinguish her voice from other voices. The more she tries to read the texts around her and

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[5]Scott reads this as ecological adaptation.

untangle her voice, the more she becomes bound by these texts. Indeed, her explanation of the wallpaper's design resembles her attempts to construct her own narrative: "You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples on you" (653). Like the reciprocal effects of panoptic surveillance, she perpetuates other texts' power through her analysis of them.

The narrator comprehends that to write her own text, she must destroy the wallpaper, but since the pattern represents the panoptic and patriarchal control present in her efforts to tell her own story, she cannot eliminate it completely. She cannot move the bed to reach the sections of the wallpaper above her head. She can only peel off "…all the paper [she] could reach standing on the floor" (655). She tells John, "'I've got out at last,'…'in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'" (656). Scholars often focus on the identity of Jane in the narrator's declaration to John, but the significance of her declaration to John is not to associate herself with a name. Instead, the placement of "Jane" at the end of the story signal her unsuccessful attempts to disentangle herself from the identities prescribed for her—John's wife, John's patient, a woman struggling with illness, a woman unable to maintain her sanity—in the same way that her name or identity become absorbed as part of the wallpaper's text.[6] She can pull off *most* of the paper but not *all* of it. In fact, the more she physically engages with the paper, in her attempt to destroy its panoptic effect, the more alive it becomes, multiplying into "…so many of those creeping women" (656). In contrast to the body parts in the wallpaper's design, which eventually merge into the figure of a woman, the narrator must dissociate her mind from her body to escape, or as John Bak contends, to break "…free of this internal prison—the Victorian mind" by "…transcending all levels of

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[6]There are various readings of "Jane." While some scholars read Jane as a separate identity from the narrator, Bak argues that Jane is the narrator. In "Reading about Reading," *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, Johns Hopkins UP, 1986, Judith Fetterley asserts that the narrator actually "…becomes a version of John himself" (164). In response to the question, "if the narrator is Jane, then why does she try to tie her up again once she has escaped," Susan Lanser argues in "'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America," *Feminist Studies*, 15.3 (Autumn 1989): 415–41, that Jane's existence reflects a "…culture obsessively preoccupied with race as the foundation of character" (425). Lanser suggests that yellow references indicate the cultural fear of racially-mixed identities and late nineteenth century immigration (425–7). Finally, she posits that Jane could be linked to the Jane in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (Lanser 428–9).

consciousness" through madness (45). And yet, like the garden, the possibility of "escape" remains deceptive.

The narrator's attempts to tell her story, even as it merges with prescribed narratives. But the wallpaper itself, as Shirley Samuels contends, "…leaves a smudge on her body even as she attacks it" (104). The Panopticon (embodied in nineteenth-century patriarchal ideology and visually represented in the wallpaper's design) metaphorically remains fixed to the wall in unreachable remnants. At the end of the story, John's fainted body no longer confines her physically to the room, and yet the narrator remains within it—not because she is mad as much as because she cannot destroy all the wallpaper. Her text is not entirely her own and, therefore, continues to perpetuate its panoptic power.

One explanation for the narrator's decision to remain with John's body may be that the ending of the story reflects her "…desire to duplicate John's text but with the roles reversed" (Fetterley 164). Perhaps, then, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's serialized novel, *Herland*, could be read as an answer to the narrator's desire, since it reverses the gender dynamics of the observer and the observed. *Herland*'s serialized chapters were first published in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's self-published magazine *The Forerunner*, between 1915 and 1916, later published collectively in 1979. The novel portrays three male protagonists—Vandyck Jennings, Jeff Mangrave, and Terry Nicholson—and their incarceration in an all-female society. Van narrates their story—first from an aerial perspective and, once captured, from within Herland's walls, which increasingly resemble "The Yellow Wall-paper's" nursery. Among other similarities between the story and novel, Van, Jeff, and Terry are under constant surveillance. There are no bars on the windows, but they are uniformly dressed and confined (albeit, together) in a room with three beds. Their room, "built out on a steep spur of rock," uses the natural environment to reduce the possibility of physical escape (25). The garden beneath their windows offers no escape, entrenched by walls that remind the protagonists of their limited visibility.

Like "The Yellow Wall-paper's" narrator, Van, Jeff, and Terry attempt to resist assimilation, but their efforts only reinforce and perpetuate the panoptic effect. The men work together to study the landscape from their windows, fashion a rope, slip down the wall, survive on nuts from the forest, advance toward their flying machine at night, and dismantle the cloth surrounding it. And yet, despite their combined efforts, Van explains that the community "…knew well we

would make for our machine, and also that there was no other way of getting down—alive. So our flight had troubled no one; all they did was to call the inhabitants to keep an eye on our movements all along the edge of the forest between the two points" (38). The same three characters who first observed them when they entered Herland (Celis, Alima, and Ellador) reveal that they had been watching their attempt to escape without concern.

Herland's observers transcend visibility like the view from within the Panopticon's watchtower—their eyes are always present. Sometimes Herland's eyes are linked to an individual character (or group of characters like the women in the tree), while, at other times, eyes are not individualized but part of a collective social body of surveillance. Michael Foucault describes this as a "…faceless gaze…thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network" (214). Like bulbous [wall-paper] eyes in "The Yellow Wall-paper," the eyes in *Herland* are part of an intricate design that perpetuate surveillance in the absence of a primary observer.

After their attempted escape and re-capture, Van writes that they expected punishment but instead "…back we went, not under anesthetic this time…each of us in a separate vehicle with one able-bodied lady on either side and three facing him" (36–7). Van dismisses separation from Jeff and Terry as punishment because it does not include physical retribution, even though the characters' isolation and increased surveillance invoke Foucauldian discipline, which "…introduces…the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved" (182). The scene ends with a description of their physical assimilation, "…all sitting together on the roof...all in similar dress; our hair, by now, as long as theirs, only our beards to distinguish us" (38–9). Their normalization eliminates their individuality and replaces it with collective identity, or as Foucault describes it, a "regime of disciplinary power" that defines the limits of abnormality to control "binary opposition" (182–83). By unifying Van, Jeff, and Terry's appearances (first, between each other and later as part of Herland's society), they become incapable of resistance because they are part of a collective that controls their resistance. The inmates appear nearly indistinguishable from their captors.

Normalization in *Herland* engenders the same panoptic surveillance as the wallpaper in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Its power is enacted and perpetuated by those within its design, and its introduction eliminates individuality in favor of a collective identity. As part

of this collective voice, Van's voice (like "The Yellow Wall-paper's" narrator) is not entirely his own. His narration comments on experiences through asides to the reader using the narrative approach reminiscent of Gilman's earlier published story. At the beginning of the novel, he writes that his words are "…written from memory…[and] if [he] could have brought…the material [he] so carefully prepared, this would be a very different story" (1). A few chapters later, his asides point to a "different story" that contrasts a utopian perspective. Van confides that "it was not pleasant, having them always around, but we got used to it" and "…the prospect [of no bars on the windows] was not reassuring" (25). Like nineteenth-century patriarchal ideology enforced through the wallpaper's and garden's texts, Herland's ideology writes *Herland*. The female characters, as Van describes, ask "…different questions at different times, and [put] all our answers together like a picture puzzle," a compilation of "…charts and figures and estimates, based on the facts in that traitorous little book and what they had learned from us" (123). "Traitorous" comprises Van's subversive narrative, illumining his resentment that he lacks the agency to write his own story because his normalization situates him within the Herland collective. In other words, Van's writings about their experiences further indoctrinate his mind body as belonging to Herland's panoptic infrastructure.

Read together, the presence of panoptic settings and narrative asides invite readers to consider the relationship between "The Yellow Wall-paper" and *Herland* as more reciprocal than responsive. In both texts, identifying the location of the Panopticon's watchtower, or more pointedly who resides within it, expands this critical engagement. If John Bak's claim that the wallpaper acts both as watchtower and observer in "The Yellow Wall-paper" is applied to *Herland*, then Celis, Ellador, Alima, and the "careful ladies sitting snugly in big trees" constitute observers whose implementation of a psychological infrastructure completely replaces the need for an architectural watchtower (Bak 44; Gilman 38). Herland's observers transcend visibility like the Panopticon's watchtower observers. Their eyes are always present, whether they belong to the individual female characters sitting in the trees or to an anonymous collective body of surveillance.

In this way, *Herland*'s watchtower evolves into architecture without walls, where observers come and go, see or choose not to see. Wai-chee Dimock's reading of "The Yellow Wall-paper," does not examine panoptic effect, rather it contends that the observer is not a character but Gilman's positioning of the reader as mediator between character and text to create "...a deliberate and enabling gap…between

what the female reader is and what she must become" (613–14). Gilman, as Dimock suggests, imagined her ideal reader as both female and professional, a small subset of American society at the turn-of-the-twentieth century. In other words, it would be more than a century later before Gilman's ideal reader would be socio-culturally positioned to best complete a comparative reading of her text. By locating ourselves (contemporary representatives of this ideal) within the privileged space of the Panopticon's watchtower, we see into all the inmates' cells. The contemporary reader can diagnose "The Yellow Wall-paper's" narrator's symptoms—a recent birth and a "nervous" distress that she "cannot be with [her son]"—as possible post-partum depression (531–32), and is outraged by the effects of John's patronization, being fully aware that the narrator cannot cure herself with "will and self-control" because her will and self-control have been taken from her through the "rest cure's" extension of nineteenth-century patriarchal oppression (534). Therefore, reversing the gender trope, while leaving panoptic ideology intact, does not rewrite "The Yellow Wall-paper's" injustice.

In *Herland*, the physical walls may be absent but the psychological infrastructure that engages surveillance-based discipline remains fixed within the novel's setting. As a result, *Herland's* male protagonists, like "The Yellow Wall-paper's" narrator's resistance through writing her story, cannot develop beyond their prescriptive narratives. Jeff, who "…idealized women in the best Southern style…full of chivalry and sentiment" (8); Terry, who is a wealthy, "sexual predator";[7] and Van, who represents level-headedness, all embody male character archetypes. So that when Van tells readers that he "ceased to feel a stranger, a prisoner," it is not because he is no longer a Herland prisoner (77). Instead, it reflects a confinement that utilizes interpersonal relationships, instead of anonymous eyes, to maintain a prescribed panoptic discipline.

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[7]Avril describes Terry as "from the very start…a predator." She argues that his nickname, "Old Nick," "underlines a parallel between Terry and the devil himself" (148). Sutton-Ramspeck's findings in a textual comparison between the serialized version (*The Forerunner*) and the "heavily" edited version (by Ann J. Lane, 1979, Pantheon edition) supports Avril's argument. Sutton-Ramspeck recovers the missing phrase "or what he assumed to be conquest," which emphasizes the significance Gilman placed on Terry's attempted marital rape of Alima. Gilman, Sutton-Ramspeck contends, was "…far ahead of her time in even conceiving that husbands' forcing their wives to have sex against their will is a form of violence against women.

The narrative structures that perpetuate oppressive ideologies, as originally sourced in nineteenth-century patriarchal control, are inherent in both "The Yellow Wall-paper" and *Herland*. Their presence confirms Foucault's portrayal of the Panopticon as "…a privileged place for experiments on men…for analyzing with complete certainty the transformations that may be obtained from them" (204). The male protagonists in *Herland* are all subjects of a failed experiment to deconstruct this panoptic privilege. In recognizing the continued presence of the Panopticon, despite rewriting gendered positions of power, this utopian experience could be questioned, as evidenced by Terry's failed assimilation.[8] Instead, as depicted in Terry's last *Herland* scene, which is reminiscent of "The Yellow Wall-paper's" ending, female characters are physically located on the floor, wrestling (either physically or psychologically) to subdue violence—the significance of which is further emphasized in Beth Sutton-Ramspeck's comparison between the serialized version (in *The Forerunner*) and Ann J. Lane's edited version (most popular with contemporary readers) in 1979. Deleted from the 1979 edition, the original text describes Terry's attempted marital rape of Alima as a potential "conquest." Gilman's intended word choice, as Sutton-Ramspeck argues, "…is revelatory of Terry's psychology [since it]…conflates violent military language with language also traditionally applied to courtship" (407–8).

In other words, in the same way that a successful "rest cure" would have cured "The Yellow Wallpaper's" narrator but does not/cannot, a successful solution to nineteenth-century ideological oppression would have converted Terry but does not/cannot. Neither attempt toward a "cure" works as intended. Without the elimination of an implemented oppressive ideology the narrative that perpetuates it cannot be revised. Incapable of implementing its vision because it remains bound by the ideology it seeks to destroy, *Herland* cannot rewrite "The Yellow Wall-paper" because it did not disentangle itself from unwittingly replicating a panoptic infrastructure.

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[8]While Fusco does not engage Terry's failed assimilation, my argument developed from Fusco's assertion that Gilman was committed "…to understanding people as the products of systems" (423).

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