

Unfolding epistemic injustice in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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Abstract

This essay aims to analyze the different interpretations that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* has received over time, highlighting how these readings contribute to the understanding of the concept of epistemic injustice and its effects on the recognition and practice of rights in plural social contexts. Based on Miranda Fricker's contributions, two types of injustice are discussed: testimonial and hermeneutical. This essay emphasizes how theoretical, political, and cultural advances have enabled new readings of the work, expanding the interpretive resources available in each era and highlighting the historical limitations in the acknowledgment of the narrated experiences. By articulating literature and theory, this essay contributes to elucidating the mechanisms through which identity prejudice limit the intelligibility of marginalized testimonies and, at the same time, to reflecting on the gradual constitution of hermeneutical justice as a corrective virtue in the social and theoretical fields. Keywords: Epistemic injustice. Testimonial injustice. Hermeneutical injustice. Gender violence.

1

Os tempos de injustiça epistêmica nas dobras de "O papel de parede amarelo"

Resumo

Este ensaio tem como objetivo analisar as diferentes interpretações que o conto *O papel de parede amarelo*, de Charlotte Perkins Gilman, recebeu ao longo do tempo, destacando como tais leituras contribuem para a compreensão do conceito de injustiça epistêmica e seus efeitos sobre o reconhecimento e a prática dos direitos em contextos sociais plurais. A partir das contribuições de

Miranda Fricker, discutem-se dois tipos de injustiça: a testemunhal e a hermenêutica. Destaca-se que avanços teóricos, políticos e culturais possibilitaram novas leituras da obra, ampliando os recursos interpretativos disponíveis em cada época e evidenciando as limitações históricas no reconhecimento das experiências narradas. Ao articular literatura e teoria, o ensaio contribui para elucidar os mecanismos pelos quais preconceitos identitários limitam a inteligibilidade de testemunhos marginalizados e para refletir sobre a constituição gradual da justiça hermenêutica como virtude corretiva nos campos social e teórico.

Palavras-chave: Injustiça epistêmica. Injustiça testemunhal. Injustiça hermenêutica. Violência de gênero.

Los tiempos de injusticia epistémica en los pliegues de "*El papel de pared amarillo*"

Resumen

2

Este ensayo tiene como objetivo analizar las diferentes interpretaciones que ha recibido a lo largo del tiempo el cuento *El papel de pared amarillo*, de Charlotte Perkins Gilman, destacando cómo dichas lecturas contribuyen a la comprensión del concepto de injusticia epistémica y de sus efectos sobre el reconocimiento y la práctica de los derechos en contextos sociales plurales. A partir de las contribuciones de Miranda Fricker, se discuten dos tipos de injusticia: la testimonial y la hermenéutica. Se destaca que los avances teóricos, políticos y culturales han permitido nuevas lecturas de la obra, ampliando los recursos interpretativos disponibles en cada época y revelando las limitaciones históricas en el reconocimiento de las experiencias narradas. Al articular literatura y teoría, el ensayo contribuye a esclarecer los mecanismos por los cuales los prejuicios identitarios limitan la inteligibilidad de testimonios marginados y, al mismo tiempo, a reflexionar sobre la constitución gradual de la justicia hermenéutica como virtud correctiva en los campos social y teórico.

Palabras clave: Injusticia epistémica. Injusticia testimonial. Injusticia hermenéutica. Violencia de género.

Introduction

The role of women in society and the ways this image has been constructed and understood across different historical periods remain widely discussed. Over the centuries, intersecting social, scientific, and religious discourses have shaped women's marginalized position in society, often associating them with the private sphere, emotional fragility, and irrationality (Lerner, 2019). These socially shared images operate as tools of control and exclusion, producing concrete effects on how women are recognized, and frequently silenced, in public and institutional spaces. Even today, women who occupy positions of prominence and authority continue to be confronted with discourses that seek to reaffirm this place of subordination. A striking example can be found in a recent incident involving the Minister of the Environment, Marina Silva, whose trajectory has been marked by struggles in defense of social and environmental justice. During a plenary session in the Brazilian Federal Senate, after she expressed her position with assertiveness and authority, she was addressed by a senator who advised her: "know your place, Minister". The remark, although directed at a highly regarded public figure, exposes the persistent desire to limit women's participation in the public sphere, shamelessly reaffirming the logic of exclusion and silencing sustained by androcentrism and currently echoed by progressive neoliberalism (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser, 2019). Cases such as this one lay bare the symbolic and institutional mechanisms that uphold the attempt to delegitimize women as epistemological subjects.

Given the context of violence and the marginalization of knowledge, we might ask: how do gender-based forms of violence, by silencing and delegitimizing women's voices, affect the production, circulation, and recognition of knowledge across plural societies and within processes of educational and epistemic democratization? To demonstrate how certain subjects are systematically discredited in their capacity as knowers, Miranda Fricker (2023) develops the concept of epistemic injustice, which manifests in two forms: testimonial and hermeneutical. The first occurs when the credibility attributed to a speaker suffers an unjust deficit owing to identity prejudice, leading their testimony to be disbelieved or devalued. The second refers to the absence of collective interpretive resources that would allow a subject to understand and render

their own experiences intelligible. Both forms operate through mechanisms of epistemic exclusion within the field of knowledge, revealing the structural hermeneutical gaps that pervade the processes of producing, legitimizing, and circulating of what is considered knowledge.

This essay analyzes Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (2024) short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* to explore the asymmetrical forms of credibility attributed to women and men within gendered experience. Published in 1892, the story exposes the dynamics of gender oppression characteristic of that period. Structured as a diary, it allows readers to follow the protagonist's experience of confinement in a country house, a regime imposed by her husband under the guise of medical treatment. As a physician and a representative of nineteenth-century scientific ideals, he embodies the structures of repression and silencing faced by women of his time, naturalizing female subordination through a paternalistic discourse of care and protection. The work invites contemporary readers to question the meanings embedded in the narrative, opening new interpretive possibilities that reveal both continuities and transformations in power relations, while also prompting a symbolic reconstruction in light of contemporary scientific and cultural knowledge.

4

In this essay, the concept of epistemic injustice is examined in articulation with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (2024) narrative, highlighting the ways in which literary storytelling can unsettle subtle forms of silencing and delegitimization of knowledge produced by certain subjects within their historical context. The purpose is to analyze the different interpretations that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* has received over time, highlighting how such readings contribute to the understanding of the concept of epistemic injustice and its effects on the recognition and practice of rights in plural social contexts.

The essay is organized into three main sections. The first offers an analysis of the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, adopting literary language as a means of communicating experiences of silencing and delegitimization of knowledge. The second section presents and discusses the concept of epistemic injustice, exploring its main theoretical formulations and implications. Finally, the conceptual reflections are articulated with the literary understanding, emphasizing how the reading of the

story challenges the normative horizon of the subjects across different historical periods and can broaden the comprehension of social injustices in their multiple forms.

***The Yellow Wallpaper* in its temporal folds**

Published in 1892, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* portrays a white, middle-class woman who, after giving birth, spends the summer with her family in a colonial mansion to recover her delicate health. In keeping with the scientific worldview of the late nineteenth century, her diagnosis is described as a "[...] temporary nervous depression — a slight hysterical tendency [...]" (Gilman, 2024, p. 12), a condition frequently attributed to women of her time. Her husband, John, embodies a technocratic rationality, impatient with anything that cannot be measured by numbers. As a physician, he determines the diagnosis and prescribes her treatment: the so-called rest cure, which forbids her from working or engaging in any form of intellectual activity.

This period of enforced rest takes place in a rented colonial mansion surrounded by a vast garden and attended by several servants. Despite its seemingly comfortable appearance, the house bears unmistakable signs of confinement: locked gates, barred windows, and a bedstead bolted to the floor — elements that make it resemble a prison. The couple occupies a room on the upper floor, decorated with a peculiar and partly torn yellow wallpaper. Within this narrow and oppressive setting, the protagonist keeps a secret record of her daily impressions. Narrated in the first person, the story unfolds through the notes she writes in her diary, composed furtively under the constraints imposed by her supposed treatment.

Despite the narrator-protagonist's expressed wish to stay in another room of the house, her husband keeps her secluded and confined to that large upper chamber. "You know this place is doing you good [...]" (Gilman, 2024, p. 21), he asserts — an act of authority that seeks not only to impose a decision but also to constitute reality itself, dictating to his wife how she ought to perceive her own experience. Forbidden to engage in social interaction and advised not to give free rein to her imagination — since such imaginings might

be dangerous, turning into "excited fancies", according to her husband — the protagonist begins to devote herself to observing the yellow wallpaper that covers the walls of her room.

From the very beginning, John's control over perception becomes evident: he defines experiences and sets the boundaries of what the protagonist is allowed to feel or understand. She recognizes this contradiction from the outset, considering that it is precisely because he is a physician that her husband hinders her recovery. Disagreeing with the prescribed treatment, she states that "personally" — and repeats the expression emphatically — "[...] personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good" (Gilman, 2024, p. 13). From the first pages, the workings of patriarchal power within the domestic sphere become evident, confining the woman's epistemic agency to the private sphere and suppressing her autonomy

Despite her pleas or objections, the husband interprets her through a historically shared image of womanhood — one that defines her as incapable, childlike, and submissive (Lerner, 2019). The very treatment prescribed by John, in this sense, constitutes "[...] an important source of her distress, and perhaps a cruel instigator of it, albeit unwittingly [...]" (Hedges, 2024, p. 89), a point extensively taken up by feminist criticism since its rediscovery in the 1970s (Ford, 1985; Lanser, 1989; Hedges, 2024).

Other figures of authority mirror these same structures of oppression, perpetuating similar patterns of coercion.

There can be no doubt that the narrator dwells in the middle of Patriarchy. She is living in "ancestral halls", has just given birth to a boy, is surrounded by men — her husband, her brother, and somewhere in the background, Weir Mitchell — and even the female or females in the house appear to be cardboard figures cut out by the patriarchy — first Mary, the virgin mother who "is so good with the baby" and later Jennie (a word which means a female donkey or beast of burden) who "is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession". (Ford, 1985, p. 309).

This condition of submission lends greater credibility to the protagonist, since it is necessary to recognize not only the imposition but also the acceptance and the "[...] woman's participation in the construction of the system that

subordinates her" (Lerner, 2019, p. 65). Nevertheless, it represents a "[...] false acceptance of male domination [...]" (Oliveira, 2020, p. 4), functioning as a literary device that exposes the mechanisms of patriarchal power and its concrete effects on women's lived experience. Thus, as a means of survival amid the surrounding absurdity, the narrator begins to speak of herself through the relationship she forges with her environment.

The exterior of the property is depicted as idyllic, evoking the fantasy of a romantic and domestic bliss: an exuberant garden, with arbors, shaded benches, abundant flowers, and even a private wharf. This setting invites the woman into the fantasy of a domesticated happiness, marked by the passive acceptance of the role imposed upon her by the patriarchal structure. Thus, the exterior of the mansion symbolizes the identity prescribed to women — that of the good wife, respectable and guardian of the home and decorum — in accordance with the expectations of the time: obedience, dependence, and submission (Lerner, 2019). Yet this chimera, shaped by the prevailing gender oppression, gradually unravels as one moves further into the house, becoming even more corroded in the relationship the protagonist establishes with the room and, above all, with the yellow wallpaper itself.

At first, she hates it: "[...] the color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering, unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight" (Gilman, 2024, p. 17). This initial rejection may be understood as the illusory expectation of aligning her inner world with the romantic utopia suggested by the exterior of the estate — the ideal of the devoted mother and exemplary housekeeper, images embodied by other women who accompany her in the mansion. The discoveries prompted by the yellow wallpaper are thus intimately related to the protagonist's inner experience — to all that John and her social context seek to silence. It becomes evident that "[...] the interiority of the house in which she dwells is analogous to the interiority of the self, the place where we, as readers, now find ourselves" (Tiburi, 2024, p. 6).

As time passes, the protagonist grows attached to the decoration of the room, and her initial aversion to the wallpaper gradually softens. She no longer hates it and describes its smell — even after a damp week of fog and rain — merely as a peculiar scent, "[...] quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met" (Gilman, 2024, p. 52). She begins to spend long hours examining

the mismatched pattern on the yellow wallpaper, its curves and contradictory folds. When this analytical lens is turned toward the protagonist's inner life, we perceive that she, like the wallpaper itself, is also marked by contradictions, dissonances, and conflicting affects. These traits can be observed in her apparent inability to perceive and name her own experience, since she acknowledges, for instance, that "[...] these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing [...]" (Gilman, 2024, p. 19), yet rejoices in thinking that they are not serious. In this inconsistency, she invites the reader into a state of estrangement: how can her troubles be dreadfully depressing and, at the same time, not so worrisome? Another remnant of this supposed resistance to correlating her experience with its generative cause appears in the first entry of her diary, when she confesses to feeling "[...] unreasonably angry with John sometimes" (Gilman, 2024, p. 15). She labels her own feeling as irrational, prompting the reader to fill the interpretive void and to associate the subtle marginalization of her condition — anchored in the symbolic violence of her everyday life — with the origin of her afflictions and her fragile health. In this way, she invites the reader to connect the forms of oppression imposed by her husband and by her social context to the unease and anger she experiences.

8

The device adopted by the protagonist — that is, narrating her experience through the relationship she establishes with the yellow wallpaper — gains complexity as the entries in her journal progress. She begins to perceive an overlapping of layers within the wallpaper: first, a visual repetition that resembles bars or a cage; behind it, the faint figure of a woman who seems to hide herself within those structures. As the story unfolds, that woman multiplies, giving the impression that several female figures are trapped within the pattern, hiding during the day and becoming visible only furtively at night. At a certain point, the protagonist shares her impression that these women shake the bars traced on the paper, moved by a desire to escape. According to Lanser (1989), this imprisoning design functions as a metaphor for the relations of power and submission that restrict women's freedom, and the narrator's devotion to deciphering it represents an attempt to understand her own condition.

The narrator's growing desire for liberation becomes increasingly evident in the way her relationships with the other characters evolve. At the beginning, the protagonist describes John as "[...] careful and loving, he hardly lets me stir without special direction [...]" (Gilman, 2024, p. 15), revealing her

initial acceptance of her husband's authority, disguised as care and devotion. However, as the narrative unfolds and she becomes increasingly conscious of her own situation, her understanding of him begins to shift in significant ways. In the final days of their stay at the mansion, the narrator begins to expose the subtle traces of dissimulation and control in John's behavior — traits that had previously been silenced or even naturalized. When he questions Jennie, his sister, about his wife's health, the narrator remarks: "He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind. As if I couldn't see through him!" (Gilman, 2024, p. 62). Highlighting the narrator's growing epistemic agency, Lanser (1989) interprets this shift in her relationship with her husband as a transition between two perspectives: "John says..." and "I want." This signals a process of rupture with the submission that underlies both the marital relationship and her own way of understanding reality. There is a perceptible change in her stance toward John's habitual credibility excess; she no longer accepts his authority passively and begins to assert herself as a knower.

As the story progresses, the narrator's depressive state begins to shift through her growing attachment to the yellow wallpaper, and she gradually regains a sense of vitality: "Life is much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, something to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was" (Gilman, 2024, p. 49). Her growing fascination with the wallpaper begins to infuse her daily life with a renewed sense of purpose. She shares none of these thoughts with her husband, nor does she seek his help. On the contrary, she takes upon herself the task of freeing the woman trapped behind the wallpaper, and she begins to plan her strategy. Her goal is to complete the task within two days — the same day she and John are to leave the house. From that moment on, she devotes herself to tearing and pulling off the wallpaper, an act that expresses not only her wish to liberate the hidden figure but also a symbolic gesture of rupture with the gendered order that has defined her experience until that point.

By the end of the story, the narrator identifies with the women imprisoned behind the yellow wallpaper: "I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?" (Gilman, 2024, p. 67). As Hedges (2024) notes, the scene reverses the dynamic: the narrator now treats her husband with the same condescension and infantilizing tone he once used with her. Faced with John's desperation as he tries in vain to open the bedroom door, she declares: "It is

no use, young man, you can't open it!" (Gilman, 2024, p. 68). In this scene, the roles are reversed: the husband now displays emotions and behaviors that, throughout the nineteenth century, were conventionally associated with women — he screams, pounds on the door, and even considers breaking it down with an axe. He becomes emotional, loses control, and collapses under his own agitation. Meanwhile, she responds in a calm, sweet voice, repeating patiently where the key can be found, embodying instead a posture grounded in reason and logic: "It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!" she observes serenely. When John finally manages to enter the room, she, creeping on the floor, declares: "'I've got out at last,' said I, 'in spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'" (Gilman, 2024, p. 69) — an exchange that overwhelms her husband, bringing him to the point of collapse. In this closing scene, the protagonist subverts the gender expectations of her time, unsettling the images that had sustained nineteenth-century ideals of masculinity and femininity.

The many interpretations of the story since its publication in 1892 invite readers to reflect on the linguistic and conceptual resources available to make sense of the protagonist's experience across different historical contexts. In this light, the next section examines testimonial and hermeneutical forms of epistemic injustice, offering a critical reading of the narrative, examining how these representations expose and sustain the mechanisms of silencing and the discrediting of situated knowledge.

Epistemic injustice in times of credibility and interpretive deficits

Distinct epistemological approaches have long sought to develop a normative framework for justice, aiming to provide an ideal basis for understanding and guiding social practices. Miranda Fricker (2023) argues that this dominant outlook can foster the misleading impression that justice is normal and injustice merely an anomaly. In her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, she emphasizes the importance of not limiting philosophical inquiry to this positive framework — particularly if we wish to understand human practices that often stray from rational and universalist conceptions of justice. Fricker develops her argument by analyzing injustices in epistemic

practices and by articulating a set of virtues that are ethical, intellectual, or both. This way, her work stands at the intersection of epistemology and ethics, expanding the possibilities for understanding epistemic injustice.

Fricker (2023) identifies two forms of epistemic injustice that affect a subject's capacity as a knower: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Let us first consider testimonial injustice, which occurs when a hearer assigns a credibility deficit to a speaker's testimony on the basis of identity prejudice. In such cases, the hearer anticipates a negative judgment and unjustly deflates the level of credibility of a subject on the basis of an identity marker — one that intersects with a pre-existing prejudicial bias. This constitutes an injustice because it harms the speaker, undermining their basic human capacity to be recognized as a knower.

This form of injustice is often visible in corporate settings, where women's expertise and contributions are delegitimized. Such a process is rooted in historical structures of gender domination through which, as Lerner (2019) argues, patriarchal power takes shape and becomes institutionalized. In its current articulation with neoliberal capitalism, androcentrism, as Fraser (2020) analyzes, takes on new forms and intensifies its cruel logic of exploitation and expropriation, affecting women in varied ways across social contexts — in other words, democratizing injustice. In this context, women are positioned as having limited access to power, which helps explain why their voices are seldom recognized — at least initially — as sources of legitimate knowledge.

As a result, in this androcentric system, hearers often retain an identity prejudice — or at least its lingering traces — that confines women to the private sphere, as though their presence in public life still depended on male sanction. Beneath this masculine worldview lies the notion that a woman's professional rise to positions of power and prestige amounts to a form of irrationality, thus requiring plausible justifications — according to this distorted logic — to explain her presence in such spaces. Such warped rationalities give rise to discourses that undermine women's competence by insinuating, for instance, that their professional advancement is tied to sexual favors. Unable to recognize women's capacities — and, above all, to face their own sense of inadequacy when confronted with otherness — men, or rather the patriarchal discourse, resort to such narratives as a way of preserving dominance. Instead

of acknowledging their own failure in light of the still naturalized belief that certain spaces are rightfully theirs, they resort to discrediting others as a means of reaffirming their superiority.

Returning to the previous idea, the power relations that emerge in corporate environments stem from such modes of social being. In meetings, a woman's contribution on a given topic is to be taken seriously by leadership only after a male colleague repeats it. Often, this discredit operates so naturally that it goes entirely unnoticed by others. When she tries to assert herself more firmly in an effort to be heard, she runs the risk of being perceived as aggressive or inappropriate — yet another layer of disrespect toward her epistemic authority, a subtle but forceful form of gender discrimination.

Building on these ideas, we can see that testimonial injustices are often intertwined with other kinds of injustice — political, economic, sexual, racial, professional, among others. These forms of injustice stem from "[...] prejudices that 'track' the subject through different dimensions of social activity [...]" (Fricker, 2023, p. 49), manifesting in the workplace, education, access to rights, and many other domains. Because they are systematic and persistent, such injustices are bound to an identity-tracking prejudice, leading Fricker to conclude that the central case of testimonial injustice involves a "[...] identity-prejudicial credibility deficit" (Fricker, 2023, p. 51).

Such negative identity judgments are embedded in socially constructed images that subtly shape people's beliefs. These images work as imaginative social coordination — a shared framework that produces common understandings. The generalizations that stem from these images are not always associated with prejudice, since they can be useful in everyday life, allowing one to anticipate meanings and expectations. For example, when someone sees an ambulance, they naturally expect to be helped by a trained professional. The symbols of the scene — the vehicle, the uniforms, the equipment — all of which trigger this expectation almost automatically. However, when we consider certain images associated with such generalizations, it becomes possible to identify a negative anticipation of judgment based on prejudice. We might reflect, for example, on what it means to be identified as a woman, a man, Black, young, Brazilian, Latin American, among other identity markers. Many of these images are rooted in prejudiced — or, at the

very least, constraining — interpretations of social identities. It is precisely these rigid and violent social interpretations that manifest as forms of identity prejudice. Such limiting images weave an invisible web that sustains injustice and normalizes it, narrowing some people's possibilities for action while widening others. These often veiled forms of violence gradually shape a shared perception of social power — "[...] a socially situated capacity to control others' actions" (Fricker, 2023, p. 21).

The second form of epistemic injustice identified by Fricker is hermeneutical injustice, which occurs when people lack shared interpretive resources to make sense of a speaker's experience. It refers to the disadvantage people face when gaps in collective interpretive resources prevent them from understanding and expressing their experiences of injustice (Fricker, 2023). An illuminating example of this concept appears in Susan Brownmiller's memoirs of the feminist movement in the United States during the 1970s. The philosopher recounts the experience of Carmita Wood, a forty-four-year-old woman who worked in a laboratory and was frequently subjected to inappropriate advances from an influential professor. On one occasion, he cornered her in an elevator and forced her to kiss him — an act that had profound repercussions on her daily life. Faced with this situation, she requested a transfer to another department, but when that proved impossible, she eventually resigned. When she applied for unemployment insurance, Carmita lacked the appropriate language to describe the violence she had suffered and had no one to recognize her experience as harassment. Without the means to name and make sense of what she had gone through, it was unlikely that any action could be taken to address the injustice. Embarrassed by the situation and required to justify her resignation on the unemployment form, she wrote "personal reasons," which led to her claim being denied.

For Fricker, this case illustrates a gap in collective hermeneutical resources, since at the time there was no established vocabulary to characterize the violence experienced by Carmita as sexual harassment. She might have been able to describe a certain discomfort with the professor's inappropriate behavior, or perhaps to portray it as intimidation or coercion. Yet it was only when a group of women began to share such experiences and to call them sexual harassment that these episodes could finally be understood through that interpretive lens. These women questioned the habitual interpretive frameworks,

recognizing both the expectations of justice — perhaps of trust, respect, and solidarity — that they brought into their social interactions, and the dissonance between those expectations and the behaviors they encountered in testimonial exchanges. They came to see how deeply shared these experiences were, how they pervaded the everyday lives of many women — an awareness that enabled them to reach

[...] exceptional interpretations of some of their formerly occluded experiences; together they were able to realize resources for meaning that were as yet only implicit in the social interpretive practices of the time (Fricker, 2023, p. 197).

14

When the term sexual harassment was coined, women with experiences similar to Carmita's were able to make sense of what had happened to them, identifying the forms of violence and injustice they had suffered, as well as the primary and secondary harms resulting from those acts. However, this did not mean that such meanings were already widely shared or immediately intelligible to others in the broader social context. In this regard, Fricker (2023) distinguishes two levels of hermeneutical injustice: the first arises when a subject lacks the interpretive resources to understand what is happening to them and thus fail to recognize the injustices they face; the second concerns the broader absence of shared hermeneutical resources that would make their experiences intelligible to others.

Fricker (2023) notes that before the term sexual harassment was coined, Carmita and other women lacked the conceptual tools to interpret and name their experiences — there was a hermeneutical gap — which produced unequal participation in the shared hermeneutical dimension of testimonial exchange. In such cases, Fricker describes a form of hermeneutical marginalization of the disadvantaged social group, characterized by a moral and political exclusion of practices that are deeply meaningful to its members (Fricker, 2023, p. 203). This interpretive powerlessness is often a consequence of identity power, which renders collective hermeneutical resources "structurally prejudiced" (Fricker, 2023, p. 205) and shapes the social construction and recognition of their identities. Thus, Fricker (2023, p. 209) proposes a comprehensive definition of hermeneutical injustice that encompasses both systematic and incidental cases: it is "[...] the injustice of having some significant

area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalization".

In light of these considerations, we take the notions of epistemic injustice — both in its testimonial and hermeneutical forms — as analytical tools for examining how certain voices are silenced or misinterpreted within contexts marked by unequal relations of power. Testimonial injustice exposes the mechanisms through which a subject's testimony is systematically discredited due to identity prejudice, whereas hermeneutical injustice refers to the absence of shared interpretive resources that would enable individuals to understand and fully articulate their experiences. Both forms of injustice not only restrict access to knowledge but also directly affect the process of subject formation. The following section examines how these conceptual categories can illuminate aspects of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the critical interpretations it has inspired.

Unfoldings lurking in the time of recognition

Nineteenth-century critics largely failed to recognize the gender oppression at work or its decisive influence on the protagonist's health. At the time, the narrative was interpreted primarily as a warning about the perils of the enforced 'rest cure' imposed on women. Some accounts even suggest that the very physician mentioned in the story — the same clinician who had recommended the treatment to Gilman herself — publicly reconsidered his medical practices after the story was published.

This essay concentrates on passages that reveal how the narrator's epistemic position is undermined and her testimony systematically discredited within her family. The relationship between testimonial injustice, gender politics, and the effects of these experiences on the narrator's health and sense of well-being went largely unnoticed by earlier critics, who interpreted the story simply as a "[...] keenly accurate 'case study' of a presumably inherited insanity" (Lanser, 1989, p. 418).

Rediscovered in the 1970s, during the second wave of feminism, the story was reinterpreted through the lens of emerging feminist critics, who helped expose how patriarchal power operated in the protagonist's life and

contributed to the deterioration of her health. This new reading revealed how deeply identity prejudice confines the protagonist's world, reducing her possibilities to those socially prescribed for women under patriarchal structures. Critics have noted John's infantilizing condescension toward his wife: "[...] the husband sees her as a foolish little thing [...]" (Hedges, 2024, p. 90) and have highlighted the power dynamics that silence the protagonist's desires and will: "[...] despite her pleas, he refuses to take her away from the country house she so deeply detests" (Hedges, 2024, p. 91). In this context, testimonial injustice is made evident in her everyday life, expressed in the persistent delegitimization of her capacity to know and interpret her own experience — a consequence of structural stereotypes that undermine both the willingness to hear and to understand her account. In such cases, "[...] the speaker is doubly wronged: once by the structural prejudice in the shared hermeneutical resource, and once by the hearer in making an identity-prejudiced credibility judgement" (Fricker, 2023, p. 210). What becomes apparent, then, is not only a questioning of the woman's lived experience but also of her very ability to tell her own story — a pervasive distrust that undermines her role as a legitimate witness to her own story.

16

Paradoxically, the protagonist's redemption emerges through the prospect of finally having her testimony recognized by others — even if such recognition is bound to the loss of her mental stability. In this reading, the narrator manages to escape — if only partially — the experience shaped by her husband's gaze and control, finding a form of limited freedom within that confinement. The story's ending thus reveals "[...] the limited freedom of madness which, virtually all these critics have agreed, constitutes a kind of sanity in the face of the insanity of male dominance" (Lanser, 1989, p. 418).

Despite its long-standing recognition as a masterpiece of feminist literature — for the unusually forthright way it engages sexual politics at a time when direct treatments of the subject were rare (Hedges, 2024) — it is important to emphasize the limits of the author's political and epistemological outlook in relation to the broader struggles of feminism. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an active leader in the women's movement of her time (Hedges, 2024); however, her advocacy for women's rights was limited in scope, excluding women of color and thus reinforcing a white, middle-class and exclusionary perspective (Lanser, 1989). Seeking to broaden the interpretive scope of Gilman's work,

Susan Lanser examined other writings by the author, especially those published in *The Forerunner*, the magazine Gilman wrote and edited single-handedly for seven years. Even as she criticized women's subjugation, Gilman reproduced a discourse of white supremacy, evident in her positions on immigration and eugenics. Gilman's writings endorsed

[...] white Protestant supremacy; belonged for a time to eugenics and nationalist organizations; opposed open immigration; and inscribed racism, nationalism, and classism into her proposals for social change." (Lanser, 1989, p. 429).

This tension between denouncing androcentrism and adhering to exclusionary ideologies reveals not only the contradictions in her life and thought but also the limits of understanding faced by individuals who belong to a situated and multifaceted historical context. Gilman was, by all accounts, a white woman who enjoyed privileges uncommon for women of her time — such as access to education and the opportunity for personal writing — all indicators of an economic condition that set her apart from most women of the period. Yet, while these privileges afforded her both voice and visibility, they also limited her perspective to the social and racial frameworks of the late nineteenth century, a time marked by rigid hierarchies and the systematic exclusion of other groups. Reading her work against the backdrop of the 1890s thus allows us to acknowledge not only its critical force but also the historical and structural limits that shaped the framework of her thought.

In doing so, *The Yellow Wallpaper* highlights not only the impact of patriarchal power on the experience of a white, middle-class woman in the nineteenth century but also lays bare the suppression of difference (Lanser, 1989), since the whiteness, social class, and privileges shaping the character's condition had long been overlooked by critics. Readings of the story that attempt to claim a false universality to the female experience are insensitive to dimensions of class and race, which inevitably silence historically marginalized subjects. Preventing such erasure requires situating gender, racial, and class oppression within a unified theoretical framework, as Fraser and Jaeggi (2020) argue, since patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy do not operate as separate systems. Today, they are "[...] structurally anchored in a single social formation — capitalism, understood broadly as an institutionalized

social order" (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2020, p. 129). Feminist critique that disregards this analytical frame has, as Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser (2019) note, become an obstacle to the pursuit of social justice. Feminism's radical force lies precisely in its anti-racist and anti-capitalist trait — a fundamental condition for envisioning a more just society for all women.

Recognizing the ambivalence that shapes us is part of a corrective virtue, one capable of tracing experiences over time and of naming the acts of violence and silence that remain hidden and have been naturalized. This paradox also permeates the story's protagonist, who projects her inner self onto the yellow wallpaper. As she grows familiar with the decoration of the room, she notices that, even though its lines are irregular, the wallpaper imposes a rhythm, a sense of pattern — much like the way silencing and injustice persist in relations of knowledge and power. She observes that there are "[...] lame uncertain curves [...]" which "[...] suddenly commit suicide — plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions" (Gilman, 2024, p. 17). The contradictions traced across the wallpaper mirror, to some extent, both the protagonist's limitations of perspective and those of the author herself in her historical context — and, by extension, our own in the present.

18

These reflections are called for because the way we read a given narrative is largely "[...] the product of those conventions or strategies we have learned through an 'interpretive community'" (Lanser, 1989, p. 419). We must therefore challenge the language available to make sense of the character's experience, recognizing its possibilities and its limitations in every period. After all, textuality, "[...] like culture, is more complex, shifting, and polyvalent than any of the ideas we can abstract from it" (Lanser, 1989, p. 435). Acknowledging the inadequacy of our collective interpretive resources to fully grasp the narrative implies, much like the protagonist, accepting the invitation extended by the yellow wallpaper: to follow one of its lines, aware that we follow only one among many possible paths, while a pulsating amalgam of other meanings lies beneath the surface, awaiting for new unfoldings within the multiplicity of lived experiences.

Conclusion

This essay has analyzed the different interpretations that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* has received over time, highlighting how such readings contribute to the understanding of the concept of epistemic injustice and its effects on the recognition and practice of rights in plural social contexts. The protagonist's experiences reveal forms of testimonial injustice, as her testimony is systematically discredited due to an identity prejudice rooted in her position as a woman. We have also emphasized that both the critique of the oppressive system portrayed in the story and the acknowledgment of Gilman's own imitations became fully possible only with the theoretical and cultural advances brought about by feminism and the struggle for women's emancipation. As Lerner (2019) points out, "the recognition of injustice becomes political when women realize that it is shared with other women", a process that can foster feminist awareness and collective mobilization. From this perspective, contemporary critics draw on a more refined and less stigmatizing interpretive lexicon, which allows for new ways of framing the narrator's experience. Examples include a greater understanding of postpartum and puerperal conditions, as well as the recognition of common mental disorders as social and health issues that require specialized attention and care.

The limited linguistic means available at the time of the story's original publication, combined with the theoretical and cultural gaps that constrained more complex interpretations of the text, constitute a form of hermeneutical injustice. The analyses produced over the decades reflect historically situated understandings that relied on the conceptual resources available at each moment to illuminate only a small portion of the narrated experience. It took a collective theoretical, political, and linguistic effort, as well as the broader sharing of these frameworks, for the injustices faced by the character, and the illusion of universality attributed to her experience, to be recognized and named. The reading presented here is a reconstruction from a particular interpretive standpoint, since the story resists any final or definitive reading — which, according to Lanser (1989), constitutes one of its most significant messages.

By examining the absence of justice itself — the systematic and persistent failures within social and discursive structures — we can begin to imagine

its creation. For the hermeneutical marginalization experienced by the narrator to be even partially neutralized, we must reflect more broadly on the injustices that permeate her daily life, recognizing its nuances and dissonances. In this way, the essay underscores the expansion of interpretive tools available within contemporary plural societies, expanding the communicative intelligibility of the protagonist's experience. In doing so, it contributes both to revealing the mechanisms through which identity prejudice constrains the understanding of marginalized testimonies and to fostering the gradual formation of the corrective virtue of hermeneutical justice. By helping to bridge the gaps in collective linguistic resources, this essay develops an interpretive reconstruction of the short story through readings grounded in distinct historical and social contexts. It also highlights the theoretical and practical implications of the interplay among power, language, and social recognition, providing analytical tools for understanding how the idea of (in)justice is constructed as gender, race, and class take shape in lived experience.

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20

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21

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