Analyzing “The Yellow Wallpaper”
Mandy Welch

“The Yellow Wallpaper” was first published in New England Magazine in 1892. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an advocate for the advancement of women, authored the short story. She intended the piece to bring to light the inherent ineptitude of the Weir Mitchell “rest cure.” Though this subject is addressed, many other pertinent topics are broached, ever so subtly. Other themes in the book include the role of women in a society dominated by men, the role of the mother, and how oppression can affect the mind of a creative individual. These themes, however, can be altered merely by how the tale is edited. I intend to point out some of the pertinent differences that exist between the full text of the story and an abridged version, describing how they give the same story contrary interpretations.

To better understand the differences I will be noting, one may find it helpful to be familiar with the basic plot of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Both versions relate the story of a woman losing her mind. She has not been feeling well for some time, so her husband, a physician, decides a summer spent relaxing in the country would benefit her. While there, she is forbidden to write in her journal, as it indulges her imagination, which is not in accordance with her husband’s wishes. Despite this, the narrator makes entries in the journal whenever she has the opportunity. Through these entries we learn of her obsession with the wallpaper in her bedroom. She is enthralled with it and studies the paper for hours. She fancies she sees a woman trapped behind the pattern in the paper. The story reaches its climax when her husband must force his way into the bedroom, only to find that his wife has pulled the paper off the wall and is crawling around the perimeter of the room.

The most easily recognizable difference between the original story and the abridged version, which was printed in Reader’s Digest, can be noted even before reading. This distinction is the way in which the paragraphs are divided. In the full text, the paragraphs are terse and somewhat disjointed. This erratic paragraphing can be attributed to the narrator’s precarous mental state. It is possible that in the abridged version paragraphs have been condensed for space-saving purposes and perhaps reader-friendliness. While that is understandable, it takes away from the authenticity of the story. The narrator is indeed a woman on the verge of a mental collapse. It seems reasonable that her writing would be illogical and somewhat irrational, as her actions are, as the story progresses. The irregular paragraphs of the original capture her paranoid state of mind. Her thoughts are broken much like our stream of consciousness. Also, it should be noted that she is writing quickly, hoping not to be caught by her husband or sister-in-law. It would stand to reason that the pressure she is under would lend itself to her fragmented writing style. While both versions tell the same story, the original text is more authentic in that even the paragraphing fits more readily with the plot.

Another pertinent discrepancy between the two versions is the fact that in the Reader’s Digest version the narrator seems to be more trapped. In the abridged version, much of the description of the garden and surrounding areas has been omitted. The following excerpt is the only extensive reference the
narrator makes in the twelve-page passage regarding her environment outside of the house. "There is a delicious garden! I never saw such a garden-large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them. There were greenhouses, but they are all broken now" (abridged). In the full text, she describes the garden in detail on three separate occasions. In addition to the passage above, she mentions gazing out the window at the garden below and taking intermittent walks down the lane and through the garden. As insignificant as these discrepancies may seem, they can have a profound impact on what we perceive to be the physical and mental state of the narrator. With her obvious interest in her exterior environment in the beginning of the story, we know she has not yet become entirely engrossed with the wallpaper; readers, as well as the narrator, can escape the confines of her room and dwell on the outdoors for a fleeting moment. There is no such escape in the abridged version, where the description is almost exclusively of the room and the maddening wallpaper. The reader feels the wallpaper closing in on him or her, as well as the narrator. While this makes the story more intense, it manages to discredit the narrator’s true mental state by making her seem more paranoid. In the beginning of the full text, she was once able to appreciate spaces beyond her immediate environment. In the Reader’s Digest version, however, the narrator is entirely absorbed with the nursery and its wallpaper. This ultimately gives the story a more claustrophobic and oppressive tone, while it furthers the narrator’s split from sanity.

Though the narrator may seem trapped by her surroundings, she is actually imprisoned by the nature of her husband. Though both versions make it clear he is in control, the original text makes his authority more intense. While the abridged version keeps most statements made by John and any references to him, the full text makes him seem more dominating. It is evident in both the full and abridged versions that John is adamantly against the narrator writing; however, his ruling is more prevalent in the original text. The following was omitted from the abridged version,

[...] but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least.

He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try. (Gilman 46)

Not only does this important passage depict how John controlled the narrator, but also how he curtailed her imagination. The narrator’s response, “So I try,” is evidence of how submissive she was to her husband’s bidding.

Another significant omission I found regarded the inertia of the narrator’s life. She is a woman in desperate need of social stimulation, though this seems to be disregarded by the Reader’s Digest version for the most part. While there is only one reference to Cousin Henry and Julia in the abridged version, there are two in the full text. The following statement has been omitted from the Digest. “When I get really well, John says we will ask Cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fireworks in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about now” (Gilman 46). This significant remark not only serves as further testimony as to the controlling nature of her husband, but also as to how desperately the narrator needs social interaction. The narrator herself mentions this need for social interaction. “I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says that is the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition [...]” (Gilman 42). This inertia is obviously a subject of great concern to the narrator and deserves being addressed entirely in the abridged version.

The most notable and bothersome discrepancy I found between the two versions was how the narrator’s intelligence seems to be discredited by the Reader’s Digest version of the story. In the original text, the narrator makes references to knowing “a little of the principle of design” (Gilman 48). She then proceeds to describe the wallpaper in great detail, using jargon indicative of those familiar with design. This has been cut from the abridged version. In the Reader’s Digest version the narrator, of course, describes the wallpaper, though it is not as credible as the descriptions made by the narrator.
in the original text. It is unfortunate that the narrator has been edited down to a woman merely raving about her wallpaper driving her mad in the abridged version. The character presented by Reader’s Digest is not the woman Gilman had intended her to be; she has been stripped of her intelligence and some of her precious remaining sanity.

On the surface, both versions relate the story of a woman driven mad by the wallpaper. However, the story presented by the original text is much more complex. It is that of an intelligent woman being driven mad by her position in life. The wallpaper merely serves as a catalyst for her breakdown. This interpretive discrepancy, as well as the loss of authenticity and finally the weakening of John’s power, ultimately leaves the two versions of “The Yellow Wallpaper” open to varying interpretations.

Works Cited
