

The Red Wall-Paper: Reservation Policy, the Dawes Act, and Gilman's Literature of Argument

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wall-paper," which follows the deterioration of its nameless narrator as she descends into madness while undergoing the "rest cure," perhaps as a result of post-partum depression, has been interpreted both as a ghost story and as a feminist story. And while feminists have claimed this story as part of their canon and Gilman herself declared that the story was written "not... to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy" (820) by the rest cure, I suggest that it is time we consider other sources of inspiration for Gilman's masterpiece of realism and the literature of argument. The inspiration for my analysis is a red reading, which, as Scott Andrews notes in his introduction to this issue, "produces an interpretation of a non-native text from a native perspective" (i). This "imaginative and playful" (Andrews ii) methodology allows me to ground my reading in federal Indian policy broadly and the Dawes Act of 1887 specifically. What new meanings might be produced if we engage with this canonical Euro-American feminist text from a native, "red reading" perspective? How might questions about America's Indian policies be answered if rendered through the literature of argument of the late 19th century that took class and gender inequities to task but neglected America's first people?

"The Yellow Wall-paper" was published in 1892, more than a decade into the reservation period and five years after the passage of the Dawes Act. This policy, known as the General Allotment Act, was designed to force Indians to adopt a Euro-American concept of individual land ownership through the allotment of communally possessed reservation land. A red reading appropriation of Gilman's short story reveals a harsh critique of reservation policy and the Dawes Act; it also invokes America's federal Indian policy in broad strokes, with references to both the Marshall Trilogy and The Indian Removal Act. In this red reading, the wallpaper's pattern represents the Dawes land allotments and their devastating effect on indigenous peoples and their communities while the country manor setting signifies both the removal and reservation policies that circumscribed Indian existence as the 19th century drew to a close.

As the story opens, the narrator, our proxy Indian, has been “removed” to a country house, her “reservation,” to recuperate from what her doctors—including her husband—term a “temporary nervous depression” (808). Her treatment, called the “rest cure,” requires that she stay on the removal site with no interaction from the outside, just as Indians were required to stay on their reservations. Moreover, those in charge of her treatment insist that it is for her own safety, just as federal policy addressing removal and reservations characterized the segregation of Indians as being for their benefit rather than the benefit of whites. For example, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 states that “it shall and may be lawful for the President to cause such tribe or nation to be protected, at their new residence, against all interruption of disturbance from any other tribe or nation of Indians, *or from any other person or persons whatever*” (qtd. in Prucha 52 emphasis added). This issue of contact was still an issue almost 3 decades later in 1858 when Commissioner of Indian Affairs Charles E. Mix wrote in his annual report that “Great care should be taken in the selection of the reservations, so as to isolate the Indians for a time from contact and interference from the whites... No white persons should be suffered to go upon the reservations” (qtd. in Prucha 94). This point is made explicit in Gilman’s text when the main character and her husband discuss the possibility of visitors: “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 pillowcase as to let me have those stimulating people about me now” (811). Gilman’s protagonist, like Indians in the removal and reservation eras, is being told that her isolation is for her own protection rather than the protection of others.

The control shown over the main character extends to her physical location, with the limited space of the reservation being too broad to ensure the government’s goal of assimilation, characterized here by Gilman as the “rest cure.” Thus, even within the “reservation” space of the house, the narrator is not given a choice of where she will spend her time:

I wanted [a room] downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings! but John would not hear of it. He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another. (809)

John, her husband, functions as the story’s Indian agent. Reservation agents and “special agents” were vital to the implementation and enforcement of the Dawes Act: “the allotments provided for in this act shall be made by special agents appointed by the President for such purpose, and the

agents in charge of the respective reservations on which the allotments are directed to be made... shall be certified by such agents to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs” (171). In John’s determination to keep a close eye on his subject, he follows the rules established by reservation and Dawes policy, rules that demand his constant presence to facilitate the surveillance of his wife. He thus insists that she occupy the nursery at the top of the house, choosing her “allotment,” although the Dawes act declares that “all allotments set apart under the provisions of this act shall be selected by the Indians” (qtd. in Prucha 170). Gilman writes that “It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls” (809). The fact that the windows are barred “for little children” reminds readers of *Cherokee Nation v Georgia* (1831), the second case of the Marshall Trilogy in which Chief Justice Marshall writes that Indians’ “relation to the United States resembles that of a ward to his guardian” (qtd. in Prucha 59). Additionally, the windows that look in all directions suggest the increasingly panopticon-like surveillance of reservation life as the Dawes Act was implemented. The narrator later realizes that the bed in the nursery is fixed to the floor—“it is nailed down, I believe” (812)—and thus further constrains her movement and her desire to determine the layout of her increasingly small “allotment” in the house. Thus, by the end of the opening sequence, Gilman establishes the narrator as a victim of removal and reservation policies who is under surveillance by someone who deems her to be child-like, just as Indians had been removed in the 1830s and confined to reservations by the 1880s, treated as children by a federal government that attempted to control all aspects of their lives.

The narrator’s interaction with the few people in the house, her husband John, her sister-in-law and caretaker Jane, and her nanny Mary, reinforces Gilman’s red reading argument against the oppressive nature of federal Indian policy and the legacy of the Marshall Trilogy in particular. John, the Indian agent watching over his tribe of two, repeatedly refers to his wife as child-like. He calls her “a blessed little goose” (810) and “little girl” (814); the narrator also tells us that John “gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head” (813). John expects the narrator to trust in him implicitly—“can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?” (814)—and tells her that

her own ideas are dangerous to her health: “There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating... [as]... a temperament like yours” (814). Indians cannot be left alone with their dangerous and fascinating temperaments; they must follow the guidelines established by federal Indian policy and enforced by Indian agents. As the Supreme Court observed in the first case of the Marshall Trilogy, *Johnson and Graham’s Lessee v William McIntosh* (1823),

to leave [Indians] in possession of their country, was to leave the country a wilderness; to govern them as a distinct people, was impossible, because they were as brave and as high spirited as they were fierce, and were ready to repel by arms every attempt on their independence. (qtd. in Prucha 36)

Readers familiar with the end of Gilman’s tale recognize how well the words “high spirited” and “fierce” describe the nature of her protagonist as the story comes to a close.

And who is in charge on a reservation when the agent is absent? The most egregious enforcer of federal Indian policy—the Indian policeman or, in Gilman’s case, the Indian policewoman. Jane, by virtue of her gender, is identified with the narrator; in the context of a red reading, then, she should be read as Indian. Jane supervises the protagonist while John is away at work, making sure that she is not allowing her own temperament to take over. The narrator is aware of Jane’s role and sees her surveillance as much more despicable than John’s, likely due to the women’s shared origins. Jane even goes so far as to try to supervise the narrator while she sleeps, but the protagonist escapes her influence: “Jennie wanted to sleep with me—the sly thing! but I told her I should undoubtedly rest better for a night all alone” (818). Like many Indians in the reservation period, the protagonist is hiding her actions, her efforts to preserve her way of life, from those who are trying to assimilate her through the Dawes Act. It is only through this subversive strategy that the narrator can hope to overcome the crushing weight of allotment policy and the government’s broader assimilationist agenda.

Gilman saves her harshest critique for the Dawes Act itself, represented here as the wall-paper that pushes the narrator into madness. The wall-paper and its effects are foreshadowed by the gardens outside the house. When the protagonist first arrives at the manor, she is intrigued by the beauty of the gardens, which she describes as “*delicious!*” (809 emphasis in original). She goes on to say that she has never seen “such a garden—large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them” (809). This European-American style garden appeals to the narrator because of its newness, its separateness from her

experience. She does not yet understand that its patterns will be forced upon her, although she hints at some of the estate's more ominous qualities:

It is quite alone standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people... There was some legal trouble I believe, something about the heirs and coheirs. (809)

The house's "removal" from the village and the main road echoes the country's removal of Indians, first to Indian Territory and later to reservations. Moreover, the "little houses" suggest allotments while the "legal trouble" with "heirs and coheirs" suggest the devastating Dawes practice of dividing allotments among heirs, leaving families and individuals with ever-smaller parcels of land. But the narrator seems largely unaware of the problems the garden foretells and it is not until she grapples with the wallpaper that she fully understands the implications of the General Land Allotment Act of 1887.

In her description of the wall-paper, Gilman invokes the legal intricacies of the Dawes Act, revealing its contradictions and foreshadowing its disastrous impact on Native Americans' lifeways and their land base. The narrator tells us that "I never saw a worse paper in my life" (809) and says that it is

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions. (809-10)

The pattern is indeed deadly; the Dawes Act, represented here by the wall-paper, will lead to the loss of 90 million acres of Indian land (*iltf.org*). Moreover, the pattern is a "constant irritation" because there was no escaping Dawes policy for most Indians. The legislation decreed that

in all cases where any tribe or band of Indians has been, or shall hereafter be, located upon any reservation created for their use either by treaty stipulation or by virtue of an act of Congress or executive order setting apart the same for their use, the President of the United States be, and he hereby is authorized... to allot the

lands in said reservation in severalty to an Indian located thereon. (qtd. in Prucha 170)

The legislation helps readers understand Gilman’s attention to the details of the wall-paper, which here are read as the allotment maps showing individual parcels as well as land taken for development at the hands of the government or private industry and land lost to Euroamerican farmers. The “lame uncertain curves” (809-10) and the “outrageous angles” (810) suggest the checkerboarding of the Indian land base under Dawes policy, a federal strategy that would be reinforced in the coming decades through the Dead Indian Act of 1902 and the Burke Act of 1906; it would not end until the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 finally put an end to federally sanctioned land theft (and federal land theft itself).

Even though the narrator does not initially grasp the wallpaper’s meaning, she quickly recognizes that the wall-paper is about surveillance and is affecting her agency. She says that the “paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had!” (811)—shades of Teddy Roosevelt describing Dawes as the “mighty pulverizing engine to break up the tribal mass” (*digitalhistory.uh.edu*)—and describes part of the pattern as “two bulbous eyes” that “stare at you” (811)—the eyes of the Indian agents and the Dawes commission, working to force Indian assimilation to Western lifeways. As the story progresses, the narrator begins to fear that the paper will outlast her: “I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness” (811). She also becomes increasingly aware of the paper’s violent capabilities, observing that “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 upon you. It is like a bad dream” (815). This passage speaks to American Indians’ feelings of futility in fighting the Dawes Act, which they could not escape, a notion Gilman reinforces with the paper’s odor. The paper not only visually dominates the narrator and leaves marks on her clothes, it also permeates the house with its smell: “I noticed it [the smell] the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here” (816). As the narrative—and thus allotment policy progresses—its effects become inescapable. Even when one is not confronted with a visual representation of the land lost via the wallpaper’s pattern, one is forced into awareness of allotment, which “creeps all over the house... hovering... skulking... hiding” (816). It stays with the narrator even on the rare occasions that she is allowed to leave the

reservation of the ancestral mansion: “Even when I got to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it—there is that smell!” (816). Like many Indians who at first may have not understood the potential catastrophic effect of Dawes, the narrator initially finds the smell of the paper annoying but of little concern: “It is not bad—at first—and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met” (816). However, as she starts to understand the power of allotment policy, she also recognizes the danger of the paper’s odor, commenting that she “wake[s] up in the night and find[s] it hanging over” her (816) and that while she “thought seriously of burning the house—to reach the smell,” (816), she is now “used to it” (816). But her familiarity does not signify her willingness to comply with the Dawes Act; rather, it sets the stage for her resistance to it. And while the narrator does overcome the paper and her Indian agent, Gilman’s story remains ambivalent about the fate of American Indians and their homelands.

One reading of the story’s ending suggests that Gilman falls prey to the vanishing Indian stereotype, giving her protagonist a hollow victory that affirms America’s belief in the inevitably of Dawes, the government’s assimilationist doctrine, and the decline of American Indian civilizations. While the narrator “frees” the woman she sees trapped behind the wallpaper—freeing natives from allotment policy—and crawls over her husband, the Indian agent, who has collapsed in the face of Indian resistance, readers may feel that this victory is not only short-lived, but self-defeating, as the narrator seems to have descended into madness. But the fact remains that the narrator has in fact stripped the room of many of its “allotments”—giant swathes of wallpaper—and she, not her Indian agent husband or her tribal policewoman caretaker, is in control of the scene. The protagonist’s final act thus suggests the persistence of Native Americans even in the face of federal Indian policy that worked to strip them of their cultures. It is not the Indians who have been stripped of their culture at the end of the story; it is the room that has been stripped of its wall-paper.

You may be asking yourself “but what about the narrator’s baby?” After all, in the feminist reading of this story, the baby plays an important part and contemporary readers are likely to understand the protagonist’s illness as post-partum depression. In this red reading, the baby is largely missing—as it is in the text of the story, appearing in only three brief mentions—

because an Indian child would be removed from its mother and sent off to boarding school to endure a different assimilationist model from that which its mother fights here.

If only “The Yellow Wall-paper” were about the plight of the Native American. But what few sympathizers there were for the Indian in late 19th century were misguided, hoping only to offer a less traumatic transition to a Western way of life. Perhaps if they had read Gilman’s story as “The Red Wall-paper,” they would have had a change of heart.

Why I Wrote “The Red Wall-paper”¹

Many and many a conference goer has asked that. When I first read the paper at the Native American Literature Symposium in Albuquerque in 2015, the reading got appreciative laughs as I transformed this canonical American short story through a red reading. The laughter ended, however, when I explained why the narrator’s baby was not mentioned in my paper, and the audience was reminded of the seriousness of the subject matter and the lasting historical trauma of the Dawes Act and other federal Indian policies.

Gilman grounds her reasons for writing “The Yellow Wallpaper” in her personal experience, observing that she was subjected to the rest cure “for some three months” and that she “came so near the border line of utter mental ruin that [she] could see over” (820). Like many of her literary realist peers, Gilman used the literature of argument in an effort to create social change and sought to secure a safer method of treatment for women and also grant them agency over their own bodies and wellness. In constructing this reading, I asked myself what change might have been precipitated had more authors used their literary skills to effect change for America’s indigenous people. And while one might think of an example or two, such as Helen Hunt Jackson’s non-fiction study *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government’s Dealings with Some of the Indian Tribes* (1881) and her novel *Ramona* (1884), scholars of American literature know that American literary realism focused on gender and class and the urban experience while overlooking federal Indian policies that transformed Indian life in ways that are still felt today.

As this reading suggests, the experience of American Indians in the 19th Century, particularly in the Dawes era, was ripe for the kind of analysis found in stories like “The Yellow

Wallpaper” and perhaps offers us a lesson. The absence of American Indians from the literature of argument mirrors decades-old concerns with the absence of women of color in the American feminist movement while the relative ease with which this canonical white feminist text can be transformed into a red text offers a model for alliance. What empathy might be gained and new sites of literary resistance found through red readings like the one modeled here?

Towards the close of her expository essay on the origins of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman notes that “the best result [of her story] is this. Many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading ‘The Yellow Wall-paper’” (820). This red reading of Gilman’s story cannot influence any of the policymakers long dead who enacted Removal or Reservation policy, the Dawes Act, or even the Indian Reorganization Act. But it can make a space—an allotment, if you will—in the American literary canon for literature that echoes the experience of American Indians a full 76 years before the American Indian Renaissance.

This red reading was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save scholars of Indigenous literature from being driven crazy at the absence of Indians in American literary realism, and I hope it works.

Notes

¹ The opening and closing language of this section mirrors Gilman’s in “Why I Wrote “The Yellow Wall-paper.””

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