

Fictional and Delusional Worlds in Charlotte Perkins-Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'

Kate Taylor

In a book chapter that discusses the increasing biologisation and medicalisation of the mind, Patricia Waugh argues that works of fiction have the power to convey complex mental states such as those found in cases of mental illness. Fiction shows such 'cases' to be more than a collection of symptoms by 'creating worlds' that 'convey what it feels like to be alive'.¹ She argues that this world-creating capacity can be thought of as a type of phenomenology, in which characters think and act in ways which simulate the thoughts and actions of non-fictitious consciousnesses.²

The ability to create a space in which putative consciousnesses can have particular experiences is potentially useful as a tool for understanding experiences that are abnormal or difficult to describe. One experience of this type is the schizophrenic delusion, an experience which some psychiatrists consider beyond the scope of ordinary understanding.³

¹ Patricia Waugh, "The Naturalistic Turn, the Syndrome, and the Rise of the Neo-Phenomenological Novel." *Diseases and Disorders in Contemporary Fiction: The Syndrome*. Ed. Peacock, James & Lustig,

Tim Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013, pp. 23-24.

² Waugh argues that the fictional world created is akin to a "pre-reflective place" and the characters therein "embodied consciousnesses." P. 24.

³ Louis Sass and Elizabeth Pienkos. "Delusion: The Phenomenological Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. Ed. K.W.M. Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard G.T. Gipps, George Graham, John Z. Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, Tim Thornton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 4.

The psychiatrist Karl Jaspers thought that with the schizophrenic delusion psychiatric understanding reached its limit. He coined the term 'un-understandable' for those psychic phenomena which could not be understood by available empirical or conceptual tools. See Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*.

If fiction can be thought of as a kind of phenomenology, then one way that the delusional experience might be understood is through acts of descriptive storytelling. ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892, New England), a short story written by the American novelist and social activist Charlotte Perkins-Gilman towards the end of the nineteenth century, recounts the experience of a woman whose declining mental health culminates in an experience that resembles the experience of schizophrenic delusion as reported by psychiatrists and their patients.⁴

Perkins-Gilman wrote the story after suffering from ‘severe and continuous nervous breakdown’. For this she was advised by medical authority to ‘live a domestic life as far as possible’, a regime which she claims sent her ‘near the borderline of utter mental ruin’.⁵ The story is not wholly autobiographical (she did not experience hallucinations, for instance), yet traces of her own experience can be seen throughout, especially in relation to the protagonist’s recent birth (Perkins-Gilman suffered her nervous breakdown following the birth of her child), and in its reference to the physician Weir Mitchell, pioneer of the ‘rest cure’ responsible for Perkins-Gilman’s accelerating mental decline.⁶

If Waugh is right, and fiction can be thought of as a kind of phenomenology that is able to convey what it is like to have an experience of a certain type, then there must be something about fiction as a mode of writing that enables it to convey experiences that cannot be adequately conveyed through theoretical writing. For Waugh, these are the phenomenological insights that certain works of fiction

⁴ It is worth noting that the publication date of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892) is prior to the medical categorisation of schizophrenia. Under the care of Weir Mitchell, Perkins-Gilman may have been diagnosed with more contemporary illnesses such as neurasthenia or puerperal insanity; applying the category of schizophrenia therefore risks charges of ahistoricism. Nevertheless, the report given in Perkins-Gilman’s story significantly resembles more recent accounts of the schizophrenic experience, especially the progression through various stages of delusion.

⁵ Perkins-Gilman, C. “Why I wrote The Yellow Wallpaper.” 1913. *The Forerunner*. Warwick University. 06 Feb. 2019. <<https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/whyyw.html>>.

⁶ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Warwick University. 05 Jan. 2019. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/1/9/5/1952/>>, p. 5.

incorporate at a 'formal level'.⁷ It is through fictional writing's utilisation and manipulation of devices specific to the literary form, such as alterations to narrative voice and self-reflexivity, that enable certain works of fiction to convey the sorts of complex mental states that have traditionally vexed psychiatrists' attempts to understand them.

Though 'The Yellow Wallpaper' has invited a number of different readings from literary critics working within feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytical frameworks (to name but a few), less has been said about 'The Yellow Wallpaper' as a piece of fiction through which the *phenomenology* of schizophrenic delusion might be understood.⁸ Some of these critics have commented on the formal devices used by Perkins-Gilman, particularly her use and manipulation of the first-person narrative voice, but the possibilities that this ambiguous narrative voice has for understanding the mystifying nature of the psychotic experience remains largely unexploited.⁹ This paper will give a reading of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' that identifies Perkins-Gilman's utilisation and manipulation of these formal devices, and will explain how this usage enables the unique qualities of the protagonist's delusional state to be successfully conveyed.

⁷ Patricia Waugh, "The Naturalistic Turn, the Syndrome, and the Rise of the Neo-Phenomenological Novel." *Diseases and Disorders in Contemporary Fiction: The Syndrome*. Ed. Peacock, James & Lustig, Tim Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013, p. 26.

⁸ Feminist literary critics, for instance, have variously read *The Yellow Wallpaper* as expressing the challenges and limitations of representing oneself through a language that is male-dominated, or as invoking the emancipation of woman via the protagonist's identification with the woman trapped behind the wallpaper and their subsequent escape into the "open country." Psychoanalytic responses to these readings include Lacanian interpretations which see the story as expressing woman's capitulation to male discourse via the protagonist's identification with the imaginary woman behind the wallpaper, who she perceives as real. Critics often disagree on the degree of success the protagonist achieves from her plight. For more critical readings of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, see Catherine Golden. Ed. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*. London: Routledge, 2005.

⁹ Catherine Golden. Ed. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 2.

The Phenomenology of Delusion

In order to show how ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ successfully conveys the phenomenology of the schizophrenic delusion, it is worth first briefly outlining some theoretical accounts of the phenomenology of schizophrenic delusion as it is studied by psychiatrists, mental health professionals, and philosophers. Psychiatrists have identified several different types of delusion that can occur as a result of mental or neurological illness, but it is the schizophrenic delusion that has historically eluded psychiatric formulation.¹⁰

In his book *General Psychopathology*, the psychiatrist Karl Jaspers differentiated schizophrenic delusions, which he called ‘true delusions’, from mere delusion-like ideas, on the basis of the former’s incomprehensibility: the schizophrenic experience involves elements that are ‘in principle psychologically inaccessible’ and ‘closed to empathy’.¹¹ In other words, there are certain elements of the (true; schizophrenic) delusional experience that we are simply unable to grasp for lack of an appropriate conceptual repertoire which might allow us to imagine what it is like to have such an experience.¹²

Perhaps motivated by these concerns, much theoretical interest in the delusional experience focuses on the ‘*ontic*’ content of the delusion, i.e., those manifestations of the delusion that can be perceived by an observer and studied

¹⁰ See, for example, the “Capgras” and the “Cotard” delusions, experiences which involve false beliefs such as the belief that somebody familiar, like a family member or pet, has been replaced by a replica or an imposter; or the belief that the person who is experiencing the delusion is actually dead. (Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, pp. 10-12).

¹¹ Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968, p. 578.

¹² In *General Psychopathology*, Karl Jaspers writes that the experience of the schizophrenic can “*in principle never be seen by us*, [and] which we always have to circumscribe negatively and indirectly by saying what they are not” (p. 578). In *Feelings of Being*, Matthew Ratcliffe also comments on the difficulty of describing an experience for which there is no shared conceptual understanding: “We think and speak in the context of a presupposed world” (p 197).

empirically, such as the sufferer's adoption of false beliefs about reality.¹³ By contrast, the psychiatrist or philosopher who is interested in the phenomenology of delusion is primarily interested in the *ontological* content of delusion:

The phenomenologist puts less emphasis on *what* is experienced or asserted by the delusional patient (or on whether his beliefs are accurate or not) than on *how* he seems to experience his delusional world or what *sorts* of reality or existence he might be ascribing to it.¹⁴

This distinction between the ontic and the ontological content of the delusion then typifies the difference between those interested in studying the experience of schizophrenic delusion for its observable, behavioural content, from those interested in studying it in order to understand its phenomenology.

Whilst those suffering from schizophrenic delusion *do* typically adopt false beliefs about reality, their experience can also be characterised according to more fundamental ontological or *existential* changes that transform the normal sense of self and world that Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, calls *being-in-the-world*.¹⁵ The originality of Heidegger's insight is in his perceiving that human experience cannot be adequately explained by any schema which carves up experience into 'subjective' conscious acts on the one hand, and 'objective' worldly or physical matter on the other. All experience is predicated on a background of uniquely complex, existential relations between self and world that encompass the whole of an individual's sense of his or her own existence.

Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world then provides a framework in which to understand the unfolding of the schizophrenic delusion as this affects both how

¹³ Louis Sass and Elizabeth Pienkos. "Delusion: The Phenomenological Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. Ed. K.W.M. Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard G.T. Gipps, George Graham, John Z. Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, Tim Thornton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1962, p. 53.

the individual comes to experience themselves and, interrelatedly, how they experience the world. Following Heidegger, the philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe argues in his phenomenological study of mental illness that to have a delusion “is not just to have a false belief about the world,” and that delusions are “embedded in existential changes” that can be described phenomenologically.¹⁶ The psychiatrist or philosopher interested in studying the phenomenology of the schizophrenic delusion then aims to give a *descriptive* (as opposed to a causal or explanatory) account of these ontological or existential changes that transform an individual’s usual sense of being-in-the-world.

I will now turn to Perkins-Gilman’s story, having set out some of the theoretical considerations necessary to inform this reading. This reading will show how *The Yellow Wallpaper* engages certain literary devices in order to convey the phenomenology of schizophrenic delusion.

Delusional worlds in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’

In ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, the central character, who is also the narrator, a woman with ‘slight hysterical tendencies’, moves with her physician husband to a large, long-vacant house in the countryside to convalesce from a nervous illness.¹⁷ Through the first-person narrative, which is put together through the central character’s thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, ostensibly jotted down in a personal diary, narrator and reader work together to construct the story’s fictional world.

The story begins innocuously, with the narrator-protagonist’s noting down a number of observations on the room in which she finds herself: it is a ‘big’ and ‘airy’

¹⁶ Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 194.

¹⁷ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Warwick University. 05 Jan. 2019. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/1/9/5/1952/>>, p. 1.

room, with windows that 'look all ways'.¹⁸ This panoramic effect is offset by the bars on the windows ('for the little children') alluding to and cautiously suggesting against the dangers of childlike fancies and imaginary play. John, the protagonist's husband and physician 'of high standing', embodies the late nineteenth century figure of the paternalistic, infantilising doctor. He chastises his wife for indulging in imaginative fancies (her 'habit of story-making') in a way that recalls the anxiety felt by the psychiatrist threatened with impotency when confronted by the delusional patient.

The dizzying effect produced by the confusion of the expansive, airy room and its barred windows is compounded by the yellow wallpaper that hangs from the walls 'stripped off in patches'.¹⁹ Its colour, 'a smouldering unclean yellow', is adorned with a sprawling, nonsensical pattern that "constantly irritates" and 'confuses the eye'.²⁰ This unnatural juxtaposition of things: a room that at once expands and encloses; wallpaper whose colour is both bright and unclean, creates an atmosphere that portends the delusional atmosphere in which things begin to loosen from their usual, common-sense perceptual contexts. This impression is registered by the protagonist, who notes down that 'there is something strange about the house - I can feel it'.²¹

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger illustrates how the mode in which we usually experience things changes by referring to the moment in which a thing we are using ('equipment') breaks and fails to work as usual.²² Pieces of equipment, or objects that are 'ready-to-hand', are not things that we experience as they are 'for themselves', i.e., as mere *things* with sets of properties. Rather we experience equipment according to how these objects fit into whichever activity we are currently involved with, and this activity, in turn, is decided by *its* relation to something else,

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, p. 2.

²² Ibid, p. 74.

extending towards a general, overall sense of *who we are* as spatially and temporally situated 'beings-in-the-world'.²³

Heidegger uses the example of a hammer to illustrate this point. When the hammer is enlisted for the sake of an activity, i.e., when it is being used as a piece of *equipment*, the hammer itself, as an *ontic* object with a set of properties, is experienced as something inconspicuous. So long as it is functioning to perform the activity that it has been enlisted for (that has been circumscribed by the chosen ends of its user), the properties of the hammer: its shape, size, weight, and so on, recede into the background of experience. But if the hammer stops working, these properties suddenly come to the fore of experience. The hammer goes from being an *inconspicuous* object to a *conspicuous* one.²⁴

In order to better understand the schizophrenic delusion, psychiatrists have developed a framework in which its development and progression can be understood across a number of different stages. Each of these stages can be described in terms of the specific existential changes that it involves. The first of these stages is variously described as the 'delusional mood', 'delusional atmosphere', or 'pre-delusional state'.²⁵ This stage, which marks the onset of the delusion, is characterised by an indeterminate, vague sense of change or newness: 'The delusional mood is experienced by the patient as unprecedented, something entirely

²³ Ibid, p. 77. Hubert Dreyfus, commenting on Heidegger, describes the way in which our everyday practical activity involves the individual in a "constant making sense of itself and everything else." See Hubert Dreyfus, *Being in the World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*. London: The MIT Press, 1995, p. 29.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1962, p. 74.

²⁵ Louis Sass and Elizabeth Pienkos. "Delusion: The Phenomenological Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. Ed. K.W.M. Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard G.T. Gipps, George Graham, John Z. Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, Tim Thornton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 6.

new'.²⁶ Jaspers describes how this sense of change is felt to 'envelop everything with a subtle, pervasive and strangely uncertain light'.²⁷ This 'uncertain light' which envelops everything is described by one of Jaspers' successors, the psychiatrist Paul Matussek, in terms of a 'loosening of the natural perceptual context' that allows 'individual perceptual components' to 'float free of any standard anchoring in common-sense unities or scenes'.²⁸

The delusional mood can then be understood as causing a similar phenomenological change to the way in which objects appear as that which occurs when a piece of equipment fails to work. The onset of the delusion can therefore be explained *ontologically* according to a reconfiguration of the individual's existential relations brought about by pathological disturbance. The shift in salience that this disturbance brings manifests phenomenologically as the intrusion of 'new meaning' that 'opens the way to attributions of exaggerated or peculiar significance'.²⁹ What is conveyed, then, by the protagonist's impression that 'there is something strange about the house', is that vague and transfiguring feeling of strangeness that accompanies the onset of the schizophrenic delusion.

The ruminative, lyrical flow of the narrative is disrupted when the protagonist's husband John enters the room: 'There comes John, and I must put this away - he hates for me to write a word'.³⁰ Suddenly, the fictional world, whose existence depends on the presence of both narrator and reader, comes under threat. Through

²⁶ Mishara. A and Paolo Fusar-Poli. "The Phenomenology and Neurobiology of Delusion Formation During Psychosis Onset: Jaspers, Truman Symptoms, and Aberrant Salience." *Schizophrenia Bulletin* vol. 39 no. 2 (2013): p. 282.

²⁷ Louis Sass and Elizabeth Pienkos. "Delusion: The Phenomenological Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. Ed. K.W.M. Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard G.T. Gipps, George Graham, John Z. Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, Tim Thornton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.7.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

³⁰ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Warwick University. 05 Jan. 2019. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/1/9/5/1952/>>, p. 3.

a gesture that points, self-referentially, to the story's narrative form, Perkins-Gilman incorporates a phenomenological reflection upon the act of reading itself. The narrator signals to the reader that were she to stop writing, reading too must stop, and so the world might be 'put away'; disappear. The ontological precarity of the imaginary fictional world – its mutual, interdependence on narrator and reader working together – mirrors the ontological precarities of the delusional world and its interdependence on the dynamic interplay between self-and-world. The effect is a kind of "narrative recentering" that reproduces the disconcerting feeling of unfamiliarity that occurs when the mode in which we experience an object changes.³¹

This re-orientation amounts to a change in an object's *salience*, and can be described as an ontological change, since it involves a reconfiguration of those existential relations that direct our goal-directed practical activity and that underpin our usual sense of being-in-the-world. When these relations are made to undergo a reconfiguration (either as the result of an occurrence in the world or of a change in an individual's physical or mental state), the mode in which we experience things – *how they appear to us* – changes. The salience with which object(s) are experienced is the specific phenomenological manifestation of this change.

As with the hammer that becomes conspicuous when it fails to work, Perkins-Gilman's self-reflexive gesture problematises the nature of the text itself, stalling the "circumspective absorption" involved in the act of reading.³² What confronts the reader then is no longer a story, whose ontic properties – the textual medium which

³¹ In his book *Modernism and the Machinery of Madness*, Andrew Gaedtke writes that: "It is because fiction and delusion both perform gestures of 'narrative recentering' that paranoid delusion has so often become not only the subject matter of fiction but also a trope for metafictional reflections upon the act of worlding that fiction performs." See Andrew Gaedtke, "On Worlding and Unworlding in Fiction and Delusion." *Modernism and the Machinery of Madness*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 101.

³² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1962, p. 77.

supports and confers its usual sense of meaning – recede into the background; instead, these properties come to the foreground of the reader's experience. The reader is suddenly confronted with a strange *object*. This manoeuvre denatures the text's situatedness in its usual perceptual context, making it appear, like the object(s) suffused with new meaning in the delusional mood, strange or uncanny.

Perkins-Gilman further exploits narrative technique by aligning the story's temporality with the subjective temporality of the protagonist. As the sentences written down flicker from past, present, and future tense, the reader experiences her recollections and anticipations as they are bound up and given meaning by her present experience. As Heidegger points out, the structure of being-in-the-world is 'ekstatic' or *outside of itself*: experience of the present is always inflected with what has already gone before and with what is anticipated to follow in the future.³³

This device then enables the reader to inhabit the idiosyncratic, pre-reflective space in which the protagonist's experience is given its personal significance. The phenomenology of the experience is then able to be conveyed more convincingly, since when the delusional state brings with it changes to the protagonist's experience, the reader is, like the individual suffering from delusion, unlikely to perceive these changes as incongruous. This is then a second act of 'narrative recentering' involving a compromising of the reader's ability to discern between truth and falsity, mirroring, again, the delusional state as it progresses and begins to permeate more and more of the individual's experiential field.

In the psychiatric literature this first stage, the delusional mood or atmosphere, in which there is felt a general sense of new meaning or change, is

³³ 'Ekstatic' is the Greek word that 'ecstasy' is derived from. It means 'standing outside oneself'. For Heidegger the ekstatic structure of Dasein (being-in-the-world) means that the present moment is never merely experienced as an immanent, singular moment of time; experience of the present moment is always bound up with other temporal modes ('ecstasis') 'outside' of the present. Thus Heidegger writes that "in every ecstasis, temporality temporalises itself as a whole" (p. 401).

followed by a second stage, in which this felt sense of new meaning begins to crystallise around objects, persons, or situations. This stage reaches its culmination when this crystallisation of new meaning has taken over the whole of the experiential field, resulting in an experience that the psychiatrist Klaus Conrad calls the 'apophany'.³⁴

The apophany, from the Greek word meaning 'to become visible or apparent', is the revelation-like character of the experience of new meaning as it begins to take over the individual's whole experiential field. The apophany is therefore the phenomenological precursor to the individual's formation of false belief(s) about reality, as these typically arise in response to the attribution of exaggerated meaning to parts of the individual's perceptual or proprioceptive experience.³⁵ The apophany also has a personal, inner dimension that Conrad calls the 'anastrophe', a 'turning back or inwards'. The anastrophe is what gives the experience of new meaning a *personal* significance.³⁶ Conrad reports this experience in one of his patients:

Every component of his experiential field appears to stand in a special relation to him, e.g., the instructions given to others about how to behave in front of him, the preparations, the being staged. His 'world' transforms itself into a singular field specifically meant to 'test' him...³⁷

The apophanic, or worldly aspect of experience, is inextricably bound to the anastrophic, or inner aspect of experience. Meaning is inextricable from the personal

³⁴ Louis Sass and Elizabeth Pienkos. "Delusion: The Phenomenological Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. Ed. K.W.M. Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard G.T. Gipps, George Graham, John Z. Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, Tim Thornton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 8.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 12.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 8.

³⁷ Mishara. A and Paolo Fusar-Poli. "The Phenomenology and Neurobiology of Delusion Formation During Psychosis Onset: Jaspers, Truman Symptoms, and Aberrant Salience." *Schizophrenia Bulletin* vol. 39 no. 2 (2013): p. 283.

resonance of that meaning.³⁸ This relationship, as we shall see, is what becomes threatened as the delusional state develops.

The anastrophe, or turning inwards, also involves a paradoxical sense of *alienation* from the self: 'the patient is a victim of his own way of experiencing the world yet is somehow "detached and alienated from his own perceiving"'.³⁹ The individual's alienation from their own way of perceiving the world is what gives the world a dream-like quality, and undermines the ontological integrity of the empirical world on which the ability to determine the accuracy of our perceptions depends.⁴⁰ The effect, finally, is a perceptual chaos that problematises the ability to demarcate between self and world, delusion and reality:

No core holds things together, providing the lens through which to see the world, to make judgments and comprehend risk. Random moments of time follow one another. Sights, sounds, thoughts and feelings don't go together.⁴¹

The result is a world in which there is 'no reliable practical hold'; it is an 'endless realm of unpredictable happenings'.⁴² These qualities can also be said to characterise the fictional world depicted by Perkins-Gilman as the protagonist's experience continues to progress through the various stages of delusion.

³⁸ In *Feelings of Being*, the philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe writes: "When the relevant sense of belonging is altered or diminished, the experience is not of 'self' and of 'world' decoupled from each other. Finding oneself in a world is more fundamental to the structure of experience than the self in isolation from world or vice versa. When the relation between the two is changed, both are changed along with it." (p. 65.)

³⁹ Louis Sass and Elizabeth Pienkos. "Delusion: The Phenomenological Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. Ed. K.W.M. Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard G.T. Gipps, George Graham, John Z. Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, Tim Thornton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Matthew Ratcliffe reports that for the schizophrenic: "Experience is dreamlike in some respects; 'the patient does not feel being fully existing or alive, fully awake or conscious, or fully present and affected'" (195).

⁴¹ Louis Sass and Elizabeth Pienkos. "Delusion: The Phenomenological Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. Ed. K.W.M. Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard G.T. Gipps, George Graham, John Z. Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, Tim Thornton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 10.

⁴² Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 196.

As the protagonist's experience continues to unfold, her fascination with the pattern of the wallpaper grows; she notices that it has a 'kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one', that can only be seen 'in certain lights'.⁴³ This frustration is alleviated when she speculates on the possibility that there is some sort of intrinsic connection between the wallpaper and her own, inner state: 'I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps BECAUSE of the wall-paper'.⁴⁴ This is quickly followed, in a pace suggesting agitation, by a remark about how the wallpaper has begun to 'dwell' in her mind ('It dwells in my mind so!').⁴⁵ The 'dwelling' of the wallpaper in her mind can be read quite literally: the wallpaper is indeed 'in' her mind, in the sense that its exaggerated significance is a product of her metastasising imagination.⁴⁶ Again, this sudden interjection prompts the reader to remember the centrality (and precarity) of the mind – both their own and the narrator's – in constructing the fictional world and the delusional sub-world that is contained within it.

The protagonist's intensifying fascination with the wallpaper and its pattern is conveyed by a long description (almost an entire page is given to it), which describes the pattern in methodical, meditative detail:

The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction.
They have used a horizontal breadth for a frieze, and that adds wonderfully to the confusion.

There is one end of the room where it is almost intact, and there, when the crosslights fade and the low sun shines directly upon it, I can almost fancy radiation after all, --the

⁴³ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Warwick University. 05 Jan. 2019. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/1/9/5/1952/>>, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Chris Wiesenthal sees the narrator's depiction of the wallpaper as the worldly counterpart to the deteriorating mental state of the protagonist, arguing that it can be seen to "operate as an effective and sophisticated solution to the problems of unintelligibility raised by the prospect of signifying psychosis from a subjective perspective". See Akiko Kimura, "A Story on the Verge - Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Narrative of Madness in "The Yellow Wallpaper." *The Journal of Psychoanalytical Study of English Language and Literature*. (2005), p. 21.

interminable grotesques seem to form around a common centre and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction.⁴⁷

The neurotically monotonous repetition of this perception foregrounds the various contours of the wallpaper's pattern so that the wallpaper comes to dominate the protagonist's experiential field. What, in a different mode of experience, would be merely background or peripheral has become obtrusive and conspicuous. This technique again re-enforces the phenomenology of that experience, in the delusional mood, of an object or objects shifting salience. What we see is Perkins-Gilman reproducing almost exactly the progression through the delusional state that psychiatrists describe in terms of the individual's 'taking note, finding significance in things, and then finally [...] intrusive meaning, which spreads monotonously to more and more of the patient's experience'.⁴⁸

The protagonist's increasing obsession with the wallpaper gives rise to a suspicion that there is, behind its pattern, a woman there, "stooping down:"

There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.

Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day.

It is always the same shape, only very numerous.

And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit.⁴⁹

This insight is the 'becoming visible' that signifies the apophany. Perkins-Gilman also shows the inner aspect of the apophany – the 'turning inward' of the anastrophe – by stressing the personal significance of the insight ('nobody knows *but me*, or ever will'). This part of the story then conveys that stage in the delusional experience as it

⁴⁷ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Warwick University. 05 Jan. 2019. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/1/9/5/1952/>>, p. 6.

⁴⁸ Mishara. A and Paolo Fusar-Poli. "The Phenomenology and Neurobiology of Delusion Formation During Psychosis Onset: Jaspers, Truman Symptoms, and Aberrant Salience." *Schizophrenia Bulletin* vol. 39 no. 2 (2013): p. 283.

⁴⁹ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Warwick University. 05 Jan. 2019. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/1/9/5/1952/>>, p. 7.

progresses from the delusional mood into that in which the individual's experience changes from, as the psychiatrists Louis Sass and Elizabeth Pienkos report, 'a general sense of change and unease' into feelings of 'revelation or recognition that may involve various degrees of clarity or certainty'.⁵⁰

The delusional state having now progressed to the stage of the apophany the protagonist stops sleeping: lying awake at night, surreptitiously so as not to wake John, she observes the "undulating" pattern of the wallpaper as it changes with the passage of light from twilight through to dawn.⁵¹

By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour.

I lie down ever so much now. John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can.

Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal. It is a very bad habit I am convinced, for you see I don't sleep.⁵²

The physical inertia of this activity reduces the parameters of the fictional world so that these begin to merge with the delusional sub-world.⁵³ The reader, like the protagonist, loses the ability to demarcate between the different spatio-temporal worlds; between the world constructed by imagination and the world constructed by an alien other. This merging of the fictional and delusional world recalls the phenomenon that psychiatrists call 'double bookkeeping', in which patients report knowing, despite their convincingness, that the contents of their delusion are taking

⁵⁰ Louis Sass and Elizabeth Pienkos. "Delusion: The Phenomenological Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. Ed. K.W.M. Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard G.T. Gipps, George Graham, John Z. Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, Tim Thornton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 8.

⁵¹ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Warwick University. 05 Jan. 2019.

<<http://www.gutenberg.org/1/9/5/1952/>>, p. 8.

⁵² Ibid, p.9.

⁵³ Husserl talks about the necessity of "kinestheses" for capturing the full 'sense' of an experiential object Without an adequate range of movement, the full range in which an object or objects can be experienced is therefore curtailed. See David, A. Smith, *Routledge Guidebook to Husserl and the Cartesian Meditations*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 163.

place in a different ontological domain from reality.⁵⁴ This paradoxical awareness of events taking place in two separate ontological domains is also intrinsic to the act of reading fiction, which relies upon a similar paradox in the reader's ability to entertain the contents of the story whilst not believing them to be literally true.⁵⁵ The fictional world is like the delusional world, a 'kind of shallow or parallel world that, while it drains away the feeling of the real in the primary world, similarly lacks existential fullness for the patient'.⁵⁶

This paradoxical 'double' quality of the delusional world is further conveyed by the protagonist when she speculates on the reason for an 'inexplicable look' that she perceives on the face of their housekeeper, John's sister Jennie: 'It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis, -- that perhaps it is the paper!'.⁵⁷ The formulation of a 'scientific hypothesis' presupposes an ability to distinguish between the putative content of the hypothesis and reality. What is shown is how the two worlds – the delusional and the real, co-exist side by side, seemingly without contradiction. It is out of this paradoxical mode of experiencing that the ontological peculiarities that characterise the schizophrenic delusion are able to become manifest.

⁵⁴ Karl Jaspers describes the "corrigibility" of delusional belief states: "Reality for [the patient] does not always carry the same meaning as that of normal reality.... Hence the attitude of the patient to the content of his delusion is peculiarly inconsequent at times [...] Belief in reality can range through all degrees, from a mere play with possibilities via a double reality—the empirical and the delusional—to unequivocal attitudes in which the delusional content reigns as the sole and absolute reality". See Louis Sass and Elizabeth Pienkos. "Delusion: The Phenomenological Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. Ed. K.W.M. Fulford, Martin Davies, Richard G.T. Gipps, George Graham, John Z. Sadler, Giovanni Stanghellini, Tim Thornton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 17.

⁵⁵ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. London: Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 128.

⁵⁶ Patricia Waugh, "The Naturalistic Turn, the Syndrome, and the Rise of the Neo-Phenomenological Novel." *Diseases and Disorders in Contemporary Fiction: The Syndrome*. Ed. Peacock, James & Lustig, Tim Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013, p. 30.

⁵⁷ Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Warwick University. 05 Jan. 2019. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/1/9/5/1952/>>, p. 9.

The delusional state progresses to its final state when the protagonist discovers that the woman she suspects is behind the wallpaper is really *multiple* women:

The front pattern DOES move--and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over...

I don't like to LOOK out of the windows even--there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.⁵⁸

The multiplication of the woman behind the wallpaper, and her escape from *behind* the wallpaper to outside of the house, symbolises the final, complete dissolution of the self-world relationship that characterises the 'true', full-blown schizophrenic delusion. The proliferation of the women – with their frantic, insect-like crawl, conveys the inexorable pace of mental decline once the delusional mood has set in. When the delusional individual's mental state reaches this point, present experience no longer holds any reliable relation to who they are as temporally situated beings-in-the-world. The dissolution of this 'ekstatic' temporal unity damages the individual's sense of identity, causing some sufferers to feel themselves as lacking ontological integrity.⁵⁹ Once this sense of a coherent, temporally-unified identity has been lost, ontological possibilities that are inconceivable in the real world, such as the experience of one's self as *another* person or object, are made possible.⁶⁰

The final scene depicts this loss of a temporally-unified identity, as the protagonist becomes unable to distinguish between self and world. The protagonist,

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 13.

⁵⁹ Ratcliffe quotes the psychiatrist R.D Laing's observation of his schizophrenic patients: "(he) may say that he is made of glass, of such transparency and fragility that a look directed at him splinters him to bits and penetrates straight through him." See *Feelings of Being*, p. 215.

⁶⁰ The psychiatrist Louis Sass describes a patient who believes that she has been under the influence of an electrical machine which has the form of her own body, and that when somebody manipulates the machine, the 'corresponding' parts of her own body are affected. (See "Delusion: The Phenomenological Approach." *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*, p. 11.) This is the type of delusion that the protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper* also experiences, believing herself to be the woman behind the wallpaper.

in an ontological shift that challenges conceptual understanding, *is* the woman, now escaped, behind the wallpaper.⁶¹ This is conveyed by a sudden and yet, thanks to the ontological peculiarities already established (the coming apart of the self-world relationship signalled by the delusional mood and the apophany), not incongruous admission:

I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?
[...]
I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!
It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!⁶²

The story ends when John tries to enter the room in which the protagonist is “creeping smoothly on the floor”.⁶³ She informs her husband that the door is locked, and that he will have to fetch the key where it has been hidden, “down by the front door under a plantain leaf”.⁶⁴ When he finally manages to open the door, he finds his wife crawling around the floor of the room:

“What is the matter?” he cried. “For God's sake, what are you doing!”
I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

“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!”

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!⁶⁵

John's loss of consciousness is the last act of world-collapse, as the delusional world eclipses, in a final symbolic gesture, that consciousness which stands for the scientific, the empirical and the real. The shift from present tense to present perfect

⁶¹ Other critics have read the woman's escape from behind the wallpaper as a transgressive gesture of feminist dissent under patriarchal control (See Catherine Golden. Ed. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 3.). A phenomenological reading allows us to see this act in terms of ontological precarity, and the increasing permeability of the boundaries between self and world in the delusional state.

⁶² Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Warwick University. 05 Jan. 2019. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/1/9/5/1952/>>, p. 14.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

tense formally signifies the now complete estrangement of self from world, as the experiencing 'I' becomes the 'I' that is *experienced*, the contents of the delusion now playing out, as the psychiatrist Ludwig Binswager puts it, 'on a delusional theatre stage where the inner contents of the patient's own mind are played out in front of her/him'.⁶⁶

'The Yellow Wallpaper', read as a piece of phenomenological fiction, sets up a delusional theatre stage on which the inner contents of the protagonist's mind are re-constructed with the aid of the reader. Perkins-Gilman's various manipulations to narrative form are what enable this re-enactment to assume a strikingly phenomenological quality. The purpose of this paper has been to identify these formal techniques, showing in turn how these enable Perkins-Gilman to exploit the affinities between fictional and delusional worlds in order to convey the variable modalities intrinsic to both.

It is the ability of certain works of fiction to exploit the possibilities specific to the literary form that enable them to successfully overcome the conceptual difficulties that have traditionally plagued psychiatrists' attempts at understanding perplexing mental states such as the schizophrenic delusion. It is for this reason that works studied in the humanities – particularly certain works of literary fiction, might be used as tools for accessing, and therefore facilitating a greater understanding of, complex mental states such as the alien world of schizophrenic delusion.

⁶⁶ Mishara. A and Paolo Fusar-Poli. "The Phenomenology and Neurobiology of Delusion Formation During Psychosis Onset: Jaspers, Truman Symptoms, and Aberrant Saliience." *Schizophrenia Bulletin* vol. 39 no. 2 (2013): p. 283.

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