

**UNRELIABLE NARRATOR IN CH. GILMAN'S *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER* AND  
E. A. POE'S *THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER*: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

*This article provides the comparative analysis of two English gothic fiction samples to point out the distinct features of unreliable narration. The imitation of E. Poe's style of writing and criteria for short stories by Ch. Gilman is issued.*

**Key words.** *Short story, unreliability, first person narration, narrative perspective.*

*У статті запропоновано порівняльний аналіз двох зразків англійської готичної літератури з метою виявлення певних рис ненадійної розповіді. Досліджується імітація Ш. Гілман стилю письма та критеріїв написання оповідань Е. По.*

**Ключові слова.** *Оповідання, ненадійність, розповідь від першої особи, нарративна перспектива.*

Numerous researchers [1, 2, 7] have been arguing about the first person narration. One of the points raised holds that a female narration is more reliable being explained by women's weak nature, particularly, the possibility to *see clearer the truth and injustices which lie behind the voice* [6, p. 13].

Charlotte Perkins Gilman first published *The Yellow Wallpaper* in 1892 in *New England Magazine*. It was perceived as a simple horror story. The narrator is a young woman whose husband is a physician and who claims she is suffering from *a slight hysterical tendency* [5, p. 648]. They stay in an ancestral mansion for summer but she finds herself confined in the room with horrible wallpaper: *The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off the paper - in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life* [5, p. 648]. Despite the husband's order, she continues to keep a diary becoming distant from the outside life, starts seeing hallucinations and one time has a complete emotional meltdown. Later Ch. Gilman explains the purpose for it. Her aim was not *to drive people crazy, but to save them from being driven crazy, and it worked...* [4] The thing is that for many years she suffered from a *break-down tending to melancholia* [4]. Similarly to the narrator of the story, she was told that there was nothing wrong with her and the solution sounded like a verdict: *never to touch pen, brush or pencil again...* [3, p. 62] Some years later Ch. Gilman found out that one woman was saved from a similar fate and what is more the specialist who almost drove Ch. Gilman mad changed the way of treatment after reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

In *The Philosophy of Composition* [10], Edgar Allan Poe claims that a short story *must be easily read at one sitting...and have strong unity of impression* [10]. It does not imply that any short story should meet these criteria.

*The Yellow Wallpaper* by Ch. Gilman is rather short as it takes about 30 minutes to read it. From the very beginning, the reader is supposed to feel mystery, fear, and puzzlement. The first evidence in support of the narrator's madness appears in the following phrase: *Here is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down...* [5, p. 649] Her condition is becoming much tenser throughout the novel as she trusts no one except her diary.

The correlation between *The Yellow Wallpaper* and E.A. Poe's *The Fall of the House of User* may seem not to be clear. R. Perry and H. Sederholm argue that it is possible to understand Madeline's condition and behavior in terms of Ch. Gilman's story. They claim, "it ought to be

approached as a reading of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, particularly because of the way it inverts Poe's male perspective [8, p. 20]"

In fact, both stories have similar features. First of all, they are written in the first person narration. If written from a different perspective the reader may not understand the implied narrators' conditions. One more common feature is the syntax. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* the narrator starts her story using quite long complex sentences:

*This very seldom that mere ordinary People like John and myself secure ancestral hall s for the summer. A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity-but that would be asking too much of fate [5, p. 647]!*

In the middle of the story, the narrator starts to use shorter and simpler sentences:

*Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was [5, p. 654].*

*John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wall-paper [5, p. 654].*

*I turned it off with a laugh [5, p. 654].*

By the end of the narration, the protagonist uses short simple sentences, and each of them starts with a new paragraph:

*This bedstead is fairly gnawed!*

*But I must get to work.*

*I want to astonish him.*

*This bed will not move!*

*Why there's John at the door!*

*It is no use, young man, you can't open it. [5, p. 655]*

All this lends support to the instability of the narrator's mental condition and thus her probable unreliability as a story-teller. The shorter the sentences and paragraphs are, the tenser is the mood of the whole passage.

In *The Fall of the House of User* E.A. Poe emphasizes the same features, albeit in a slightly different way. He uses dashes to cut the long sentences down. The intensity of the narrator's inner state is shown throughout the text in the following way:

*During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit [9, p. 1].*

The story-teller in E.A. Poe's story describes the picture using complex sentences and logical paragraphs. Nothing stands for his unsteadiness, and the reader is to perceive the information from the reliable narrator. In the middle of the story the general spirit becomes strained as dashes appear more frequently in the text:

*I uplifted myself upon the pillows, and, peering earnestly within the intense darkness of the chamber, hearkened – I know not why, except that an instinctive spirit prompted me – to certain low and indefinite sounds which came, through the pauses of the storm, at long intervals, I knew not whence [9, p. 9].*

*His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan – but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his eye s – an evidently restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor. His air appalled me – but anything was preferable to the solitude which had so long endured, and I even welcomed his presence as a relief [9, p. 9].*

The emphasized additional information interrupting normal progression of the sentence hints at probable hesitations or emotional instability of the narrator. What makes him much closer to Ch. Gilman's protagonist is the inner hysteria supported by the last paragraph of the story:

*While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened – there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind – the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight – my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls*

*rushing asunder – there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters – and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the “House of Usher”* [9, p. 12].

Thus, the presented above arguments on the two stories cast light on how Poe's and Gilman's styles and methods to deliver a sense of mental instability appear to be similar. This gives an opportunity to claim that Ch. P. Gilman follows E. A. Poe's philosophy of writing. The only distinct difference lies in either male or female perspective chosen by the author. Similarly to E.A. Poe's *House*, Ch. Gilman uses the *Wallpaper* as a symbol of the main character and the decent into delusion and insanity. Thus we argue that there is no distinction between male or female narration when unreliability is in the focus of research.

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#### СИНОНИМИЯ СОВРЕМЕННОГО РУССКОГО ЯЗЫКА

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