Aesthetic transformative experience. A pragmatist outline

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Abstract
How does emancipation from social oppression work and unfold? The paper is an attempt to deal with this question from an aesthetic point of view. By drawing on pragmatist resources, and more precisely on John Dewey’s aesthetic theory and on Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, I discuss the critical and transformative potential of a special kind of aesthetic experience, namely ‘aesthetic experience’. The paper unfolds in three steps: First, I introduce Iris Marion Young’s account of social oppression, which fits particularly well with the framework of the ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1). I show then, in contrast to an established interpretation, how the protagonist of Gilman’s story makes an experience of liberation from oppression (2). Finally, I reconstruct Dewey’s role in my interpretation of this feminist classic, and I suggest what a Deweyan account might learn from it (3).

Keywords
social oppression, aesthetic experience, emancipation, transformation, madness

1. Introduction
Present-day critical social philosophy seems to be predominantly preoccupied with the question of how a social order reproduces and strengthens various forms of social wrongs, for example, domination (Allen 1999), alienation (Jaeggi 2016), reification (Honneth 2008), structural injustices or oppression (e.g. Young 1988; 2011), social pathologies (Zurn 2011; Laitinen and Särkelä 2018) and others. The prevailing theoretical focus of these contributions is on the wrongness of things (and sometimes on the criteria that allow
to detect wrongness). But further questions should preoccupy critical theorists, as for example: how can we disentangle ourselves from or leave behind the wrong norms, structures, habits and institutions of the socio-political order? How can we change ourselves and our social environments in ways that overcome wrongness? The shift from the questions around critique and problematization to the questions around emancipation and change does not happen ‘naturally.’ The latter does not ‘automatically’ ensue from the former. Liberation from and transformation of wrong norms, structures, habits or institutions consist of complex practices that must be theorized in their own right. The paper aims to contribute to this theoretical effort. It suggests that one fruitful way to tackle the issue of emancipatory transformation is to cast it from an aesthetic point of view. It formulates the hypothesis that aesthetic experiences have an important role to play in practices of liberation and change. Sometimes, an aesthetic experience holds an ecstatic component, which is particularly conducive to transformation. The ecstatic in the aesthetic experience corresponds, roughly, to the moment, or phase, of ‘going out of’ and ‘beyond’ oneself, of losing oneself even. The result is often a radical decentering of one own’s perspective and the taking on of other perspectives on oneself and on the world. This component has a strong epistemic and practical significance, not only for grasping the oppressive, and thus problematic constraints that individuals and social groups psychologically and materially undergo, but also for sensing, envisaging, anticipating how things could be otherwise and better, on individual and on collective levels. I coin the term aesthetic experience to designate an aesthetic experience which has, due to its ecstatic phase, a decisive emancipatory potential. For elaborating the notion, I draw on pragmatist resources: on John Dewey’s idea of experience as formulated in his aesthetic theory (Dewey 2008/1934) and on one iconic work of fiction, namely Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (Gilman 2019).

Published for the first time in 1892, Gilman’s exemplary tale has marked the first wave of feminism in North America. It has had explosive, controversial, and transformative effects from the very beginning (Gilman 1972/1935, 119–121) and not ceased to bewilder and inspire its readers ever since. The story insightfully exemplifies one paradigmatic social wrong, a form of social oppression, namely gender oppression, but also one phase or dynamic in the process of liberation from it. As it has been already established, Gilman can be situated in the pragmatist, and especially Deweyan philosophical and intellectual tradition. Gilman knew of Dewey’s work, and shared many of his insights: the importance of evolutionary theory for challenging assumptions about eternal truths and self-evident facts, especially with regard to a conception of humanity, which is not taken as an essence but is the result of ‘a process requiring the fullest freedom of development to succeed’ (Seigfried 2001a, 79) the belief in the importance of life-long education, the need for critique of dominating and harmful institutional forces, and ‘the integration of thought and feeling, aesthetics and knowledge, facts and values’. (ibid, 76) According to the version of pragmatism she endorsed, the goal of theoretical and artistic expression is not merely to give a descriptive account of a given situation, but to change it (ibid, 79–80; see also Seigfried 1996; Whipps and Lake 2016). In this article, I do not aim at historically determining Gilman’s overall influence on Dewey, or Dewey’s influence on Gilman. Rather, I draw upon Dewey’s aesthetic theory to make explicit the transformative content
of Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, which has been unfortunately largely overlooked by critics. I also use this story as a conceptual tool to further articulate and push Dewey’s account into the direction of a more radical critique of (gender) oppression.

The article has three parts: first, I give an account of social oppression based on Iris Marion Young’s influential proposal, which fits particularly well with the social, cultural and psychological framework portrayed in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1), I show then how the protagonist of Gilman’s story makes a (partial) experience of liberation from oppression (2) and finally, I make explicit Dewey’s role in my interpretation of this feminist classic, and I suggest what a Deweyan account might want to learn from it (3).

2. Social oppression in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’

What is social oppression? For the purposes of this paper, I start with the account of oppression that Iris Marion Young has outlined in her seminal paper ‘Five Faces of Oppression’ (Young 1988). Young proposes a differentiated, systemic and structural account, that allows to understand what is common among the experiences and situations of injustice suffered by a wide range of social groups – as for example, in the U.S. context, ‘women, blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and most other Spanish-speaking Americans, Native Americans, Jews, lesbians, gay men, Arabs, Asians, old people, working-class people, poor people, and physically or mentally disabled people’. (Young 1988, 270) Young’s conception of oppression does not need to clearly identify oppressive agents that operate intentionally. It does not exclude them either, but it does a good job in capturing the role played also by ‘frequently unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchy and market mechanisms, in short, the normal ongoing processes of everyday life’. (ibid, 272)

Social oppression is marked by five different and interrelated harmful and unjust mechanisms: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. Oppressed groups experience at least one of these mechanisms, very often more than one. Oppressed people are exploited insofar as their power are transferred to others, whose powers become, as a result, augmented: ‘the energies of the have-nots are continuously expended to maintain and augment the power, status and wealth of the have’. (ibid, 278) Gender exploitation, for example, results from transferring both the products of material labour as well as nurturing and sexual energies to men.

Marginalized groups are expelled from useful and active participation in social life. They are often characterized by a position of dependence (on other members of their families, or on the state, via welfare provisions), which might deprive them of certain rights (to privacy, respect and individual choice) and freedoms, make them vulnerable to arbitrary and invasive exercises of authority. As a result, they are not put in the condition to exercise their proper capacities ‘in socially defined and recognized ways’. (ibid, 281)

Powerless groups suffer from bad work conditions: they have little or no autonomy, cannot exercise creativity or judgement, have no and cannot achieve technical expertise or authority, do not command respect. As a result, also in other dimensions of their lives they are misrecognized and disrespected.
If exploitation, marginalization and powerlessness remind of and are the result of the social division of labour (based especially on class, gender and race), the fourth facet of oppression, cultural imperialism, has a more general and symbolic meaning: ‘[c]ultural imperialism consists in the universalization of one group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm’. (ibid, 285) Victims of cultural imperialism experience a paradoxical oppression, in that they are both marked out by stereotypes and rendered invisible. They do not have, or have limited access to the means of interpretation and communication that are relevant in a society. They feel and are defined and positioned from the outside, by a system of dominant meanings that they struggle to comprehend, and that does not include them. Insightfully, Young frames this category of oppression as a sort of double bind: those oppressed in this way do refuse to identify with the devalued and objectified visions of themselves, but, at the same time, cannot but desire the recognition and respect that only the dominant culture and their representatives can provide (ibid, 286).

Finally, oppressed groups are target of violent attacks, of various degrees of intensity and of different form (degradation, humiliation, name calling, harassment and physical attacks), and suffer constant threats of violence. Violence is ‘systematic because it is directed at any member of the group simply because he or she is a member of that group’. (ibid, 287) The causes of this violence, Young maintains, are to be traced in identity formations: the oppressive groups (unconsciously) project onto the oppressed groups some identity traits that threaten the rigid unity of their own identity.

Young’s account is not exempt from criticisms or controversies. Yet it offers, I believe, a helpful background to frame the type of oppression suffered by the protagonist and narrator of Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’. Our heroine is a middle-class, white woman who is suffering from a severe case of ‘nervous breakdown’ (Gilman 1972/1935, 119) that today would be rather referred to as postpartum depression. Her husband John, a physician ‘of high standing’, agrees with her brother, another physician of ‘high standing’ (Gilman 2019/1892, 179) that the best treatment for her is a rest cure: they compel her to spend some months confined in an isolated, ‘colonial mansion, a hereditary estate’ (ibid,) to avoid social contact, and to do basically nothing, except eating well, exercise, get fresh air and rest. She is barely allowed to attend to her child (who is not a presence in the story) and is forbidden to engage in any intellectual and artistic activities, or to think about her ‘condition’ (ibid, 180). This woman is a writer, like Gilman herself, and clearly, from the very beginning, very suspicious of the arrangement. What bothers her the most is her confinement in the room at the very top of the house, whose main characteristics is a very ugly wallpaper, the ‘worse’ she has ever seen (ibid, 181). We can say that, together with Bertha, Mr Rochester’s ‘mad’ wife in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) and many other women, she is a prototype of the ‘madwoman in the attic’ figure.

Let us now recall Young’s facets of oppression. Gilman’s protagonist, an alter-ego of the author (Gilman 1972/1935, 119), is explicitly marginalized: through her isolation, she is expelled from meaningful, active participation in social life, she is completely, both economically and emotionally dependent on her family, explicitly forbidden to exercise her own capabilities and deprived of privacy. As a result, she is utterly powerless: her autonomy is denied, her creativity obstructed, her own expertise and judgement are not
required, encouraged or recognized. She is furthermore the target of subtle forms of violence, that appear as normalized: her husband does not take her seriously, he mocks, belittles and infantilizes her,\(^8\) threatens to bring her to an even more inflexible physician if she does not obey (ibid, 185). Maybe not paranoically, she is afraid of him (ibid, 189). Exploitation is the less evident face of oppression here, since the protagonist, a privileged woman with regard to class, is not asked to participate in the capitalist economy. One can nevertheless detect emotional exploitation insofar she is obliged to emotionally care for John, performing as a loving, faithful, respectful wife, restraining herself from pursuing her own wishes and projects.

The most evident Youngian face of oppression displayed in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ is perhaps cultural imperialism. Gilman has a word for it, namely, ‘androcentrism’.\(^9\) In androcentric regimes, (white, cis-hetero and bourgeoise) men have managed to construct a system of meanings, habits and values modelled solely around their own perspectives and interests. Women are defined, moulded and steered on the basis of this system. ‘I am a doctor, dear, and I know’ (ibid, 188). John, together with the protagonist’s brother and the spectre of Dr Weir Mitchell, the real-life physician who had treated Gilman, represent the standpoint of science, of the only knowledge that matters in this context. The heroine’s intuitions and insights about her mental and physical situation are not acknowledged as relevant or reasonable.\(^10\) The protagonist is aware of her distinctive individuality, she manages to retain her own opinion (‘Personally, I disagree with their ideas’, ibid, 180) and does not comply with the men’s commands (e.g. she keeps writing in secret). Alas, she is attached to them through a love bond and want to please them (‘It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and he loves me so’, ibid, 187).

Although Young does not talk about it in ‘Five Faces’, a further aspect of oppression, namely, its emotional and affective dimension,\(^11\) that underlies every facet, needs to be emphasized. In a recent article bringing together in illuminating ways Gilman and Dewey, Katrin Wille casts oppression in terms of ‘uneasiness’. Oppressed individuals feel unease in specific, contextual situations, and their feeling depends on ‘habitualized power asymmetries that attack the epistemic authority of some’. (Wille 2020, 2) In this emotional response to structures of oppression, the evaluation is unstable, hesitant and the identification of the sources and causes is not straightforward. Affective and somatic levels are closely connected and play a pivotal role. Furthermore, the oppressed individuals do participate, \textit{malgré} them, in the reproduction of oppression: structures and conditions that trigger the sensations of unease ‘are sustained and co-generated by one’s own behaviour and thus somehow accepted’. (ibid, 5) When evaluating John’s manners towards her, for example, she feels, on the one hand, that he is misbehaving, on the other, she justifies and actively accepts it (‘One expects that in marriage’ Gilman 2019/189, 179).

With reference to Dewey’s conception of habits (Dewey 1988/1922), Wille speaks of ‘habitualized unease’, which is the ‘consequence of every structure through which a normality and a marked, subordinated other are generated’ (Wille 2020, 10) – in Young’s terms, it is the consequence of cultural imperialism. The reference to habits is key, in this context, because it reminds us that oppression works, among other things, also by moulding, regulating and giving a direction to our bodily sensations and reactions, impulses, affects, desires, and emotions. According to Wille, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’
exemplifies habitualized unease from the embodied perspective of an oppressed woman. The consequence, on our heroine, consists mostly in a loss of epistemic authority, and related restriction of her freedom. She copes with it by ‘rebellion and secrecy’ (ibid, 6) which gradually leads her to withdraw from a context that misrecognizes and disavows her, and finally ends up in ‘psychic decomposition’ (ibid, 7). In Wille’s interpretation, that follows standard ones, Gilman’s short story has solely the diagnostic scope of showing, to put it simply, how bad the situation de facto is, of showing, that is, how habitualized unease becomes pervasive and inescapable.

In principle, however, the subjective, ‘situational’ experience of unease could also harbour liberating potentials. Not only this experience might have the effect of stabilizing shaky patterns and re-establishing the order, it might also unleash ‘restorative energies’ (ibid, 14). By relying on Dewey’s theory of qualities, Wille argues that unease can be (vaguely, indeterminately) perceived as a quality pervading a particular situation, to which one intimately belong and adhere to. One perceives oneself as part of the uneasiness, and this perception opens up the possibility of habitualized patterns becoming ‘reflexive and changeable’. (ibid, 15)

But how can patterns change? In what follows, I want to start from where Wille has left us. I would like to explain, that is, how the perception of unease might become connected to the cognitive and practical power to liberate oneself from the oppressive situation, and to contribute to the transformation of bad, namely oppressive habits.

3. Beyond oppression?

The majority of readings do not see how ‘The Yellow Paper’ could help us addressing the question of emancipation. The most common interpretation reads Gilman as narrating a sort of horror story, a story of hallucination and gradual sinking into madness. If the text is such a great critical and emancipatory (feminist) resource, it is because it shows what gender oppression, and the failed attempt to go beyond it, do to women. Gilman’s readers do indeed undergo an emancipatory experience when encountering this text, but its protagonist does not. I want to show, however, that Gilman is also illustrating the unfolding of an aesthetic experience. The heroine gets lost in her aesthetic experience, namely she undergoes an ecstatic moment that fuels an affective and cognitive understanding of her cage, as well as the figuration of a way out of it. Granted that she does not fully liberate herself in the end (but what does full liberation mean after all, and when do we reach it?), she manages to gain an affective awareness of oppression, and to sense what it would be if things were different.

The main narrative plot of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, as announced by the title, is the heroine’s engagement with the walls of the room in which she finds herself trapped in. The interaction – an aesthetic experience – follows itself a narrative plot: it starts in a superficial, undifferentiated and plainly negative way, develops through some twists and ends in a quite unexpected place. Different emotions characterize the different phases of the experience. At the beginning, she is disgusted. She does not simply profoundly dislike the appearance of the wallpaper though. Mostly, she is irritated or even outraged because she is not able to identify its rationale, its pattern. This does not seem to be her
cognitive fault; it is rather the design that is in itself confusing, irrational: ‘when you follow the lame uncertain curves […] they commit suicide – […] destroy themselves a unheard of contradictions’ (Gilman 2019/1892, 181). Interestingly, in recognizing the objective flaws of the wallpaper, she ascribes agency to it (the lines ‘commit suicide … destroy themselves’) – an agency that grows in the course of the next days, coming even to assume a normative, moral dimension: ‘[t]his paper looks at me as if it knew what vicious influence it had!’ (ibid, 183) Crucially, the power that the wallpaper exercises on the heroine can be judged as ‘vicious’ only from the perspective of the patriarchal, ‘androcentric’ regime. The wallpaper, which does not follow the ‘sequence’ of the established patterns and thus represents ‘a defiance of law’ (ibid,) has the power to irritate a ‘normal mind’ (ibid, 188) a mind, that is, that complies with and obeys the norms of the given socio-political order. It has indeed the power to corrupt the protagonist: it leads her to rebel against that ensemble of rules and norms that mould and constraint her.

As a matter of fact, it is from this point onwards that she starts to make sense of the pattern of the paper. It is as if the agency of the wallpaper is projected onto her and becomes her own agency. She is able to trace repetitions and to establish a sort of unity of meaning or sense. As soon as she succeeds in capturing the main pattern of the wallpaper, she becomes also able to see a sub-pattern, that seems to emerge from under the superficial one. While the surface appears as an anthropomorphic pattern – ‘[t]here is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes state at you upside down’ (ibid.), ‘those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere’ (ibid.) – the sub-pattern does not limit itself to exhibit human-like characteristics, it does de facto appear as swarming with human beings. The protagonist perceives a ‘strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design’ (ibid, 184). Soon enough, a woman shape is perceived: ‘it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind’ (ibid, 187).

The relationship between the protagonist and this female figure behind the front pattern evolves during the story. At the beginning, she loathes and dreads her. As the days go by, she develops an attachment for this woman, who will soon reveal herself as her own double. The heroine understands that the other woman/she herself is trying to shake and break the front design, as if she were trying to liberate herself from the bars of a prison. Eventually, the heroine helps the trapped woman to escape (ibid, 193). Note that the emancipatory relationship is not a dyad. The trapped woman is actually a multitude of women (ibid, 192) who do however not merge in one indistinct amalgam, but somehow retain their differences: ‘I wonder if they all come out of the paper as I did?’ (ibid, 195)

The liberation, alas, is not finalized. The protagonist does not leave the house. As the husband realizes what she has done, he senses his defeat and faints, and she has to ‘creep over him every time’ (ibid, 196). This formulation, that closes the story, suggests that the woman will continue to go back and forth, in and out of her cage. It is especially this quite enigmatic finale that has convinced many critics to read ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ as a tale of mere malaise, hallucination and irredeemable sinking into madness. According to William Veeder for instance, the tale ends with a scene of ‘prenatal symbiosis’ (Veeder 1988, 63) of reengulfment in the maternal womb. Gilman’s protagonist is even ‘more claustrophobically trapped’ than previous madwomen in the attic. She does not challenge
but rather reconfirms a regressive stereotype, namely, ‘the traditional equation of women and illness’. (ibid, 69-70) A more nuanced reading is provided by Paula Treichler, who interprets the protagonist’s interaction with the wallpaper as a metaphor for the work that women are traditionally forbidden to do, writing, that is. What she sees and makes up of the wallpaper is a kind of writing process, a re-writing of womanhood and women history. In the end there is madness, according to Treichler, but in the form of a ‘transcendent sanity’ (Treichler 1984, 67). Transcendence consists in the fact that a new vision (of the wallpaper, of the female condition) has come to be expressed, the husband is forced to listen to what his wife has to say, and this cannot but change ‘the terms of the representational process’ (ibid, 74) itself, the very conditions for speaking. However, Treichler concludes that the ‘final vision itself is one of physical enslavement, not liberation: the woman, bound by a rope, circles the room like an animal in a yoke’. (ibid.)

It cannot be denied that complete freedom from oppression is not achieved in the end— at the end of the 19th Century, this would have been anachronistic, an abstract, idealistic and thus ideological option. Until larger structural social, cultural and political conditions do not substantially change, real freedom is impossible. However, I claim that the decision to not abandon the house, namely the space in which a crucial experience has taken place, is not per se to be deemed as a failure. In a pragmatist vein, Gilman seems to suggest that transformation, both on a personal and on a social and structural level, cannot happen all at once. Institutions, identities, habits and patterns cannot be just left behind and replaced with something completely new. And yet, the finale scene is pervaded by some newness: the wallpaper has been teared off, Jennie is not there anymore, the husband is senseless and a multitude of women has occupied the room, they come and go as they please, they creep. Creeping – this verb, and the semantic associations it inspires, are important. The fact that Treichler prefers to focus exclusively on the linguistic, discursive dimension of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ fails, I reckon, to understand the nature of transformation at stake here. Gilman’s story does not simply hint at the possibility of another discourse, of another representation and construction of reality through feminist writing. It does also show more fundamental bodily and affective transformations that exceed the linguistic and rational dimension. In other words, it is not only how women speak, but also what they feel and how they move and behave that contribute to emancipation. These women are portraited in the act of creeping – they move slowly, mellowly, insidiously, cunningly, resembling ivy on walls or crawling insects or snakes. Why is such bodily presence not necessarily a sign of madness, of regression? Let us turn now to Dewey’s thought, that puts a special emphasis on the affective as well as on the materialistic and naturalist aspects of human (and nonhuman) forms of life and of their structural problems.

4. Dewey reading and learning from ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’

Read through the lenses of Dewey’s aesthetic theory, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ narrates the unfolding of an aesthetic transformative experience. In general, Dewey defines experience as a ‘matter of interaction of organism with its environment’ (Dewey 1934/2008, 251) whereby the environment is usually a mix of human and non-human, social and
non-social (e.g. biological), organic and non-organic elements. It ‘includes the materials of tradition and institutions as well as local surroundings’ (ibid.): the colonial house rented by John, its garden and the wallpaper of the room in the attic not only symbolically represent, but also embody patriarchal oppressive institutions and traditions. Every experience is both ‘physical’ and ‘mental’ (ibid, 251). We can say that the experience narrated in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ is so mentally overwhelming and powerful because it involves different senses at the same time: not only sight, but also smell (Gilman 2019/1892, 191) and touch (ibid, 193–194).

In the experience, the self is both active and receptive, it ‘acts as well as undergoes’ (ibid.) Activity and receptivity are entangled and mutually soliciting: the organism is not simply an inert wax stamped upon by the impressions of the environment. Such impressions depend on and are modulated thanks to the organism’s responses. There is an ‘interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events’ (ibid, 25). On the one hand, our heroine does not just coldly and detachedly describe the patterns, the colour, the consistency of the wallpaper: her own previous experiences as an oppressed woman bring her to see on the wall more than what it is. On the other hand, there is a certain sense in which the front pattern is a cage, that the entrapped woman does try to shake and break. If perceiving the bars, and the women trying to liberate themselves, is a hallucination, it is one that reveals a ‘truth’ behind an appearance of middle-class solidity and well-being, one that gives an apt characterization of patriarchy.

But what does characterize a specific aesthetic experience? As it is well known, Dewey refuses to draw clear boundaries between aesthetic, intellectual, practical or emotional components in experiences (see e.g. Johnson 2007) or between ordinary and extraordinary aesthetic experiences (Leddy 2021; see also Dewey 1925/2008, Chapter 9). The separation of the realm of the aesthetics from other spheres of human (and nonhuman) interaction is socially conditioned: it is the product of a modern, industrialized society divided into antagonist classes – more precisely, into a working class that produces but cannot consume, or cannot enjoy what it can consume, and a capitalist, dominant class, that consumes and enjoys products it does not produce (Dewey 1934/2008, 87; 264–268; 345–347). In a society in which everyday life, at least the life of the oppressed classes, is deprived of any aesthetic pleasure, experience ‘is often infected with apathy, lassitude and stereotype. […] We are not sufficiently alive to feel the tang of sense nor yet to be moved by thought’ (ibid, 264).

Sometimes, however, a different kind of experience becomes possible, and this is the experience that allows to break through the routinized and mechanical monotony of the ordinary. Sometimes, temporary disruptions or ruptures are conducive to a deeper grasping of the situation in which the experiencing subjects find themselves in, thus disclosing possibilities about how things could be different, for themselves and for others. While readers of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ have made an experience of this sort thanks to this specific literary text, the transformative rupture of Gilman’s protagonist depends on her interaction with the wallpaper: transformative aesthetic experiences do not happen necessarily thanks to works of art (the wallpaper, actually, is perceived by the protagonist as anti-artistic).20
Without denying the continuity between nonaesthetic and aesthetic experience, we can nevertheless attempt to say that the latter arises insofar as:

(i) there occurs an intensification and clarification of both feeling and thought (e.g. ibid, 61). The increasing agitation and hallucinatory/revelatory episodes of the heroine, arising as a deviation from the ordinary rhythm of affects and thoughts, can be taken as signifying such intensity and clear vision. These lead to the following points;

(ii) a form (or series of forms, a pattern) is perceived, and the experience itself is apprehended as a unity: Gilman’s protagonist seems, in fact, to have no other goal than following ‘the pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion’ (Gilman 2019/1892, 185) to what Dewey calls ‘consummation in consciousness’ (Dewey 2008/1934, 45). In perceiving both the front and the sub-pattern, she manages to learn fundamental lessons about herself and the world: to begin with, she comes to understand who she ‘really’ is (an unfree woman) and what she wants (freedom!). She moreover learns that her condition of captivity is not personal or individual, but structural, that she is connected, that is, to all other women through the bounds of oppression. Such learning process would have not been possible without breaking with ordinary rules and norms, with the rules and norms, namely, that contribute to the perpetration of the system that trap and oppress women, and prevent them from becoming aware of it;

(iii) it does not follow from a clear goal fixed and determined in advance (ibid, 61). In early phases of aesthetic experiences, we cannot know what we are going to go through and with which outcomes, ends-in-view are only foggily in view, if at all. The ‘end’ of the experience, its consummation, the sense to having grasped ‘what it is about,’ is however not only what it comes as a result, but is intimately entangled with the unfolding of the whole experiential process. In ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ this is conveyed by the fact that the heroine does write from the beginning until the end, giving meticulous testimony of her aesthetical journey (even when she turns into a creeping being, she writes!);

(iv) the consummatory phase does require the undergoing and overcoming of a phase of uncertainty, ‘commotion, turmoil’, ‘ferment’ and ‘excitement’ (ibid, 72), thus confusion, maybe even tension and conflict (see also ibid, 62; 341). Our heroine engages in an agitated and painful manner with the other characters in the story, with the other women, and with herself;

(v) the self is not an entity that precedes the experience, but comes to the fore through the interaction with the environment. If this is true for every experience, in an aesthetic experience (as well as in a scientific or intellectual one) the self is also ‘brought to consciousness’ (ibid, 286). As suggested in the previous point, conflictuality might play a decisive role in the process of self-awareness and self-transformation.

On the basis of these features, we can now try to make explicit the transformative character of experience. If the self, for instance a human being, as mentioned in (v) is
formed through the experience, each experience transforms her (a bit) as well. Since the transforming self contributes to the world she is experiencing, this contribution does also consist in provoking change in the environment. More precisely, the possibility of something new, both for the individual and for her surroundings, comes to the fore in the consummatory phase of experience (ibid, 144) once, as suggested in (iv), the moment of turmoil, tension, conflict is (temporarily) overcome. The passage in which a new unity or sense is achieved, a form changes.

But why does transformation require and imply an ecstatic moment?

A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. […] We are, as it were, introduced into a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences. We are carried out beyond ourselves to find ourselves. […] This whole is then felt as an expansion of ourselves. (ibid, 199, my italics)

When encountering a work of art, or more generally going through an aesthetic experience, we become other: while experiencing the world from another perspective, or from various other perspectives, we get a glimpse of how another world could be. In the interaction23 that opens up the aesthetic experience of our heroine, the environment is perceived as not familiar or ‘normal,’ the wallpaper appears to begin with as a weird, hostile and scary otherness. In the course of the experience, however, it progressively loses its difference, it begins to take on human traits, especially the power to act, and, subsequently, female traits. Insofar as the protagonist stops to perceive her environment’s strangeness and overcomes the relation of estrangement, she becomes this other, she loses herself in the room’s wall, she becomes the wallpaper itself: she is one of the women trapped there, deeply connected to all the other women behind the bars. She takes on herself the wallpaper’s weird qualities, and in fact, towards the end of the story, she becomes the one to be perceived as a hostile and scary figure by the other characters (and by the readers, who are tempted to categorize her weirdness and otherness as sheer madness). In going out of and beyond herself, the heroine manages to understand and show how it is actually the patriarchal, bourgeois family that produces estrangement, thus opening up a rift that is a promise of emancipation from this oppressive institution, and of transformation of the social context based on this institution.

A paradigmatic manifestation of ecstatic movement consists in the heroine’s transformation in a creeping being, namely in a dehumanized, animal creature, flattened on or even blending with the ground. As mentioned, this is taken as major proof of her insanity. But this does not have to be necessarily the case. To begin with, the word ‘creeping’ is introduced for the first time as the protagonist realizes what the figure behind the wallpaper’s pattern is attempting to do, namely trying to escape (Gilman 2019/1892, 187). And the moments in which this woman appears as free, liberated from the bars of the wall, she is creeping outside, in nature (‘in the long shaded lane’, ‘in those dark grape arbors’, in the ‘garden’, ‘under the trees’, ‘under the blackberry vines’ ibid, 192), and, rebelliously, during the day: ‘she is always creeping, and most woman do not creep by daylight’ (ibid.). This bodily movement, and the close contact and exchange with the natural strata of the
environment that it fosters, seems to be felt as a liberating gesture (which must be hidden from the husband). In light of a Deweyan reading, the heroine’s development into a creeping creature could be taken as symbolizing both the overcoming of the dualism between society or culture and ‘external’ nature and the dualism between mind and body: the movement of emancipation is not only in the ‘head’ of the woman, not only a cognitive, rational, intellectual achievement, but it does correspond to modifications in motoric and affective habits as well.

A recent neuro-cognitivist interpretation of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ seems to offer support for such a Deweyan-naturalist reading. Quite sanguinely and positively, Christopher Roethler states that the protagonist’s activity of studying the wallpaper is indeed a sign of health, for it is the way she finds to exercise her agency. It is an exercise in aesthetic perception that ends up in a cognitive advancement: ‘The narrator only reaches this knowledge after much neurological cross-training, which stocks her storehouse of experience to the point that the woman may step clear of the shifting, strangling male pattern with clarity’. (Roethler 2020, 155). From a neurological standpoint, these are not the perceptions of someone getting mad, but of someone with a mind and a body capable of learning. The narrator’s absorption into the pattern is evidence of a capacity to empathize with objects, to feel shared embodiment, and to let go ‘of our human scale a bit and allowing the other thing to fully inhabit our perception – to “enworld” us’ (ibid, 160). One might say that the capacity to overcome the distinction between subject and object, self and world, enables resistance against an oppressive social context. This finds confirmation in Dewey’s view of social oppression. According to Dewey, oppression, or domination, does in general consist in the perpetration of dichotomies like society versus nature and mind versus body, which underly and reinforce social division into classes (capitalists/workers, consumers/producers), as well as into social groups defined by gender (Gregoratto 2017a; see also Dewey 1922/2008, 52).

According to Dewey, importantly, a (human) form of life can be made less oppressive not (only) through critical judgements, but (also) through ‘disclosure of possibilities that contrast with actual conditions. [...] It is by a sense of possibilities opening up before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem in and of burdens that oppress’ (Dewey 2008/1934, 349) and that we can find the resources for overcoming ‘indurated habits’ (ibid, 350). Such possibilities, that concern social relationships as well (e.g. relationships between classes, or between genders, or other kinds of social groups), cannot be gathered from given, established costumes, norms and institutions (ibid, 352) but must be imagined and figured anew. This is a view very much indebted to the British Romantics, as the numerous references to the poets and theorists in this tradition throughout the whole *Art and Experience* reveal. Most notably, in ‘A Defence of Poetry’, Shelley sees the transformative effect of poetry (and, for Dewey, of art more generally) as socially, morally and politically transformative (e.g. Shelley 2002/1821, 647). It consists in an awakening and enlarging of ‘mind’ ‘by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thoughts’. (ibid, 642) Enhanced awareness and expansion of human beings’ imaginative and cognitive powers are the result, also for Shelley, of an ecstatic movement, that he identifies as ‘Love’, and that corresponds precisely to ‘a going out of our own nature’ and putting oneself ‘in the place of another and of many others’ (ibid.).
The difference between the Romantic view and Gilman’s story, however, is that in the latter the ecstatic moment is not experienced as an encounter with and in beauty, what Shelley calls ‘an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action or person, not our own’. (ibid.) The wallpaper is, until the end, perceived as ugly and scary, the encounter with the other women is not harmonious and peaceful, hostility does not get away. If, also for Dewey, ‘resistance and conflict […] are, as we have seen, a necessary part of artistic form’ (Dewey 2008/1934, 341) conciliation between self and other, overcoming of negativity, a smooth recovery from the phase of self-loss are not easily achieved and achievable. The ecstatic moment, and thus the whole aesthetic experience, is often a scary, painful, dangerous process, that does not offer any guarantee. If I have tried to argue against a negativist reading of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, I do not want to claim that its protagonist can be safe and free. Until gender oppression is not substantially overcome, we do not have any guarantee of proper safety and freedom. Madness is not overcome, and cannot be positively transfigured. A deep ambiguity remains.

My joint reading of Dewey and Gilman should help to highlight a more resolved and radical critical-theoretical motive in the pragmatist tradition. Dewey is in general quite sanguine with regard to the social, political and moral powers of art, which can have the power to build up a community experience towards ‘greater order and unity’, (ibid, 87) and, hence, freedom. Such enthusiasm must be curbed, and accompanied by an awareness of the depth and capillarity of social oppression, and of the tremendous difficulties attached to the attempts to resist and overcome it. Reading together Dewey and Gilman should have highlighted some crucial elements in the processual experience of coming to term with oppression and trying to realize emancipation, a process that is painful, and yet both cognitively and emotionally rich.24

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Notes

1. For a systematic and insightful discussion of the concept of social wrong in social philosophy, as distinguished from moral and political wrong, see Laitinen and Särkelä 2020.
2. I am not trying to resuscitate the debate around the relation between theory and practice. The paper stems from the conviction that the theory of the practice of emancipation and change
needs more attention from critical theorists today. This has been somewhat lately acknowledged by Sally Haslanger (2021a; 2021b). In the contemporary panorama, the most serious attempts to think about the question of emancipatory transformation are to be found in discourses on social struggles and conflicts, both in the Frankfurt tradition of critical theory (e.g. Honneth 1995; Bertram and Celikates 2015) and in the pragmatist tradition that is presented in continuity with the Frankfurt School (Dewey 1973; 2015; Särkelä 2013; Gregoratto 2017b). This paper follows another track.

3. For a general, insightful account concerning how aesthetic experiences bring to the fore changes of perspectives, see Schmetkamp 2019.

4. See e.g. these very recent visual art exhibitions, that originally and closely rework the images of Gilman’s short story: Lindey Mendick, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (Eastside Projects 2020, https://eastsideprojects.org/projects/the-yellow-wallpaper/); Kehinde Wiley, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (William Morris Gallery 2020, https://www.stephenfriedman.com/news/202-kehinde-wiley-the-yellow-wallpaper/).

5. See Seigfried 2001a, 80–84. On Dewey’s feminism, see also Seigfried 2001b.

6. On the literary tradition of this female figure, and its feminist meaning and potential, see the groundbreaking study by Gilbert and Gubar 2020/1979.

7. Gilman has critically theorized this aspect of women oppression, namely, women’s economic dependence on their families and men, in her non-fictional work Women and Economics, Gilman 1998/1898.

8. According to William Veeder’s psychoanalytical interpretation of the story, the protagonist does act, in fact, like a girl, she does linger on an infantilized stage (Veeder 1988). Her vicissitudes, moreover, show a process of deteriorating infantile regression. This psychological or psychoanalytical reading misses the point, in my view: despite the good intention (‘I have no desire to let patriarchy off the hook’, ibid, 58) it ends up regarding a social problem (gender oppression) predominantly from an individual standpoint. The woman’s complicity is far too emphasized: for example, Veeder stresses how the ‘the gender arrangements so favorable to John’ are considered as acceptable and even desirable by his wife as well, as they ‘encourage her tendency to regress’. (ibid, 60) What is more, and as a result, this reading is not able to see the potential for emancipation hidden in the protagonist's aesthetic experience.

9. In her most famous novel Herland (Gilman 2019/1915) Gilman conveys a powerful critique of androcentrism by staging its opposite, a gynocentric utopia.

10. As Paula Treichler remarks, the men in the story have the power to carry out a ‘diagnosis:’ ‘[…] this diagnosis not only names reality but also has considerable power over what that reality is now to be […]. I use “diagnosis”, then, as a metaphor for the voice of medicine or science that speaks to define women’s condition. Diagnosis is powerful and public; representing institutional authority, it dictates that money, resources, and space are to be expended as consequences in the “real world”’. (Treichler 1984, 65). Miranda Fricker’s (2007) reflections on epistemic injustices might also be useful to understand the oppression undergone by the protagonist of the ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’.

11. On this dimension, see Young 2005.

12. The quality of the situation lived by the heroine is not only unease, then. As Dewey views it, every experience is characterized by a variety of emotions, it ‘moves and changes’ (Dewey 1910/1975).
1934/2008, 48) as various emotions arise and flow one into the other; every experience is a sort of drama.

13. A woman, in the very end, utters: ‘I’ve got out at last […] in spite of you and Jane!’ (Gilman 2019/1892, 196) Who is Jane? The most likely answer is that Jane is the name of the protagonist, of the writer herself. The exclamation might express the fact that Jane has now finally managed to overcome that part of herself complicit with the established order. Liberation might appear then (also) as self-liberation. According to Veeder, since the name Jane recalls the one of John’s sister, Jennie, the three woman – the sister, the protagonist, and her double– would represent three faces of gender oppression. In this reading, there would be almost no difference between the ‘perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper’ (ibid, 184) Jennie, the intellectual woman and the madwoman who regresses into a creeping being: ‘[t]hat we learn the heroine is Jane only at the moment when she becomes Jennie indicates the futility of the wife’s triumph over her husband. She can escape the male only by entering the relay of female pseudo-identities which leads eventually back to mother and thus to the loss of identity inevitable with re-engulfment. The psychotic […] succumbs eventually to the terrifying reunion with mother’ (Veeder 1988, 64). But why must the protagonist be inevitably identified with Jennie/Jane? For sure, there is a connection between the two women, as they are both, as woman, similarly oppressed. The protagonist suggests that Jennie is as well attracted by the wallpaper (‘I know she was studying that pattern’ Gilman 2019/1892, 190): Jennie could come to make the same kind of experience, but she does not in the end. The protagonist, moreover, is able to draw a clear boundary between herself and John’s sister: for example, she refuses to sleep in the same bed with her during their last night at the mansion (ibid, 193). But ‘Jane’, against whom the heroine, as well as the other women, have to fight, could also be Charlotte Brontë’s famous female protagonist. The reference could hint at the identification between the protagonist and Bertha, the repudiated wife who, when still alive, interfered in the romance between Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester.

14. ‘From a conventional perspective, it first seems strange, flamboyant, confusing, outrageous: the very act of women’s writing produces discourse which embodies “unheard of contradictions”. Once freed, it expresses what is elsewhere kept hidden and embodies patterns that the patriarchal order ignores, suppresses, fears as grotesque, or fails to perceive at all’. (Treichler 1984, 62)

15. Roberta Dreon (2015) offers a detailed and helpful overview of how aesthetic experience in Dewey can have emancipating effects on the whole society by a close comparison with Herbert Marcuse’s work. However, I do not share her conviction that, historically, there has been no fruitful theoretical exchange between Dewey and exponents of the first generation of the Frankfurt School (Dreon 2015, 74; on this, see e.g. Gregoratto 2017b; Särkelä 2020).

16. ‘There is an act of reconstructive doing, and consciousness becomes fresh and alive’. (Dewey 1934/2008, 59) The reconstructive doing is called by Dewey ‘perception’, which is different from mere ‘recognition’; that consists in attaching ‘tag or label’ (ibid.).

17. ‘In an experience, things and events belonging to the world, physical and social, are transformed through the human context they enter, while the live creature is changed and developed through its intercourse with things previously external to it’. (Dewey 1934/2008, 251)
18. In Deweyan terms, one can say that the front pattern as a repetition of bars and the sub-pattern as a woman trying to escape are ‘objects’ that emerge from a ‘qualitative background’, a whole that ‘stretches out indefinitely’ (Dewey 1934/2008, 197). It is thanks to the emergence of these objects, focus of attention, that the background can acquire sense and meaning, becoming ‘definitely conscious’ (ibid.). Objects emerge thanks to human beings’ capacities, histories and values, even if they are not just merely ‘made’. Human mind ‘is a functional aspect of experience that emerges when it becomes possible for us to share meanings, to inquire into the meaning of a situation, and to initiate action that transforms, or remakes, that situation’. (Johnson 2007, 76, my italics).

19. On Dewey’s account of social domination and class antagonism, which has both economic and gender dimensions, see my Gregoratto 2020. The arguments that I made in those articles should explain more in detail why Young’s account of oppression is a good match for pragmatist reflections on these topics.

20. ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ has indeed had transformative consequences: for example, one editor of New England Magazine, where the story was first published, had a friend who was ‘in similar trouble’ (postpartum depression) and the story convinced her family to change the treatment of her case. More impressively, Dr S. Weir Mitchell himself was convinced by Gilman’s text, that she sent him and he pretended to ignore, to drop his rest cure for good (Gilman 1972/1935, 121).

21. According to Gerald Edelman’s brain-based approach to knowledge, indebted to the pragmatist tradition, being able to recognize, or, in Deweyan terms, perceive ‘patterns’ is pivotal. It explains how the brain prima facie operates, namely ‘the origin of perceptual categorization, of concepts, and of thoughts based on interactions between the brain, the body, and the world’. (Edelman 2006, 65) For Brian Boyd, pattern recognition and the ability to play with patterns is at the core of production and enjoyment of art, to begin with of storytelling. As such, narration and fiction train us ‘to explore possibility as well as actuality’ (Boyd 2009, 188) ‘to reflect freely beyond the immediate and to revolve things in our minds within a vast and vividly populated world of the possible’. (ibid, 199) Our heroine’s obsession with the patterns of the wallpaper, and her need to write about them, might be better understood in the light of his theory. I thank Italo Testa for directing me to this line of interpretation, which I unfortunately cannot develop here.

22. In fact, ‘[e]very process of free art proves that the difference between means and ends is analytic, formal, not material or chronologic’ (Dewey 1925/2008, 280).

23. Or, to use a more precise Deweyan term, ‘transaction’. On the concept of transaction in Dewey, also from a feminist perspective, see Sullivan 2001.

24. The idea for this article comes from a PhD seminar on feminism and pragmatism at the University of Parma (Italy) in November 2019. I thank Italo Testa for the invitation to teach the seminar as well as for the great discussion we had also with Francesca Sofia Alexandratos, Teresa Roversi and the other PhD students who were there. For comments on the draft, I am thankful to Núra Sara Miras Boronat, Matteo Santarelli, Arvi Särkelä, Susanne Schmetkamp and Just Serrano.
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