

The Yellow Wallpaper: A Feminist Study

Abstract

The Yellow wallpaper is 1860 short story of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which deals with an unnamed woman narrator who is confined a room by her her husband. It is written from the first person perspective as a collection of diary notes. It was created in the 19th century and is one of the first examples of American feminist literature. She keeps a diary for her emotional outlet, but her physician husband has locked her up in a room with windows and walls covered with a yellow wallpaper, all this in the name of rest cure. She deals with neurasthenia, a kind of depression which happens to her after two years of giving birth to a daughter and the storyline is somewhat autobiographical.

Keywords: Woman Issues, Patriarchy, Mental Illness, Oppression, Isolation, Female Freedom.

Introduction

In this research paper I will look at the struggle of the narrator with her own perception as opposed to other people's, which was a result of her seclusion and her insistent manner of putting forward the act of writing. In the story the narrator's uncertainty is quite visible which leads to a lot of confusion of perception on her part and she later gives up on reason too, which makes this plot line an inclination towards gothic fiction of American literature.

Being a woman in the Victorian era must have been a difficult task because there were no rights for woman, they were mentally and physically abused because there no strict laws too and this strange rest cure process was in vogue too, which led the new mother into isolation. The story revolves around a woman who is kept in nursery room upstairs by her husband and other members of the family because they feel she is not well and keeping her like this, confined and not letting her do any sort of work will be best for her. In those times this strange 'rest cure' thing was popular, in which when a woman suffered from mental illness she was isolated and barred from doing any work, thinking it will calm her agitated mind and body.

Review of Literature

Catherine Sustana, 2019

Like Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour,' Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is a mainstay of feminist literary study. First published in 1892, the story takes the form of secret journal entries written by a woman who is supposed to be recovering from what her husband, a physician, calls a nervous condition.

Jeffrey Keeten, 2018

If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression---a slight hysterical tendency---what is one to do?"Well, one must quit being a silly goose and get better. The baby is fine; thank goodness, the baby is fine. It is safe, safe in another room. Away from the horrid yellow wallpaper. This wallpaper is an artistic monstrosity, an assault on the senses. It is so yellow it reeks of...yellow.

Brina, 2016

The Yellow Wall Paper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman written in 1892 is considered a story that is a leading feminist view about a woman's place in a traditional marriage during that time period. Gilman herself was an intellectual voice and staunch supporter of women's rights in marriage. Most leading magazines refused to publish this story and it was lost for many years. Once recovered, it has become an often talked about story in many literary anthologies.



Shivani Singh

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Cecily, 2016

International Women's Day is perfect for reviewing this chilling short story, written by a utopian feminist in 1890. (Yes, I opened with Wilde, but I couldn't resist, and he was also a victim of sexually-related prejudice.)

Jaline, 2017

This is an amazing piece of writing and worth reading for the experience of better understanding mental illness and how it can subtly infect all areas of a person's life.

Aim of the Study

This research paper tries to provide an insight into this 19th century text that can be accurately called a feminist study on the topic of female mental health, freedom of living and dominance of male in male female relationship.

In the story, the husband is decides for her rest cure and takes her up there in the nursery room. The room has strange arrangements, the bed is there from where she can sit and look outside the window which has a garden view. The walls of the room are covered with yellow colored wallpaper with a floral pattern covering it. The narrator here isn't happy about the fact that she has to live there alone with no interaction with the society or the family but there is nothing she can do, apart from surrendering to what her husband has asked her to. She is dominated by her husband John. He forbids her from her creative work that for her is writing. She had mental illness, which back then and till now is a delicate topic and even some people consider it a remark of disgrace and shame. The one's who were ill were accused of ill fate and they not just were in ill health but became victims of the society and people around them. These people were isolated, abandoned and were considered less worthy of the love and care they deserved, leave alone the self trauma and torture they felt which was a result of this abandonment. And on top of that, imagine being a woman who had just been a mother, and is kept away from seeing her child and is abandoned. All these circumstances can even make a sane turn into an insane. She is advised to abstain from all physical activity and creative stimulation. She is not allowed to read, write, or to see her new baby, the only thing she can do is sleep and breath in the fresh air of the country estate. John manages to keep the protagonist in a subordinate role and make her think she did not have the ability to make her own decisions. Perkins-Gilman's protagonist struggles against depression and male dominance, which was common in the 19th century. She is constantly watched and controlled by John that this behavior of his, leads to her breakdown also. "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction."(Perkins P.688) The protagonist becomes increasingly fixated on the yellow wallpaper found in the room where she spends majority of the story. "It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide-plunge off at outrageous

angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions."(Perkins P.688).

The protagonist's house for the summer is a countryside estate. "It is 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!"(Perkins P.686) The estate is isolated and secluded away from the main road. There are gates, locks, other small houses surrounding it, and large walls. Despite the protagonist's progression into insanity, the wallpaper and the room become her source of strength, giving her the courage and confidence to leave her husband John.

Initially the Yellow wallpaper that is all over the walls of her room make her very nervous and conscious. As the story progresses she starts to sink deeper and deeper into the realm of madness as a result of that isolation that was imposed on her and as a result of this she starts to identify with the yellow wallpaper that is present on the walls of her room. She starts to see a woman inside that wallpaper that crawls here and there in order to breakaway from that floral pattern wall and come out, which in a way represents as a cage of society in which she has been trapped. She identifies this wallpaper as a symbol of patriarchy which traps woman and holds them captive. The woman trying to come out of that wallpaper symbolises her attempt of opposing the norms society has inflicted upon her. And she similarly wants to break away from her husbands captivity and run. She says, "Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out. The front pattern does move-and no wonder! The woman behind it 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." (Perkins P. 695).

The story here not only portrays the mental derangement of a woman in hands of society and family but also portrays how her closest confidant her husband is mistreating her, not realising her condition and not providing her with the love and care she needs the most in these tiring times, rather, he is the greatest oppressor who pay no heeds to her feelings and emotions. This shwos how women were mistreated in that time. The subject of captivation and mistreatment of a woman by someone may have been heard, but here the situation turns even grave for a woman because the doing it is her own husband and hardly any rules or laws were applicable in this scenario.

She is denied any social contact, she is denied her freedom and her only emotional outlet, that is writing is also forbidden in the name of cure, which only worsens her condition. She cannot talk to anyone and even do not get to see a single human being. She finds herself isolated in the middle of society and despite of having a family of her own, she can't have the presence of any member of the family. She earlier used to write in few intervals which she got when her husband was away and doing this would surely have given her a sigh of relief because her relation with her husband seems problematic. But now when she has

nothing do to of that sort, she starts to grow interest in the yellow wallpaper that's present all over her room. Now she starts to imagine and more imagine about the woman she sees in the wallpaper. She thinks that woman is trapped like she is trapped in the room, without their wish and she wants only one thing and that is to break away these shackles and come out, like she wants to break away the walls of this room and go out. Her only preoccupation becomes the woman she thinks is trapped in the wallpaper. She starts to grow more interest in the woman as time passes and now according to her that woman has started moving in the room to wall to floors and around her bed. She thinks about that woman only the whole day. She only can look out of her room into the garden that is visible from her bed. She sees lush green trees and grass outside her room and as a result of madness she starts to see that woman from the wallpaper all over her room. She start to find her everywhere crawling and moving inside her room on all walls of the room. She identifies herself with that woman and feels both of them have been trapped by the wicked society and they are trying hard to break away those chains. Her mental deterioration is highlighted in the book by Gilman and the protagonist was a creative person at heart which lead to her creating a woman behind those yellow wallpapers, when she was isolated by her husband and family. She clearly had no say in her marriage and had to obey what was told to her and did that too. She now not only started to see the woman in the room crawling here and there but now she could see her moving in the garden and under the trees. She thinks now that woman can move out and roam then one day she will also be able to do the same. By doing this, she was providing herself the freedom to move out, which was not possible in reality and Gilman here shows how tragic a woman life can turn, if something so bad as mental breakdown happens to her. The condition of woman in that society was poor and even worse because their consent was of no importance and they were advised and expected to do that only. At that point, she is being inferior to John and having a low self esteem and confidence in herself. John knows his wife on a superficial layer only and he sees the outer part, but misses the woman trapped screaming to be set free. John's ignorance blinds him from fully understanding his wife. Their relationship is not equal in a marriage sense. According to the 19th century, women were expected to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers. The protagonist is unable or willing to adhere to the ideal model of domesticity by the 19th century society and John is at loss as to what to do. With this in mind, John was a reflection of society. The ignorance and shortcomings of society led the protagonist in a direction that could have been prevented if they would of just stepped out of the box. John's solution was to use Weir Mitchell's rest regimen to cure his wife, not knowing he was going to push her over the edge of insanity.

The narrator but ultimately finds the escape she wanted, from the physical imprisonment which was forced upon her, through that woman whom she created from her mind and imagination with the floral

pattern of the yellow wallpaper of her room. The narrator feels a break from her reality in the story she has created. Isolation and boredom forces the protagonist to use the room as a playroom where her mind begins to wonder and she begins to find comfort in the yellow wallpaper. She gradually begins to see the patterns in the wallpaper, which is "a woman stooping down and creeping around behind that pattern." (Perkins P.692). She feels as the woman wants to come out of the pattern that is drawn on the wallpaper and she shakes it do so, similarly she also wants to this and she does this subconsciously through the woman she has created. She must have been doing this escape game from her husband in form of her writings when his husband is out, but now she cannot write and that need for escape has emulated itself into this woman she has created which from time to time escapes from the wallpaper and crawls. By making that escape from the wallpaper from time to time, her hopes of escaping from that room increase.

How her imprisonment has effected her can be understood by the fact that she even contemplates suicide. And the reason for her suicide will ultimately be rendered her madness, and no one will ever understand why all this started at first place. She would have gotten proper care and medicine which would have cured her, but her husband and family neglected her and believed on the prevalent rest cure procedure which worsened her condition. She was not visited frequently and no medical help was provided to her, and all she was left to was to delve into insanity. John eroded the protagonist's personality. She is treated as a child relying on guidance and help from John. She relies on John, as a child would depend on a parent regarding any move or thought she makes.

This story is about patriarchal oppression and about Victorian view of the sexes. The narrator here is representing woman sect of the society on the whole and her husband is representing the patriarchal oppressing society that exercises its control over woman without thinking about their feelings. Her Isolation from the social life and the forced cessation of her creative craft add layers of repression on her life, forcing her to find escape in madness when she can no longer have the physical escape from dominant male society. This work is a cautionary tale of subjugation of woman in the hands of men, against the repression of of woman creative power and against the dangers of society inherited in the 19th century for woman.

This act of the husband of the narrator complicated the traditional notion of home as a space of sanity safety and protection for woman. At last, the insanity has taken over the narrator to such an extent that she tears down the wallpaper all over the room with her nails and crawls here and there in the room just like the woman she was complaining used to do. She does this with the thought of freeing that woman from the cage of society and seeing the condition of her wife, the husband faints. The protagonist has locked the room, while John is away and begins to peel off the layers of the wallpaper. Also the protagonist begins creeping around the room as the

wallpaper-trapped woman does when she comes out at nighttime. John finally opens the door and sees what the protagonist has done and faints. "I've got out at last, said the protagonist, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman P.32). As John faints, the protagonist proceeds to creep over him to continue with her work. The creeping over him symbolizes that the protagonist has obtained control of her own life.

Conclusion

To conclude we can say that such acts of her own family, be it a brother or husband, shatter down the image of home for a woman which symbolises love protection care and take them to the verge of insanity and even leads them to suicidal thoughts. The matter of female subjectivity may not be of much importance for man, but for women it holds much high significance and should be paid much needed attention. This work is a step towards that direction.

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