

DETERIORATION OF WOMAN'S MENTAL HEALTH IN GILMAN'S *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER*

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" stands as a critical examination of the suffocating patriarchy of its verse, one that contributes to the decreasing mental health of women. The plot of the paper centers around the narrator's psychological decline, as the "rest cure" which had become a popular treatment prescribed to women who were dubbed 'nervous persons' in the 19th century, took a devastating toll on her mind. The paper demonstrates, through an examination of the narrator's descent into madness, the ways in which restrictive gender roles, medical misogyny, and social conventions work together to inhibit female autonomy and intellectual expression. The article, which proceeds to explore Gilman's life—her suffering from depression and her treatment by Dr. Weir Mitchell—makes a direct link between the tale and the real-life male dominated medical practices. Additionally, the paper explores the larger scope of late 19th century socio-cultural context surrounding marriage and work, and the restrictions imposed on women in both areas. The diagnosis of women's conditions as hysteria or nervous depression, mostly determined by their reproductive functions, provides further insight on how systematic the oppression of women was by medical practitioners. The yellow wallpaper itself symbolizes female entrapment, and serves as a powerful metaphor for a psychological rebellion. Approaching *The Yellow Wallpaper* with a feminist lens, this analysis demonstrates that Gilman provides us with not simply the individual account of a woman driven to mental breakdown, but wider commentary on the systemic forces of gender inequality and societal norms that render women alienated. The narrator's ultimate breakdown, represented by the last of her wallpaper, is an expression of tragic identity and self-violating defiance. The story powerfully reflects the disregard for women's voices and the dreadful effects that stem from fertilizing the soil of their psychological and emotional needs.

Keywords: patriarchy, mental health, psychological decline, rest cure, nervous persons, gender roles, medical misogyny, social conventions, female autonomy

Introduction

"The Yellow Wallpaper", first published in the *New England Magazine* in 1892, first attracted critical attention as "a small literary masterpiece" that deserves the widest possible audience" in 1973, after the first full-length analysis of the story was written by the famous feminist critic Elaine R. Hedges since Gilman's text has received widespread critical attention and the story has been

interpreted as one documenting the oppressive and stultifying relation between a husband and wife, leading to disaster. The narrator/woman in the story thus, becomes an icon of the plight of women within the restrictive conditions of domesticity in the life of a 19th century woman as well as all women in all societies which fail to recognize the individuality, dignity and rights of a woman. In 1913, more than twenty years after the first publication of this story, Gilman wrote that she devised the story to save people from being driven crazy. She has suffered a near mental breakdown and was advised not to touch pen, paper or brush so that she could not exercise her intellectual and creative faculties. This was the instruction of the then most famous nerve-specialist Dr. Weir Mitchell. In this story, the narrator or the suffering wife shows the inadequacy of androcentric medical treatment, which believed that all nervous frustrations can be cured by physical rest. The story shows how disastrous such an interpretation of the mental processes of a woman could further lead to disaster. Gilman, herself, professed that her story was a "piece of propaganda; if it is literature, it is by chance." Yet the story is far more than just a crying out for improvement in one facet of a woman's life, it touches on many issues relevant to women trapped in domesticity.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is likely Gilman's most recognized short story. The narrative vividly illustrates Gilman's personal battle with depression, her writing experience and her existence in a society dominated by men. It gives emphasis on women's nervous breakdown and its treatment, health, motherhood, gender roles in late 19th century America. During the 19th century in America, the notion was moving towards a more consumer oriented society with the Industrial revolution and the end of the Civil War, society changed and money became increasingly important. While the New Age brought more women into the work force, few women actually supported themselves. Working young women were often expected to surrender their earnings to their parents, while married women were anticipated to hand over their wages to their husbands. Those women who didn't participate in the workforce were typically encumbered with household responsibilities. Haralambos and Holborn (601) describes how the society of the time viewed women saying that, "Married life is a woman's profession, and to this life her training - that of dependence-is modelled." Marriage and work didn't lose the barriers inflicted upon women. Each and every situation consists of a different set of specific rules. Doctors in the 19th century believed that the energy on the part of a woman was revolved around her reproductive organs. When a woman suffered a medical problem, doctors often diagnose the problem as a problem with channeling energy. Most of the time doctors concluded that a sick woman was out of harmony with her reproductive organs because fertility was central to a woman, living in the 19th century. Additionally, the woman belongs to the upper section of the society made ideal patients. Their husbands' bank accounts seemed almost inexhaustible and the patients were usually submissive and obedient to the doctor's orders.

Mental illness is a physical disorder that everyone is very known to. The disturbance it causes is still so favourable and acceptable to a significant section of the society. Mental illness currently represents a significant proportion of the global disease burden and is considered by physicians to be a common health problem (Beer 197). Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself was treated for a similar

nervous condition as that of the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper", The narrator describes how both her husband and her brother view her condition saying,

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? My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing (Gilman 833).

It is a perfect feminist story which is also very realistic. The physician husband, who is supposedly very compassionate and highly educated in medical sciences and who is often busy with extreme critical cases, plays the role of Male-god. Silas Weir Mitchell was her physician. He was well renowned for his treatment of "rest cure" in The United States. It is important to note that at the beginning of the story, the characters experience is based on Gilman's own experience. She talks about this in her essay "Why I Wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper:" In this essay she describes her own pathetic condition and how the medical field responded to her. The cure according to the doctor was to live as domestic a life as far as possible" and to "have but two hours intellectual life a day" (Gilman, Why I Wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" 844). Gilman also describes the real outcome of the treatment, saying that she "came so near the border line of mental ruin that I could see over (Gilman, Why I Wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" 844). Her husband believes the theory that his wife is not ill because there are no physical symptoms that he can detect and his idea is that whatever can't be seen and detected, does not exist. According to Mitchell no harm was done by rest. He often required patients to stay in bed for 6-8 weeks. The relationship between John, the husband and the narrator is the microcosm of the larger gender inequality in society. Gilman makes it clear that much of John's condescending and paternal behaviour towards his wife has little to do with her illness. The women patients were not even allowed to sit up, flourish their extra curricular activities and educate themselves. It appears that no effort to probe the symptoms of mental illness were made. In the case of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and in the case of the narrator in The Yellow Wallpaper" the rest cure failed. One analysis of such failure is that the rest cure simply locked Gilman, her narrator and "sick" women into an extremely submissive, helpless role. The husband dismisses her well thought out opinion and her flights of fancy with equal disdain while he belittles her creative impulses. He speaks of her as a child, calling her a little girl. He overrides her judgement on the best course of treatment for herself, making her live in a room she detastes in an isolated environment which makes her unhappy and lonely. Apparently, John is full of solicitous care. but he believes that the woman being innately inferior is always in a state of infantile dependence on the husband. As we can conclude from the conclusion of The Yellow Wallpaper", the rest cure only deepened a person's psychic unrest. The Yellow Wallpaper", in its direct protest of doctor's "rest cure for women passed Dr. Mitchell himself to change the treatment for similar cases.

As we observe the narrator's mental breakdown, the sentences in the story become shorter and more disconnected. As we follow the narration of Gilman's story, much of what happens in the story seems distorted or unexplained. The narrator's husband even hires a house, for removed from

the din and bustle of London, and selects the room upstairs as her nursery where she can have absolute rest, since there is plenty of air. What is suggested is that this woman is even shut away from her child, who is looked after by a nanny. This woman realizes that her nursery is like a jail because all the windows of her room are barred and that a huge iron gate would prevent the suffering woman to freely move about here and there. It is obvious that isolation didn't cure the narrator from his illness. In fact, it made her condition worse. It is also undead, however, whether or not the narrator believed she was actually sick or not. In this respect, We might find the narration of his story unreliable. On the one hand she evaluates her husband's good Intentions and on the other, she presents his cruelty in front of readers who prevent her from writing. This is an example of cratic narration. At the same time, one who is sick rarely understands what is happening to oneself. Thus, in order to understand the events, one must make inferences based on details that the narrator provides. It is important for us to read "The Yellow Wallpaper" with a critical eye and to allow ourselves to perceive ideas in the story the same way the narrator does.

Since John is a man and a doctor and therefore the authority, he must be right. The woman gradually develops a tremendous irritable obsession to the yellow wallpaper in her room, a faded yellow with patterns she doesn't understand or appreciate. Gradually, the woman is obsessed with the yellow wallpaper and comes to hallucinate the vision of a woman standing against bars, particularly at night, because the day is the male-time designated for clarity and reason, while the "moon-light" suggests the free flow of the imagination of a woman. This woman writes her diary, but has to hide it from her husband, because he has specifically prohibited her to Write because writing might further prostrate her. Actually, this sexist principle of John fails to understand that his wives attempts to write might relive her from oppressive treatment and that writing is creative to her, that creation gives individuality and identity, which could exercise the demons within her mind. Gradually the woman's condition deteriorates and she starts seeing apart from one woman behind bars, multiple images of crawling woman in the yellow wallpaper. When one of them crawls, the paper appears to her be moving. Her obsession is so acute that she even smells yellow.

The story depicts the woman's desire to be independent. The narrative explores the gradual decline of a woman into insanity as a result of her lack of engagement. In a more broader context, the story highlights the conflicts between marriage and career, social conventions and individual goals. In reading about Gilman's own life, the story also clearly reflects her own feelings of being rapped in a marriage while the narrator has lost much of her independence and self determination. The determination that does remain for her is in her desire to tear down he wallpaper and set the mysterious woman free. Gilman in her own life attempted to change her lifestyle along with the other women in the society. She replaced her old self with a totally different version of herself after abandoning her own husband and became a discoverer of her own individual perspectives. She became an inspiration for other women. She constructs her own reality. Focusing on the wallpaper has certainly provided her with a mental distraction. There is no doubt regarding the fact that the narrator is a character experiencing genuine emotions and significant mental decline.

The story ends with a climatic breakdown of the woman into insanity when one day she locks her from within throws her keys in the garden below, and tears up the wallpaper into pieces. Actually, she is trying to free the woman in the wallpaper, behind her bars. This outrageous act of insanity is symbolic of the narrator's triumphant gesture to break down the bars that stifles her and to rescue her to a state of freedom. When the husband finally enters the room, he finds his wife, totally broken down, lying upside down and crawling and the shock makes him fall down too. The final image of the woman crawling over her unconscious husband is a feminist symbol of the woman's victory over the man because it subverts the patriarchal position of sexuality, where the woman is below, while the man lies upon her. This story is a terrible critique of andro-centric principles, which how ever benign can be disastrous and ruinous to a woman's suffering within the stultifying connections of patriarchal domesticity.

It is important to remember that the entire story is presented only through the narrator's perspective. The majority of the background information presented is derived from Gilman's autobiography and reflects her personal viewpoint. The narrative remains authentic solely from her perspective as the author. In the story, Gilman's author represents a battling woman. Throughout the story she battles with the wallpaper and its enigma; in its historical context, she is lighting with the patriarchal social customs. For these reasons, the story carries a controversial edge. Her interesting tale of a new mother's dive into madness brought into focus the imbalance between men and Women within the household and the enormous nature of Victorian social norms for womanhood. In her real life Gilman freed herself from hurting anyone, she was capable of visualizing some of the details of the story. Therefore, the story is partly factual and partly fictional.

The narrative has been written in the first person so that the readers may be able to discover the complex layers of the protagonist's individuality. The tale resonates with the readers, allowing them to understand what the main character is thinking and feeling. The first-person narrative also makes a sense of ambiguity and doubtfulness that invites the readers to question their own purpose and preconceived notion. To conclude, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a captivating contribution to the field of literature that provides an awareness into the hidden emotions of women living in the late 19th century, weaving the themes of gender roles, mental illness and societal norms. The story is a powerful critique in which the women feel marginalized and alienated, believing that their voices are not being heard and their concerns are being ignored. It sought to bring attention to the issues affecting the women in the 19th century. The narrator's post partum depression clearly shows us how the nervous disorder affects her mindset at a slow pace, leading to disaster.

Conclusion

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* acts as a strong criticism of the patriarchal systems that restrict women's independence, intellectual creativity, and mental health. As the narrator sinks into insanity, the tale reveals the harmful impacts of confining gender roles, medical prejudice against women, and social norms that render women alone and voiceless. Gilman's

personal struggle with depression and the "rest cure" offers an intimate basis for the story, emphasizing the tangible effects of restrictive medical approaches. The narrator's fixation on the yellow wallpaper represents her fight against confinement, ultimately resulting in her mental revolt and collapse. Her ultimate action of ripping apart the wallpaper represents a poignant loss of identity as well as a rebellion against the powers that aim to dominate her. The narrative's feminist viewpoint highlights the systemic discrimination experienced by women in the 19th century, a fight that continues to be relevant today. By highlighting the repression of women's voices and the harmful impact of enforced domesticity, *The Yellow Wallpaper* continues to be a relevant and important piece. It urges a reassessment of cultural standards, championing women's empowerment, independence, and the authority to shape one's own identity.

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