

Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper as A Road to Women's Discourse.

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Abstract

This paper analysis the true nature of women's lives through the eyes of an unreliable, insane narrator. The story is an amalgamation of oppression and freedom, fiction and non-fiction, men and women. Gilman's story is about a journey to freedom from the hold of patriarchy. "The Yellow Wallpaper" raises protests against the male chauvinism that drags women down and acts as a chance to rediscover broken pieces of women and mend them mentally and physically. The story revolves around a yellow wallpaper that the narrator wishes to escape from to gain autonomy for herself. Gilman's short story has become a tale for feminist readers and scholars to venture into and make such stories available to the masses and students in particular so that they can contribute to the making of a better community that understands the need for Gender studies in our curriculum.

Keywords: Patriarchy, gothic, fear, feelings, hysteria, nervous, depression, madness, sanity

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's most iconic masterpiece, "The Yellow Wallpaper," is often identified as having an expressionist demeanour with a hint of psychological realism that lays the path for a realistic story of women's lives in a male-dominated society. It is believed that the text could be semi-autobiographical and hail from Gilman's "own interpretation of her life" (Schilling). There is a possibility that she connects her personal married life to that of other female victims and deliberately mixes facts with fiction to elaborate on the daunting experience of women in an institution like marriage in the 19th century. Eugenia C. Delamotte, in her work *Male and Female Mysteries in The Yellow Wallpaper*, believes Gilman took inspiration from Ann Radcliff's famous women's Gothic genre. She states, "In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the story of a Gothic heroine who becomes, as it were, a Gothic writer, Gilman both exploits and explores the conventions of the genre from a feminist perspective." Delamotte is positive that Gilman created a mystery, which is the protagonist/narrator of the story, unknown to "her husband and herself" (Delamotte). The main purpose of women's Gothic is to reflect their true feelings and fears. With the use of Gothic as a genre, we witness an eerie sense of the real world of women who were trapped in domesticity. The story also mirrors the real-life horrors of women stemming from the domestic sphere, which they have kept secret from others and themselves for a very long time. The way the narrator describes the house and the wallpaper can be compared to women's endured agony; in fact, the narrator begins by stating her desire for the house to be haunted, haunted like her. John, her husband, uses his masculine knowledge to pin her down and make her feel as if she were nothing but a senseless, hysterical woman. She is kept at a distance from the knowledge that only men can acquire which women cannot fathom.

The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is nameless, unwillingly confined to an attic nursery covered in yellow wallpaper by her husband. At first glance, she despises the wallpaper; she says, “I never saw a worse paper in my life” and carries on to describe how it makes her feel uneasy, “One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin”. Initially, the repellent and revolting colour made her feel uncomfortable, but later in the story, she grows fond of it, almost obsessed with it. The more time she spends staring at the wallpaper, her perception of it as a “horrid paper” changes to a reflection of herself trapped behind the wallpaper like a “woman stooping down and creeping about behind the pattern” like a prisoner. Just like the “faint figure” of the woman who wants to get out from behind the wallpaper, the narrator too wants to get out of the room she was put in by her husband, despite her hesitation. By the end of the story, we witness her peeling off the paper to release the figure that is trapped; in a way, she is setting herself free from the clutches of her husband and the manipulative nature of patriarchy. She says, “I’ve got out at last... I have pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!”. It is evident that the role played by “The Yellow Wallpaper” is of immense significance, which helped in rediscovering feminist literature once dominated by patriarchal ideologies. Susan S. Lanser, in her work *Feminist Criticism, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and the Politics of Color in America*, is confident when she says, “The canonization of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is an obvious sign of the degree to which contemporary feminism has transformed the study of literature”, leading to the importance of Gender Studies has increased in recent decades. There is a constant demand from students to incorporate Gender Studies into their curriculum.

The language used by Gilman’s narrator, to an extent, symbolises females in general. Men see women’s language and power of imagination as a threat, because “John says” it is not good for her to work and use her wild fancies. Amidst all that “John says”, the narrator has her own opinion about what she feels is best for her. Upon being diagnosed with “temporary nervous depression” by her husband and her brother, she refuses to agree with them; she states, “Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.” She is able to recognise her needs but is unable to express them to the men in her life because, in reality, they are not even trying to understand her but instead are busy creating opinions of their own about her.

Throughout the story, we witness her grow out of feeling guilty and obliged to assert her needs and wants. Though this patriarchal set-up caused her a mental breakdown and drove her to madness, in a way, this madness gave her sanity, a breakthrough in the form of a breakdown. She was able to walk from an insecure state of mind to a secure one. She carved herself out of the “pointless pattern” of the wallpaper, which represented a patriarchal society and its rules. However, unreliable the narrator is, she is able to project her thoughts and feelings that led her to madness, but along with madness, she also gained confidence. Just like how the wallpaper committed “every artistic sin” by being repulsive, she wants women who make patriarchy their daily life and common sense to commit such sins by rebelling against the male order. By tearing apart the wallpaper, she is separating all the subjugated women from the patriarchal chain of ideology and society. The narrator is now confident and free and believes that if one doesn't realise how patriarchal society is holding their true potential and restricting them from mental and physical freedom, it will drive them insane, eventually leading them to “commit suicide”. In the end, the

narrator's quest to unravel the meaning of the wallpaper as protection or restriction becomes clearer to her and the readers as well, leading to her insane but sane enlightenment.

Gilman, by using wallpaper as a metaphor for women's strange position in a strict patriarchal society, gives way to Women's discourse and Gender studies. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a one-of-a-kind story that has achieved a higher stance in feminist literature and taken the form of a classic, a perfect piece of literature that dives deep into the realities of women's lives in less than fifty pages and that's what makes it so revolutionary. This story provides modern readers with a new perspective and chooses a path that leads us forward and not backward. Stories like these contribute to Gender studies, which are necessary for the purposes of education and empowerment.

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