

The Yellow Wallpaper: A Feminist Critique of 19th Century Patriarchy

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a seminal work of feminist literature that critiques the patriarchal medical establishment's treatment of women's mental health in the 19th century. Through the protagonist's descent into madness and her subsequent liberation from the oppressive forces of her husband and the medical profession, Gilman exposes the detrimental effects of the confinement and infantilization of women. This essay will explore the themes of gender, power, and madness in "The Yellow Wallpaper," and analyze how Gilman uses the symbolism of the wallpaper to convey her critique of patriarchy.

The story is narrated by an unnamed woman who has been confined to a room in her husband's country estate as a treatment for her "temporary nervous depression." Her husband, a physician, prescribes the rest cure, a popular treatment for women's mental health issues at the time. The rest cure involves complete bed rest and isolation from stimulating activities, which only exacerbates the protagonist's mental state. As the days pass, she becomes fixated on the yellow wallpaper in the room, which she finds increasingly disturbing. She begins to see a woman trapped behind the pattern of the wallpaper, and becomes convinced that she must free her.

The yellow wallpaper serves as a powerful symbol of the protagonist's entrapment and oppression. The pattern of the wallpaper, with its "sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin," mirrors the constraints placed on women by the patriarchal society. The protagonist's fascination with the wallpaper reflects her growing awareness of her own subjugation and her desire for liberation. The act of tearing down the wallpaper at the end of the story represents her defiance against the forces that seek to confine and control her.

The protagonist's descent into madness can be seen as a result of her confinement and infantilization by her husband and the medical profession. The rest cure, which was prescribed to countless women during the 19th century, effectively stripped them of their agency and autonomy. The protagonist's inability to express her own thoughts and desires, and her husband's dismissal of her concerns, contribute to her deteriorating mental state. Gilman's portrayal of the protagonist's madness is a stark indictment of the medical establishment's ignorance and mistreatment of women's mental health issues.

The story also sheds light on the power dynamics within the protagonist's marriage. Her husband, John, is portrayed as a well-meaning but condescending figure who infantilizes and patronizes his wife. He dismisses her concerns and insists on her adherence to the rest cure, despite her protests. His control over her is further reinforced by his role as a physician, which gives him authority over her physical and mental well-being. The protagonist's eventual rebellion against her husband and the medical profession can be seen as a rejection of their oppressive power and a reclaiming of her agency.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is a powerful critique of the patriarchal society of the 19th century, and its themes remain relevant today. The story highlights the detrimental effects of the confinement and infantilization of women, and serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality. Through the protagonist's journey from confinement to liberation, Gilman challenges the traditional gender roles and power dynamics that oppressed women during her time. The symbolism of the yellow wallpaper serves as a potent metaphor for the protagonist's entrapment and eventual emancipation, and underscores the story's broader critique of patriarchy.

In conclusion, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a powerful feminist critique of the patriarchal medical establishment's treatment of women's mental health in the 19th century. Through the protagonist's descent into madness and her eventual rebellion against the forces that seek to confine and control her, Charlotte Perkins Gilman exposes the detrimental effects of the confinement and infantilization of women. The symbolism of the yellow wallpaper serves as a potent metaphor for the protagonist's entrapment and eventual emancipation, and underscores the story's broader critique of patriarchy. This timeless work continues to resonate with readers today, serving as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the importance of women's autonomy and agency.