
Keeping Women Sane

Reading “The Yellow Wallpaper” is like being drawn into the imaginary world of someone who is slowly leaving reality behind them. The short story is written as a kind of journal of the narrator as she becomes more and more detached from her family and her life. The reader sees only the narrator’s perspective, but her jumbled and paranoid thoughts are enough to make it clear that her viewpoint is far out of touch with the truth.

A main theme of Gilman’s work seems to be that the role traditionally available to females is not fulfilling enough to keep a relatively normal woman sane. As evidenced by the outlook of the central male character in the story, the narrator’s husband John, a female is a sort of delicate adornment for the home - not a living, breathing person with dreams, struggles, and needs. The more the narrator conforms to this belief, the more she loses her grip on reality.

From page one, Gilman’s narrator offers examples of her husband's belittling attitude. She writes, “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that.” While certainly any loving, happy marriage will be filled with laughter, this is not friendly camaraderie: this is the kind of condescending laughter that says, “You are only a woman.” John treats the narrator like a child, even directly addressing her as “little girl” on several occasions. When discussing her illness, rather than supporting his wife through her difficulties, John “assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with [her] but temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency.” John seems to view her as dimension-less, consisting only of a physical body. She writes, “John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him.” Her husband is confident that there is nothing medically wrong with her, and therefore ignores her deep emotional pain.

One of the most visible ways John treats the narrator as a emotionless possession, rather than as an equal, is by forbidding her to write. John would rather “put fireworks in [her] pillowcase” than allow her too much stimulation in her condition. However, it is clear that this rule does the narrator more harm than good. At this point, she still views herself as more than an object. She ignores John’s rule, and he inadvertently causes her to exhaust herself further because now must work twice as hard to be sure she keeps her pastime hidden. She writes, “It does exhaust me a good deal – having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition.”

This prescription against writing negatively affects the narrator in another important way. She interrupts a train of thoughts about the wallpaper with, “There comes John, and I must put this away – he hates to have me write a word.” In a way, John is responsible for the thoughts that lead her deeper and deeper into lunacy. Perhaps if she were only able to sit and peacefully

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write about the wallpaper without interruption and fear, she would be able to better comprehend her feelings and avoid her spiral into insanity.

In a very telling statement, the narrator writes, “I have a scheduled prescription for each hour in the day; [John] takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more.” It is important to notice that she does not write that John “takes care of everything for me” or that John “handles everything for me.” She says rather that “he takes all care from me.” The implication is that she is not freely offering something to him; he takes “all care” (control) completely out of his wife’s hands and schedules an activity for her for each hour of the day. While John likely feels he is doing this because he loves her – for her own good - he is still forcing her to conform to his worldview and think of herself as under him.

As the narrator’s illness worsens, John requires less and less of her: “Jennie sees to everything now.” Like the creeping woman in the wallpaper, the narrator is trying to escape from the world John has created for her. She is, essentially, bored to the point of having a complete breakdown. As she becomes what John wants – less a person and more an adornment – she drifts further and further into her delusions. However, in a way, her delusions are empowering, ultimately giving her the strength to stand up to John. She even refers to him as “young man,” returning his belittling address from earlier in the story.

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