
Literary Essay on the Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

In the 1890s, the prejudice against mental illness, especially in women, was reinforced by various physicians. They believed that if a woman was mentally ill, she was either insane or hysteric. They had little to no scientific basis to their theories of the women's lunacy, and often prescribed extended periods of isolation or sent women to asylums because they did not conform to the gender expectations.

In the short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper', Charlotte Perkins Gillman explores and criticizes this practice when she describes the narrator's life with postpartum depression, and how the doctor's prescription only worsened her condition. Gilman uses connotative diction, imagery, and symbolism in her story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' to show society the impact of the stigma against mental health and how the predominant patriarchal gender roles affected women in the 1890s. Gilman begins her short story by setting a distinct patriarchal tone, employing diction specific to provoking feelings of male power and authority over women. When the narrator is confronted with her husband's instruction of the rest cure for her ailment, she responds with 'But what is one to do?'. The sarcastic quality of her words, as well as the mocking tone indicates that she believes his advice to be unhelpful. However, she is limited in doing what she wants without the influence of a man. Women of the time were expected to be obedient, and the narrator is forced to listen to her husband.

Another way Gilman uses diction is when she shows the declining health of the narrator. For instance, the narrator portrays the smudge in the wallpaper as going "Round and round and round--round and round and round". The repetition of this word implies her mental descent into insanity. The word itself, "round," indicates that she's descending into a mental spiral, in which she can only think of one thing – the wallpaper. The repetition, in turn, insinuates that there is not escape, that it is infinite. The stigma against mental illnesses lead healthcare professionals of the time to impose many unhelpful treatments, and these often resulted in the deterioration of the patient's mental state rather than helping them recover. The narrator's descent into madness is partly due to her lack of a "creative outlet", as her husband forces her to give up all physical and mental activity. This in turn leads to her expressing herself in the only way she can, which just happens to be through the wallpaper. Her obsession with it is focused on by Gilman throughout the novel, who uses the wallpaper as a symbol of the narrator's mental state and her descent into madness. When the narrator first sees the wallpaper, she describes it as 'repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow,' which is characteristic of how she sees her domestic life.

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This wallpaper represents her oppressive society, with its “sprawling flamboyant patterns” and “infuriating” color. How in it there is an abundance of contradictory and complicated rules to live by that seem illogical. The fact that her room includes a 'great heavy bed ' and that 'the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out' is strangely reminiscent of a room in an asylum and foreshadows her degrading health, as well as serves as symbolism for the metaphorical chains and cells that keep women tied to men, and keep them trapped. The marred floor is seen as a result of women trying to escape the room, and she is disgusted at its color, which is 'repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow”. Initially, the narrator is appalled by the color and pattern of the wallpaper, and Gilman uses diction that conveys that feeling of revulsion. The disturbing ending to this story confirms to the narrator what we as readers already knew – the woman “creeping” all around was the narrator herself. It also enforces the story’s message that doctors’ oppressive treatment towards women inhibits their recovery.

In that last line, the narrator states that she had to “had to creep over her husband every time” she went around the room. The use of the word “creep” is reminiscent of how the narrator described the woman in the wallpaper, and now that she has finished “freeing” her, the narrator has a moment of self-identification between herself and the women in the wallpaper. Gilman wrote this story to criticize the practice of the rest cure, which usually hurts the women it’s supposed to help.

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