
“Who Run the World? Girls.” — An Exploration on Female Liberation, Selfhood and the Entrapment of Marriage through Symbolism, Imagery, and Irony in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “The Story of an Hour”

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” explore ideas of female identity and selfhood, and more importantly, female liberation. These authors present their female characters as self-assertive in a positive manner; however, the characters also acknowledge that the journey for ideal feminine freedom, liberation, and selfhood in the oppressive environment of a patriarchal society is extremely difficult due to societal scrutiny, self-scrutiny, the entrapment of the convention of marriage, and other social establishments. Gilman and Chopin utilize specific literary tools, prominently symbolism, irony, and rich imagery to reveal the inner themes of female liberation, patriarchal oppression, and the female identity.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator and her husband retreat to a vacation home to treat her “nervous depression” and “slight hysterical tendencies” (Gilman 1184). Gilman’s story immediately begins with the narrator’s point of view that men, specifically men’s ideas, are more valuable than women’s ideas. Immediately revealing the oppression that the narrator’s husband exerts on her, she states, “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 depression — a slight hysterical tendency— what is one to do? My brother is also of high standing, and he says the same thing. Personally I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?” (Gilman 1184)

This immediately reveals to the audience that the narrator is oppressed by men; her husband’s and brother’s professional opinions are enough to silence her, and make her submissive to their rules. In this time period, men were superior; their ideas, beliefs, morals and regulations ruled everything.

Paula A. Treichler, a Women’s Studies scholar and professor at the University of Illinois, touches on this in her article about “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

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It is the male voice that privileges the rational, the practical, and the observable. It is the voice of male logic and male judgement which dismisses the superstition and refuses to see the narrator's condition as serious. It imposes controls on the female narrator and dictates how she is to perceive and talk about the world. It is enforced by the "ancestral halls" themselves: the rules are followed even when the physician-husband is absent. (Treichler 66)

Gilman expresses this patriarchal oppression, and lack of control through symbolism throughout the story.

The first major symbol Gilman utilizes is the yellow wallpaper itself; Gilman repeatedly emphasizes the wallpaper and how the narrator responds to it. The first time the narrator mentions the yellow wallpaper, she states, "The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight... I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long" (Gilman 1185). The color imagery within the passage mirrors the narrator's mental state, sickly and ill. Little knowing that she would be imprisoned in the room for long periods of time, the narrator slowly begins to see an "object behind" the wallpaper. She states, "I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind that dim sub-pattern but now I am quite sure it is a woman. By daylight she is subdued, quiet. It is the fancy pattern that keeps her so still. It keeps me quiet by the hour" (Gilman 1191). The narrator also states that it seems as if the woman behind the wallpaper is entrapped by "bars," revealing that the woman is in a prison of sorts; this woman behind the wallpaper symbolizes the narrator.

Gilman employs the symbol of the wallpaper to show the lack of freedom the narrator has. Just as the wallpaper—with its imprisoning pattern—entraps her, so does her physician-husband; he entraps her body and mind, restricting things such as writing, and even going outside of the home. Gilman also uses the bed as a major symbol within "The Yellow Wallpaper" to express the narrator's entrapment. The narrator says, "I lie here in this great immovable bed— it is nailed down, I believe" (Gilman 1189). This bed, unmoving, heavy, and destroyed, represents the narrator's lack of freedom. The bed is unmoving, just as the narrator is; she attempts to move the bed, and the bed is steadfast— mirroring the activity of the narrator. This "rest cure" prescribed by her husband, brother, and general physician render her useless; she cannot work, she cannot paint or write, and she cannot move from the house, this causes a major deterioration of her mental state.

In addition to the bed, Gilman uses a window to symbolize the narrator's liberation, or lack

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thereof. Within the story, the narrator constantly mentions windows, beginning in a positive light and slowly morphing into a negative light. She mentions the windows provide “air and sunshine galore,” and she enjoys looking at the garden and the wharf (Gilman 1188). The window initially is a happy, joyful thing within the room; it allows access to a small chunk of freedom. However, as the story progresses, she then begins to hate the barred windows because they allow her to see things she cannot have. She states, “I can see her [the woman behind the wallpaper] out of every one of my windows! ... I often wonder if I could see her out of all the windows at once” (Gilman 1193). In the end, the window symbolizes the narrator’s inaccessible freedom. She says, “I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be an admirable exercise” (Gilman 1194). The window is her access to freedom; however, being barred and unescapable, it also symbolizes her oppression, her lack of free will, and her unreceived liberation.

The controversial topics within “The Yellow Wallpaper” caused a literary uproar, so Gilman responded with a letter entitled “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”. Within the letter, Gilman explains that the short story is semi-autobiographical; Gilman herself was diagnosed with “nervous breakdowns tending to melancholia and beyond” (Gilman 1203). A famous physician prescribed her to stay on the “rest cure” and sent her home with the advice to “live as domestic a life as far as possible,” to “have but two hours of intellectual life a day,” and “never to touch a pen, brush, or pencil again” as long as she lived (Gilman 1204). Gilman states, “I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near to the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over;” Gilman eventually went to work shortly after her mental ruin, ultimately recovering some measure of power.

At the end of the letter Gilman states, “[“The Yellow Wallpaper”] was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked” (Gilman 1204). Within “The Yellow Wallpaper” Gilman gives light to mental illnesses and the importance of free will, and the female identity. Using the symbolism and imagery of the wallpaper, the nailed-down bed, and the barred windows, Gilman creates a strong theme within the story, and reveals the importance of female freedom and identity. Within the same societal message as “The Yellow Wallpaper,” “The Story of an Hour” revolves around themes of female liberation, identity, and the entrapment of marriage.

Just as Gilman does, Chopin utilizes symbols throughout the piece to explore these themes; however, she utilizes much more irony and imagery to express the themes than Gilman does with “The Yellow Wallpaper”. Emily Toth, a noted Chopin scholar, states that “among Chopin scholars there have always been gender gaps. Chopin’s male critics of the early 1970’s in particular were prone to claim that Chopin’s works are “universal” rather than feminist, about the human condition rather than the women. Virtually all of these claims are wrong” (Toth 16).

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Critical analyses of Kate Chopin's works readily evoke a note of tension between women and the society surrounding them. This connection between women and society, more specifically women and their husbands, is apparent within Chopin's "The Story of an Hour". The story begins with a third person omniscient narrator stating that Mrs. Mallard suffers from "heart trouble" and great care was needed to break the news of her husband's death. Mrs. Mallard immediately weeps, as one expects, and then quietly goes to her den to be alone. As she is admiring the spring day, she suddenly begins to exclaim "free, free, free!" (Chopin 67). Mrs. Mallard revels in this new-found freedom, little knowing that she would soon be startled dead by her husband walking through the front door.

The first major symbol within the story is the heart troubles Mrs. Mallard experiences, specifically referring to the heart itself. The heart is, societally speaking, traditionally a symbol of an individual's emotional core. Her physical heart troubles in life symbolize her emotional turmoil in her marriage. It is likely that Mrs. Mallard's heart troubles also represent the peril of the entrapment of marriage in the 19th century — completely based around inequalities and the imbalance of power. Mrs. Mallard herself is a symbol within the story, as well. She is an exhausted woman, young and pretty, but with "lines that bespoke repression" (Chopin 67). She represents women within this time frame— trapped in marriage and unable to find happiness within it, constantly battling the thoughts of society vs. selfhood, and what ultimately makes a person happy.

Upon returning to her den to collect her thoughts, Mrs. Mallard sinks into an armchair. The narrator states, "There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy arm-chair. Into this she sank, pressed down by physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul" (Chopin 66). After sinking into this arm-chair, her revelation begins— she can be free. This arm-chair symbolizes rest from the societal expectations of marriage, she can find solace in this arm-chair just as she will find in life.

Chopin also utilizes rich imagery to express Mrs. Mallard's need for independence from her husband. While in her study, Mrs. Mallard sinks into an arm-chair and sits with her thoughts of her husband's recent death. She weeps for a short period of time; however, contrary to societal expectations, she begins to enjoy this time in her study. The narrator says:

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves. (Chopin 66)

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Chopin is making a direct correlation between the new spring day and her new quivering, awakening life. The rich imagery such as “aquiver with the new Spring life,” “delicious breath of rain,” and “sparrows twittering,” expresses the new found freedom Mrs. Mallard will have— just as a Spring day is often a fresh start, or the start of something new, Mrs. Mallard’s life reflects this Spring day. Chopin's use of imagery is also reflected in the description of the “patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing window” (Chopin 66). These are images of happiness; the blue patches of sky reveal her new, happy life peaking through the oppression of her marriage.

Chopin’s use of irony in “The Story of an Hour” is weaved throughout the entire story, but is more present at the end of the piece. By then:

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years: she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have the right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination. (Chopin 67)

Mrs. Mallard, near the end of the story, is undoubtedly free. She is chanting of freedom, she is quivering with freedom, she has finally been released from the chains of marriage— the constant struggle between loving a spouse or being complacent with a spouse. Mrs. Mallard “suddenly recognized her self-assertion as the strongest impulse of her being,” (Chopin 67). As Josephine kneels at the door, she hears Mrs. Mallard crying, little knowing it is not because she is weeping for her husband, but because she is enthralled with new-found liberation. This scene reiterates the social expectation that women are weak, over-excited, “nervous,” or overall a hysterical mess. On the contrary, Louisa is chanting “Free! Body and soul free!” (Chopin 68).

Toth states of Chopin, “Like many writers, Chopin used her stories to ask and resolve questions— in her case, about marriage, motherhood, independence, passion, life, and death. Where she seems to make choices, she favors solitude, nearly always in a positive context” (Toth 24). In lieu with Toth, Chopin makes it clear that Mrs. Mallard is absolutely reveling in her new-found solitude; there is nothing but hope and joy of her new life ahead of her. Josephine

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eventually coaxes Louisa out of her study and, when walking she's down the stairs, Brently Mallard appears; Mrs. Louisa Mallard dies instantly. The narrator states "When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease— of joy that kills" (Chopin 68). This irony in this statement is clear to the audience: Mrs. Mallard did not die from happiness or joy of seeing her husband alive, but from shock of her new-found liberation immediately ripped from her grasp.

Gilman and Chopin's stories explore ideas of female oppression that are still relevant in today's society. These authors utilize literary devices such as imagery, irony and symbolism to express critiques on the convention of marriage, and the negative effects that this ritual can have on women. Chopin and Gilman illustrate ways in which marriage and female oppression can lead to insanity; women need to work, to create, to live and breathe to be successful and healthy. The critique on marriage is obvious to the audience through the authors' diction and syntax within the short stories, and flourishes with the rich imagery, strong symbols, and situational irony.

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