

Kathy Tse
AP Eng Lit P7
Nov 7th

The Yellow Wallpaper

Published in 1892, the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman gives an insight to readers of a woman battling nervous exhaustion after depression from giving birth. Through the portrayal of John’s control over the narrator’s well-being, Gilman criticizes how men worsened the treatment of women’s mental problems during that time. She does this through the use of first-person point of view to create sympathy for the main character, introduces the symbol of the yellow wallpaper to portray the protagonist’s trapped feelings and by creating a condescending doctor and husband.

With the story written from a first-person perspective, Gilman clearly establishes the narrator’s imprisoned feelings. In doing so, she invites the readers to have a better understanding of the protagonist’s point of view. As someone who is no longer allowed to pursue her love of writing and to engage in substantial conversations, her feelings about being trapped is expressed through interior monologue and commentary of her daily life. For example, in the very beginning, she confesses to the reader, “John is a physician, and *perhaps* (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is a dead paper and relief to my mind) - perhaps this is a reason I’d not get well faster.” (pg. 1) From the use of parentheses, Gilman creates an intimacy with the readers as it implies that the narrator is sharing the information she would not dare say to anyone. Furthermore, through the use of the pronoun “I” through the whole story, readers are able to have a better and more immediate understanding of the protagonist’s inner thoughts. For example, when the protagonist says “I wish I could get well faster” (pg. 3) the readers would receive a

Kathy Tse
AP Eng Lit P7
Nov 7th

much more powerful and direct expression while reading than if Gilman had expressed this statement in the third person. In addition, Gilman doesn't give the narrator a name; while the other two characters, John and his sister (Jennie) both have a name. This shows that the narrator isn't even significant enough to be identified to have her own name, but at the same time allows her to represent all the women in that era undergoing a similar experience.

Another technique that Gilman uses to criticize the treatment of the narrator is through the symbol of the yellow wallpaper. The wallpaper symbolizes the narrator's marriage and her struggles as a woman in a male-dominated society as it is something that surrounds and traps her. At the start of the story, she establishes that she sees the colour of her wallpaper in her room as a "dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulfur tint in others." The adjectives she used to describe the wallpaper are negative and unhealthy which directly correlates to her feelings of how she is being treated. The phrase includes words such as "orange" and "sulfur" which activates the colours in the readers' minds. This is further complemented by the sense of smell or olfactory imagery which is triggered by the word sulfur which creates a "repellant" and "revolting" sensation. Furthermore, Gilman parallels the narrator's experience with the wallpaper as the protagonist becomes increasingly obsessed and confused. She mentally traces the wallpaper pattern "by the hour" which suggests the frequency of her obsession. And she will continue to do so "for the thousandth time... follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion." as the narrator attempts to make sense of her own imprisonment, the wallpaper transcends being a physical object and to become a metaphor for a society which entraps her. As the story progresses, the protagonist starts to believe that there is a woman trapped inside the

Kathy Tse
AP Eng Lit P7
Nov 7th

wallpaper: “The front pattern *does* move - and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!” (pg 8)

Metaphorically speaking, the woman shaking the wallpaper symbolizes the narrator’s own attempts to escape her own imprisonment. Furthermore, Gilman suggests that there were many women of this era who have experienced the same plight as the protagonist as she suggests that there may possibly be “a great many women” trapped inside the wallpaper” (pg. 8) At the end of the story, we can see the protagonist channeling her energy by destroying the wallpaper and claiming that “I got out at last” (pg 10) claiming herself to be free. From this, we can see that the wallpaper is a clear symbol of a society that is entrapping her.

Finally, through the character of John, Gilman criticizes the problem of male superiority. As a doctor and a husband, he has a major role in controlling the narrator’s life and her wellbeing. John asserts his position in a way that lacks a deep understanding and treats her in a condescending manner. His character’s personality is a representation of how most male experts were dismissive of the female experiences back then. For example, he would proclaim his status by emphasizing his professional credibility: “...but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better. I feel really much easier about you.” (pg 6) When John says “I am a doctor” this declarative statement further reinforces his authority which entitles him to dismiss the narrators’ experiences. Additionally, he uses tones of endearment such as “dear” or “darling”, “bless her little heart” and “a blessed little goose”. While in some contexts, these endearments may sound heartwarming and sweet, but in this case, because he doesn’t understand the narrator these phrases end up sounding condescending. Additionally, by repeatedly calling her “little” and

Kathy Tse
AP Eng Lit P7
Nov 7th

associating her with the animal imagery of a “goose”, it gives the readers an impression that he is, in fact, looking down at her.

Through the use of first-person, the yellow wallpaper symbolism and the character of a condescending doctor and husband, Gilman criticizes how men exacerbated the mental illness of women through a lack of compassion in their treatment. In addition, this short story was partially autobiographical by nature as Gilman herself had experienced a similar experience inspiring her piece of the “The Yellow Wallpaper”. During the 1800s, the time period when the story was written, Gilman had gone through a series of unusual treatments for her depression and suffered through marriage issues, strongly impacting her wellbeing. Therefore, “The Yellow Wallpaper” deeply connects to Gilman the most and gives readers an insight into how men and women were depicted back then.

WORK CITED

Charlotte Perkins, Gilman. “The Yellow Wallpaper” 1892 1-10. [PDF Document].

Telegraph: The Pattern of Despair

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/4125453/Charlotte-Perkins-Gilman-the-pattern-of-despair.html>

Kathy Tse
AP Eng Lit P7
Nov 7th