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An Exploration of Distorted Reality Through Dialogue

In the haunting short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Charlotte Perkins Gilman explores the journey of a woman as she descends into madness after not receiving proper psychiatric care for her undiagnosed mental illness. Locked in a house with very few people, including her husband, she writes about her experience as her illness progresses and her view of what is real and what is not becomes wry. This theme is best depicted in the author’s use of dialogue, both internal (in the form of the main character’s first person narration) and external (in the form of speech exchanged between characters). She uses this as a facet to touch on other literary devices such as imagery and sentence structure.

Gilman uses the woman’s internal commentary on her surroundings to illustrate the gradual distortion of her reality. This is perhaps most lucidly seen in the colourful imagery of her descriptions of the wallpaper before her, at the beginning of the story, and at its conclusion. Her first remarks about the wall, though from a place of distaste, are relatively orderly. She describes the colour as “repellant, almost revolting” and the “flamboyant patterns” as “committing every artistic sin” (Gilman 648–649). The only indication of a description that is more foreshadowing of her descent into madness that is yet to come is when she mentions that the “lame uncertain curves” seem to “suddenly commut suicide— plung[ing] off at outrageous angles, destroy[ing] themselves in unheard of contradictions” (Gilman 648). Though this description is indeed more

sinister, the diction in her dialogue remains somewhat proper and perceptive. However, as the story develops, her internal dialogue's descriptions become more and more obscure, and even alarming. She reports to herself in the lead up to the climax that she "can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (Gilman 650). This is the critical point when her internal dialogue ventures outside the realm of the ordinary and instead begins to illustrate the way her mental illness is distorting her perception of the real world. By the climax, she reportedly sees in the wallpaper "strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths [that] just shriek with derision" (Gilman 655). Perhaps more frighteningly, the woman in the wallpaper seems to come alive, "creep[ing] faster than [the main character] can turn." This makes light of just how twisted her perception of actuality has become. These internal observations are a stark contrast from the comparatively demure descriptions given earlier on in the story. By utilising first person's guarantee of internal dialogue, Gilman develops the theme of a distorted reality by describing the progression of imagery the main character sees— from mundane to mad.

Gilman's inclusion of external dialogue in addition to internal broadens the theme of misplaced perception from beyond just the protagonist. The author utilises external dialogue to display her husband John's own distorted perception of reality in the way that he views wife's illness and how he treats her on the basis of it. He begins by describing her mental illness as a "false and foolish fancy", thus dismissing what his wife is enduring (Gilman 652). John continues to invalidate not only her mental illness, but her as an adult with autonomy, treating her as a child that he must care for instead. He refers to her as "little girl", continuing to patronise her by saying "bless her little heart" when she is informing him of the worsening of her

mental illness (Gilman 652). John's perception is that his wife's suffering is nothing more than a "fancy", and that she is not a capable adult and is rather more childlike. What he says is clear continuation of the theme of a distorted reality— in the way that he can't see or understand his wife or her illness for what they truly are. Gilman made the choice to express the theme through not only the main character but the dialogue of her husband as well to express how an incorrect impression or an askew view is not just confined to those who are struggling with an illness. John's judgement of her situation is perhaps more destructive than her own, as it is because of John's belittling that she does not get access to the help she needs. This is especially true considering John himself is a physician. Through the use of John's external dialogue, Gilman emphasises the theme of a masked actuality.

Finally, Gilman uses sentence structure in a combination of both internal and external dialogue to vividly illustrate the strongholds of her madness as the idea of what is real and what is not blurs. Her internal dialogue at the beginning of the text remains very much calm in tone, with very little use of explosive phrases indicated by exclamation marks. When observing the wallpaper, she notes to herself that the patterns "looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes— a kind of 'debased Romanesque' with delirium tremens — go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity" (Gilman 651). These observations seem to appear from a placid place, one in which the main character still has a grip on her sanity and sense of reality. The sentence is relatively long and elaborate and is coupled with higher level punctuation such as em dashes. This demonstrates a level of maturity and poise. However, as her mental illness worsens, there is an increase in the use of frenzied phrases. For example, midway through the story, she says that her "appetite may be better in the evening when [he is] here, but

it is worse in the morning when [he] is away!” while addressing John (Gilman 652). Gilman’s choice of an exclamation mark, though on the surface level is meaningless, foreshadows the frequent use of it the more she cuts herself off from the real world. “I think that woman [in the wallpaper] gets out in the daytime! I can see her out of everyone of my windows!” the woman screams by the climax of the story (Gilman 654). Although these sentences may justify the use of exclamation marks, there are a plethora of others that usually would not. For example, she announces how “those children did tear about [t]here! The bedstead is fairly gnawed!” Finally, as she is at the height of her apparent insanity, she cries out to herself that “there's John at the door! It is no use, young man, you can't open it! How he does call and pound! Now he's crying for an axe. It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!” This idea is even expanded to John, where he exclaims “for God’s sake, what are you doing!” These short, charged sentences reflect her scattered thoughts (Gilman 655–656). They imply that her mind drifts fleetingly from subject to subject and she lives her every moment in a frantic haze. As a result, she does not see things for what they are— often regular and routinely items or events that before her illness she would speak about in a much more composed manner, if at all. Gilman’s use of sentence structure in the story’s dialogue allows for her to develop the theme of obscured reality by comparing longer, more complex sentences at the beginning to shorter, more simple sentences at the end.

In conclusion, through the use of dialogue, Gilman constructs and develops a theme of distorted reality. This idea is visible in both the main character’s first person internal dialogue, as well as the external dialogue exchanged between her and her husband.

Works Cited

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