Yellow Wall Paper And Women Role Essay, Research Paper

In the nineteenth century, women in literature were often portrayed as

submissive to men. Literature of the period often characterized women as

oppressed by society, as well as by the male influences in their lives. The

Yellow Wallpaper presents the tragic story of a woman’s descent into depression

and madness. Gilman once wrote "Women’s subordination will only end when

women lead the struggle for their own autonomy, thereby freeing man as well as

themselves, because man suffers from the distortions that come from dominance,

just as women are scarred by the subjugation imposed upon them" (Lane 5).

The Yellow Wallpaper brilliantly illustrates this philosophy. The narrator’s

declining mental health is reflected through the characteristics of the house

she is trapped in and her husband, while trying to protect her, is actually

destroying her. The narrator of the story goes with her doctor/husband to stay

in a colonial mansion for the summer. The house is supposed to be a place where

she can recover from severe postpartum depression. She loves her baby, but knows

she is not able to take care of him. "It is fortunate Mary is so good with

the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so

nervous" (Gilman 642). The symbolism utilized by Gilman is somewhat askew

from the conventional. A house usually symbolizes security. In this story the

opposite is true. The protagonist, whose name we never learn, feels trapped by

the walls of the house, just as she is trapped by her mental illness. The

windows of her room, which normally would symbolize a sense of freedom, are

barred, holding her in. (Biedermann 179, 382). From the outset the reader is

given a sense of the domineering tendencies of the narrator’s husband, John. The

narrator tells us: "John is a physician, and perhaps ? (I would not say

it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my

mind) ? perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster" (Gilman

640). It is painfully obvious that she feels trapped and unable to express her

fears to her husband. "You see, he does not believe I am sick. And what can

one do? 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

nervous depression ? a slight hysterical tendency ? what is one to do?"

Her husband is not the only male figure who dominates and oppresses her. Her

brother, also a doctor, "says the same thing" (Gilman 640-641).

Because the story is written in diary format, we feel especially close to this

woman. We are in touch with her innermost thoughts. The dominance of her

husband, and her reaction to it, is reflected throughout the story. The narrator

is continually submissive, bowing to her husband’s wishes, even though she is

unhappy and depressed. Her husband has adopted the idea that she must have

complete rest if she is to recover. This is a direct parallel to Gilman’s life,

wherein during her illness she was treated by a doctor who introduced her to the

"rest cure." She was instructed to live a domestic life, only engage

in intellectual activities two hours a day, and "never to touch pen, brush,

or pencil again" as long as she lived (Gilman 640). In this story, the

narrator’s husband, John, does not want her to work. "So I . . . am

absolutely forbidden to ?work’ until I am well again"(Gilman 641). John

does not even want her to write. "There comes John, and I must put this

away ? he hates to have me write a word"(Gilman 642). It is also a direct

allusion to Gilman’s personal experience that the narrator is experiencing

severe postpartum depression. Gilman suffered from the same malady after the

birth of her own daughter (Gilman 639). It is interesting that the room her

husband chooses for them, the room the narrator hates, is the nursery. The

narrator describes the nursery as having barred windows and being

"atrocious" (Gilman 641-642). The narrator’s response to the room is a

further example of her submissive behavior. "I don’t like our room a bit. I

wanted one downstairs that opened onto the piazza and had roses all over the

window, and such pretty old fashioned chintz hangings! But John would not hear

of it" (Gilman 641). Although she is practically a prisoner in the room,

she is given no voice in choosing or decorating it. She attempts to justify

John’s treatment of her. "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me

stir without special direction. I have a schedule . . . I feel basely ungrateful

not to value it more"(Gilman 641). Even though she knows that writing and

socializing would help her recover faster, she still allows the male figures in

her life to dominate and control her treatment. "I sometimes fancy that in

my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus ? but

John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I

confess it always makes me feel bad"(Gilman 641). I believe that the

narrator’s husband loves her very much. He is tender with her and speaks to her

in a loving, sometimes child-like manner. However, he obviously does not want

anyone knowing the extent of his wife’s mental illness, referring to it as a

"temporary nervous depression ? a slight hysterical tendency"

(Gilman 641). I believe this is also a reflection of the way women and mental

illness were perceived in the nineteenth century. Women were supposed to let

their men take care of them, and mental illness was often swept under the

carpet. The husband, John, did not want the stigma of mental illness tied to his

family. "He says that no one but myself can help me out of it, that I must

use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me.

(Gilman 645). In reading this story I had to constantly remind myself that

society today treats mental illness differently, and that this was written from

a nineteenth century perspective. The narrator continues to repress her own

needs and allow her husband to dominate. Seeing the wallpaper in the bedroom,

she writes: "I never saw a worse paper in my life one of those sprawling,

flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (Gilman 642). It is also

interesting to note that the bed in the room is a "great immovable

bed" which is "nailed down" (Gilman 644). I wondered if this was

a metaphoric reference to her husband’s attitude about her illness. As she looks

out the window, she can see the garden. She describes flowers, paths, and

arbors. All that she sees outside is beautiful. Just as Gilman uses the room the

woman hates as a metaphor for her mental illness, she uses the beautiful garden

as a metaphor for the mental health the woman craves. The narrator’s husband

also stifles these thoughts. "I always fancy I see people waling in these

numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in

the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a

nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and

that I ought to use my good will and good sense to check the tendency. So I

try" (Gilman 642). The more time she spends in the room, the more obsessed

with the wallpaper she becomes. In her mind, the wallpaper becomes more than

just wallpaper. It takes on human characteristics. "This paper looks to me

as if it knew what a vicious influence it had" (Gilman 643)! When the story

begins the narrator refers to the house as haunted. This theme is again brought

to the forefront when she begins describing the wallpaper. "There is a

recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes

stare at you upside down" (Gilman 643). Gilman’s sensory descriptions are

ingenious. The descriptions are intense and detailed. They make the reader a

part of the story, increase suspense, and help the "reader’s perception of

the particular kind of insanity that afflicts the narrator" (Cunningham

par. 1). In reading the story we are provided not only detailed visual images,

but vivid olfactory descriptions as well. We are told: But there is something

else about that paper ? the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the

room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog

and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here. It creeps

all over the house. I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the

parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs. It gets into my

hair. Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it-there

is that smell! Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours trying to analyze

it, to find what it smelled like. It is not bad — at first, very gentle, but

quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met. In this damp weather it is

awful. I wake up in the night and find it hanging over me. It used to disturb me

at first. I thought seriously of burning the house?to reach the smell. But now

I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the color of

the paper! A yellow smell. (Cunningham par. 2; Gilman 647) The combination of

Gilman’s words, and the short choppy sentence structure, combine to allow the

reader grasp the depths of the narrator’s insanity. In addition to the sense of

smell, the reader is also captured by the sense of touch. The narrator tells us:

"The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted

to get out. I got up softly and went to feel and see if the paper did move and

when I came back John was awake (Gilman 645). She further tells us: "The

front pattern does move ? and no wonder! The woman behind shakes

it"(Gilman 647)! It is through these compelling descriptions, utilizing the

reader’s senses, that Gilman is "pulling the reader into the narrator’s

world . . . these descriptions nearly perfectly encapsulate what we might all

imagine it is like to be insane"(Cunningham par. 5). It is as if the

haunting images of the wallpaper mirror the haunting feelings inside the

narrator’s mind. The heroine, unable to openly express her feelings to anyone,

begins to see herself through the wallpaper. She imagines a woman trapped behind

the wallpaper, just as she is trapped in the room and in her mind. The

wallpaper, and the barrier it poses to the woman behind it, as imagined by the

narrator, mirror the narrator’s own thoughts about being confined in a room with

barred windows. "At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight,

lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern,

I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be" (Gilman 646). The

heroine is also behind bars. "I am getting angry . . . but the bars are too

strong . . . "(Gilman 649). The behavior of the woman behind the wallpaper

mirrors the narrator’s behavior. "By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I

fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me

quiet by the hour" (Gilman 646). The narrator is also subdued in the

daytime. "I don’t sleep much at night, for it is so interesting to watch

developments; but I sleep a good deal during the daytime" (Gilman 647).

Another parallel between the actions of the narrator and the woman behind the

wallpaper is reflected when the narrator looks out the window and sees "her

in that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape

arbors, creeping around the garden. I see her on that long road under the trees,

creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines.

I don’t blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by

daylight: (Gilman 648)! The narrator is expressing her own humiliation in having

to sneak around. "I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can’t

do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once"(Gilman

648). Similarly, while her husband is away, the narrator sometimes will

"walk a little in the garden or down that lovely lane, sit on the porch

under the roses, . . . "(Gilman 644). As the narrator realizes the meaning

of the wallpaper, her life begins to change. "Life is much more exciting

now than it used to be. You see, I have something more to expect, to look

forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was"

(Gilman 647). It is apparent that she is still feeling imprisoned by her

husband. "I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it

comes night, and that is hard" (Gilman 649)! However, she has decided to

rebel and break free. "?I’ve got out at last,’ said I, ?in spite of you

and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper so you can’t put me back’"

(Gilman 650)! Because the story is somewhat autobiographical, Gilman is able to

vividly portray a woman’s descent into madness. She "wrote the story to

effect change in the treatment of depressive women" (Gilman 640). She once

stated that "It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people

from being driven crazy" (Anderson par. 10). The story brilliantly depicts

a woman whose opinions and feelings have never been acknowledged or recognized

as valid in the real world. The room, and particularly the wallpaper she hates

so much, become the center of her world ? her voice. She realizes the woman in

the wallpaper is herself, and is finally able to break free. Perhaps it can all

be summed up in this exchange: "John is so pleased to see me improve! He

laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of

my wallpaper. I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it

was because of the wallpaper . . . "(Gilman 647).

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