

Danielle Jacovino

Professor Pallis

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Feminism, and “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Knowledge about the life of a writer is often important when attempting to discover a deeper meaning in their work. This, however, is not always true as any given author may or may not use details that are relevant to their own lives. Each writer and the pieces they produce will differ in inspiration from the last. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a work that is arguably based entirely off of Perkins’ experiences, and goes even further to be the collective experience of the women in society when it was written. Written in 1892, this story became important in the heated movements of women’s rights and suffrage that were occurring at the time. As relevant as the piece was amongst the issues of the time, the issues of the time also greatly influenced the creation of the piece. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is representative of how personal and historical events may influence the contents of a writer’s work.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is known for having occupied many different roles throughout the span of her life. She is most well known now for her short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” but her role in the issues that this story presents have also marked her a notable character in history. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the protagonist is a young woman who is married and has just recently given birth. As a result of having the baby, the protagonist (who remains nameless throughout the entire story-- a way of Gilman showing how the woman is dehumanized) falls into a “temporary nervous depression- a slight hysterical tendency...” (Perkins Gilman 172) and

is subjected to extreme isolation, and a lack of any mental or physical exercise as a form of treatment. Her husband, a doctor, decides that it will be best for her health to temporarily spend a few months in a rented home where she can be both secluded and watched. After the protagonist shares general information about the treatment plan she is on, she makes a point of noting that she does not agree with the methods. The protagonist states, “Personally, I disagree with [the doctors] ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good” (Gilman 172). This statement is said by the protagonist of the work, but the voice and idea behind the statement comes directly from Gilman herself.

Much like the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman expressed a strong dislike for the isolating treatment that was called the “Rest Cure” in the late 1800’s. At the age of 24, Gilman herself was subjected to the Rest Cure as she fell into a depression after giving birth to her daughter. She eventually recovered under this treatment, but was sent home “to live as domestically as possible, keep her child with her at all times, lie down for one hour after each meal, and to never touch a pen, brush, or pencil for the rest of her life” (Gagnon 3). Naturally, she fell back into a depression once returning home, and her life took on a new set of challenges and triumphs. Gilman’s personal experiences with both hysteria, which would now be identified as *postpartum depression*, and the Rest Cure is written directly into “The Yellow Wallpaper” through the tale of the protagonist.

Comparing the depressive symptoms and Rest Cure experience of Gilman’s to the experience of her fictional protagonist in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” there are more similarities than there are distinctions. Both of the women’s bouts of depression began with the birth of their child, their method of treatment is exactly the same, and their reaction to the treatment is also

mutually disappointing and ineffective in end result. In this way, Gilman's own experiences are influencing and inspiring the contents of her story.

Another piece of "The Yellow Wallpaper" that is being influenced by real aspects of the author's life is the presence of a restricting husband. There are moments in the story where the protagonist tries to "assert herself against the power of John's voice," John being her husband, with words and techniques that many critics believe represent "'women's language' or the 'language of the powerless'" (Lanser 419). These beliefs arise because the protagonist has to use "ironic understatements, asides, hedges, and negations..." (Lanser 419), rather than direct language, to speak her truth against her husband. When the narrator states, "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--- he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away," (Gilman 182) she is observably refraining from the use of direct language. The narrator disagrees with John's logic, but fears that disagreeing with him will cause him to take away what she believes is making her more sane. She never uses her words to disagree, but she protects her own belief and discretely refuses his by laughing and letting him believe that he is correct in his assumption.

Perkins Gilman herself was a married woman as she underwent her struggles with hysteria and the Rest Cure. Although her husband was not a doctor, nor was he influential in her treatment plan, Perkins Gilman came to believe "that her condition was deteriorating and that marriage and motherhood were the sources for her affliction" (Berman 39). As a result, she separated from her husband and sent their daughter to live with him. Gilman's experience at that point in her life is closely related to that of the protagonists in "The Yellow Wallpaper" because

both are being weighed down by domestic oppressions. Gilman had felt unsuited for marriage, motherhood, and the domestic roles associated with being a woman and so her character in “The Yellow Wallpaper” expresses these same feelings. For example, in the story, the protagonist makes it known that she feels uncomfortable with her role in the family by stating, “I mean to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!” (Gilman 174), and, “It is fortunate that Mary is so good with the baby...And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous” (Gilman 174). The protagonist recognizes that she does not feel fit and able to assume her roles. In the case with her child, she feels that she cannot do anything at all.

As much as personal experiences can influence the contents of a writer’s piece, these personal experiences are only a microscopic portion of macroscopic representations of the external world. An even greater influence that may be placed on a writer’s piece is the social or historical events that are occurring as the piece is being written. As a tool for analyzing the historical influence of social events on “The Yellow Wallpaper,” late 1800’s and early 1900’s feminism is an appropriate lens to look through. This period of time was one that was important for the history of women, and for bringing to light the unfair roles and stereotypes that were assigned to an individual based on their gender. Gilman was active in the nation’s feminist movements, and evidence supports that “The Yellow Wallpaper” was written to bring awareness to the issues and lack of equality.

For Perkins, her role in feminism began with the desire to gain economic equality, promoting it “as the true basis for any social progress...” (Van Wienen 604). She acknowledged in her young adulthood that being a woman automatically came with a heavy burden to bear. As

she had experienced, the patriarchy was oppressive and women were unable to represent themselves or have any role other than “wife” or “mother” in their society. “The Yellow Wallpaper” was evidently written to preach openly to society exactly what that oppression felt like. From the time she published her story, it “quickly evolved from a relatively obscure and subversive magazine piece of the late nineteenth century to a formative feminist classic” (St. Jean 397). Every aspect of the story is written to convey what womanhood consists of, from the namelessness of her protagonist to the evident social pressure constantly being placed upon her.

Gilman’s own experiences with being a woman during the nineteenth century were not unusual in nature. Women were oppressed with limited rights both socially and economically: “The Yellow Wallpaper” has become such an impactful piece as it represents the oppression of women. Although Gilman wrote her story in a way that was very much representative of her personal history, it was possible for almost any female reader to relate to. Hysteria, as it was called, was a common disorder experienced by many. Supposedly, “[h]ysteria can be understood as a woman’s response to a system in which she is expected to remain silent, a system in which her subjectivity is continually denied, kept invisible” (Herndl 53). This description of hysteria correlates exactly with the character in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. The protagonist has experienced a mental panic since giving birth to her daughter and as a result is told to shut her working body and mind down. Her husband and her doctor prescribe her “tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise”, and still she is “forbidden to ‘work’ until [she is] well again” (Gilman 172). She is not allowed to write, read, socialize, or expend any of her energy, and the more she tries to do so the more she is scolded and repressed from doing what makes her feel better. Her hysteria only becomes worse.

Gilman herself claimed that her reason for writing “The Yellow Wallpaper” was “in order ‘to save people from being driven crazy’” (Herndl 52). Evidence of Gilman attempting to bring awareness to the intensity of losing sanity exists as her story progresses from beginning to end. At first, the protagonist deals with what are her own typical symptoms such as sadness and loss of pleasure or energy. As the story continues on, the narrators symptoms become more and more extreme, and she is pushed even further into an oppressed state as this happens: The more intense her symptoms, the more she is oppressed. By the end of the story, the narrator is driven absolutely mad and the scene described is brutal. She has locked her bedroom door to keep her husband and maid out, her thoughts are sporadic, and she is tearing at her wallpaper tooth and nail. Her ugly wallpaper and the hallucinated woman behind it drive her to insanity as she has nothing else to occupy her mind.

Another message that Gilman weaves into her story about the truth of womanhood is that women are not enough to even be considered as individuals, and truthfully this was an idea that existed. The narrator of the “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the lack of her having her own name is representative of the dehumanization of women. Having a name is a way of defining oneself. Having a name is a way of one person recognizing another. Without a name, there is no identity to understand or person to know. Without analyzing the namelessness of the narrator, she clearly is recognized as an oppressed woman. With an analysis of the namelessness of the narrator, she is even more than oppressed and is deemed so unimportant that she remains unidentified. Gilman makes her point that oppressed woman, aside from having little say in the happenings of their own life, are completely unnamed among men.

Gilman's life and the lives of those around her had a great impact on her. Oppression, illness, the arts, and the combination of all shaped who she was and the stories she had to tell. "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman's most well known short story, compiles all of her world in under 30 pages. The short story touches on Gilman's own experiences with her hysteria, the Rest Cure, social oppression, and a restriction from the arts. Her narrator takes the liberty of sharing to the world what Gilman herself could not. Aside from "The Yellow Wallpaper" sharing Gilman's story, it also shows how influential events in history are on the artistic works that come of it. While Gilman shared her experiences, she did so with the intention of waking up her society to the issues at hand. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is indeed a piece to be analyzed for exploring the nature of feminist literature, as well as for exploring the influence that life has on a writer's work.

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