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SYMBOLISM IN “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER” BY CHARLOTTE GILMAN THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

Throughout history, male and female relationships have been under close scrutiny especially in the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century. The determined attempts to shed light on the issue of traditional gender roles and their assignment have been a constant source of investigation and discussion in all areas of the society.

The story “The Yellow Wallpaper”, written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, was published in the first Wave of Feminism and, thus, represents a wonderful example of women’s writing skills and the criticism of the position of women within the institution of marriage and society. Since that time, Gilman’s story has been subjected to both critical acclaim and controversy, and has been analyzed by literary critics through a wide range of different perspectives, including historical, sociocultural, political, educational, biographical, psychological and, no doubt, feminist.

It should be noted, that “The Yellow Wallpaper” is autobiographical and takes its roots in the life of Charlotte herself, who has endured the horrors and sufferings of the androcentric society and its dehumanizing attitude to the fair sex. After giving birth to her daughter, Charlotte was receiving special treatment on the advice of her husband, Charles Stetson, who believed she was suffering from mental disorders. She was diagnosed with a post-partum depression by a prominent nerve specialist, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchel, whose prescription was the rest-cure: Live as domestic life as possible. Lie down an hour after every meal. Have two hours of intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live [1, p. 96].

The merciless rest-cure limited all possible manifestations of intellectual, physical and emotional activities of women: reading, writing, expressing thoughts and ideas, painting, thinking, social interaction. In the nineteenth century cultural discourse that was a common tool of transforming women into docile creatures when their behavior went beyond the established order of things which was mainly expressed by fulfilling the role of a silent, obedient mother and wife together with the absence of rights, individual needs and aspirations in life. Women were forced to believe that such “beneficial” restrictions imposed on them would heal their mental wounds.

Later Gilman wrote of her treatment, which reminds more of a prison confinement rather than the attempt to improve her condition: “I came perilously close to losing my mind. The mental agony grew so unbearable that I would sit blankly moving my head from side to side...I would crawl into remote closets and under beds – to hide from the grinding pressure of that distress” [1, p. 96]. After several dreadful months of sticking to recommendations, Charlotte refused such treatment, plucked up her courage and got down to writing “The Yellow Wallpaper”. Therefore, writing became the only available effective tool of resistance for Gilman that allowed her to focus on her society in an imaginary distance setting, and provide fresh perspectives. [2, p. 4].

Such painful and nerve-racking experience allowed Charlotte Gilman not only to expose the significant repercussions and detrimental effects of such medical treatment on women’s nature, but also express a female indignation and outcry against the cruelty, ruthless suppression of women’s identity in the patriarchal society. Her personal illness and relationships with husband inspired Gilman to write “The Yellow Wallpaper” where she puts the narrator of the story into the horrible conditions she witnessed herself, thus representing all the women deprived of their voices and freedom.

Charlotte managed to set off a series of feminist fireworks, which sparked numerous points of view on “The Yellow Wallpaper”. Ashley N. Brooks, for instance, believes that “The Yellow Wallpaper” reflects the narrator’s ensnarement in a feminist paradox: to remain trapped in her illness while preserving her autonomy, or to become forever confined by domestic life and lose any sense of control over her own identity and fate [3, p. 102]. This “feminist paradox” is reflected in the use of various symbols that allegorically illustrate an ongoing fight against the patriarchal influence.

Gilman masterfully applies the first-person narration technique. The story itself is written in the form of a diary, which immediately establishes intimacy and closeness to the protagonist. This type of narration arouses interest and provides access to the inner world and thoughts of the heroine, makes the reader plunge and live through the events and feelings. It gives the reader an opportunity to clearly visualize the distress and the dramatic changes that take place within the woman's consciousness, her perception of the male world around.

Writing a diary, by the way, can be taken as a symbol of women's constant search of identity, a valuable source of support that empowered the narrator. Such form of expression also evokes empathy and compassion, even though the atmosphere of the whole story is depressing, gloomy and tense. The heroine's writing abounds in exclamatory sentences, which also shown her rebellious and emotional nature.

From the heroine's words, it becomes evident that her husband, John, has brought her to the old mansion as a part of helping the narrator overcome her "illness", which she herself describes as a kind of depression. At those times, it was an ordinary practice within the patriarchal society to isolate women who suffer from "nervousness" and separate them from the outside world. In her book, "Victorian Renovation of the Novel", Suzanne Keen states that Victorian novels surround characters with spaces, places, homes and geography in a variety of ways [4, p. 66]. The mansion and its geographical remoteness can be viewed as a symbol of physical imprisonment of women. Right from the beginning, the mansion is described as the hereditary, even haunted place with hedges, walls and gates that lock. The narrator is impressed by the breathtaking beauty of the surroundings, but she admits that there is something queer about it. This place evokes the feelings of unrest, anxiety and separation in the inner world of the heroine. It enhances the instability of heroine's emotional state close to hysteria through the mysterious and eerie atmosphere. This setting arouses the picture of a typical female gothic novel, where a young lady is haunted and tortured by a male tyrant.

Hence, a binary opposition of male and female beginning can be traced in the faces of John and the narrator. The narrator comes across as a young woman, very imaginative, emotional and unconfident, who secretly writes a diary and is scared of being caught by John or his sister Jennie: *I wouldn't say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind* [5].

This fear shows that the narrator is discouraged and even not allowed to do the things she takes pleasure in. The narrator is perceived as an *inanimate* object, she is passive and weak, her desires, wishes and women's identity are suppressed by her husband. The narrator is unable to write, she can't even talk too much, because it will be "detrimental" to her recovery. Though the narrator expresses her desire to change rooms, this request is overruled by her husband and she is confined to a prison-like nursery room, where she spends most of her time. The setting and the description of the house and the room also contain a lot of symbolism. The room, where she was kept, was destroyed, neglected, with barred windows and scratched walls. On the one hand, the nursery room might be taken as a constant reminder of the narrator's duties of motherhood and household chores.

It, ironically, represents that endless entrapment of women in the dullness of domestic life. On the other hand, there is also a huge immovable bedstead in the middle of the room, which is nailed down to the floor. Probably, barred windows and nailed bed give the reader way to think that this place was used as an asylum for mentally ill people. The bed itself might also symbolize women's sexuality, which was oppressed by men, the inability to control the situation. Men didn't care much about women's pleasure and desires, they aimed at satisfying themselves everywhere, especially in sexual life.

The barred window in the room overlooks the garden which at first is viewed by the heroine as fertile and bright, but as the story goes, the descriptions of the garden become more apprehensive: *I do not like to look out of the windows even – there are so many creeping women, and they creep so fast... deepshaded arbors, riotous old-fashioned flowers, gnarly trees* [5]. The change of the narrator's descriptions of the garden and women there might symbolize the change of her attitude towards traditional gender roles in society, domestic life, motherhood, outdated ideas about women's identity and femininity in general.

The narrator's husband John represents a stronger and active side. He is a respected physician in the patriarchal society, which can be connected with the figure of authority, endless power over people's lives and fates. He is in charge of the house and their family, which makes the narrator emotionally and economically dependent on him. He feels himself superior to the narrator and constantly imposes his point of view on the wife and believes that he knows what is better for her. John stands for all men who dominated the society, who were practical, rational and always kept cool. John always uses different diminutive suffixes and pet names: *a blessed little goose, darling, little girl*, which shows that he infantilizes his wife, perceives her as a creature or object without feelings and thoughts. In other words, he takes her as the "second sex". Moreover, he tries to control her in every possible way. When she tries to mention about the way she feels in the room, John silences her, constantly interrupts her and dominates the conversation by saying that he knows better. He even makes her lie down after each meal, which suppresses her will to make her own decisions.

Jennie can be considered as a foil character to the narrator, because she represents *The Cult of True Womanhood* ideology – she is the symbolic embodiment of the best traditions of gender roles of those times, all characteristics and virtues women were supposed to cultivate and adhere to. She is a type of woman, who keeps the house, takes care of anyone apart from herself and is completely satisfied with it. She is a kind of caricature of the women's position at those times. Moreover, Jennie highlights the narrator's features of a woman that stands out. Even though the narrator is oppressed, through the writing, the reader still can feel the narrator's guilt, horror and inner protest, rebellion, that she tries to express towards John, but all her attempts are in vain, because women were not supposed to have or show any feelings in the androcentric society. They were expected to be always happy, calm, quiet and meant to please their husbands all the time. Submissiveness was considered to be one of the major qualities instilled in women, as they were expected to be passive bystanders and supplements to men.

Obviously, one of the main symbols of the story is the yellow wallpaper in the narrator's room [6]. First of all, yellow is generally believed to be the colour of energy, happiness, optimism, freshness, sunshine, intellectual activity. Ironically, the heroine right from the start becomes somehow distracted by the colour: *The color is repellent, almost revolting, a smouldering, unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is dull, yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others* [5]. She seems to even abhor the wallpaper itself: *I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin* [5]. On the one hand, the yellow colour of the wallpaper might refer to the established order of things, the corrupt patriarchal society, which constantly tortures and drives women crazy. Then, the wallpaper is described by the narrator as ripped, unclean, which may refer to the sickness, decay and degradation which women faced in marriages in the male-dominated society. On the other hand, the yellow colour may indicate the narrator's illness, madness and psychosis caused by patriarchal constraints, her inner mental state. The floral pattern is normally perceived as something genuinely feminine. All elaborate interlacing lines and elements might represent the magnificent maze of the female thought process, their subconscious aspirations, desires, drives, inclinations which are generally regarded as inappropriate and abnormal by the androcentric society.

The heroine feels trapped, helpless and paralyzed by her illness and the commands of her husband, so as the illness progresses, she becomes more concentrated and even obsessed with the wallpaper and its pattern. The pattern of the wallpaper is hideous and nightmarish at first, the narrator looks at it for hours and even notices the formless posture of a woman who is trapped under the pattern and tries to escape: *I have really discovered something at last... The front pattern DOES move and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast and her crawling shakes it all over* [5]. This has the parallel with all the women who are trapped by the male pattern of behavior in the androcentric society.

In fact, analyzing the pattern of the wallpaper becomes the moment of illumination for the narrator. On the one hand, the wallpaper symbolizes *the disease*, the decay, the patriarchal standards, authority and control which holds her prisoner. On the other hand, her illness becomes *the cure*, as it's the only thing that truly belongs to the narrator. Though she feels oppressed and surrounded by the wallpaper much in the same way that she is oppressed and surrounded by the male figures in her life, the wallpaper provides her with something to rebel against [3, p. 104]. The wallpaper pattern doesn't enslave the heroine anymore; it becomes a key source of strength.

At the end of the story, the narrator undergoes severe spiritual transformation, when she locks herself in the room and tears apart the wallpaper. She turns from an object into subject by freeing the woman from that awful pattern and establishes her own identity. By releasing the woman and surrendering to her disease, she liberates herself from the patriarchal chains and regains control over her own life and fate [7]. The narrator chooses to go through mental disorder and madness rather than be subdued by the male society. That is the price she has to pay.

The light also acquires a symbolic meaning in the story. It is interesting that by moonlight the wallpaper pattern changes and becomes less creepy. In folklore and mythology, the moonlight is generally associated with divine female energy, immortality, eternity, subconscious drives. Whereas, sunlight is attributed to the masculine energy and the destructive power as well. This might show that during the day time, women are subdued (like the narrator by her husband), but at night they are alone, left to themselves and free from the male influence. In general, the moonlight symbolizes intuition, sensitivity, intimacy, holy women's energy, that is released when no one can see.

It's vital to mention that the story "The Yellow Wallpaper" symbolically reveals the huge consequences of the patriarchal views and values on women's personality, exposes the effect of the reclusive lifestyle women had to lead under the suppression of men. And, more importantly, it provides an artful example of feminist writing.

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