

The Yellow Wallpaper: A Peek into the Postpartum Female Psyche

Postpartum depression plagues many women after childbirth. This type of depression was not always recognized as a real problem. In the eerie story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses complex symbolism to portray the deteriorating mindset and neurosis of women in the throes of postpartum depression. The reader gets the impression that the woman in the story has this type of depression because the story mentions that she has previously had a baby and the infant makes her so nervous that she has to be separated from it. Symbols used throughout the story include things like bars on the windows, the use of the color yellow, the hideous design of the wallpaper itself, the calming light from the moon, and the smell of the paper. The culmination of these symbols shows the woman's path from minor postpartum depression to complete insanity. Entrapment can be physical or created by an active imagination. During the time period that "The Yellow Wallpaper" is set, the late 1800's (Gillman 686), women were oppressed by men and society. Melvin Gray in "Neurosis" states that the primitive man was confounded by forces he could neither understand nor control (Gray 3), which in other words, actions that a man shows are spur of the moment and what he may feel is best even if it hurts the other person. Gillman shows this in "The Yellow Wallpaper" when her husband thinks that she is better off upstairs alone. Women in the 1800's were seen as the weaker sex, subjected to their husbands command and authority. Postpartum depression was not seen as a serious illness. In the room, that the woman was placed by her husband, the windows were barred. This symbolizes that "Victorian" age oppression. The bars on the windows only allows the woman to gaze on outside society possibly imagining what life could be like without being trapped like a bird or a criminal in a cell. The woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" not only suffered from postpartum depression but also psychogenic or reactive depression which is for people who "responded to external situations with depressive symptoms and improves as the situation improved" (Gray 179), which is shown at the end of the story when her husband falls to the ground and she walks over him as if he was not there. Gilman's use of bars on the windows adds to the woman's neurosis and help lead to her final insanity. The bars, however, are not the only symbol that represents the woman's incarceration.

A wallpaper's design plays a key role in the effect it has on a person's psyche. The woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is greatly affected by the horrendous, rambling design. Gilman also wrote a story called "Herland" which connects to "The Yellow Wallpaper" in such a way that I feel the two stories should be sequels of one another. "On the home: a man does not have to stay in it all day long in order to love it; why should a woman? As for women, the poor, dragging, deadweights. You had manufactured" "They must be turned into world-building people by being freed from their demeaning domestic position. Motherhood is venerated in your world, as it is in

Herland" ("Herland", Gilman XVII). She comments that the wallpaper has "a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes staring at you upside down" (Gilman 689). This quote is pretty disturbing in a sense that the devil is possibly taking over the woman's logical way of looking at things. The story continues to describe the wallpaper as faded with great torn patches everywhere she looks. The wallpaper seems to symbolize the woman's chaotic mental state. In "The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman" it is apparent that her life has not been one of the easiest and that she has always been somewhat depressed due to always being so isolated. She writes in her diary on Christmas night in 1880 that "she had a particularly hard time dealing with the holiday letdown, which seemed to amplify her sense of isolation". Gilman's self-pity is now apparent. (Knight 27) This story is a book of a certain time in Gilman's life that she felt alone even when she was not. The wallpaper also symbolizes a type of mental screen, with the design of the paper being the screen to hide behind or escape from. In the story, the woman visualizes other women trapped behind the rambling, swirling, entanglements of the wallpaper, peering out at her, playing with her mind, perhaps urging her to join them. Like the locked away woman, these women in the wallpaper possible represent woman's struggle to escape the oppression of a male dominated society. The constant incarceration and exposure to the wallpaper finally causes the woman to have a complete mental breakdown. Gilman had felt throughout her life that she was supposed to fail, no matter how wonderful her situation may have been. In 1882, she fell in love with a man named Walter but "Charlotte clearly felt that she had failed by wavering in her resolve to contribute meaningfully to the "Worlds work" as she had vowed to do" (Kinight149). As the night comes in "The Yellow Wallpaper," the woman feels a sense of calmness and serenity through out her body.

"By moonlight- The moon shines in all night when there is a moon- I wouldn't know it was the same paper" (Gilman 693). Her husband John, did not want her writing, so at night when she knew he was asleep, she would stay up all night and write her heart out. "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 694). The woman was doing what John, her husband, wanted her to do, only during the day, because at night she felt free enough to be able to express her true feelings through her writing. The moon light does a strange thing to the wallpaper at night as it is turned into bars and a woman standing behind it is clearly seen. "I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman" (Gilman 693). The mind sees what it wants to see, but the heart sees what is real. The woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is seeing herself in the paper behind the bars, because it is she that is feeling alone and unwanted. The woman in the paper seems to get out during the day and at night she was always there again. "The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" (Gilman 692). Again, this symbolizes the

woman's "want" to be freed from her husband's authority. There was also something else about the wallpaper that bothered the woman, the smell.

Since the house is so old and was once used for a mental institution, the furniture was bolted to the floor and it smelled a peculiar smell. "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" (Gilman 694). It seems as if the odor is following her because of her depression state. No matter if the windows remain open through out the day, the odor is still lingering around, waiting to attack. The woman used to be disturbed by the horrendous smell but now has gotten used to it. "The only thing I can think of that it is like is the color of the paper! A yellow smell" (Gilman 694). Since the smell of the house was "Yellow" this symbolizes possibly decay of the human mind in Gilman's circumstance. Her mind was ill and her thoughts were disturbing during the day, but at night, besides the shadows on the wall, she was in the right state of mind.

In Ben Caruso's literary analysis of "The Yellow Wallpaper" he states that Gilman was an "ardent feminist" who spent much of her time challenging Dr. Weir Mitchell's beliefs. With "The Yellow Wallpaper" being based on Gilman's personal experience with postpartum depression, the parallels between her experiences and those of the story are noticeable, as are implication of late nineteenth-century patriarchal and medical attitudes toward women, during this time (Caruso 1). Mitchell was a tenacious male-chauvinist, and was against woman voting, and strongly against them getting any education that could further their careers.

The story of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is an interesting yet sad tale of a young woman struggling with mental illness, just as Gilman has done through out her life. By John belittling her by calling her "little girl" (Gilman 692), he is just adding to the weigh she is already feeling from having postpartum. The many symbols used through out the story aide in the overall understanding of the character, her oppression, struggles with postpartum depression, and why she finally went totally insane, Any woman who has experienced the trauma of childbirth and postpartum depression could easily relate to this story. Woman like Gilman herself who had trouble with mothering (though she loved her child), could live comfortable in a place that was only "Herland" (Gilman XIV), just to raise the child she gave birth to. Perhaps if her husband had placed her in more cheerful surroundings, encouraged her to take care of her child (not have let his sister do it), and given her freedom to be part of a normal society, she may have snapped out of her depression.