

A Cure for Temporary Depression

The Yellow Wallpaper, written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is a story of a young depressed woman, traveling to the country with her husband, so that she can be away from writing, which seems to have a bad impact on her psychological condition. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call it "a striking story of female confinement and escape, a paradigmatic tale which (like *Jane Eyre*) seems to tell *the* story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their 'speechless woe'" (874). In this story theme and point of view interlace and work together to create an intense description of an almost prison-like prescription for overcoming depression. She struggles with male oppression, because she is told by her husband and her brother many things about her own health that she disagrees with. She strives for independence, and she wants to break free from the bondages of that oppression. The story is written from the character's point of view in a form resembling journal entries, which describe her stay in the house. The house itself is an old mansion, and the yellow wallpaper in the character's bedroom seems to be really disturbing. She believes that there is a woman locked behind bars living in the pattern of that wallpaper. She spends a lot of time trying to figure it out, and in the end she completely breaks away even from her own mind.

Ann Charters defines theme as the "generalization about the meaning of a story" (1013). The theme in *The Yellow Wallpaper* describes the struggle of women to live in a male-dominated society. Gilman portrays the man as insensitive and lacking in emotional support. From the beginning of the story forward the narrator speaks of how her husband and other men in her life direct her so that she will recover quickly. The narrator shows that even though she is convinced that she knows what to do about her depression, she is still influenced by her husband with the following passage: "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" (306). Her husband seems to be the one who can change her thoughts because he is a man or because he is her husband. Nonetheless, she is still being suppressed by a member of the opposite sex. Many times the narrator also speaks in a way that suggests that because a man speaks she has no means by which to disagree with him because she is a woman. A perfect example of this is presented in the beginning passages of the story, where the narrator states, "Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?" (306). This last sentence "But what is one to do?" exemplifies wonderfully her oppressed female stature in the society of her life. She states right from the

beginning that "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 the one reason I do not get well faster" (306). She obviously loves her husband and trusts him but has some underlying feeling that maybe his prescription of total bed rest is not working for her. In the second passage the narrator becomes comfortable with the room, now she likes the room enough and is curious enough to open up to her husband and tell him what she thinks she has been seeing. John becomes terrified of these ideas she has in her head and what she might believe to be real and not real. He begins to plead with her and tries to convince her that she must control all of her ambitions and act sanely. Later John is trying to manipulate the narrator with guilt. He is implying that she must think of herself as getting better, mind and body, for the sake of other people, rather than herself. The narrator is, however, doubting that she will ever recover mentally. Although John says her appearance has improved, she believes that she is not physically better. The final passages of the story, at last, successfully manifest a display of power and possible regain of self-governance through the narrator's finally standing up to her husband by locking him out of the room in which he has imprisoned her supposedly for her benefit. Whereupon, for the first time in the story, he must listen to her entreaties to discover where the key is hidden (317).

According to Charters, point of view is "the author's choice of a narrator for the story" (1009). In this story the narrator is a first person narrator. We can easily see what is going on the head of the main character. We can feel sorry for her because she is a victim of male oppression. However, we are presented with a biased story. We can only see the events that take place from her point of view, which turns out to be quite distorted. She stares at this wallpaper for hours on end and thinks she sees a woman behind the paper. "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" (313). She becomes obsessed with discovering what is behind that pattern and what it is doing. "I don't want to leave now until I have found it out" (314). Once the narrator determines that the image is in fact a woman struggling to become free, she somehow aligns herself with the woman. We don't see that until she mentions that she often sees the woman creeping outside: "I see her in that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape arbors, creeping all around the garden.... I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight! 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" (315). This shows the

narrator seeing herself in the woman and when she sees the woman creeping outside, she sees herself. When she creeps outside she locks the door. She is afraid her husband will take away the only comfort she has. She continues to pursue this obsessive idea that she has to get the woman out. The narrator wants the woman to be free of the paper but does not want to let her go, because the woman is what keeps her focused and sane: "I don't want to go out, and I don't want to have anybody come in, till John comes. I want to astonish him. I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!" (317). She peels all the wallpaper that she can reach. She wants to help the woman get out, and she becomes quite extreme: "I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try. Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued" (317). She goes on to say, "I don't like to look out of the windows even--there are so many those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?" (317). It seems she has released the woman and it is indeed herself. As if she enjoys being out and doing as she likes but at night her husband will be around and she mustn't creep around her husband. He might find her mad. But at last she finds the courage to confront her oppressor and stand up for herself. "'What is the matter?' he cried. 'For God's sake, what are you doing!' I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder. '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!'" (318). Jane is undoubtedly the narrator herself. She is the result of a distorted mind trying to free herself from the male oppression. From the narrator's point of view we had this fact hidden throughout the story. However, as soon as her mind has freed itself, she had freed herself both from her husband and from her own identity.

In order to read and understand this story, we must consider many things. First the time frame in which the story was written, and that society's attitude of the story content at that time. Written in 1892, a woman suffering from depression was not clearly understood and was treated with isolation. This would clearly drive any person mad. The narrator made attempts to bring to her husband's attention what she felt was a better way of making her better but he refused to listen and ignored her wishes to involve herself in more activity. This was the experience of Gilman herself. She shares that she wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* "to save people from being crazy" (879).

Works Cited

- Charters, Ann. "The Elements of Fiction". *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Compact 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 1003 – 1015.
- Gilbert, Sandra m., and Gubar, Susan. "A Feminist Reading of Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'." [First published 1979.] Rpt. *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Ed. Ann Charters. Compact 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 873 – 875.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wallpaper." [First published 1892.] Rpt. *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Ed. Ann Charters. Compact 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 306 – 318.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper'." [First published 1913.] Rpt. *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Ed. Ann Charters. Compact 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 878 – 879.