

Feminist Criticism of the Yellow Wallpaper

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Abstract

This paper does a feminist criticism of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' by Charlotte Perkins. Advocates of feminism contend that women have equal rights as men regarding political, social, and economic activities. Women should therefore be given equal opportunities in their personal and social lives regarding decision making, career development and freedom of expression. Many feminist authors use female characters to criticize the male dominated society and highlight issues affecting women in any given society. 'The Yellow Wallpaper', which was written in the early to mid-nineteenth century, warns the reader of the dangers of fixed gender roles in a male dominated society. During this time, domestic ideology positioned women as spiritual and moral leaders in their households. Isolation was the dominant theme that made women take private domain in their homes. Charlotte Perkins wanted to present the revised roles of women during this time. Just like men, they needed to take part in social, economic, and political activities in the community. Thus, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' presents issues that were affecting women during the nineteenth century. The main problem of the study was to determine how the author depicted a woman in the 19th Century society. A library research was conducted from articles and books that present feminist criticism of different texts. The study used Feminism theory of literature. The findings of this study indicate that the author was influenced by the societal conditions that were happening in the nineteenth Century. More research should, however, be conducted to determine if the themes in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' are still relevant in the contemporary society.

Keywords: Feminism, gender issues, male dominated society.

Background of the Novel

Late 19th century and throughout the 20th century, the male and female relationships have been under close analysis. The process of assigning gender roles has been an issue of concern and it cuts across political, socioeconomic, cultural, educational and societal perspectives. Traditionally, men were viewed as holding the ultimate authoritative position of patriarchs and they defined the different gender roles in the society. A man was seen as the norm while the woman was seen as the 'other'. The word 'other' provided an impression of inferiority in the women. During this time, the woman was expected to be timid, yielding, gentle, dependent, self-sacrificing, emotional, and intuitive (Das, 2002). Traditional feminists like Simone de Beauvoir have highlighted the need for a greater awareness and understanding of woman's position in the world. de Beauvoir de (1989) believed that to understand women roles in the society, it was important to understand the historical, cultural, and societal values embedded and widely accepted in the system of patriarchy (Das, 2002). The feminist believed that men looked at women based on their self-constructed paradigms and by default; a woman was also made to look at herself from that same lens.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a short story that represents an important early work of American feminist literature, illustrating attitudes in the 19th century towards women's health, both physical and mental. The story is presented in the first person with a collection of journal entries written by a woman whose physician husband (John) has rented an old mansion for the summer. Forgoing other rooms in the house, the couple moves into the upstairs nursery. As a form of treatment, the unnamed woman is forbidden from working and

is encouraged to eat well and get plenty of exercise and air so that she can recuperate from what he calls a ‘temporary nervous depression-a slight hysterical tendency’(Hume, 2002), a diagnosis common to women in that period. The woman hides her journal from her husband and his sister the housekeeper, fearful of being accused of overburdening herself. The room’s openings are grilled to prevent children from climbing through them, and there is a gate across the top of the stairs, though she and her husband have access to the rest of the house and its adjoining estate. The author depicts the effect of under stimulation on the narrator’s mental health and her deterioration into psychosis. With nothing to stimulate her, she becomes obsessed with the pattern and colour of the wallpaper. Towards the end of the story, she imagines there are women creeping behind the patterns of the wallpaper and comes to believe she is one of them. Eventually, she locks herself in the room, now the only place she feels safe, refusing to leave when the summer ends. The paper was written during in the early to mid-nineteenth century. During this time, domestic ideology positioned women as spiritual and moral leaders in their households. Isolation was the dominant theme that made women take control of their homes. Gilman wanted to present the revised roles of women during this time. Just like men, they needed to take part in social, economic, and political activities in the modern community (Hume, 2002).

Gilman’s personal experience influenced *The Yellow Wallpaper* and as a feminist, she wanted to direct her readers into the world of danger, horror, and mystery that negatively affected women in the nineteenth century. She also used the short story as a genre to criticize the male dominated society. The short story is a typical example of the rebellious approach that discriminated White women in the 19th century. Therefore, the author uses this narration as a symbol of her individual experience as a feminist (Hochman, 2002).

The Yellow Wallpaper can be categorized as a feminist text because it presents a story of a woman struggling with both her husband’s way of thinking and the societal norms. The author uses a female narrator to condemn the medical profession of the 19th century. The narrator also presents the different roles of women in the modern society including child bearing, and caring for the family yet they have to remain isolated from other members of the society (Hochman, 2002). This paper therefore analyses the status of the woman or rather the lack of status of the woman during late 19th century.

Research Method

The study has applied a descriptive, analytical method to demonstrate the application of feminism and how gynocriticism, in particular, helps to show that women’s writings express a very distinctive female consciousness. Furthermore, the research explores how a woman’s image and voice have been subjected in the male-oriented society. Finally, the research shows how gender is shaped or misshaped to reflect cultural identity as opposed to a purely biological sexual identity.

The analysis sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do the social, economic, political, and cultural frameworks of patriarchy affect the portrayal of women in literary work?
2. How do these portrayals relate to the issue of gender with regard to the historical setting of the story?
3. How does the work depict patriarchal ideology and treat its impact on women’s lives in their societies?

Review of Related Literature

Charlotte Perkins Gilman has written several articles and books on *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Davis (2005) presents the difficulties that Gilman experienced in her own personal life over her constant efforts to reconcile the demands of a woman’s situation in both marriage and

work. Internal conflict was symbolically presented in *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a result of conforming to society's expectations of a securely rooted domestic life as opposed to living a life that offered a more economic and social independence. Gilman (1998) advocates intensely against the reduction of a woman's identity, and her unpleasant experiences during her first marriage enabled her to argue vehemently on behalf of women's rights to economic independence in her book.

Gilman (1998) advocates powerfully against the lessening of a woman's distinctiveness and her unpleasant encounters all through her first matrimony allowed her to contend passionately on behalf of women's rights to financial independence. Gilman also examined why men's professional life overshadowed women's domestic life. As an advocate for women's rights, she felt a strong sense of urgency to reform the disappointing state of an economic hierarchy of segregated roles within a marriage setup. She believed that by giving women greater intellectual and economic freedom, this would bring them closer to achieving an equal footing with that of men. Moreover, she believed that if both partners in a marriage met on an equal standing, then a stronger union between them would result, thus fostering greater harmonious, satisfying roles within their relationship.

Gilbert (1996) notes that *The Yellow Wallpaper* depicts a sprinkling of Gilman's autobiographical life. She further observes that the story exemplifies the suffocating nature of life for women of the Victorian era as Gilman herself experienced it. It was Gilman's intent throughout this story, to bring to light (and gain some kind of personal satisfaction) the plight that nineteenth-century women diagnosed or associated with 'hysteria' were subjected to under Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell's infamous 'Rest Cure' treatment (Gilman, 1998: 25). Gilbert also examines how, despite the fictional nature of this classical feminist story, Gilman weaves into it a testament to her own life involvements and most likely, how life's results can affect one's emotive and mental well-being as was in Gilman's case.

Barry (2002) presents a modern perspective on how to create a more careful examination and awareness of women's mental health issues and how health professionals should pay closer attention to those women whose voices have been silenced, ignored, or robbed since decisions concerning their care and treatment have been taken. Furthermore, Green (2003) highlights other women (writers) whose fates were wrongfully decided by the mental health professionals. These include Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Virginia Woolf who in particular found the courage to challenge the indignity of being silenced.

Golden (1992) notes that *The Yellow Wallpaper* is an actual representation of the 'Cult of True Womanhood,' which bound women to the sphere of domesticity – that of home and family. He notes that during the 19th century, men perpetrated the minds of women by subjecting them and silencing their voices through a male-constructed ideology and a politically-designed male system that acknowledged them as the sole authority and designer of women's lives. Using the male dominated ideology, the men were in a position of maintaining unquestionable control over women. The story also explores the narrator's bizarre and delusional journey of psychological deterioration.

In the same way, Hume (2002) powerfully explains the narrator's difficult anxieties over *The Yellow Wallpaper*, which slowly begins to overcome her judgments and her sentiments even over her own child whom she vaguely and detachedly mentions. She also reveals her perceptions of the outside world and finally of herself. In addition to this, Hume (2002) points out the different aspects that create and add to the storyteller's psychological decline.

Components of a depressing and gothic setting can be found in the numerous explanations such as, 'an imposing mansion, a genetic estate, a preoccupied house there is something queer about it' (Gilman, 1998: 3) that creates an ominous, sinister like atmosphere. Furthermore, the description of the bedroom as having, barred windows rings and things in the

wall, a stripped off the paper, a heavy bedstead nailed to the floor and fairly gnawed as well as her recollection of a familiarity in the strong odour of the wallpaper are distracting images of her delicate mind. Her sluggish descent into mental illness is also seen in her insanity thoughts over extreme burning of the household to reach the smell further makes a description of a madwoman and the household as an evocative thought of a mental institution.

Hume (2002) implies that the already troubled storyteller's mind was getting worse by these descriptions and through the male-controlled domination of the male number, John. Her suppression as a woman, as a writer, and through the procedure of her ill-treatment, all contribute to the final collapse. Hume notes that throughout the storyteller's 'journalistic cover-up of her narrative', she makes an effort of managing/controlling her troubled and disjointed mind. Hume notes that the condition contributes to paradoxical emancipation. Hume (2002) adds that *The Yellow Wallpaper* not only serves to reject Gilman's intentions about the maladies of the gender-bias rest cure of the nineteenth-century, but it also shows how Gilman's character, who falls apart in the end, ironically seems to reinforce that same gender-bias ideology of the emotionally and physically frail nineteenth century woman.

Galullo (1996) conducted a study on several components on the 'Gothic and The Female Voice: Examining Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*'. In this study, the author emphasized on the need to look at the social and historical contexts of feminine literature (Feminine Scripture) in order to better interpret the significance of the text's themes and messages. Lisa (Gilman, 1998: 57) explores the feminist explanation of the story by looking at the importance of the literary text's social and historical context in order to better grasp and interpret the implications of its feminist themes and messages. Galullo (1996) investigates the feminist clarification of the story by looking at the influence of the narrator's opinion as a means by which the writer depicts of the Victorian female voice which have been suppressed and assigned to specifically distinct gender roles. In addition, *The Yellow Wallpaper* attempts to show how society attributed a woman's medical struggles to the biological disparities of her procreative system.

Reynolds (1999) examined the internal narrative space of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and how the inner structure, which is mainly the bedroom, emphasizes and supports the idea of patriarchal authority. The idea of exerting dominance is reaffirmed in the silencing of both the narrator's voice and body. The idea of being shut in, shut inside, and shut out or shut off from the exterior (the outside world) again reinforces these thematic motifs as symbolic of nineteenth-century women's writings as pointed out earlier in Reynolds (1999). According to Reynolds (1999), *The Yellow Wallpaper* represents a re-establishment of the influential domestic thought which is seen evidently in the story's control of essential recurrent objects such as; woman, man, room. The ideas of space, household containment, and its preventive boundaries interrupt the silencing of female voice; in this case, that of the narrator.

In addition to this, Reynolds points out the important symbolic wallpaper that emphasizes the powerful patriarchal grasp over the narrator. This central iconic object in the story acts as the story's focal image which controls and contributes to the further fragmentation of the already fragile mental state of the narrator. Reynolds (1999: 67) presents another interesting perspective by suggesting that not only does the confinement of the room's interior space reinforce male authority through John's ever-watchful gaze, but also, on the other hand, Jane's journal is also seen as a dominant male object keeping surveillance over the narrator's impulsive urges to write. This inability to write is seen through her covert and feeble attempts to desperately find refuge in her writing which is constantly subjected to her husband's authority; 'I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me...having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition' (Gilman, 1998: 4). Finally, Reynold concludes by stating that the story's strong internal structure represents the suppression of the narrator's interiority by the male's exteriority.

The implication that these African American communities and geographical positions, characterize important constituents that create to some extent, haunting, unexplained, gothic-like atmosphere to the fictional novel. These enigmatic representations further support the image of a woman committed to a hidden, isolated 'institutional-like' structure, but superficially presented as a place of beauty and comforting solace.

According to Keen (1998), 'the location of these subjects on the ground or inside walls constitutes a new field of representation. They are frequently shown as the appearance of an inaccessible, hidden away woman so often portrayed in 19th century literature. Another important component of this representation is the idea of narrative extensions. For Keen (1998), 19th century women writers used this agreement to 'influence the language of customs and restrictions...so often used in her border-crossings, daring excursions, and representation of impossibilities as necessities of action and self-discovery' (Keen, 1998: 67). In other words, Keen (1998) states that through the use of these narrative extensions in Victorian writing, it allowed the writer's characters to 'step outside' their gendered boundaries and exert their power of imagination.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the gendered limits of the narrator are clearly shown through the figuration of boundaries, the spatial constraints placed on her as a remedy to placate not only her physical mobility, but her mental ability as well. However, from a gynocriticism perspective, Gilman's narrative annexes allows her character, Jane, to 'venture' into a realm of imagination from what she sees hidden within *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Gilman, 1998: 99). *The Yellow Wallpaper* can be seen to serve as a vehicle by which the narrator embarks on a daring and imaginative excursion in which she sets out to explore and discover its puzzling and defying patterns. As such, she defies the overly prescriptive social conventions of 19th century Victorian culture as seen in her main character's extreme confinement.

Furthermore, Gilman dramatizes a kind of 'Bildungsroman' of the character through these narrative annexes. The narrator appears to go through this developmental passage and exerts some effort to get out of the conventional stations inscribed upon her. Through these narrative annexes, Gilman openly critiques the gender roles and exposes the abuses of patriarchal power as seen in the narrator's desire to be taken away from the home, but the husband's insistence for her to remain there, to stop her from walking about simply because as a doctor, he knows what is best for her.

Another critical approach is debated by Susan Lancer's 'Feminist Criticism, The Yellow Wallpaper and the Politics of Colour in America' (Lanser, 1989). In this essay, Lancer presents an over-read of Gilman's story by suggesting it to be a product of the politics of heavily laced race issues (specifically, a less than favourable opinion towards Asians; the reason for the paper's yellow colour) and therefore making it a textual product of culture. In conclusion, Hedges (1992) shows that the main objective of the article was to demonstrate the multitude of interpretations to Gilman's feminist classic and how these interpretations can be seen and will continue to be seen as products of a dynamic shifting of social changes. In summary, all these sources provide the springboard for a critical analysis of Gilman's short story based on a feminist approach.

The Image of Woman in the Yellow Wall Paper

The story focuses on the narrator's mental condition as she slowly loses her sense of reality. John, who is married to her, cannot understand this mental sickness and misdiagnosed her psychological condition, and in turn, confines her in a room for treatment. The narrator makes a rhetoric statement suggesting that her husband did not understand what was happening to her (Gilman, 1991: 116).

From the context of this story, the reader is exposed to the illogic medical treatment offered in the nineteenth century that did not understand what they were treating. Furthermore, most doctors did not understand the mental conditions of women during this time. Most of the doctors used the rest cure to control women suffering from psychological disorder. In the story, the narrator is not suffering from hysteria but undergoing a nervous condition that results from childbearing. However, John decides to confine her because he did not understand her (Hochman, 2002).

The narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* uses feminist analysis when she attempts to examine the yellow paper hanged on the wall. She attempts to identify the meaning of the wallpaper. For example, she focuses on the writing style used in drafting the paper (Gilman, 1991). Then she looks at the decorations and attempts to organize them geometrically but they still confuse her. The wallpaper displays different colours and it produces a unique odour which she cannot identify (Gilman, 1991). At night, the narrator sees a woman locked in prison. Thus, the author uses her narrator to develop a complicated text within a patriarchal society.

Gilman uses John to portray a dominating husband who holds absolute control over his wife and treats her as an inferior being within their household. For example, the narrator says that John laughs at her. However, this is unexpected in the marriage. John does not value his wife's opinions and undermines anything she says. From these interactions, we see that such laughter was part of societal norms.

Most of the women were discriminated against and their opinions were not valued. Furthermore, when Jane takes her roles, John becomes powerless and acts like a woman (Gilman, 1991). Gilman uses John to illustrate the patriarchal discrimination in the society. The readers can understand the concept of discrimination through John. For example, through his behaviour, readers can deduce that he is an authoritarian husband because he conveys authority in their marriage (Hochman, 2002). Therefore, using feminist approach to literary analysis, the readers can use John to interpret the story.

As a feminist, Gilman uses *The Yellow Wallpaper* to explain and demonstrate the terrible arrogance and domination, as well as lack of understanding of women in a male dominated community. She uses the narrator to fight for feminine rights, show how difficult it was for them to decided and fight for their rights. Furthermore, men defined roles performed by women and regarded women as unintelligent. Women were expected to remain passive, good, and pure (Gilman, 1991).

In the story, the narrator tries to follow her husband rules of staying in the room without doing anything apart from writing in her diary. Gilman uses this scenario to make the readers understand that the narrator is intelligent and when locked in a nursery, she begins to search for knowledge and observe the wallpaper critically. This critical observation made her see several patterns in the wallpaper that conveyed different meanings and as the story progresses, she continues to see a woman creeping and searching for a way out of the paper (Gilman, 1991).

The symbols used in the nineteenth century are evident in the story. Gilman uses language and imagery to illustrate her buried fears. These fears include fears for her baby, childhood memories, and fear of being strangled and violated by those who say they love her (Gilman, 1991). She uses her narrator to make the reader understand the misdiagnosis conducted on women, and the frustrations they face that stem from the narrator's treatment experiences. She makes the reader aware of the irresponsible conclusion made by the male doctor about the narrator's mental condition.

The symbolism used in the story illustrates how feminism theory can be used to interpret the text. For example, Gilman used symbolism when the narrator stated that despite her sufferings, she still wrote. This writing represents the independent side of the female

narrator where the narrator can only express her thoughts and feelings through writing that in turn makes her an independent woman (Hochman, 2002). As a feminist, the author wanted to make readers understand that women can use their brains to develop meaningful concepts.

The wallpaper is a major symbol in the story. The author describes how the narrator looks at the picture for some time until she figures out what was inside the patterns presented in the wallpaper. The paper is a representation of the narrator's challenging life. It represents the independent life of the narrator, and illustrates how the narrator breaks away from her role as a wife and discovers that she should not be trapped. Furthermore, she can use her intelligence to make proper decisions concerning her wellbeing (Hume, 2002). The feminist critical approach therefore enables the reader to critically analyse the story using symbols.

Additionally, the wallpaper is an element of domestic decoration and it represents the act of domesticity, meaning a woman tied to the family. Women were enclosed to the set restrictions developed by men. Women were socially conditioned to control their creativity. Therefore, when the protagonist rips down the paper, she destroys her prison merging herself with the women presented in the paper. Finally, she releases the restricted anger of women in the society (Gilman, 1991). The reader comprehends the family structure and treatment procedure that traps the narrator. It depicts the domestic life that affects several women.

The Yellow Wallpaper can be analysed through the eyes of the narrator. She states that she belongs to her husband. Through her actions and thoughts, she depicts weakness in her marriage. For example, she says she is meant to assist John and that she is a burden to her husband. This view makes the narrator inferior to her husband which makes her a weak female character in the story. Another example appears when the narrator was taken by her husband and called a blessed little goose, making her appear as a child before the readers. John makes her appear inferior because he treated her as a child not as a wife (Hume, 2002). Therefore, the main character can be used to analyse the story using feminist criticism.

From the feminist point of view, the wallpaper, the mansion, room, and her husband John are symbols of frustration and oppression that affect the narrator's psychological development. Men were the main cause of the narrator's psychological breakdown. According to the feminist literary theory, the narrator's mental disorder and lack of an original outlet in her marriage affected her psychological relationship with John (Hume, 1991). Therefore, the mansion, wallpaper, and John are symbols of prison life or bondage.

The story occurs in locked rooms that entail nothing but disparagements and madness from a female protagonist. Feminist views are reinforced by the narrator's surroundings. This setting is like a prison. She wished to change the environment, but her husband refused to change it because he wished to put her in prison. This setting emphasized the feminist views in the story, and the paper represents a psychological prison.

The Victorian expectation in the nineteenth century drove most women insane, and *The Yellow Paper* was crafted to represent a metaphor for societal pressure. According to Treichler (2002), the narrator is a writer but forbidden to perform her work by her husband, John. She added that the diagnosis conducted imposed more restriction on women during the Victorian time. She describes the journal as a dead paper because the protagonist cannot talk to a living human being but puts her views on paper.

Gilman uses Jennie to depict other restricted roles of women in the community. She manages their household. She takes part in supervising the kitchen and carries orders from her brother without questioning. Furthermore, she understands that the doctor's orders cannot help the patient, but she does not question or refuse to follow his instructions. She does not consider helping the patient until she becomes insane (Treichler, 2002: 67).

The author used the protagonist vivid imagination to create another environment of a creeping woman. She even stated that there are many women suffering in the male-dominated community (Gilman, 1998). She describes the woman as mechanically trying to climb the

bars and trying to get out of the bars that repress her being. The bars that block the woman in the paper prevent her from escaping (Treichler, 2002: 78). Moreover, the striking male domination controls women who do not conform to their norms. The narrator shares her sufferings with the reader by developing a metaphorical pattern of the wallpaper.

Gilman used the epistolary story to display the narrator's descent to insanity both personally and objectively. Through the narrator, the reader understands the situation of the woman in the wallpaper. The reader can interpret the difficult famine situation in the story, just as the speaker must try to decipher the confusing life story and the inexplicable designs of the wallpaper. The journal used in the story illustrates a powerful intimacy and proximity when either Jennie or John interrupts the story (Treichler, 2002: 56).

The contemporary readers get an authoritative statement from the author concerning the realities of women during the nineteenth century and the Victorian period. The narrator's agreeable characteristic is instantaneously a usual attribute for women during this time and the channel of her madness. The author had to develop a believable character to symbolize the actual situation affecting women. It is the story's feminist assertion that contributes to its popularity in the nineteenth century (Treichler, 2002).

Gilman begins with the use of symbolism early in her story. In the second sentence of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Jane's description of the mansion is the first clue that things are not as they should be. Gilman describes the mansion 'a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity, but that would be asking too much of fate! Still I would declare that there is something queer about it. Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted' (Gilman, 1991: 34). The room in the mansion that her husband chose for their bedroom is also symbolic. The windows are barred, the bed is bolted to the floor and there are deep scratches on the floors and tears in the ugly yellow wallpaper. Her husband controls her day to day activities himself when he is at home and then turns over that responsibility to his sister, the housekeeper, when he is gone. The mansion becomes a prison where the jailers, John and his sister, are trying to maintain order over someone who increasingly begins to resist the order.

The wallpaper is first described as having a 'colour [that] is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight' (Suess, 2003: 87). As her fascination with the paper grows, she begins to notice that the wallpaper has deeper designs that are not noticed at first. 'This wallpaper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then' as indicated by (Suess, 2003: 88). Finally, the wallpaper begins to take on human or animal characteristics. The sub-pattern begins to grow and create paths that are impossible to follow.

The sun shining through the window creates bars on the paper and Jane begins to see a person developing behind the bars that is trying to get out of the wallpaper prison. 'And it is like a woman stopping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder-I begin to think' (Gilman, 1991: 55). Suess (2003: 78) suggests that 'Jane attempts to create her own order'. She begins to follow her own regime day after day. She secretly writes in her journal and watches the progression of the wallpaper. Suess contends that 'the wallpaper gains more and more authority over her; it becomes the recourse to which Jane turns' (Suess, 2003: 4). Gilman's character is so restricted in every aspect of her day-to-day existence; she begins to break free of her bonds through her relationship with the wallpaper.

Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a story, as interpreted by feminist theorist, of someone who feels imprisoned and their desperate need for escape. The main character feels imprisoned by her husband and his sister in a mansion. She has no control over her day to day activities and feels oppressed by the wallpaper in her room. Suess describes her as 'not consciously recognize[ing] the socially oppressive character reflected by the physical pattern

of the wallpaper’, her observation that ‘I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still’ (Suess, 2003: 55) indicates her awareness of the futility of any attempt made by the woman in the wallpaper, or herself, to receive and relieve understanding, or satisfaction from this oppressive order. At the end of the story, the character seeks release for herself and the woman in the wallpaper, by stripping the wallpaper off the walls. She says to John ‘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, 1991: 67).

Supporters of the feminist perspective of the *The Yellow Wallpaper* contend that Gilman was able to escape from her jailors and enjoy freedom from those who oppressed her. Mental breakdown, however, is not freedom at all. By examining Gilman’s early life and analysing it by the Lacanian theory as explained by (Gilman, 1991: 34). Gilman is mentality ill to begin with and the birth of her baby brought about a crisis. As a child, Gilman was never able to separate from the mirror image of her mother. This separation is usually brought about by a father and since Gilman’s father was absent, she did not develop her own position in the social order.

Jane tries several times to make her feelings be known about the mansion, room and wallpaper. Each time she is ridiculed or made to feel silly. When Jane first mentions her misgivings about the mansion, the reaction from her husband is, ‘John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in a marriage’. In this simple statement, Jane expresses her frustration in having to suppress her opinions for the sake of her marriage. Women of her time knew their place in the patriarchal society and Jane was a true woman of her time. She laments ‘I get so unreasonably angry with John sometimes. But John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself-before him, at least, and that makes me very tired’ (Barry, 2002: 23). Jane realizes what is expected of her in her role as a wife and mother and these traditional roles symbolize bondage and oppression to Jane and to many of her feminist readers.

According to feminist thinking, the mansion, room, wallpaper and well-meaning husband are symbols of the oppression that Jane feels which eventually leads to a mental breakdown. John theorizes that ‘men were responsible for the narrator’s physical confinement and subsequent mental demise’ (Barry, 2002). Suess (2003) maintained that Gilman’s story chronicles how women have been socially, historically, and medically constructed as not only weak, but sick beings According to the feminist theory, Jane’s mental breakdown was due to the restrictions placed on her and her lack of a creative outlet.

Conclusion

The Yellow Paper was developed to act as an instrument to express the feminist point of view. It represents the mental and physical hardship women experienced in the nineteenth century. These harsh conditions are expressed through John, the narrator’s husband as well as the setting of the story. Gilman depicts the confinement and psychological conflicts women experience in the society. She aims at correcting the male dominated society and encouraging frustrated women. Using the feminist approach, readers can analyse the story using symbols, language, and characters. From the story, the reader can distinguish different gender roles depicted by the characters by comparing their individual traits. The wallpaper symbolizes freedom and everybody should be in a position to write, create, and do all the things he or she likes.

The paper explains that the crawling woman symbolizes all women who were seeking freedom and their desire to escape from suppression, as well as the domineering male community. The narrator focuses on isolated women, and this makes the reader understand the effects of isolation. When the narrator destroyed *The Yellow Wallpaper*, it signified the end of her sufferings and a new beginning of freedom experienced by women. From the

essay, the reader realizes that Gilman isolates the narrator from her male-controlled environs without allowing her to react or rebel the entire situation. The plot illustrates the contrasting male domination and cynicism with the main character's rich creativity which displays Gilman's silent feminist assertions of the male dominated condition.

The *Yellow Wallpaper* also provided feminist with instruments on how to conduct close reading and interpret works of art using different ways. It is an important feminist article because the main character herself depicts feminism when she tries to interpret *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The paper illustrated how the narrator kept on trying to interpret the wallpaper. It highlights how the story looked at both individual and societal issues that affected women during the nineteenth century. The author was a prominent feminist and much of her lifestyle profoundly influenced the story. The story tackles larger issues including patriarchy's consequences on marriage. The images, symbols and the simple plot make the reader sympathize with the female character oppressed by the male character.

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