

A PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITIQUE

ON

THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

SAHIL MITTAL (2011C6PS520G)

ABHISHEK PATRIA (2011A1PS434G)

GAURAV KUMAR (2011A7PS052G)

KUMAR AVINISH (2011A3PS050G)

ANKUR AGRAWAL (2011B4A4PS400G)

UDIT GURU (2011B3A8431G)

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ABSTRACT

We have taken the text “**Yellow Wallpaper**”, for analysis in partial fulfillment of the assignment component of the course ‘Literary Criticism’. This text is a short story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

In this report, we have tried to analyze various stages of consciousness of the main and semiautobiographical character of the story using Psychoanalytical Elements, pioneered by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

We have used three theories namely Freudian, Lacanian and Object Relations Theory. It was all the more important to think along the narrator’s state of thinking and point of view for reviewing this text.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a writer and social activist during the late 1800s and early 1900s. She had a difficult childhood. Her father abandoned the family, leaving Charlotte's mother to raise two children on her own. Gilman moved around a lot as a result and her education suffered greatly for it.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman married artist Charles Stetson in 1884. The couple had a daughter named Katherine.

During this period i.e. around 1890s, women were seen as "hysterical" and "nervous" beings; hence, even when a woman claimed to be seriously ill after giving birth, her claims were generally disregarded as false.

Sometime during her decade-long marriage to Stetson (said that after giving birth to her daughter), Gilman experienced a severe post-partum depression and underwent a series of unusual treatments for it, thereby creating a severe impact on her viewpoints and ideologies. This experience is believed to have inspired her best-known short story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892).

ANALYSIS

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is a short-story written at the time when there were fights for Rights for women (Victorian Age). It is an appropriate text to apply Psychoanalytic Theory. Through his story Gilman tries to enforce the reader into the psyche of a young wife and mother who is powerless in her peril in which no one understands.

It is about a woman who has a mental illness but cannot heal due to her husband’s lack of belief.

The author incorporates the hysteria which prevailed in her real life into the character which she portrays in the story. It is evident from the lines below:

“Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.”

“Sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus”

Clearly, the narrator understands that she needs activity, rather than isolation and “rest” to overcome the hysterical situation which she faces.

The principle character in the story, who is also the narrator herself, is a creative person who loves writing but her creativity

is tamed by her husband's belief that, writing is the cause of her illness. He is adamant about not letting her indulge in any sort of creative work. But what can confine a lady who has so much passion for writing. She thinks writing will help her recover fast and thus continue writing in deceit.

At this point itself, a **parallel** can be drawn between her husband's attempts to help her recover from post-partum depression and what she actually does. He believes that there is nothing really wrong with her and shrugs away her illness. This is clearly visible in the following lines of story:

"You see he does not believe I am sick!

And what can one do?

John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him.

I take pains to control myself - before him, at least, and that makes me very tired."

Her husband being a physician tells her that there is nothing much wrong with her which compels her to herself believe that she is ill. So to defend her true self she uses ego defense mechanism in which a person develops and maintains a consistent sense of self i.e. ego and doesn't allow her 'id' to dominate when confronting someone. She presents herself as just fine but suffer in silence.

"John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. So I will let it alone and talk about the house."

Initially, the painting was an excuse from 'ego' for the author. It is a way to stop thinking about her condition which always makes her feel bad.

There is a hint of domination that males had in society during her time, as in the following line:

"He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction."

Her husband treats her as a child and controls every action of her and speaks to her as such. The narrator also falls victim to derogatory names on behalf of her husband such as 'little goose'. It clearly demonstrates how oppressed women were during that specific time period which is also evident from the fact that Freud used only males in his theory.

There happens to be instance when the author undergoes Freudian slip – "delicious garden" she might have been wishing to have grapes in the underlying but calls the garden itself delicious.

"One a those, sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin."

*It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly **commit suicide** - plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions."*

The violent images and reference to suicide are portrayed in the bold lettered words used by the author. The author seems to be a pessimist having a tough past. The uncertain patterns in

the wallpaper suddenly terminate, this in some sense reflects author's life. Whenever she seemed to be approaching a peaceful situation in her life, an upturn or disturbing situation would sprung out of nowhere.

"I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have! I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store."

The above point can be extended according to **Object Relations Theory**: she attached herself to various materialistic objects in her childhood, which she carried in her adulthood too. This is what we observe when she attaches (finds amusement) to the Yellow Wallpaper.

After a point in the story, the author becomes fond of the wallpaper. She becomes obsessed by it. It seems as if the wallpaper has come alive and interactive! In fact, it has become another character. The wallpaper seems to have taken over the mind of the author. Even if she tries to be indifferent towards the wallpaper, she can't get over it.

"I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper .Perhaps because of the wallpaper."

The author sees a pattern in the wallpaper, which resembles a lady.

"The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out."

The lady in the wallpaper reflects every action of the author. At some point it seems as if the author is looking at her own shadow reflected in the wallpaper in moonlight. But again she fails to convince herself and ends up concluding every time that it is another woman with a similar fate as her. Application of the object relational theory can be seen: she is so attached with that character (of the self) that she cooks up her own story. This happens to be an example of **transference**.

"On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law that is a constant irritant to a normal mind.

The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing."

The various elements or the characteristics of the wallpaper such as its ridiculous pattern, its pale and smothering color, reflections, the absence of recurrence, all these factors **condense** and form a nightmare for the author. She is frustrated from this image which continuously outruns her anticipation. This leads to anxiety and distress of the author and she starts to behave monotonously.

The change in the appearance of the lady in wallpaper at different points of time in a day, reflects how the nature of author changes in different circumstances and in presence of other people.

"By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour.

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be."

She remains quiet and peaceful, when alone. At night, when everyone is around she becomes restless, she can't even sleep. The author feels constrained in front of her husband. Her husband acts like a gatekeeper (or super-ego) between her 'ego' and 'id'.

At this point there is change in the perspective of author towards her husband. She is getting a little afraid of him. She fears that her husband John has discovered her writings.

"I have watched John when he did not know I was looking, and come into the room suddenly on the most innocent excuses, and I've caught him several times looking at the paper! And Jennie too. I caught Jennie with her hand on it once."

This extract also depicts the phenomena of **Freudian projection**, she is seeing her husband and Jennie doing things with the wallpaper that she has been doing till now. Even if they might be seeing the wallpaper trying to find why she finds amusement watching it, she is taking it for granted that they are also watching the same things that she watches.

"The front pattern does move--and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!"

She, now, may be suffering from identity crisis. As many critics have said that the woman behind the pattern is the lady character herself. This is where **Lacan's mirror stage** comes into

picture. She might not have found her character in the mirror stage i.e. she might not had a smooth transition from this stage. Therefore during her fantasies with the Yellow Wallpaper, she sees a woman locked behind a wallpaper (mirror) that wants to come out which means she wants to interact with herself. As she is confined to her bedroom for treatment, she is drawing a parallelism between herself and the woman behind the wallpaper. Also, she is afraid of her as she doesn't know what might happen if she sets her free.

*"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!"*

On the last day in the house with the wallpaper, the author locks herself in the room and wouldn't respond to anyone except John. According to the **Lacan's Theory**, a boy marries a girl like her mother and a girl marries a boy like her father. Generally, girls tend to tell their fathers their secrets and give them surprises. Similarly in the above extract, the character is trying to astonish her husband the same way she would have astonished her father. She wants to tell him and only him about the experiences she is having with the wallpaper. Also she is

trying to hide the rope from Jennie, as she might have a father fixation towards her husband.

"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."

The author identifies herself with the woman that is portrayed in the wallpaper behind the patterns. There's an analogy between the author and the woman, both are desperate for getting freedom of the bars, desperate to fulfill the desires entrapped in her "id". But the bars are too strong.

In case of the author the bars refers to the limitations put on the author by her husband who constrains her from writing independently as well as mixing up with relatives.

Similarly the lady portrayed is entrapped inside the patterns of the wallpaper which is somewhat similar to the hectic conditions as suffered by the author in a semiautobiographical approach.

"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!"

Like the narrator herself, the **woman is trapped within a suffocating domestic "pattern" from which no escape is possible**...however, she tears off the paper to free the woman (and herself). Her Id has overcome the fear of her husband and she has become free from her side of story.

CONCLUSION

In a capsule, this text when analyzed from a psychoanalytical perspective provides all the stages through which suppressed desires try to break through the Ego and Super Ego. Also, other theories like Lacan's symbolic order and Object Relations Theory have been used to analyze specific parts of the story.

The resemblance between the imaginary woman and the narrator is clearly a result of the Object Relation Theory. The curbing of the narrator's creativity and the imagination provides a good analogy to the suppression of the subconscious.

There is a change in the attitude of author towards her husband. In the beginning, she is affirmative to her husband's views regarding her illness or state of mind, but through the story, till the end she develops a fear and negative attitude towards him, crashing the barrier between her id and her ego. There is sublimation of her imagination.